

Philosophy in Review



J. P. F. Wynne, "Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion: On the Nature of the Gods and On Divination."

Sean McConnell

Volume 40, Number 4, November 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074038ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074038ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McConnell, S. (2020). Review of [J. P. F. Wynne, "Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion: On the Nature of the Gods and On Divination."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 40(4), 176–178. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074038ar>

Copyright © Sean McConnell, 2020



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

J. P. F. Wynne. *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion: On the Nature of the Gods and On Divination.* Cambridge University Press 2020. 318 pp. \$99.99 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781107070486).

In his two dialogues *On the Nature of the Gods* and *On Divination*, written 45–44 BCE, Cicero purports to be addressing a contemporary problem: although they had inherited a rich religious tradition, the Romans did not know the meaning of the rituals and cult practices they performed, nor did they know the nature of the gods they worshipped. This problem motivates Cicero to turn to the philosophy of religion rather than undertake a historical study into the origins of religious institutions in order to understand things (an enterprise undertaken by his contemporary Varro in *Antiquities*)—philosophy promises a way to understand religious practice in an intellectually rigorous way. Critics, however, have often found these dialogues more interesting for what they might tell us about Cicero’s sources and the views of the Epicureans, Stoics, and others in the Hellenistic philosophical tradition. In his book, Wynne overturns such attitudes in magnificent fashion: his careful analysis reveals the two dialogues’ argumentative and literary structure and allows us to see more clearly than before the subtlety and sophistication of Cicero’s own philosophical thinking on religious matters. This book is a substantial and high-quality contribution to the burgeoning study of Cicero the philosopher.

Wynne’s introduction makes the case for reading Cicero’s dialogues on their own merits, with his target audience firmly in mind (a learned Roman intellectual elite, already quite familiar with philosophy), and with his own commitment to Academic scepticism fully acknowledged. This is all in tune with recent trends, but Wynne offers a particularly detailed and engaging justification of an approach that leads seamlessly into his close reading of the target texts, which forms the bulk of the book.

A central claim is that Cicero sees philosophy not only as a way to understand Roman religion but also as a way to moderate it. In the first chapter Wynne makes a very compelling case that this is in fact the central project in these two dialogues: Cicero seeks to identify and mollify two unwelcome extremes that arise from false beliefs about the nature of the gods (namely, impiety and superstition), promoting instead the virtue of piety. The project revolves around what Wynne calls ‘The Central Question’: do the gods care for us? Believing that the gods do not care for us at all undermines Roman religious practices (performing them with such attitudes is impious). Believing that the gods care for us more than they do or in ways that they do not, makes religious practices into superstitious rituals; ideally religious practices are performed with the right attitudes towards the gods (making them pious activities). However, having those correct attitudes (or, perhaps more to the point for Cicero, having intellectually rigorous reasons for having those correct attitudes) requires systematic philosophical inquiry into the nature of the gods, as their nature will determine the answer to ‘The Central Question’ and subsequently what defines virtuous attitudes towards the gods and the pious practice of religion. Although Cicero addresses these concerns with the particular case of Roman religious practice firmly in mind, it would seem that the same sort of issues might pertain more widely in any religious tradition and make Wynne’s book of interest to an audience of theologians and philosophers of religion beyond those focused foremost on Greco-Roman antiquity.

In addressing ‘The Central Question,’ Cicero has his characters present and interrogate positions put forward by the Hellenistic schools of philosophy. In *On the Nature of the Gods*, Velleius put the Epicurean material forward. The basic position is that there are gods but they do not care for us. Piety is defined in terms of our reflection on and admiration for the gods, whose freedom from pain and anxiety we strive to imitate, but we expect no direct benefit from them. Cicero subjects the

