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Religion, Platonist Dialectics, and Pragmatist Analysis: Marcus  
Tullius Cicero's Contributions to the Philosophy and Sociology of  
Divine and Human Knowing

**Abstract**

Whereas Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Augustine are probably the best known of the early Western philosophers of religion, Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE) also played a particularly consequential role in the development and continuity of Greco-Latin-European social thought.

Cicero may be best known for his work on rhetoric and his involvements in the political intrigues of Rome, but Cicero's comparative examinations of the Greco-Roman philosophies of his day merit much more attention than they have received from contemporary scholars. Cicero's considerations of philosophy encompass much more than the theological issues considered in this statement, but, in the process of engaging Epicurean and Stoic thought from an Academician (Platonist) perspective, Cicero significantly extends the remarkable insights provided by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

Although especially central to the present analysis, Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* (1972) is only one of several texts that Cicero directs to a comparative (multiparadigmatic and transhistorical) analysis of divine and human knowing.

Much of Cicero's treatment of the philosophy of religion revolves around variants of the Socratic standpoints (i.e., dialectics, theology, moralism) that characterized the philosophies of Cicero's era (i.e., Stoicism, Epicureanism, Academician dialectics), but Cicero also engages the matters of human knowing and acting in what may be envisioned as more distinctively pragmatist sociological terms.

As well, although Cicero's materials reflect the socio-historical context in which he worked, his detailed analysis of religion represents a valuable source of comparison with present day viewpoints and practices. Likewise, a closer examination of Cicero's texts indicates that many of the issues of divine and human knowing, with which he explicitly grapples, have maintained an enduring conceptual currency.

This paper concludes with a consideration of the relevance of Cicero's works for a contemporary pragmatist sociological (symbolic interactionist) approach to the more generic study of human knowing and acting.

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There are a number of branches of philosophy that have not as yet been by any means adequately explored; but the inquiry into the nature of the gods, which is both highly interesting in relation to the theory of the soul, and fundamentally important for the regulation of religion, is one of special difficulty and obscurity...The multiplicity and variety of the opinions held upon this subject by eminent scholars are bound to constitute a strong argument for the view that philosophy has its origin and starting-point in ignorance, and that the Academic School were well-advised in «withholding assent» from beliefs that are uncertain...[M]ost thinkers have affirmed that the gods exist, and this is the most probable view and the one to which we are all led by nature's guidance; but Protagoras declared himself uncertain, and Diagoras of Melos and Theodorus of Cyrene held that there are no gods at all. Moreover, the upholders of the divine existence differ and disagree so widely, that it would be a troublesome task to recount their opinions. Many views are put forward about the outward form of the gods, their dwelling-places and abodes, and mode of life, and these topics are debated with the widest variety of opinion among philosophers; but as to the question upon which the whole issue of the dispute principally turns, whether the gods are entirely idle and inactive, taking no part at all in the direction and government of the world, or whether on the contrary all things both were created and ordered by them in the beginning and are controlled and kept in motion by them throughout eternity, here there is the greatest disagreement of all. And until this issue is decided, mankind must continue to labour under the profoundest uncertainty, and to be in ignorance about matters of the highest moment. (Cicero 1951a [*De Natura Deorum*], I, i:1-2)

Although generally overlooked as both a philosopher and a sociologist of religion, Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE) is, as the preceding quote suggests, a scholar who has given the matters of human knowing and acting considerable thought. More than that, though, Cicero represents a vital link between Greek philosophical thought on religion and more contemporary Western theology and religious studies. Further, because his work addresses so many issues pertaining to human knowing and acting, Cicero's analysis of religion is pertinent to a more comprehensive understanding of the human condition.<sup>2</sup>

Cicero's analysis of religion, as with his other academic works, is very much indebted to classic Greek (700-300 BCE) scholarship. Indeed, Cicero's

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<sup>2</sup> This statement represents a small part of a much larger intellectual odyssey wherein I (as a symbolic interactionist) began tracing the development of Western social thought (particularly pragmatist scholarship) back to the classical Greek era (see Prus 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007a, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2009a, 2010; Kleinknecht 2007). At the outset, I had no particular familiarity with Cicero's scholarship and had no cognizance of his work on religion or philosophy. However, I became more acquainted with Cicero's works as I began to inquire more fully into the development of rhetoric as persuasive endeavor in the classical Greek era. Given a long standing pragmatist and ethnographic interest in the nature of human knowing and acting (Prus 1996, 1997, 1999; Prus and Grills 2003) including people's involvements in religion (Prus 1976), I was most intrigued to discover Cicero's materials on religion. I had been reading Plato's texts and realized that despite his willingness to engage most every area of human knowing and acting in dialectic analysis, he did not do so with religion. Cicero does this and more.

considerations of philosophy and theology have been very much influenced through Cicero's exposure to later versions of Plato's Academy.<sup>3</sup>

Still, in developing *On the Nature of the Gods* (*De Natura Deorum*) and his related texts *Tusculan Disputations* (1945), *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* (*On Ends of Good and Evil*) (1914), *De Fato* (*On Fate*) (1942a), and *De Divinatione* (*On Divination*) (1923a), Cicero provides readers with a highly instructive set of comparative, historical, and pragmatist analyses of human knowing and acting pertaining to religion that extends well beyond that which Plato and Aristotle (given their relative time-points) could have generated.<sup>4</sup>

Further, although neither of the two viewpoints (Stoicism and Epicureanism) that Cicero addresses most centrally in his writings on religion have persisted in direct forms to the present day, it should be noted that the viewpoints that the Epicureans and Stoics developed are not so different in many ways from more contemporary Western (Judaic, Christian, and Islamic) notions of divine and human knowing.

Likewise, those who may be inclined to (a) question as well as (b) defend the viability of religious (and spiritual) claims of any sort, along with those who (c) wish to better comprehend the ways that people make sense of and experience religion more generally may appreciate the exceedingly profound, thorough, and precise ways that Cicero's Academician enters into the analysis of religion and considers people's claims, questions, and uncertainties.

As well, because of the analytic/conceptual ways in which Cicero engages these and other religious standpoints, the issues that Cicero examines have maintained an enduring, cross-cultural relevance. Thus, matters pertaining to the existence, form, and role of any divine essence(s) are central to sustained considerations of religion as also are notions of devotion, virtue, truth, skepticism, evidence, life and death, and the physical constitution of nature.<sup>5</sup>

### ***On the Nature of the Gods (De Natura Deorum)***<sup>6</sup>

As suggested in the introductory extract, Cicero does not intend to offer any definitive answers on the nature of the gods. Instead, and in more uniquely

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<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Cicero's exposure to Aristotle's writings appears to have been much more limited (as also seems the case for the [Aristotelian] Peripatetics of Cicero's day). Still, residues of Aristotle's works (and viewpoints) are evident and these generally constitute instructive counterpoints to the more skepticist views associated with the Academic (Platonist) tradition. Thus, while Cicero lacks an adequate base for engaging Aristotle's works in more direct terms, Cicero maintains continuity with some of Aristotle's ideas in his philosophic debates.

<sup>4</sup> Cicero appears to have written most of his works on philosophy in a comparatively short span of time (when Romans were banned from practicing law) and was apt to make use of whatever texts he had at his more immediate disposal. Although best known as an orator, it should be appreciated that Cicero had a long-standing exposure to and interest in philosophy and religious thought (e.g., see *De Divinatione*, II:i-ii). As well, while Cicero often acknowledges his dependence on other authors, Cicero provides a wealth of comparative historical, philosophic and oratorical analyses that is available nowhere else.

<sup>5</sup> Emile Durkheim has no apparent knowledge of Cicero's works on religion. Still, those familiar with Durkheim's (1915 [1912]) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* will find much in Durkheim's text (with its emphasis on religion as realms of human knowing, acting, and interchange amidst the continuities and transitions of community life) that resonates with Cicero's materials.

<sup>6</sup> This statement is derived principally from the English translation of H. Rackham's (1951a) *De Natura Deorum*, but also has been supplemented by Horace C. P. McGregor's (1972) translation of the *Nature of the Gods*, as well as, Paul Mackendrick's (1989:169-184) abbreviated commentary.

sociological terms, Cicero acknowledges a plurality of viewpoints that people may develop, express, and contest with respect to these matters. Likewise, while primarily adopting the questioning (dialectic) stance associated with the Academy, Cicero allows representatives of the Epicurean and Stoic positions to state their cases at some length.

In developing *On the Nature of the Gods*, Cicero (Book I:1-17) identifies himself as an Augur (an elected Roman religious leader). Relatedly, Cicero explicitly acknowledges both the functional relevance of religion for community life and his own obligation to respect this office. At the same time, because matters pertaining to religion have such profound relevance for the human condition, Cicero deems it important to attend carefully to the nature of religious claims and related considerations as these have been engaged by the best minds.

Thus, developing *On the Nature of the Gods* within the forum of a courtroom interchange, Cicero has (1) Gaius Velleius present the Epicurean position, (2) Quintus Lucilius Balbus articulate the Stoic viewpoint, and (3) Gaius Cotta assume the role of the questioning Academicians.

