

# Theophrastus and Political Aspects of the Belief in Providence

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Two sixth-century commentaries on the *Phaedo*, by Olympiodorus and Damascius, splendidly edited, translated and annotated by L. G. Westerink are the latest additions to the many Neoplatonic texts that we owe to his unflagging dedication.<sup>1</sup> As often in the case of such late commentaries, we do not read the masters' own work but one or several sets of notes taken by students who attended their lectures.<sup>2</sup> For Damascius' exegesis of the *Phaedo* we have two such sets of notes—*hypomnemata* may be the right word for them. The fuller of the two includes a brief reference (547, p.279 West.) to an opinion of Theophrastus regarding the belief in Providence. As Westerink observes (*ad loc.*), this testimony has remained unnoticed. It is not found in the collection of Theophrastus' fragments nor mentioned in the standard *RE* article "Theophrastus" by Otto Regenbogen.<sup>3</sup>

Commenting on Plato's account of the underworld, Damascius takes up the question why certain kinds of souls—*scil.* the worst and "incurable" ones—will never leave Tartarus.<sup>4</sup> His answer in *hypomnema* I begins as follows: *πῶς εἴρηται· ὅθεν οὐποτε ἐκβαίνουσιν; ἢ πολιτικῶς; ἀλλ' οὕτω γε καὶ τὰ ἀληθῆ φαίη τις ἄν, ὡς τὸ περὶ προνοίας δόγμα φησὶν ὁ Θεόφραστος.* In *hypomnema* II there is no reference to Theophrastus; if Damascius' comments as here reflected are to furnish some context or background to Theophrastus' opinion, they

<sup>1</sup> L. G. Westerink (ed.), *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*: I, Olympiodorus (Amsterdam, Oxford, New York 1976); II, Damascius (*ibid.* 1977).

<sup>2</sup> For fuller information on these notes see Westerink, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) I 18ff, 28ff; II 15ff. Cf. also R. Beutler, *RE* 18 (1939) 211ff *s.v.* "Olympiodorus (13)." Neither of these commentaries is preserved entire.

<sup>3</sup> *RE* Suppl. 7 (1940) 1354ff. A new collection of the fragments (last edited by F. Wimmer, *Theophrasti Eresii opera* III [Leipzig 1859]) is overdue.

<sup>4</sup> The passage discussed is *Phd.* 113E6. 'Never' is hard to accept for the Neoplatonists, who do not easily reconcile it with the idea of reincarnation or with the tenet of successive cosmic periods. See also Damascius I 492. Of Olympiodorus the corresponding section is not extant. For Proclus' views see Westerink's very informative note on I 547.

must be used with the utmost caution. The passage (147) runs thus: *πῶς οὐδέποτε ἐξίαιεν; ἢ πολιτικῶς ἔψευσται ἵνα εὐλαβῶνται αἱ ψυχὰι τὰ ἀνήκεστα τῶν ἀμαρτημάτων; . ἔψευσται* is a strong word; although political lies had been sanctioned by Plato (*Resp.* 3.414bff), we have no right to assume that Theophrastus too advocated them. The *ἵνα* clause deserves attention; meant to explain the *Phaedo*, it may be useful also for the understanding of Theophrastus.

Westerink (in his note *ad I 547*) has laid the basis for a correct interpretation. The doctrine of divine Providence is “true” for the Neoplatonists (including the latest phase of the school, inaugurated by Proclus, who wrote two treatises in defense of *pronoia*).<sup>5</sup> Theophrastus regarded this tenet (*dogma*) or belief as “politically” desirable; the presumption would be that he supported it on grounds of expediency.