Epicureans to strong criticism. A major worry is that this denial of the gods' care for us undermines Roman religious practice (it becomes impious). The Stoic position is presented at length by Balbus. The basic position is that the gods do care for us. However, there is a tension between the Stoic conception of the gods and Roman religious practice. For the Stoics, the supreme god is variously described as reason, the active ordering principle, fire, nature, and the cosmos. This is quite different to the gods of Roman tradition, and embracing the Stoic position would involve quite radical reform of Roman religious cult and practice. The sceptical response is given by Cotta, who subjects the Stoic position to various objections. While holding the position of an Academic sceptic Cotta also represents a kind of conservative traditionalist: critical philosophizing, demanding rational reasons for dogmatic assent to claims about the gods and failing to find any solid reasons, leads him not to atheism or a disengaged agnosticism but something much more intriguing—a kind of fideism where 'scepticism about rational inquiry leads us to fall back on faith or tradition' (167). Cotta stresses the benefits of religious practice based on sceptical rather than dogmatic attitudes (it is the practical benefits for Roman society more generally that keep the tradition going), a theme which Cicero develops further in *On Divination* when, now speaking as a character himself, he rejects the Stoic case in favour of divination, showing that it falls into superstition, but keeps augury and other traditional divinatory arts owing to their practical utility for the Roman body politic (such arts can be practiced piously so long as one has the correct attitudes about what one is doing).

Wynne's treatment of this material is excellent. In particular, he provides detailed discussion of key philosophical questions that exercised the Stoics and their Academic critics—for example, the importance of beauty as evidence of an intelligent and beneficent creator; the problem of evil; the problem of what qualifies as a god (and how many there then are); and the problem of determining between causation, correlation, and chance in the drawing of inferences from the observation of signs, an issue critical for the predictive power or otherwise of the divinatory arts. Wynne interprets these concerns very much in their ancient context and is careful to avoid anachronism. It seems, however, that much of the material could be relevant to contemporary debates in the philosophy of religion—an opportunity that Wynne leaves open for others.

Throughout the book Wynne highlights a major tension between belief and practice and stresses that Cicero's key focus is on orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy—right practice as opposed to right belief. This is certainly true, but the connection is subtle: the outwardly observed performances and behaviours are interpreted differently depending on the beliefs informing them. As Wynne notes: '[Cicero's] approach is to accept the performances as given by tradition, and then to supply from philosophical investigations intellectually rigorous ways to interpret those performances, so that one may render them pious, or at least so that one may avoid the false beliefs about them which make them impious or superstitious' (78). It is beliefs that are the real focus for the practical efficacy of philosophy of religion, for it is beliefs that change upon critical reflection (and in turn transform the outward behaviours into pious rather than impious or superstitious performances). Wynne demonstrates convincingly that Cicero opens up space for piety between the two vicious extremes through his sceptical methodology, which allows him to acknowledge uncertainty but also to assent to what is most persuasive given all the evidence and argument under consideration (he reserves the right to change his mind). For Cicero, the key persuasive evidence that there are gods and that they care about us is the beauty and order in the empirical world, the cosmos being a thing of wonder that is ordered exquisitely for our rational contemplation and even imitation. This observation might appeal to a contemporary atheist as well, but Cicero posits that reflecting on this beauty and order allows us to develop the attitude of piety towards the gods (even if god is really just the cosmos or nature or reason as the Stoics maintain). It must be stressed that as an Academic sceptic, Cicero thinks this

position is more persuasive than the alternatives, in part because of the practical benefits that result, but he is not dogmatic about anything. Indeed, as Wynne concludes, Cicero ultimately offers a model of non-dogmatic religion, in which traditional practices and the benefits accruing are to the fore rather than unbending acceptance of the truth of certain theological postulates, and in which sceptical inquiry continues unabated, involving both the critical questioning of the dogmatists (so as to avoid impiety and superstition) and the continual contemplation of the beauty and order of nature (so as to promote piety).

In sum, Wynne's analysis is detailed and penetrating, and, as befits a work on Cicero, everything is presented in an elegant and engaging prose style. In addition to being a significant contribution to the exegesis of Cicero's religious dialogues, this book also shows that Cicero's philosophy of religion is well worth revisiting in its own right, and it should be of particular interest to contemporary fideists and proponents of religious traditionalism.

Sean McConnell, University of Otago