Parts of the text (some of Book III and a fuller conclusion) appear to have been lost from Cicero's original, but the material to which we still have access is quite remarkable in both substantive scope and analytical detail. Indeed, after Cicero, it is not until Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) that one finds a more detailed and comprehensive treatment of an assortment of religious viewpoints and even Aquinas does not eclipse Cicero's contributions.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, David Hume's (1711-1776) *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1957) appears to be a partial restatement of arguments developed between the Stoics and the Academicians in Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*.<sup>8</sup>

On a more contemporary plane, Cicero's works on religion resonate notably with a constructionist (Berger and Luckmann 1966) or interactionist viewpoint (Blumer 1969). Thus, while acknowledging an [out there] to which humans may attend, Cicero not only recognizes the multiplicity of world views that people may develop in coming to terms with (the world), but also envisions people's definitions and claims as subject to ambiguity, challenge and debate as his spokespeople attempt to ascertain the nature of human and divine knowing and acting.<sup>9</sup>

Because many readers are apt to not be familiar with Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, I will review the themes that Cicero introduces, while maintaining the essential flow of his analysis. This way, readers may more readily locate sections of Cicero's text on their own. Readers also are cautioned, at the outset, that Cicero does not speak of most things himself, but instead (and more like Plato) allows his speakers to address wide-ranges of theological (and secular) matters.

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<sup>7</sup> For those who have not had the opportunity to examine Thomas Aquinas' works, I would observe that Aquinas is not only one of the most competent Aristotelian commentators of all time, but also that Aquinas is one of the most accomplished dialecticians on record (see *Summa Theologica* 1981). Although Aquinas fuses some of his analysis with his religious beliefs, a great deal of his analysis remains highly instructive for scholars in philosophy and the social sciences as well as for those more centrally involved in religious studies and theology. Aquinas' emphases are notably different from that of Cicero, but no other scholar of record in the intervening centuries approximates the range, depth, or acuity of Cicero's analyses.

<sup>8</sup> Despite the unmistakable heavy reliance of Hume on Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, Hume provides only the paltriest of references to Cicero's text.

<sup>9</sup> Somewhat intriguingly, too, Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* grapples more directly with issues pertaining to human knowing and acting in religious arenas than does Peter Berger (1969) *The Sacred Canopy* or Thomas Luckmann (1967) *The Invisible Religion*, despite the access of these latter two authors to their own (1966) conceptually enabling text, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

In Book I (1-17) of *On the Nature of the Gods* (NG), Cicero sets the stage for the interchanges that follow. Here, Cicero acknowledges a basic and perplexing set of philosophic issues pertaining to a divine or supernatural (beyond human or natural object) existence. As well, he considers the qualities of any divine essences and the ways in which these essences might engage the cosmos and its human inhabitants.

In the process, Cicero not only recognizes a broad variety of theological viewpoints, but also includes stances ranging from intense piety to totalizing skepticism. Here, as well, Cicero accounts for his own interests in, and knowledge of, philosophic intrigues. In NG, Cicero intends to provide a forum in which people may consider a wide range of theological matters, weigh the evidence, and draw their own conclusions.

Velleius, the Epicurean, is the first speaker (NG, Book I:18-56). Following a general denunciation of Stoic and Platonic stances on theology (18-24), Velleius (25-43) reviews an extended assortment of viewpoints on religion. Although Velleius' descriptions are notably truncated and should not be seen as viable substitutes for fuller accounts of various religious viewpoints, they establish a vast array of views that different people in the broader Mediterranean arena had developed with respect to theology.

In the process, Velleius not only indicates that various Greek scholars have adapted viewpoints sharply at variance from the popular, poetic renderings of the gods (as depicted by Homer, Hesiod and others), but that the positions that Greek thinkers have developed often contradict one another where they do not also connote various internal inconsistencies.

By compactly presenting this array of sources, some *highly consequential theological issues* become prominent. These include questions dealing with matters such as: do the gods exist/exist; does divinity exist as a singular entity or as a plurality; in what way may divine essences be part of the cosmos; of what matter do god(s) consist; are divine essences immortal; are divine entities active or passive; are people connected with divine essences; can god(s) be known to humans; is worship appropriate; and what is the relationship of virtue to divinity?

After pointing out a great many inadequacies and contradictions evident within and across the positions he has referenced, Velleius (NG, I:43-56) expounds on Epicureanism. In developing his position, Velleius asserts that Epicurus (341-270 BCE), who ought to be clearly identified among the major gods, has provided a uniquely viable account of theology.

Positing that the existence of the gods are proven by the general consensus of a wide array of people, Velleius further insists on the immortality of the gods' existence and the perfect state of their bliss. He stipulates, too, that the gods are free from passion and are to be worshipped for their perfection. The gods are not to be feared. The gods also are alleged to assume human form, but to be free of corporeal states and limitations. Likewise, Velleius contends, the gods correspond to their human counterparts in both number and likeness because the gods are constituted through a continuous stream of invisible atoms flowing from humans to these divine essences.

The (Epicurean) gods are depicted not only as highly contented essences, but also as free from all demands and obligations. Thus, according to Velleius, the gods spend their time contemplating their own happiness, virtue, and states of perfection. Notably, too, the gods neither control nor interfere with human affairs or any matters of the cosmos. Relatedly, the Epicureans directly dismiss all Stoic conceptions of divine control, fatalism and divination as unfounded.

Cotta the Academician (*NG*, I:57-124) then responds to the Epicureans. In a manner paralleling Cicero's own circumstances, Cotta observes that his position as a religious office holder requires him to believe in the gods, but that he remains uncertain about their nature.

This allows Cotta to adopt a position in which he is more disposed to saying what is not valid than what is true. Cotta also states that while he has long been dubious of Epicurean thought, he (respectfully) considers Velleius' statement to be particularly clear and thoughtful. Cotta then proceeds to dismantle the Epicurean position, in the process elaborating on several themes that Velleius has more fleetingly introduced.

Cotta (*NG*, I:61-64) begins by challenging the Epicurean argument for the existence of the gods from consensus. Cotta cites various atheists, agnostics, and other apparent nonbelievers as a means of showing the fundamental inadequacy of claims based on consensus.

Next, Cotta (*NG*, I:65-70) launches on a concerted attack of Epicurus' theory of atoms. While giving some attention to the Epicurean argument that the gods consist of alignments of atomic particles, Cotta extends his critique to related Epicurean conceptions of the immortality of the gods, and the Epicurean argument for the spontaneous (swerve) movement of atoms within existing structures.

Subsequently, Cotta (*NG*, I:71-102) engages in a sustained critique of Epicurean claims that the gods assume human likenesses in appearance, manner, and mind. After considering a series of unsubstantiated assumptions surrounding general human tendencies to anthropomorphize about the gods, Cotta (I:103-114) then questions Epicurean claims pertaining to the possible basis of happiness of the gods and the nature of their substance and inactivity.

Noting that Epicureans envision the gods as contributing nothing either to the functioning of the cosmos generally or to human well-being more specifically, Cotta (*NG*, I:115-124) asks how people could be expected to worship gods who do nothing except contemplate their own perfection.

Then, after observing that Democritus (460-357 BCE), the atomist who preceded Epicurus, had mixed views of religion, Cotta argues that Epicurus' own position actually denies the authenticity of the gods. Cotta further suggests that Epicurus was cynical and self-serving and that Epicureanism constitutes a threat to the religiously-inspired virtues and order of the community.

Whereas Book I of *On the Nature of the Gods* focuses primarily on Epicurean thought, Book II represents a sustained consideration of Stoic theology. The Stoic spokesperson, Lucilius Balbus, states that he will develop his position (*NG*, II:3) around four objectives: (A) proving the existence of the gods (God as the supreme intelligence governing the universe and the lesser, subservient gods); (B) depicting the nature or qualities of the gods; (C) establishing the control or governance of the world by the gods; and (D) acknowledging gods' service to humans.

[This is a formidable agenda and takes Cicero's spokespeople into some of the most fundamental issues that theologians and skeptics may consider. Indeed, once they reframe Stoic conceptions of divinity in their own (monotheistic) terms, Christian, Jewish, and Islamic theologians will find in Stoic thought a great many parallels to their own positions as also will the skeptics (mindful of Cotta's [Book III] challenges) who question these latter notions of divinity.]

To prove divine presence, Balbus (*NG*, II:4-44) articulates a series of claims. Notably, these include arguments derived from (a) contemplating the heavens, (b) wide-spread consensus, (c) testimonials, (d) authoritative prophecies and other

divinations, (e) an orderly universe, (f) people's capacities to reason, and (g) the apparent harmony of the universe.

In contrast to the Epicureans who argue for human-like images of inactive gods, Balbus (*NG*, II:45-72) describes divine essence(s) as spherical in shape and as centrally active participants in the cosmos. Stoic gods not only manage all aspects of the cosmos, but they also are seen to pursue beauty, purity, virtue, and attend to all aspects of the universe in caring fashions.

Next, Balbus (*NG*, II:73-153) addresses the governance of the world by the gods. Observing that Stoic thought has been subject to much skepticism by the Academicians and overt ridicule from the Epicureans, Balbus (II:73-75) makes the Stoic position explicit.<sup>10</sup> Thus, he contends that the cosmos and all that it includes has been created and maintained in orderly condition by the gods.