Is it possible to relate this testimony to some other information regarding Theophrastus’ religious or theological outlook? According to a doxographic report at Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.35, Theophrastus conceived of God as a mind and regarded the heaven and the heavenly bodies as divine—sublime doctrines appropriate for a pupil of Aristotle. In his treatise *Περὶ εὐσεβείας* he must have been closer to popular religion; for he here sought to reform prevailing habits of cult and most particularly the customary sacrifices (Porphyry, who quotes extensively from the treatise, shows that Theophrastus condemned the sacrifice of animals).<sup>6</sup> If Theophrastus declared in this work, *ὄλωσ τριῶν ἔνεκα θυτέον τοῖς θεοῖς· ἢ γὰρ διὰ τιμὴν ἢ διὰ χάριν ἢ διὰ χρεῖαν τῶν ἀγαθῶν* (Porph. *De abst.* 2.24, 152.18ff Nauck), a belief in the care and concern of gods for man would seem to be implied. The same impression is produced by passages where people engaged in sacrifices hope for *εὐεργεταίαι* or *εὐποιαίαι* from the gods or are conscious of having received them.<sup>7</sup> Such passages and the generally sympathetic approach to religion that we sense in Porphyry’s extracts

<sup>5</sup> *De providentia et fato* and *De decem dubitationibus* are both extant in Latin and have been edited by H. Boese, *Procli tria opuscula* (Berlin 1960). Damascius’ incidental comments on the subject (see Westerink’s ‘Index’ *s.v.* *πρόνοια*) show him in agreement with Proclus. For the Neoplatonists’ defense of Providence cf. E. R. Dodds, *Proclus, The Elements of Theology*<sup>3</sup> (Oxford 1963) 263.

<sup>6</sup> Porphyry borrowed *De abst.* 2.5–8, 12–20, 21–32; 3.25. Jakob Bernays, *Theophrastos’ Schrift über Frömmigkeit* (Berlin 1866) 38–128, based his reconstruction on Porphyry’s own testimonies. Regenbogen, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 1511ff, hopes to recover further material from Porphyry. I make it a point to stay on safe ground.

<sup>7</sup> See 2.24, 153.10ff Nauck, yet also 12, 124.11 and 31, 162.1ff.

make us wonder what was ‘political’ in Theophrastus’ attitude to Providence. He surely articulated feelings and motivations of which the worshippers would not always be conscious; but whether consciously present or not, they were there for the statesman or legislator to foster as he might see fit. As far as we can see, however, the political point of view is absent from *Περὶ εὐσεβείας*.

*Audiatur et altera pars.* A blunt statement—and one that must have been known to Theophrastus—about political interests at work in religion is found in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (A 8, 1074a38ff). After proclaiming the divinity of the First Mover or Movers of the heavenly spheres as well as of the Heaven itself, Aristotle continues: *παραδέδοται δὲ παρὰ τῶν ἀρχαίων καὶ παμπαλαίων ἐν μύθου σχήματι . . . ὅτι θεοὶ τὲ εἶσιν οὗτοι καὶ περιέχει τὸ θεῖον τὴν ὅλην φύσιν. τὰ δὲ λοιπὰ μυθικῶς ἤδη προσῆκται πρὸς τὴν πειθῶ τῶν πολλῶν καὶ πρὸς τὴν εἰς τοὺς νόμους καὶ τὸ συμφέρον χρήσιν· ἀνθρωποειδεῖς τε γὰρ τούτους καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ζώων ὁμοίους τιςὶ λέγουσι καὶ τούτοις ἕτερα ἀκόλουθα . . .* (all of which accretions must be stripped off if the true and pure doctrine is to emerge). Are we to use this passage as a commentary on *πολιτικῶς* in the testimony on Theophrastus?

Students of Aristotle’s philosophy do not pay much attention to his views of popular or civic religion.<sup>8</sup> If they did, they might have been shocked at finding him so close to the notorious opinions set forth in Critias’ *Sisyphus* (fr.19 Snell=1 Nauck). To be sure there are differences. For Aristotle the gods as such are not an invention of the law-giver. However if both Aristotle and Theophrastus are aware of the political aspects and advantages of religion—and Aristotle at least could hardly be more outspoken about them—it becomes legitimate to ask whether the political approach to religion was shared by other advanced minds inside or outside the Peripatos.

