

On the Nature of the Gods

Marcus Tullius Cicero

45 B.C.

The workings of the universe are under the thoughtful direction of the gods. They are aware of all things and so govern by divine providence. The gods must also be living and possessed of reason, as we are, though their powers far exceed our own. Nature exists as an organized whole, comparable to the body of a plant or an animal, and its arrangement is for the sake of what is best. Chance could not have produced a similar effect.

Book II

Sections 75 – 86

I say, then, that the universe and all its parts both received their first order from divine providence, and are at all times administered by it. The discussion of this question is generally divided by our school [the Stoics] into three parts.

The first is contained in the arguments which declare the existence of the gods, for when that is granted it must be acknowledged that the universe

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is administered by their forethought. The second is that which shows that all existence is subject to a sentient nature by which everything is most exquisitely manipulated, since if that is established it follows that this nature was generated from living first principles. The third division is based upon the wonder which is felt at the phenomena of the earth and sky.

Now, in the first place, either the existence of the gods must be denied, as Democritus by introducing his phantasms, and Epicurus his images, do more or less deny it, or those who grant their existence must acknowledge that they perform some function, and that function an exalted one; but there is nothing more exalted than the administration of the universe; consequently the universe is administered by the divine fore-thought.

If that is not so, there must of course be something of some description which is more excellent and endowed with greater power than god, whether inanimate nature, or necessity speeding on with mighty force, and producing these most beautiful results which we see. The divine nature, then, if it is indeed subject to a power which, whether in the form of nature or necessity, controls the sky and sea and land, is supreme neither in might nor excellence; but there is nothing which surpasses god; the universe, therefore, must needs be controlled by him.

God is not, then, obedient or subject to any natural power, consequently he controls the whole of nature himself. Indeed, if we grant that the gods are intelligent we grant that they are also provident, and

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provident for what is of most importance. Is it then that they are ignorant what things are of most importance, and in what way those things ought to be dealt with and cared for, or is it that they have not the strength with which to sustain and administer what is so vast? But ignorance of things is alien to the divine nature, and difficulty in sustaining a duty because of weakness is by no means consistent with the divine majesty. In this way that which we wish is proved, namely, that the universe is administered by the divine providence.

Now it is necessary, since the gods exist, granting, as is assuredly the case, that they do exist, that they should be animate, and not only animate but also possessed of reason, and bound together by a citizen-like unity and fellowship, ruling a single universe as though it were a corporate state and kind of city.

It follows that there is the same reason in them as in the human race, the same truth in both, and the same law, which consists in the enjoining of good and the warding off of evil. From this it is understood that it was from the gods that prudence also and intelligence made their way to men, on which account intelligence, faith, virtue, and concord were, by the regulation of our ancestors, deified and publicly enshrined.

How can we reasonably deny, considering that we worship the august and holy images of these qualities, that they belong to the gods? If, on the other hand, intelligence, faith, virtue, and concord exist in mankind, whence could they have descended

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upon the earth except from the powers above? And since forethought, and reason, and prudence do exist in us, it must needs be that the gods possess these same qualities on a greater scale, and not only possess them, but also employ them in connection with what is supremely great and excellent; but there is nothing greater or more excellent than the universe; the universe must, therefore, be administered by the forethought and providence of the gods.

Lastly, since I have sufficiently shown the divinity of these objects whose signal might and brilliant appearance are before our eyes, I mean the sun, the moon, the wandering and fixed stars, the sky, the universe itself, and the multitude of things present in every part of the universe to the great profit and advantage of mankind, it is proved that everything is ruled by the divine intelligence and prudence. On the first part of the question enough has been said.

I have next to show that all things are subject to nature and are most exquisitely administered by it. But first it must be briefly explained what nature is itself, in order that what I wish to establish may be more easily intelligible.

For some maintain that nature is a kind of irrational force producing compulsory movements in bodies, others that it is a force possessing reason and order, advancing, as it were, methodically, and showing clearly what it does to achieve each result, and what end it follows,—a force to whose skill no art, or handiwork, or artificer can attain by imitation. For such, they say, is the potency of seed that, although it

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be extremely small, nevertheless, if it has fallen into a substance which receives and encloses it, and has obtained material from which it can derive nurture and increase, it contrives and effects, each in its own kind, for some things to be simply nourished by their own roots, and for others to be further capable of impressions, feelings, instincts, and the creation from themselves of beings like themselves.