Relatedly, Balbus re-engages the task of establishing the existence of the gods by arguing for divine wisdom and power (*NG*, II:76-81). Not only does he insist that the gods are rational, cooperative entities, but that they also have extended the divine graces of reason, truth, virtue, and harmony in lesser, but somewhat parallel, manners to people. In this way, Balbus acknowledges the limited, but still noteworthy capacities of humans in order to make the argument for the much greater graces of the gods (an argument by analogy).

From there, Balbus (*NG*, II:81-97) embarks on an extended consideration of nature, wherein he delineates Stoic views of nature from those characterizing other viewpoints. In rather direct terms, Balbus distinguishes (a) arguments for accidental or chaotic versions of the universe from (b) arguments for the systematic integration of nature (i.e., nature as a thoroughly integrated essence), and (c) arguments from intelligent or rational design.

The Stoic position is that the cosmos is (c) a deliberate, conscious creation rather than the product of (a) a haphazard alignment or (b) a non-rational synthesis or mechanistic ordering of phenomena. In developing this position, Balbus claims that the worldly state of intricate and interdependent perfection could only be the result of intentioned and sustained effort on the part of divine essences.

To make his case more compelling, Balbus (*NG*, II:98-153) next addresses several of the wonders of nature, each of which he argues has been divinely generated. Here, Balbus details matters pertaining to the bountiful earth, the enabling sun, the beauty of the stars, the forces of gravity, the harmony of the planets, the marvels of vegetation, the adaptive and generative features of animal life, and the enabling and integrative features of human biology.

Also included within the wonders of nature are specific references to the human capacities for reason, knowledge, and anticipation (II:147-148), speech and the extensive enabling qualities of speech (II:148-149), the structure and utility of human

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<sup>10</sup> Readers familiar with the larger corpus of Plato's works (e.g., see *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*) will find a considerable amount of theological material that is consistent with the viewpoints that the Stoics would later develop as well as a comparatively thoroughly-engaged, dialectically enabled skepticism that would form the critical base of Academic scholarship (see *Charmides* [on self knowledge and control], *Cratylus* [on names and speech], *Laches* [on courage], *Lysis* [on friendship], *Phaedrus* [on love, rhetoric], *Philebus* [on pleasure and wisdom], *Sophist* [on instructors], *Theaetetus* [on knowing]).

Put in this context, Cicero's *NG* may be seen as a sustained scholarly attempt to sort out aspects of the theological and philosophic viewpoints that confound Socratic thought more generally. While Plato deals more directly with the problematics of many topics in dialectic interchanges, and even subjects virtue (*Meno*) and piety (*Ethyphro*) to close scrutiny, Plato appears to have exempted Socratic theology from similar dialectic considerations.

hands for all manners of enterprise (II:150-152), as well as people's unique capacities for cosmic reflection and divine worship (II:153).

Balbus (*NG*, II:154-167) next emphasizes the benevolence of the gods for the human condition. He begins observing that all things (and features) of the world have been provided by the gods for people's convenience and enjoyment. In addition to the vast array of worldly qualities that enable human survival, Balbus more specifically acknowledges the plants and animals that not only provide human sustenance in more direct terms, but that also facilitate other manners of human enterprise and well-being.

Balbus (II:162-167) likewise draws attention to the knowledge and insights that the gods provide for people through divination and other modes of instruction.

Book III of *On the Nature of the Gods* centers on Cotta's Academician critique of Stoic theology. After indicating that he is prohibited from questioning the religious viewpoints of his own office, Cotta (III:1-6) indicates that he can still subject Balbus' exposition of Stoicism to philosophical critique.

Cotta (*NG*, III:7-19) first turns to Balbus' claims of divine essences. Cotta begins by emphasizing the difference between asserting that something exists and providing viable reasons for believing that it is so. Thus, Cotta asks if simply viewing the heavens can constitute proof that the gods exist. Likewise, Cotta asks Balbus if he can furnish anything more than unsubstantiated rumors to prove that gods actually have appeared to people.

Next, Cotta challenges the argument from divination. If things are destined to occur, Cotta asks, of what advantage is it to know the future and, relatedly, to forego human hope and discretion. Cotta also asks about the basis of divination, suggesting that the arts of prophecy or foretelling the future are little more than social fabrications, some of which clearly offer primary strategic advantage to those practicing divination (as opposed to their clients or others).

Cotta (*NG*, III:16-19) also attacks the Stoic scholar, Cleanthes (300-232 BCE), who Balbus had cited as providing four arguments for people's belief in the gods. Having dispensed with (a) divination, Cleanthes' first basis for belief, Cotta argues that (b) the human awe arising from the tremendous powers of nature offers no proof that the gods actually exist; neither does (c) the usefulness of the worldly things that humans enjoy establish a proof of the gods. Likewise, Cotta observes that (d) the apparent order and harmony of the universe does not constitute proof in any direct sense either.

Cotta (*NG*, III:20-64) next turns to the nature or qualities of the gods as depicted by Balbus. Contending that Balbus has failed to establish the nature of the gods, Cotta (III:20-22) first questions the Stoic's claims that the gods are unparalleled in beauty, wisdom, and excellence and therefore must be unsurpassed in superiority and rational capabilities.

After observing that Balbus has failed to provide adequate terms of reference as well as evidence for his claims, Cotta cautions against drawing conclusions on the basis of questionable premises. Cotta, likewise, takes issue with Zeno (334-263 BCE), the founder of Stoicism, who argues for divine rationality. Using Zeno's arguments, Cotta illustrates how one may use the very same logic to reach all sorts of absurd claims.

Cotta (*NG*, III:23-24) subsequently acknowledges the considerable regularity of the stars (cosmos), but then asks if this means that all other regularities that one finds in nature also are divine in essence. Cotta contends that attributing regularities of nature to the gods reflects Stoic inability to develop more rational (physical)

explanations for the things that naturally occur in the world. It is, Cotta contends, most inappropriate to invoke gods as a cover for human ignorance.

Cotta (*NG*, III:25-28) next challenges the value of the Stoic analogy that human rationality is an obvious manifestation of what the gods must possess in greater abundance (based on the more humble, but still impressive things that people have developed). Cotta also dispenses with Balbus' claims that speech and other human abilities prove the existence of the gods. It is essential, Cotta contends, to distinguish the gifts of (physical) nature from imputations that human qualities are deliberate, minded handicrafts of the gods.

Attending to the Stoic arguments that the gods are living, immortal, and sensitive to the predicament of humans, Cotta (*NG*, III:29-38) asks how the Stoics would refute the arguments of Carneades (the Academician; 219-129 BCE) who argues that every living thing not only is mortal, but also is capable of experiencing sensation of some sort.

Positing that nothing that is living can be immortal, Cotta asks further whether anything that is immortal (and therefore nonliving) can experience sensation. Relatedly, he asks if nonliving (and non-sensing) things can comprehend notions such as wisdom or virtue. And, if not, would they be able to distinguish human notions of good and evil? But, says Cotta, from a Stoic standpoint, a god without reason and virtue would be inconceivable.

Cotta (*NG*, III:39-64) then directly asks if Stoic conceptions of deities actually are more rational than the superstitions of the ignorant or the popular (mythical) deities of the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans.

Subsequently, citing an argument that Carneades had developed, Cotta elaborates on a variety of problems that emerge when one tries to establish just who (or what) the gods may be. Thus, Cotta indicates, regardless of whom or what may be deified (images, animals, people, relatives of gods, stars, the sea, evil forces, abstract qualities) all sorts of peculiar (increasingly absurd) conceptual linkages (lineages, categories) result.

Concluding that it would be the task of philosophers to dispel the errors associated with any attempts to identify the gods, Cotta then turns to the question of whether the world is under divine control. [Part of the text is lost].

[Text resumes] Cotta (*NG*, III:66-93) is dealing with human reason, which Balbus had specifically defined as a gift from the gods. In response, Cotta observes that reason provides a means of doing evil as well as good. Further, given the comparative prevalence of evil in the human arena, it is difficult to argue that perfect gods would have given people the deliberative capacity to do wrong.

Cotta asks if this means, too, that the gods are ultimately responsible for the evil, harm, and suffering that results from people's use of reason. If it is the people themselves who actually are to blame for their poor use of reason, would it not have been more appropriate for the gods, given their superior wisdom, to have provided people with a more viable form of reason than that which they possess?

Disregarding even this, Cotta continues, would it not at least be appropriate to expect that people who act more virtuously would be advantaged over the evildoers? But, judging from history, Cotta observes, this frequently is not the case. Indeed, the evidence indicates that when evil is punished, it is only because people (not the gods) punish other people.

Interestingly, Cotta notes, while the Stoics claim that the gods are not responsible for this state of injustice because the gods cannot be expected to oversee everything, the Stoics still claim that there is nothing the gods cannot do and that nothing is too small to escape their attention. It is ironic, Cotta adds, that the

same gods who do so little to insure justice with respect to good and evil would still bother to give each person unique dreams and other means of ascertaining (divining) the future.

Cotta (*NG*, III:93) concludes the extant part of his speech saying that his intention is not to disprove the existence of divine essence(s), but rather to indicate how difficult the question is and how limited are our theories that address such matters. [The text ends somewhat abruptly with an expressed intent on the part of those present to re-engage this topic].