Actually “Die Schule des Aristoteles” (as reassembled by Fritz Wehrli)<sup>9</sup> is very uncommunicative on this subject; yet about the one Peripatetic whose outlook happens to be of special interest it is possible to arrive at some opinion. Demetrius of Phaleron, who

<sup>8</sup> More interest is shown by commentators on the *Metaphysics*. See in particular Leo Elders’ helpful references in *Aristotle’s Theology* (Assen 1972) 242f. W. D. Ross, *Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, 2 vols. (Oxford 1924, repr. 1958) ad 1074A38–B14, collects passages illustrative of Aristotle’s attitude to popular religion. Add EN 1179A22–31, which is of interest for its (untypical) trust in Providence.

<sup>9</sup> Fritz Wehrli (ed.), *Die Schule des Aristoteles, Texte und Kommentar*, 10 vols. (Basel 1944–59).

governed Athens from 317 until 307 B.C. and whose closeness to Theophrastus is attested by Strabo (9.1.20) and by Diogenes Laertius (5.39), wrote a work extolling the power of Tyche.<sup>10</sup> Where Tyche rules, Providence has lost out. And yet even though specific information is lacking, we may be confident that Demetrius, far from interfering with the city's cults, maintained the traditional practices and appreciated them as a guarantee of a healthy and stable community life.<sup>11</sup> For the festivals and all other forms of celebration or worship were so integral to public and family life that, as Plato puts it, "no one *νοῦν ἔχων* will attempt to change. . . even the smallest part of them" (*Legg.* 5.738B5ff, 8; *cf.* D1).<sup>12</sup>

These religious practices were carried on as a matter of course, which for the time of Theophrastus and Demetrius means as a matter of convention. The Greek word is *νόμος*. Euripides' line (*Hec.* 800) *νόμῳ γὰρ τοὺς θεοὺς ἡγούμεθα* is quoted by Wilamowitz as appropriate to the conditions of the early Hellenistic age.<sup>13</sup> Nilsson agrees.<sup>14</sup> The reasons for this lowering of the religious temperature are not far to seek. The trenchant attacks that philosophers like Xenophanes or Protagoras and influential poets, most notably Euripides, had directed against the gods of common belief must have had their effects on the keener minds;<sup>15</sup> and with so much critical thought in the air, even men less receptive to modern doctrines must have had their doubts when they saw thoroughly wicked individuals go from success to success while honest and innocent people suffered 'undeserved' misfortune. How could such experiences be reconciled with the belief in

<sup>10</sup> Wehrli, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.9) IV frs. 79–81 (*cf.* 121). On his paean for Sarapis and the alleged motives for composing it see fr.200 with Wehrli's commentary.

<sup>11</sup> His prohibition (by law) of expensively adorned graves is probably a different matter. U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Der Glaube der Hellenen* II (Berlin 1932) 284, treats it as parallel to Theophrastus' effort to reform sacrificial customs. See also W. S. Ferguson, *Hellenistic Athens* (London 1911) 42. In his *Platon* I (Berlin 1918) 702, Wilamowitz had conjectured an influence of Plato's *Laws* (12.958D–959E). See also Glenn R. Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City* (Princeton 1960) 425 n.88.

<sup>12</sup> See the illuminating discussion of Morrow, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.11) 399ff (esp.402f), 434ff. *Cf.* also O. Reverdin, *La religion de la cité Platonicienne* (Paris 1945). We may note a very similar outlook in Isocrates' *Areopagiticus* (29), a work likely to have been composed in the same years as the *Laws*.

<sup>13</sup> Wilamowitz, *Der Glaube* (*supra* n.11) 271.

<sup>14</sup> *Cf.* M. P. Nilsson, *Geschichte d. griech. Religion* II<sup>3</sup> (Munich 1960) 30: (worship of the gods in the city) "blieb äusserlich beim alten, während der innere Geist immer mehr schwand."