Others, again, give the name of nature to the whole sum of things, like Epicurus, according to whose division all existence is made up of bodies, void, and the attributes of these. As for our own school, when we say that the universe is kept together and administered by nature, we do not say so as we would of a clod, or fragment of stone, or something of that kind, in which there is no principle of cohesion, but as we would of a tree or animal, in which there is nothing fortuitous, but in which order and something like art are manifest.

But if the things which the earth maintains by means of roots owe their life and vigour to the handiwork of nature, surely the earth itself is maintained by the same power, seeing that after it has been impregnated by seed it produces and puts forth from itself all things, nourishes and increases their roots by its embrace, and is in turn nourished itself by the elements above which are external to it. Its own exhalations also nourish the air, æther, and everything on high.

If, then, nature upholds and invigorates the earth, there is the same principle of action in the rest of the

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universe. For, while roots cleave to the earth, living things are sustained by being breathed upon by air, and it is air which aids us in seeing, hearing, and producing sound, for none of these things can be done without air. In fact it even aids us in movement, since wherever we go and wherever we move, it seems, as it were, to give way and yield.

The substances, moreover, which are carried towards the centre of the universe, which is its lowest part, and upwards from the centre, and by a circular revolution round the centre, make the nature of the universe one and continuous. It is made continuous by the substances, of which there are four kinds, changing one into another, water being formed from earth, air from water, and æther from air, and in the reverse order again air from æther, water from air, and earth, which in position is the lowest, from water.

In this way by the passage up and down, and backwards and forwards, of these elements, of which all things are composed, the connection of the parts of the universe is maintained. This connection must either be eternal, under the same form as this which we behold, or at any rate of very considerable duration, lasting on for a long and almost immeasurable time.

Taking whichever view you please, it follows that the universe is administered by nature. For the sailing of a fleet, the arrangement of an army, or, to again compare the works of nature, the generating of a vine or tree, the figure, moreover, and formation of limbs of a living creature do not indicate so much skill on

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nature's part as the universe itself. Either, then, there is nothing which is ruled by sentient nature, or it must be acknowledged that the universe is so ruled.

How, indeed, can that which contains all other forms of nature and their seeds, fail to be itself administered by nature? If any one were to say that teeth, and the hair which is a sign of puberty, were created by nature, but that the man himself, in whom they were created, was not formed by nature, he would similarly fail to understand that the things which produce something from themselves possess a more perfect nature than the thing produced.

Now of all the things which are administered by nature the universe is, so to speak, the originator, begetter, parent, rearer, and supporter, and it cherishes and contains them as members and parts of itself. But if the parts of the universe are administered by nature, the same must be the case with the universe itself; at any rate there is nothing in the administration of it which can be found fault with, for the best that could have been produced from the elements which there were has been produced.

If that is denied, then let some one show that better could have been produced. But no one ever will show this, and whoever wishes to amend anything will either make it worse, or will be regretting the absence of that which could not have been attained. But if all the parts of the universe have been so ordered that they could not have been better adapted for use, or more beautiful as regards appearance, let us see whether they are the work of chance, or whether their

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arrangement is one in which they could not possibly have been combined except by the guidance of consciousness and the divine providence.

If, then, the things achieved by nature are more excellent than those achieved by art, and if art produces nothing without making use of intelligence, nature also ought not to be considered destitute of intelligence.

If at the sight of a statue or painted picture you know that art has been employed, and from the distant view of the course of a ship feel sure that it is made to move by art and intelligence, and if you understand on looking at a horologe, whether one marked out with lines, or working by means of water, that the hours are indicated by art and not by chance, with what possible consistency can you suppose that the universe which contains these same products of art, and their constructors, and all things, is destitute of forethought and intelligence?

Why, if any one were to carry into Scythia or Britain the globe which our friend Posidonius has lately constructed, each one of the revolutions of which brings about the same movement in the sun and moon and five wandering stars as is brought about each day and night in the heavens, no one in those barbarous countries would doubt that that globe was the work of intelligence.

[Translated by Francis Brooks]