Despite the remarkable range of theological issues that Cicero considers in *On the Nature of the Gods*, he has still more to offer to students of divine and human knowing and acting. Indeed, while *NG* constitutes an analytical centerpiece in religious studies, several of Cicero's other works significantly extend the subject matters introduced in *NG*. Especially relevant in this sense are *Tusculan Disputations*, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum (On Ends of Good and Evil)*, *De Fato (On Fate)*, and *De Divinatione (On Divination)*.

A fuller understanding of Cicero's views of human knowing and acting would require an extended consideration of Cicero's highly compelling analyses of rhetoric (several texts; also see Prus 2010) and other statements on philosophy (e.g., Cicero [1951b] *Academica* [also see Prus 2006], Cicero [1923b] *De Amicitia*), but this would take us well beyond our more immediate objectives.

Accordingly, the strategy adopted here is to address the texts that deal more directly with the theological issues introduced in *NG*, indicating the additional insights and resources that these other statements offer to scholars in religious studies, philosophy, and the social sciences more generally.

### ***Tusculan Disputations*<sup>11</sup>**

After some remarks on Roman scholarship and the potential of Latin authors to surpass the Greeks, Cicero uses the setting of his Tusculan Villa as the setting for introducing five distinct theses that deal with human problems, failings, and limitations. Thus, while Book I deals with death and human immortality (through a suprahuman soul), Book II examines people's encounters with pain. Book III focuses on anxiety as a problem in human living. Book IV attends to other emotional difficulties that people may experience. Book V examines the relationship of virtue to happiness.

Although the first dialectic interchange (involving death and immortality) is most obviously connected with theological considerations and represents an issue notably neglected in *On the Nature of the Gods*, it should be appreciated that the matters with which Cicero deals in Books II-V of *Tusculan Disputations (TD)* also are often interfused with religious thought and Cicero examines these topics in both religious (especially Epicurean and Stoic) and more secular, philosophic terms.

As well, because Cicero attempts to sort these matters out in ways that are mindful of human lived experience, these discussions (as with Cicero's writings generally) should be of considerable interest to social scientists. At the same time, readers are cautioned that it is possible to do little more than outline the issues that Cicero examines in *Tusculan Disputations* and the other texts introduced here within the present statement.

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<sup>11</sup> This discussion has been developed from J. E. King's English translation of *Tusculan Disputations* first published in 1927.

The following extract from Book I of *Tusculan Disputations* not only frames the ensuing text, but also more specifically alerts readers to some of the very different notions of human contact with divinity that various philosophers have adopted:

[w]e must first then consider what death, which seems to be a thing well known to everyone, is in itself. Some consider death the separation of the soul from the body, some think there is no such separation, but that soul and body perish together and the soul is annihilated with the body. Of those who think that there is a separation for the soul some hold that it is at once dispersed in space, others that it survives a long time, others that it survives forever. Further, as to what the soul itself is in itself, or where its place in us, or what its origin, there is much disagreement... (Cicero 1945 [*Tusculan Disputations*], I, ix:18)

While acknowledging a commonplace human fear of death and the tendency to envision death as an inevitable evil that humans face, Cicero (*TD*, I:9-17) puts forth the proposition that death can be a positive end. Nevertheless, before discussing people's experiences with death on a more comprehensive basis, Cicero deals with people's conceptions of the soul (*de anima* in Latin; *psyche* in Greek).

Albeit seemingly intended to supplement his thoughts on divinity (*On the Nature of the Gods*), Book I of *Tusculan Disputations* has a notably different, somewhat less pluralist or skepticist emphasis.

As in his consideration of theological viewpoints in *NG*, Cicero acknowledges an assortment of views that philosophers have taken with respect to any suprahuman existence that transcends the mortal body in *TD*. Attending to the possibility that the soul may survive after the body perishes, Cicero (as suggested in the material following) considers the conditions of the soul's survival as well as the essence, location, source, and development of human souls:

Plato imagined the soul to be of three-fold nature; the sovereign part, that is reason, he placed in the head as the citadel, and the other two parts, anger and desire, he wished to be subservient, and these he fixed in their places, anger in the breast and desire below the diaphragm...

Dicaearchus...represents Pherecrates...as arguing that the soul is wholly non-existent and the name quite meaningless, and that the terms «animalia» and «animantes» denoting «creatures and plants possessed of soul» are applied without reason; neither in man nor in beast is there a spiritual or physical principle answering to soul, and all the capacity we have of action or sensation is uniformly diffused in all living bodies and cannot be separated from the body, seeing that it has no separate existence and that there is nothing apart from one single body fashioned in such a way that its activity and power of sensation are due to the natural combination of the parts. Aristotle, who far excels everyone – always with the exception for Plato – in genius and industry, after grasping the conception of the well-known four classes of elements...which he held to be the origin of all things, considers that there is a special fifth nature from which comes mind; for mind reflects and foresees and learns and teaches and makes discoveries and remembers and a multitude of other things: mind loves, hates, desires, fears, feels pain and joy...descriptive of a sort of uninterrupted and perpetual movement. (Cicero 1945 [*Tusculan Disputations*], I, x:20-22)

Cicero (*TD*, I:26-81) examines an assortment of arguments from various Greek sources on the existence of the soul, the immortality of the soul, and the enabling

aspects of death. Nevertheless, in contrast to the more questioning Academician stance that Cicero adopts in *On the Nature of the Gods*, Cicero seems intent on arguing for an immortal soul that corresponds more closely with the position that Plato articulates in *Phaedo*. Still, recognizing that not everyone would accept this viewpoint, Cicero develops a second set of arguments intended to reduce some of the anxiety (and negativity) that people commonly associate with death.

Cicero (*TD*, I:82-119) subsequently considers the positive features of death even should there be no immortality or afterlife in which people may find solace. Working with the sorts of assumptions and viewpoints adopted by those arguing for a totally biologically-limited human existence, Cicero acknowledges and tries to minimize the often substantial sense of loss that people associate with death. Further, as Cicero observes, death is a way to escape evil and suffering. He also emphasizes the restful, sleep-like quality of death and the borrowed time in which all humans live. Dismissing burial practices and funeral rites as inconsequential to the deceased, Cicero stresses the importance of the deceased having lived virtuous, honorable lives.

Book II of *Tusculan Disputations* affords Cicero the opportunity to examine human encounters with pain (and suffering) from an Academician (Platonic) philosophic stance. Among the other viewpoints that Cicero considers are Epicurus' claim that genuine philosophers would remain happy while experiencing extended discomfort; the Stoics' contention that pain is not an evil, but something one should try to endure; and the (Aristotelian) Peripatetics' standpoint that pain is an evil, but a lesser evil than dishonor.

Cicero also defines pain as an evil and, like the Academicians and Peripatetics more generally, views virtue as the essential good. Ideally, by more extensively pursuing a virtuous life-style, one could develop sufficient self control to be able to disregard or neutralize an attentiveness to the agony or suffering that one might otherwise experience.

Focusing on anxiety and other troubles that people have managing their entities, Books III and IV of *Tusculan Disputations* are less central to the present statement. Still, some attention is given to the interlinkages of people's religious viewpoints, emotional states, morality, and disgraceful behavior. As with people's experiences with pain, Cicero encourages people to master one's other emotional states in light of pursuing a virtuous life-style.

In Book V of *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero considers whether virtue is sufficient for a happy life (as suggested by Socrates and others). Drawing on a wide range of sources, Cicero assumes the Socratic position that virtue (combined with scholarly wisdom) is the most effective base for happiness. This topic receives further attention in *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* (*On Ends*).

### ***On Ends (De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum)*<sup>12</sup>**

In developing *On Ends*, Cicero considers the most desirable ends or objectives to which people should orient themselves. While focused primarily on moral virtue, Cicero uses *On Ends* to confront various limitations of Epicurean, Stoic, and Academician thought. The statement also emphasizes the importance of scholarship

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<sup>12</sup> H. Rackham's (1914) English translation of *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* (*On Ends of Good and Evil*) is the major source for this discussion, but I am also grateful to MacKendrick (1989:131-148) for his synopsis of this text.

as something integrally related to the pursuit of virtue. In some very consequential respects, then, *On Ends* presents a defense of scholarship within the context of religious and philosophical virtue.

Following an introductory statement in which Cicero emphasizes the importance of philosophic study for a virtuous life-style, Cicero devotes Books I and II of *On Ends* to Epicurean thought. Cicero begins by critiquing Epicurean atomic physics, but further denounces the Epicureans for disregarding logic (as in definitions, deductions) and for relying too exclusively on sense-based data. Cicero also finds fault with Epicurean emphases on pleasure and their disregard of learning.

Representing the Epicureans, the speaker Torquatus responds to Cicero's critique. Torquatus reaffirms the centrality of pleasure as the essential good. Virtues, Torquatus states, are to be recognized as a means to pleasure and self control is to be exercised in the quest of more enduring satisfaction. Further, because their system is based on physics, Torquatus contends that, the Epicureans have no need of logic or other rationale to explain human thought and action. He points out, as well, that the Epicureans also are explicitly critical of the Academicians who claim not to have any criteria for knowing things.

Cicero replies to Torquatus in Book II of *On Ends*. Cicero chastises the Epicureans for their lack of clarity and for failing to distinguish human thought from the more instinctive, animal-like dispositions of lower life forms. In addition to neglecting the central role that reason assumes in human acts, Cicero contends, the Epicureans view people as self-serving, pleasure-seeking beings. Cicero also alleges that the Epicureans fail to recognize human virtue and duty, as well as genuine friendship and conventional morality.