<sup>15</sup> For a recent survey of such critical tendencies see W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* III (Cambridge 1969) 226–49.

gods directing man's fate in a spirit of justice? We need not rely on speculation. The reactions that interest us are set forth most eloquently by Plato in the tenth book of the *Laws*.<sup>16</sup> To Plato's own intention in that section of the *Laws* we shall presently turn; here we use him as an authoritative witness for what he calls the second kind of *asebeia*, *i.e.* the outlook of those who do not question the existence of the gods but are disturbed by *κακῶν ἀνθρώπων τύχαι καὶ ἀδίκων* (899D8ff). Having come to know instances of this kind and hearing such men praised as *εὐδαίμονες* (E2–4), they conclude that the gods neglect human matters as small and beneath their dignity (900B1–3).

If this lost confidence could be restored it would doubtless infuse a new vitality into the cult of the gods. We understand why Theophrastus thought this 'politically' desirable. But how could it be achieved? The great historical developments in the age of Alexander and the diadochs would rather support the belief in *Tyche* (and were actually used in this sense by Demetrius of Phaleron<sup>17</sup>). Nor did the philosophical schools offer much help. We have seen how remote Aristotle's Prime Mover is from civic concerns. Also while Plato as well as Aristotle believe in the good operating as a final cause in nature, the teleology which implements this conviction provides man as such, *i.e.* man as species with what he needs to survive, develop his capacities and reproduce his kind.<sup>18</sup> To secure for the good man a better fate than for the wicked is no part of their teleological scheme.<sup>19</sup> The Epicurean gods must be untroubled. Thus it remained for the Stoics to reconcile teleology and Providence in their new conception of the divine operation. How and with what success their major thinkers attacked this task lies outside the scope of this paper, but we may as well note the admission of the Stoic in Cicero's *De natura deorum* (2.167): *magna di curant, parva neglegunt*<sup>20</sup>—an opinion remarkably close to the second type of impiety in Plato's *Laws*.

<sup>16</sup> *Legg.* 899D–900B. The passage seems to have escaped the historians of Greek religion. See also the playful version in *Ar. Plut.* 28–31, 500ff and *passim*.

<sup>17</sup> *op.cit.* (*supra* n.10) fr.81.

<sup>18</sup> See *e.g.* *Pl. Tim.* 41E ff, 69c ff; *Arist. Part.An.* (throughout, esp.4.10). Cf. F. Solmsen, *Plato's Theology* (Ithaca [N.Y.] 1942) 149ff, on the relations between teleology and Providence.

<sup>19</sup> With some effort (and esp. with *Legg.* 10.903E–904E in mind) *Tim.* 91D5–E3 may be read as covering the ground of Providence.

<sup>20</sup> Note the contrast in length between the section on Providence (*De nat.deor.* 2.164–67) and the teleological account of the world (*ibid.* 73–163). Cleanthes (see his hymn, *SVF* 539.10ff) thought of the divine *cura* as all-embracing.

How does Plato himself counter the denial of Providence? By a sustained and profoundly original defense of the belief in it. For reasons known to us, the defense is not close to the teleology of *Timaeus*. As it has a political aspect, we must examine it for the light it may throw on Theophrastus' opinion or on the passage in the *Metaphysics*, which looks like an obvious commentary on this opinion.

Plato first employs rational arguments for the gods' *epimeleia*—an *epimeleia* that covers everything no matter how small (900E–903)<sup>21</sup>—and then goes on to unfold a sublime vision of a world order in which this divine care operates (899D5ff). In this order of things the individual's fate contributes to the well-being of the whole, but what matters is not his prosperity or success in the course of a single life but the fate of his soul in a sequence of incarnations each of which rewards or punishes his conduct in the previous life.<sup>22</sup>