In Books III and IV of *On Ends*, Cicero focuses attention on Stoic morality. Cicero begins by observing that the Stoics are more systematic, logical, and precise in their thought than are the Epicureans and, therefore, the Stoics are more difficult sources with which to dispense.

Cato the Younger, who represents the Stoics in Book III of *On Ends*, elaborates at length on Stoic philosophy. The Stoics strive to be one with nature. Viewing nature as rational, the Stoics expect humans to act (as in logic, learning, justice) in ways that are consistent with the objectives of nature. Philosophy, accordingly, is valued as a means of pursuing this objective.

In Book IV of *On Ends*, Cicero directly critiques Stoicism. Cicero accuses Zeno (founder of Stoicism) for obscuring philosophy in needless and misleading jargon. Cicero contends that Academician scholarship is sufficient to deal with the issues most central to philosophy (virtue, knowledge, community).

Likewise, although the Stoics practice logic, Cicero observes that they have added little that is new. Importantly, too, Cicero states, Stoic knowledge of the human world is deficient, notably inferior to that of their (Greek) predecessors. Cicero also emphasizes that because Stoic notions of virtue depreciate the human body, the Stoics disregard the relationship of the body to the mind and, therefore, misrepresent the more complete nature of human experience (and action).

Book V of *On Ends* provides a mixed (more obscure) Academician-Peripatetic vision of the most desired human ends. Building on Antiochus (an Academician who blends the writings of Plato and Aristotle), the speaker, Piso, references the three Peripatetic realms of philosophy: physics; rhetoric (and logic); and ethics (and politics). Piso also notes that later Peripatetic scholars have assumed stances that are somewhat distant from those of Aristotle.

The dialogue subsequently shifts focuses on practical wisdom. This is followed by a reference to Carneades (an Academician). Carneades alleges that practical

action may be motivated by (a) pleasure, (b) the avoidance of pain, or (c) concerns about things that allow one to achieve virtuous ends. The last option is considered most desirable and Cicero describes both the Academicians and the Peripatetics as attentive to concerns with (a) self preservation and (b) the perfection of human qualities through people's activities.

Cicero (V:76-96) concludes *On Ends* as a skeptic of sorts. He accepts the Academician-Peripatetic position of people pursuing virtuous life-styles as the most viable of objectives, but notes that some related issues cannot be adequately resolved. Notably, this reflects the (problematic) relationship of virtue to happiness. This would involve yet further considerations of whether there are degrees of virtue and happiness; of the relationship of wisdom to happiness; and whether people's involvements in some evil would preclude their happiness?

### ***On Fate (De Fato)*<sup>13</sup>**

Although only a partial text of Cicero's *On Fate* exists, this statement assumes a heightened prominence because of its more direct considerations of fatalism, causation, and human agency.

Notions of determinism and free will are enduring themes in philosophy, but they are no less pertinent to theology (as in devotion, sin, and salvation), legal and judicial matters, and the social sciences. Still, in contrast to Cicero's more extensive, grounded considerations of the production of human action in his works on rhetoric, Cicero's *On Fate* focuses more directly on the task of dispelling fatalist thought.

As in *On Divination* (later), Cicero clearly is not opposed to scientific explanations of things or to predictions founded on this sort of wisdom. However, he is specifically opposed to notions of (teleological) predestination and to theories about the human condition that minimize intention, deliberation, and enterprise. Likewise, while the Stoics are the main targets of Cicero's statement, his analysis is directed to conceptions of fatalist thought or predestination more generally.

*On Fate* [extant materials] begins in the midst of Cicero's refutation of Stoic considerations of fatalism or predestination. Thus, we find Cicero (*De Fato*:5-6) making a distinction between the natural causes of things that people experience and the imputations of predestined forces.

Likewise, Cicero (*De Fato*:7-11) notes that the environments in which people live may affect their health, appearances, and abilities to learn and do things. However, this is not to be confused with people's capacities for deliberative intention and focused enterprise.

Cicero (*De Fato*:11-12) also distinguishes divination (spiritually enabled predictions) from the predictions based on scientific inquiry or the systematic observation and study of things. After criticizing various Stoic arguments for their notions of fatalism, Cicero (*De Fato*:18-25) also observes that Epicurean thought (and swerve theory) offers no viable conceptual base for accepting human freedom of will.

Subsequently, Cicero (*De Fato*:26-30) explicitly delineates causal patterns in nature from fatalist assumptions. Cicero further observes that were people truly to yield to fate as the Stoics suggest, people would become inactive and simply wait for things to happen.

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<sup>13</sup> This discussion of *On Fate* has been enabled by the English translation of *De Fato* by H. Rackham (1942a). MacKendrick (1989:199-204) was helpful as well.

Cicero also emphasizes the folly entailed in invoking fate to explain any outcome someone might experience (i.e., if fate is invoked to explain any possible outcome, fate loses all value as an explanatory or causal element).

Cicero (*De Fato*:31-38) references Carneades (an Academician) who argues that if everything were fated or predestined, then nothing would be under the control of human agency. Relatedly, fatalist claims would assume a web of invariant connections between all events. This criticism, Cicero says, does not deny necessary lines of causation for certain (shorter term) things, but it still renders absurd the longer term connections implied by Stoic fatalism.

The remaining [partial] text (*De Fato*:39-45) considers the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus' (280-200 BCE) attempt to accommodate fate and human agency. By acknowledging that voluntary features of minded activity are contingent on different kinds of causes than other sequences of events, Chrysippus appears able to escape the more deterministic aspects of Stoic thought.

*De Fato* (46-48) ends with Cicero's further rejection of Epicurus' "swerve theory" (spontaneous motion of atoms) as an adequate basis for dispensing with fatalism.

### ***On Divination (De Divinatione)*<sup>14</sup>**

Although claims that people can foretell the future through extrasensory means are generally dismissed as untenable in scientific communities in present day Western society, popular interest in prophecy, spirituality, ESP (extra sensory perception), and other modes of foretelling the future remain widespread. As well, notions of religious prophecy and providence are often accorded extensive authenticity even where other modes of foretelling the future are dismissed as unfounded.

As Cicero, in *On Divination (OD)*, makes abundantly clear, the beliefs and the associated practices of divination are deeply rooted in Western social thought. More importantly for our purposes, though, Cicero examines the philosophy that undergirds these claims and subjects these to dialectic scrutiny.

Cicero (*OD*, I:1-7) begins by acknowledging some ancient Greek and Roman beliefs that people can foretell or know future events. While the term divination is rooted in the Roman term *divi*, meaning gods,<sup>15</sup> Cicero observes that all known peoples engage in some practices along these lines. Cicero also notes that some of the most esteemed philosophers, including Pythagoras, Socrates, Democritus, and some of the Peripatetics have condoned divination.<sup>16</sup>

Cicero subsequently observes that the Stoics (Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus, and their students) have developed elaborate theories about divination. In contrast, Cicero notes that Carneades (an Academician) clearly and extensively opposes these claims.

Envisioning *OD* as a supplement of sorts to his *On the Nature of the Gods*, Cicero (*OD*, I:7-10) intends to examine divination with care. If divination has validity,

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<sup>14</sup> I am very much indebted to the English translation of *De Divinatione* by William Armistead Falconer (1923a) and have built directly on his materials. MacKendrick's (1989:185-198) summary statement also has been helpful in conceptualizing this material.

<sup>15</sup> The Greek term is *theos*; as in theology.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle (*On Divination*) also acknowledges the popularity of this practice, but dismisses divination as coincidental at best. As with much of Aristotle's written works, it is not apparent that Cicero has direct access to this text.

to deny it would be to offend the gods. However, if divination is unwarranted, then the people who attend to it are engaged in sheer folly.

*OD* develops as an interchange between Marcus Tullius Cicero (referenced here as Cicero) and his brother Quintus Cicero (referenced here as Quintus).

In developing the case for divination, Quintus builds centrally on Stoic philosophy, but supplements this with material from many other sources. Quintus also develops the viewpoint that an openness to divine sources (as in unusual events, dreams, and states of frenzy) allows the human soul to attain reason and knowledge that are normally and otherwise inaccessible to humans. By contrast, Cicero assumes the position of a scrutinizing Academician in Book II.

Further, although the two brothers assume roles as disputants, the text developed here should not be envisioned as an instance of sibling rivalry. The arguments, instead, centrally revolve around the integrity of fatalism as a philosophic position and divination as a realm of human knowing and acting.

Quintus (*OD*, I:vi) first argues for the integrity of divination by citing the long standing sets of cross-national beliefs and practices of divination (i.e., an argument from consensus). Quintus subsequently distinguishes two categories of divination: natural (people's more direct personal experiences, including dreams, visions, trances, frenzies) and artificial (as in the interpretation of astrological signs, dreams, events, oracles, and signs such as lightening and other exceptional physical or physiological instances).

Quintus (*OD*, I:vii-xvii) proceeds to foster support for his case by providing illustrations of various kinds of divination by referencing a series of literary and historical cases. Quintus (*OD*, I:xviii-xix) then elaborates further on natural divination, alleging that the souls of the people who have experiences of this sort have achieved closer contact with the spirits of gods than have other humans.

Quintus acknowledges the derision that is often directed at oracles and other soothsayers, but still argues for the beneficial results of these predictions. Quintus subsequently argues for divination as this may be achieved through (a) dreams, (b) near death experiences, and (c) uncontrollable states of frenzy.

Turning first to dreams Quintus (*OD*, I:xx-xxviii) provides numerous instances of the prophesizing powers of dreams (including two of his own dreams).

Quintus (*OD*, I:xxix-xxx) also deals with outsider objections that not all dreams are trustworthy or meaningful. To this end, Quintus quickly dismisses those dreams that have been adversely affected by food and drink. Referencing Socrates and Plato, Quintus argues that it is only during proper sleep that the soul is freed from lower-level bodily sensation and becomes more receptive to divine messages.

Likewise, Quintus contends, the souls of those who are closer to death are more amenable to the powers of prophecy. Thus, like the souls of those experiencing states of frenzy and dreams, those who have near death experiences also have greater capacities to be stimulated by divine sources since they are removed from normal human speech (and rationality) and the routine sensations of body.

Quintus (*OD*, I:xxxiii-xxxvii) then proceeds to consider artificial divination, wherein the emphasis is more completely on conjecture or deduction, as when people interpret the meanings of things that they encounter in person, in dreams, or through other signs.

The argument is that those possessing special knowledge of such things will make more trustworthy interpretations. These events or signs are viewed as mediums through which the gods converse with humans. As before, Quintus provides an array of examples from literature and history. These signs also are taken

as indications of the gods' concern for humans, to help protect people from the consequences of otherwise limited human knowledge.

Quintus (*OD*, I:xxxviii-xxxix) subsequently relates Stoic justifications for believing in divination. They argue that since the gods exist, are caring, are omnipotent, know the future, and can communicate with people, divination seems indisputable. As well, Quintus contends, the gods provide people with the means of understanding these signs. Otherwise, these messages would be of no value and the gods would know that.

Again, Quintus buttresses his arguments by reference to the widespread use of, and consensus on, divination. Why else, he continues, would certain signs be presented to people? Still, instead of being concerned about why these things happen, Quintus states, the central point is that they do happen.

Quintus (*OD*, I:xxxix-xlvi) refers to long standing accounts in the literature and cites the various sorts of expertise that different people have developed for divination both in other nations and in Rome. Quintus cites a wide range of instances and subsequent events, thusly signifying the role of divination experts in interpreting the signs presented to them.

Quintus (*OD*, I:xlvii-l) then puts the focus more directly on divination as a privileged form of knowing. He argues that a certain segment of the population will have the capacity, through the heightened receptivity of their souls, to commune more directly with the gods than will others.

Quintus also differentiates those who are wise in terms of (more mundane) human knowledge (and so may forecast aspects of the future on this basis) from those who are divinely-inspired through dreams, signs, and the like. Indeed, Quintus argues, no one naturally divines except through dreams or frenzies wherein the soul more completely dissociates itself from the body.

Next, Quintus (*OD*, I:li-lvii) discusses the wisdom that souls gather through eternity (as essences whose transmigration or recycled existence greatly transcends their immediate human bodily hosts) and through the souls' communes with other souls. It is this more extensive expertise possessed by souls that allows divination by dreams to take place.

Quintus then elaborates on Stoic doctrine, arguing that it is the existence of the gods that enables divination. Quintus acknowledges that people sometimes make mistakes in their interpretations, but that this does not deny the accuracy or value of the great many important instances of divination.

Quintus (*OD*, I:lv-lvii) subsequently refers to the Stoic, Posidonius, who says that there are three sources of divination: god, fate, and nature. By being mindful of nature and watching the signs of things (particularly exceptional instances of things), people may be better able to predict the things that the gods have destined to happen. In addition, thus, to (a) natural instances of divination, wherein things are more directly revealed to specific individuals, and (b) divinely-enabled expertise in divination that certain privileged individuals may possess, people also may (c) study nature and record the implications of specific events so that they can better interpret any (unusual) signs presented to them.

In closing, Quintus (*OD*, I:lviii) reaffirms his earlier beliefs in divination, but stipulates that he does not believe in fortunetellers or other mediums who prophesize for money or entertainment.

Book II of *On Divination* represents Marcus Tullius Cicero's reply to the position presented by his brother. In responding, Cicero (*OD*, II:I-ii) begins by reviewing the texts he has written on philosophy and locating his own pronounced interest in philosophy within the context of his present circumstances.

Cicero (*OD*, II:iii-v) then focuses more directly on divination. First, since divination does not involve phenomena amenable to the senses, Cicero argues that divination cannot be characterized as a science, nor should divination be presumed to substitute for the senses (e.g., can a blind diviner differentiate between colors?).

Cicero also points out the limitations of divining versus knowledge that people have acquired in other ways as well as and other things that people have learned to do in human forums. Quite directly, Cicero states, divination cannot be relied on to replace any realm of knowledge, dialectics, or ethics. Cicero contends that the best diviner is simply someone who conjectures or speculates better than other people.

Next, Cicero (*OD*, II:v-vii) considers the practical and logical relevance of divine prophecy. Cicero says that if the future were fated, then it would not matter what the results of any divination might be. Indeed, the results would only be viable if the future is not fated; and, if the future is not fated, then there would be no basis on which to expect divinations to predict what the future will be.

For those who still persist in beliefs of this sort, Cicero (*OD*, II:ix-x) asks what advantage there is to knowing the future (people's futures often are not pleasant) if things will happen a certain way no matter what one might do. Likewise, Cicero observes, if all is fated, no evil would be avoided by knowing the future.

Next, Cicero (*OD*, II:xi) considers Quintus' distinctions between natural and artificial divination. Noting that Quintus' claims that natural divinations are based on communications of human souls with divine sources, Cicero observes that Quintus has included in artificial divination virtually every mode of conjecture about the future.

Cicero (*OD*, II:xii-xvi) acknowledges that artificial divination may offer people certain political and religious advantages (tactically, integratively), but sees little truth value in artificial divination. As an illustrative case, he asks about the entrails (inner parts of animals) that some use for divination. Cicero asks how knowledge of this sort came about and what sorts of observations, agreements, and sharing of knowledge might be involved. Cicero also asks whether differences in instances of animal physiology reflect the communicative efforts of the gods or simply more routine accidents of nature. Cicero then points out the sorts of inconsistencies and omissions in reasoning that would be required to accept arguments based on signs of this sort.

Cicero (*OD*, II:xvii) also questions the practice of people making sacrifices to the gods in hopes of obtaining signs more favorable to one's interests. If all were fated, this would be pointless. Otherwise, it appears that both fate and the gods are fickle.

Cicero then questions the sincerity of both Stoic conceptions of the gods and Stoic philosophy, indicating that it is little wonder that the Epicureans ridicule Stoic prophecies.

In contrast to the Stoics who contend, "[i]f there are gods, there is divination; but there are gods, therefore there is divination," Cicero (*OD*, II:xvii) proposes that a more accurate rendition would be, "[t]here is no divination, therefore there are no gods." However, Cicero states, even if divination is destroyed, we must still acknowledge the gods.

Cicero (*OD*, II:xviii-xxv) then extends his argument against divination based on animal entrails, contending that similar reasoning also destroys the credibility of other signs (e.g., lightening, thunder, and other meteorological phenomena) as focal points for divination. Instead, Cicero insists, we need to learn more about the way these things are produced in nature.

Continuing his criticism of divination, Cicero also asks about the purpose of the signs that the gods are presumed to present. He asks why they are so obscure. And, if the gods had not intended for people to know things in more direct, reliable terms, would they bother to reveal things to them in riddles?

Cicero (*OD*, II:xxvi-xxvii) subsequently points out the parallels of divination with courtroom cases, whereby through conjecture people may create notably different, but still plausible accounts of the facts at hand.

Cicero goes on to ask, given the great many interpretations people may adopt on things, why it is that the gods would pick things as ambiguous as the various signs that the Stoics and others invoke to foretell (and presumably alter) some of the greatest events in history. Cicero also cautions Quintus and others from assuming that things are signs simply because they appear unusual in certain ways.

Accordingly, Cicero (*OD*, II:xxviii) summarizes his position along these lines. Instead of resorting to explanations based on mysterious forces, people would be better advised to explore the cause of each instance of things with the intention of uncovering the principles that account for manifestations of this sort.

Not only would this (scientific) investigative approach reduce people's fears more generally, Cicero observes, but it also would allow people to better appreciate the fuller realms of (natural) possibilities. Cicero adds that nothing that can occur naturally should be construed as a (deliberate) sign from the gods. Cicero (*OD*, II:xxix-xxxii) then raises some other questions about the integrity of divination.

Continuing, Cicero (*OD*, II:xxxiii-xxxv) admits that it may seem odd that an augur (such as himself), whose task it is to interpret things in religious contexts, would argue against divination. Cicero explains that the practice of augury in Rome has changed over time.

Thus, although this religious office continues to have support of the masses and remains of great (integrative) service to the state and augurs maintain a (ceremonial) prominence in the public eye, Roman political and military figures currently operate (make decisions) quite independently of augury. Hence, while maintaining that the practice of augury entails an art more generally, Cicero can still deny the plausibility of divination.

Cicero (*OD*, II:xxxvi-xxlvii) subsequently discusses a series of superstitions that are evident on both cross-cultural and historical levels. In addition to other unwarranted notions of causality, Cicero (xliv-xxlvii) specifically denounces the validity of astrological claims about people's fates and characters. Instead, Cicero argues for the viability of heredity and socialization for explaining variations in human behavior and for the importance of strategic medical intervention in offsetting some birth defects.

Cicero (*OD*, II:xxlviii-lvii) next turns to what Quintus has termed natural divination. After restating Stoic logic on natural divination, Cicero (*OD*, II:lviii) questions the viability of divination through expressions of frenzy or mania. Cicero asks what weight ought to be given to people experiencing apparent states of insanity? How is it that these people are to be invested with the intelligence of gods? Cicero continues, observing (lvi) that some oracles have been so obscure that even interpreters need interpreters.

Cicero (*OD*, II:lviii-lxxii) then addresses dreams in more direct and extended terms. After acknowledging Quintus' sources, Cicero (lviii-lxv) proceeds to cast doubts on dreams as viable sources of knowledge. Pointing to the misperceptions that are possible when people engage things in highly alert, sensory states, Cicero asks about the reliability of the images that people experience in dream-states.

After observing that people dream most nights, Cicero asks why some aspects of people's dreams would not be expected to correspond with some features of people's subsequent experiences on a chance basis alone.

Cicero also asks why people who ordinarily reject the rationale of conscious persons whom they deem insane would place their trust in dreams that so often are highly confused in essence.

Likewise, Cicero asks if it is feasible for people to wait for dreams before learning about or doing something. He observes, too, that although people dream extensively, people's dreams do not appear to have resulted in the development of any noteworthy science or skill.

After discussing some problems associated with the interpretation of dreams and various skepticisms regarding dreams as a basis for knowing and acting, Cicero further asks why the gods would pick such obscure and untrustworthy methods of communicating matters of importance to people.

Surely, Cicero suggests, the gods would recognize limitations such as these. Also, if the gods wished to send people particular warnings, would it not make greater sense to do so when people are most able (i.e., alert, sensible) to deal adequately with these messages?

A related set of issues pertains to the problems of discerning consequential from irrelevant dreams. Since people appear to have misleading or irrelevant dreams, Cicero asks, do the gods also send false dreams? Further, if people have difficulty distinguishing true from false dreams, of what value are these allegedly divine messages?

Subsequently, Cicero (*OD*, II:lxv-lxvii) dismantles the instances that Quintus has cited as proof of the viability of dreams. Cicero also questions the authenticity of historical accounts of dreams, noting that these cannot be tested. He asks, as well, how these practices were developed and popularized.

Then, sourcing Democritus, Cicero (lxvii) expounds on a natural theory of dreaming that reflects the great capacities of the soul (mind) through sensation, thought, and anticipation to maintain itself (i.e., a consciousness of sorts) even as the body relaxes:

[t]he soul is of such a force and nature that when we are awake, it is active, not because of any extraneous impulse, but because of its own inherent power of self-motion and a certain incredible swiftness. When the soul is supported by the bodily members and by the five senses its powers of perception, thought, and apprehension are more trustworthy. But when these physical aids are removed and the body is inert in sleep, the soul then moves of itself. And so, in that state, visions flit about it, actions occur and it seems to hear and say many things. When the soul itself is weakened and relaxed many such sights and sounds, you may be sure, are seen and heard in all manner of confusion and diversity. Then especially do the «remnants» of our waking thoughts and deeds move and stir within the soul. (Cicero 1923a [*De Divinatione*], II:lxvii)

After disposing with more of Quintus' illustrations, Cicero (*OD*, II:lsx) states that dream interpretations provide more evidence of the ingenuity of the diviners than proofs of relationship between dreams and any particular laws of nature that would allow people to predict the specific outcomes associated with certain dreams. Cicero also raises questions about Quintus' claims that dream interpretation has developed through systematic observation and study. How, Cicero asks, is this possible? Cicero points to the uneven, fragmented, and highly diverse nature of dreams, even where people actually recall these.

Cicero then succinctly summarizes the position he has developed to this point:

[t]herefore, if God is not the creator of dreams; if there is no connection between them and the laws of nature; and finally, if, by means of observation no art of divining can be found in them, it follows that absolutely no reliance can be placed in dreams. This becomes especially evident when we consider that those who have the dreams deduce no prophecies from them; that those who interpret them depend upon conjecture and not upon nature; that in the course of the almost countless ages, change has worked more miracles through all other agencies than through the agency of dreams; and, finally, that nothing is more uncertain than conjecture, which may be led not only into varying, but sometimes even into contradictory, conclusions. (Cicero 1923a [De Divinatione], II:lxix)

After rejecting dreams, along with other claims about divination, as superstition, Cicero observes that anyone who could eliminate superstition would render a great service to their community. However, Cicero adds, his destruction of divination is not to be viewed as a denunciation of religion. Cicero considers it wise to retain the religious institution of his state. Likewise, Cicero acknowledges a personal awe of the cosmos that leads him to believe (not prove) that there exists a supreme being who merits human respect and appreciation.

With *On Divination*, we largely conclude our review of Cicero's works on religion, at least those of a particularly scholarly nature. Thus, *On the Nature of the Gods*, *Tusculan Disputations*, *On Ends*, *On Fate*, and *On Divination* represent remarkably astute contributions to the study of humanly known and engaged life-worlds. In contrast, another volume, *Laws*, which conventionally also has been attributed to Cicero stands notably at variance with the preceding set of works.

### ***Laws (De Legibus)***

Whereas *Laws* (Cicero 1928a) also addresses matters pertaining to religion in very direct terms, this text is of a very different analytic quality from those just considered. The text to which we have access is only a partial manuscript (and possibly was never fully developed). Quite directly, *Laws* evidences little of the conceptual depth that Cicero achieves in his other work on religion and rhetoric. While maintaining some noteworthy analytical emphasis on human reason (especially see *Laws* I:22-32), this volume seems primarily concerned about promoting a civil state or social order that is steeped in the ideology of natural, divinely inspired (vs. humanly constructed) law and maintained through a religiously focused and formally sanctioned code (especially Book II). The extant text of *Laws* concludes with a more general commentary on legal procedures and offices.

Like Plato, Cicero was very much interested in fostering social order and clearly envisioned religion as a tool to be used in pursuing that objective (i.e., generating dedication, integration, morality, and purpose among the citizens in general). However, *Laws* is much less analytically astute than Cicero's other works.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly as well (and in contrast to Cicero's *On Divination*), the author of *Laws*

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<sup>17</sup> I am not disputing the point that Cicero wrote a book entitled, *Laws*, or that some segments of the text to which we have access may have been written by Cicero. However, the version of this text that we have is substantially inferior (as in conceptual depth, comparative analysis, and relative intellectual detachment) to most of Cicero's other works.

(II:30-33) considers divination to be a reasonable, viable line of action and claims privileged status for priests and augers.<sup>18</sup>

While some may claim that *Laws* depicts another, intensely religious side to Cicero, the author of *Laws* clearly is much more intent on establishing and maintaining a religious moral order as an integral component of civil society than pursuing an analysis of religion and law.<sup>19</sup>

By contrast, Cicero's other texts on religion attest to the ambiguous, pluralist, relativist, and humanly engaged nature of people's knowledge of, and beliefs about, and dispositions toward both the divinely and the humanly known world.

## In Perspective

Although often overlooked as a philosopher and analyst of the human condition, Cicero's works in religious studies provide contemporary scholars with a remarkably wide range of contextual, comparative-historical, and analytical materials. Cicero's philosophy may lack some of the originality, depth, and playfulness that one finds in Plato's writings, but Cicero brings together a great many of the most central issues pertaining to religious matters. He also does so in more direct and comparative manners than does Plato.

As well, whereas Aristotle may be seen to share much of the skepticism that Cicero expresses about religion, Aristotle does not debate Platonic (Socratic) religious viewpoints in a comparably sustained manner (at least in any of the works to which we have access).

Accordingly, it is not until Cicero's on *The Nature of the Gods* that Socrates' religious viewpoints (as represented by the Stoics) are subjected to a more sustained dialectic analysis.<sup>20</sup>

Although people may approach Cicero's writings on religion in many ways, one result of Cicero's efforts is a comparatively early, but most valuable excursion into the sociology of knowledge, with a more particularized focus on religion.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> As Augustine (1984 [*City of God*], IV:30) pointedly observes, Cicero's position on divination and augury (see *On Divination*, II:xxiv) is such that two augers could barely encounter one another without laughing to themselves (about the pretenses of their role in divination).

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, somewhat like *De Re Publica* (Cicero 1928b) (which also is an incomplete and generally less adequate text attributed to Cicero), *Laws* could well have been written by another (possibly a very capable Stoic or Christian-motivated scholar rewriting parts of an incomplete statement under Cicero's name).

Although Augustine presumably would have found much in this version of *Laws* that would be conducive to the Christian mission, Augustine (see *Against the Academicians* [Augustine 1995], *City of God*, V:9 [Augustine 1984]) is intensely critical of Cicero for rejecting divine intervention in human activity and divinely known fatalism. Minimally, had Augustine viewed this text (*Laws*) as Cicero's own, we may expect that Augustine would have taken particular effort to point out the contradictions in Cicero's positions.

On another level, there is little evidence that someone as thorough, intensely detailed, and astutely comparative in his analysis of the law and its practice (see any of Cicero's several volumes on rhetoric; e.g., see *De Inventione* [1949a], *Topica* [1949b], *Brutus* [1962a], *De Oratore* [1942b], and *Orator* [1962b]) would produce such a limited and religiously-biased statement as one finds in *Laws*.

<sup>20</sup> While Plato (*Republic*, BII-BIII [see Plato 1937]) is clearly critical of the poetic representations of the gods by Homer, Hesiod and others who depict these essences in ways other than suggest their purity, integrity, or virtuous essences, it is in *Laws* (BX:884-886 [see Plato 1937]) that Plato directly, but briefly, addresses the possibility that divine essences may (a) not exist, (b) need not care about people's activities and injustices, or (c) be easily influenced by sacrifices and prayers. Plato (*Laws*, X:886-893) also briefly considers the possibility of (d) a spontaneous natural, physical versus a divinely ordered universe and (e) that religion is an entirely socially fabricated essence.

As well as asking an extended series of fundamental questions about the existence of the gods, their essences, and how they might engage the world in *On the Nature of the Gods*, Cicero considers a much broader set of matters pertaining to human knowing and acting.

In *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero considers the related matters of the soul's existence, essence, and its (possible) immortality, as well as the ways that people deal with pain, anxiety, and other emotional difficulties within religious contexts. In *On Ends*, Cicero deals with the issues of good and evil and what these might mean in reference to people's experiences with, and quests for, virtue, happiness, and wisdom.

Cicero's *On Fate* and *On Divination* take readers into yet other realms of religious belief and human knowing. Focusing on fate, causation, human agency, and concerns with knowing the future, Cicero covers a wide range of matters such as prophesy, astrology, the interpretation of dreams, superstition, and scientific inquiry.

What is important is not just that Cicero examines this incredible array of materials pertaining to divine and human knowing, but he does so in analytic, comparative terms and in ways that are remarkably pluralist and directly attentive to human lived experiences (as is often done with respect to speech, objects, and action).

In addition to tracing many of the issues that he engages back to Plato and Aristotle, as well as the pre-Platonic philosophers, Cicero provides an invaluable service to scholarship both by (a) providing materials that link the viewpoints of the scholars of his day to the positions articulated by earlier Greek thinkers and (b) through the ways in which he explicitly, openly, and comparatively deals with so many features of human knowing and acting within the realm of religious studies.

Further, rather than talk about religion in more nebulous terms (as in historical eras, structures, variables, forces), Cicero focuses on the ways that people think about, talk about, and act toward one another and the objects to which they attend in the settings in which they find themselves.

Relatedly, because Cicero considers religion as an actively engaged feature of ongoing community life, there is much in Cicero's analysis of religion that resonates with a symbolic interactionist approach to the study of divine and human knowing and acting.<sup>22</sup>

Acknowledging an 'out there' in which people live, act, speak and think, the interactionists are highly attentive to the multiple viewpoints that people may adopt with respect to all realms of knowing and the varying life-worlds that people develop around their notions of what is and what is not.

Adopting a pragmatist viewpoint, the interactionists clearly recognize that in order to act or do anything of a meaningful nature, people inevitably make claims about things; about the things that are and the things that are not. While people may make claims of more explicit and definite as well as more tentative and even implicit sorts – as well as shift or readjust their viewpoints on things – all *meaningful* activity presupposes some knowledge claims.

Insofar as it allows people to do something or pursue some outcome, any knowledge claim has an enabling quality. The question for the interactionists, thus, becomes one of asking how people do things or engage the world about them. This

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<sup>21</sup> The earliest, highly sustained statements of record on the philosophy or sociology of knowledge are those of Plato (see *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Philebus*, *Phaedrus*, *Cratylus* [see Plato 1997]) followed by those of Aristotle (see, for instance, *Categories*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Rhetoric* [see Aristotle 1984]).

<sup>22</sup> For more detailed discussions of symbolic interactionism see (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969; Strauss 1993; Prus 1996, 1997, 1999, 2007b; Prus and Grills 2003).

means attending to when and how people develop, engage, sustain, adjust, and discontinue the viewpoints and practices that constitute the basis of their life-worlds.

Further, recognizing the intersubjective or linguistic base of all human knowing, the interactionists are acutely mindful of the symbolic features of human group life. This encompasses all manners of people (a) sharing terms and meanings for all (objects) of reference; (b) engaging in activity-related deliberations, assessments, and adjustments; (c) participating in influence work, resistance, negotiation, competition and the like; and (d) developing conceptions, assessments, and interconnections of other and self.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, as researchers and analysts, the interactionists consider the meanings that people assign to things and the ways in which people knowingly act toward or engage all of the objects to which they attend.

From an interactionist viewpoint, nothing is inherently religious, sacred, mystical or spiritual in nature. Rather, as Blumer (1969) observes, people give things meanings as they act toward those things and may change the meanings that they give things as they reflect on the situations under consideration and share their experiences of these things with others.

While not subjecting specific instances of human group life (religious arenas or other theaters of operation) to dialectic scrutiny (and the totalizing skepticism) of the sort that Plato and the Academicians commonly employ, the interactionists (as a scholarly community) still approach human knowing and acting in comparative analytic ways.

This involves analysts defining terms and tentative parameters of analysis, focusing on process, examining things in the instances in which they occur, engaging in sustained, comparative analysis, developing generic concepts, and subjecting existing formulations to subsequent examination in other settings at a more generic, comparative level.

Cicero's approach to human and divine knowing falls somewhere between these two modes of analysis. While adopting viewpoints that resonate with Platonist or Academician skepticism (in which all human knowing is doubted [especially see Cicero's *Academica*; also Prus 2006]), Cicero maintains somewhat more extended, pragmatist claims to human knowing and acting than does Plato.

Clearly, Cicero has the greatest respect for Plato's intellect. However, like Isocrates and Aristotle, Cicero has engaged the study of rhetoric in notably more direct, sustained terms and remains attentive to the enabling and limiting features of

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<sup>23</sup> Approached thusly, notions of religion represent socially constructed and socially contestable realms of reality. As with other areas of human endeavor, we may envision people's religious involvements as taking place within a subcultural arena or subcommunity (Prus 1997).

Effectively, this means attending to people's perspectives or world views, the activities in which they engage, their senses of "self and other" identities, the sorts of relationships or bonds that they develop with others, the commitments that they make to particular realms of the activity, the ways in which they express emotionality, and the linguistic fluency that they develop around this field of behavior.

Although the interactionists have not developed a sustained comparative analysis of religion of the sort that Cicero achieves in his works, some interactionist inquiries lend themselves to more generic analyses of matters such as: (a) experiencing the supernatural (religious and secular interpretations); (b) developing religious interpretations and associations; (c) obtaining cultic dimensions of association; (d) recruiting and maintaining followers; (e) dealing with the insiders; and (f) experiencing religious involvements as participants. For some related interactionist materials, see Lofland (1977 [1966]), Shaffir (1974, 1978a, 1978b, 1983, 1987, 1991, 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 1998a, 1998b, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007), Prus (1976, 2005), Kleinman (1984), Shepherd (1987), Jorgensen (1992), and Heilman (1998, 2002).

the humanly known and engaged world in his analysis of religion (see *On the Nature of the Gods*, *Tusculan Disputations*, *On Ends*, *On Fate*, and *On Divination*).

Although Cicero does not engage in the sort of sustained ethnographic inquiry that is associated with the interactionist tradition, Cicero's speakers represent Epicurean, Stoic, and Academician viewpoints in their own terms. Thus, he provides opportunities for readers to witness some ways in which scholars who assume differing perspectives on religion might, engage others within the community.

Cicero does not provide everything that one might desire from an interactionist/ethnographic standpoint, but his analysis of religious viewpoints in these texts (other than *Laws*) considered here is so conceptually encompassing, detailed, and comparative-analytic, that it would be unreasonable to ask him for more.

Indeed, those in the social sciences may be grateful to have the extended treasure chest of materials that Cicero has provided in the realm of religious studies. It is up to us to develop (and appreciate) its value for the broader analysis of human knowing and acting.

Given the vast array of materials that Cicero has developed in his considerations of religion, it has not been possible to give Cicero's work on divine and human knowing the more sustained attention that it deserves. Still, by alerting contemporary scholars to these texts and providing more specific references to the matters that Cicero addresses within, it is hoped that the present statement may enable others to draw more extended linkages with Cicero's works (and the authors that he references) and more contemporary scholarly endeavors.<sup>24</sup>

As Cicero observes in his introduction to *On the Nature of the Gods*, the issues are so enduring and intellectually challenging that they deserve attention from the very best minds.

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<sup>24</sup> Although comparatively few sociologists appear to have examined Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915 [1912]) in sustained detail, this conceptually massive text displays many affinities with a pragmatist/interactionist approach to the study of human group life and would provide another extremely valuable set of reference points for developing comparisons with Cicero's works on religion. For related considerations of Durkheim's "sociological pragmatism," see Prus (2009b, 2011).

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