We would not question the sincerity of these solemn passages, yet it surely is significant that this vindication of *pronoia* forms part of a political work and is closely tied to legislation. The reason for going here so deeply into theological subjects is that θεοὺς ἡγούμενος εἶναι κατὰ νόμους οὐδεὶς πώποτε οὔτε ἔργον ἀσεβὲς ἡργάσατο ἑκὼν οὔτε λόγον ἀφῆκεν ἄνομον (885B4ff), and the proofs for the existence and justice of the gods are considered ὑπὲρ πάντων τῶν νόμων κάλλιστόν τε καὶ ἄριστον προοίμιον (887b8ff).<sup>23</sup> Such statements may illustrate Aristotle's remarks about the usefulness of religion εἰς τοὺς νόμους καὶ τὸ συμφέρον.<sup>24</sup> As for 'persuasion of the masses', which Aristotle lists with the other uses of religion, this is practised throughout the *Laws*, but it nowhere reaches the same pitch of intensity as in our section where the speaker resorts to ἐπῶδοι μῦθοι (903B1ff). Earlier Greek legislators had been able to take the belief in gods and their influence on man's life for granted.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Note esp. 902E; 903B8f ἐπὶ τὸ μικρότατον. . . , εἰς μερισμὸν τὸν ἕχατον.

<sup>22</sup> 903E–905B. Cf. Solmsen, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.18) 152ff, and Trevor J. Saunders' more recent study, "Penology and Eschatology in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Laws*," *CQ* n.s. 23 (1973) 232ff.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. again Morrow, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.11) 399ff and 468ff, about the place of religion in Plato's city. Laws and religion in Plato's city are mutually supportive. The laws, esp. of Book X, secure the right beliefs, and nobody holding these beliefs will transgress the laws. See also Reverdin, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.12) 237ff and *passim*.

<sup>24</sup> *Metaph.* 1074b3ff (see above p.93). With the brutally 'rationalistic' outlook of this passage, however, Plato's legislation has nothing in common. For instances of myths and cults used toward political ends (which need not exclude genuine belief) see M. P. Nilsson, *Cults, Myths, Oracles, and Politics in Ancient Greece* (Lund 1951) 18ff, 30ff and *passim*.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Reverdin, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.12) 8, 247.

How does the content of Plato's 'persuasion' relate to the truth? The logic of his arguments can hardly be faulted,<sup>26</sup> and reincarnation, the subject at the core of the 'incantation myth', had been dear to Plato ever since the *Phaedo* and is here developed in such fashion that momentous new insights emerge concerning the relation between a whole and its parts (903B4ff).<sup>27</sup> Still there are problems. The divinities whose existence Plato earlier in *Laws X* (886A–899C) has demonstrated are not the gods of the civic religion but souls that govern events in the cosmos, particularly in the celestial region (896A–899B). To which kind of deities are the citizens to look with confidence? Some passages in *Laws X* may be read as an attempt to bridge the gulf between the traditional and the philosophical gods.<sup>28</sup> But quite probably the modern student of Plato is more conscious of these differences than Plato himself. For him the gods of his city were real. If conditions were as they ought to be, the religious atmosphere in which a child is brought up ought to imbue it with the true spirit of piety that would make elaborate demonstrations superfluous.<sup>29</sup> In Plato's regulations of cults, priesthoods, festivals etc. there is never a touch of condescension or of a concession made to 'weaker brethren'.<sup>30</sup> For our present purpose this matters more than scholarly theories devised to explain the relation between the gods of cult and Plato's new deities.

In Aristotle there is condescension. For him the πολλοί are weaker minds with limited access to the truth. The religion of the cities may be explained, provisions for it are necessary even in the 'best constitution',<sup>31</sup> but it is not accepted as true.

And Theophrastus? We have seen that he approaches religion with sympathy and confidence. The right attitude to the gods can be

<sup>26</sup> *scil.* of the arguments as such, though criticism might be directed at 901B, where at the beginning of a demonstration the *demonstrandum* (divine ἐπιμέλεια of things in the world) is taken for granted.

<sup>27</sup> For Morrow, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.11) 485, the thoughts of this passage are the "chief inspiration for the Stoic attitude of world loyalty." This is more than could be proved, yet the Stoic 'color' of the passage is unmistakable. It was pointed out by Wilamowitz, *Platon* (*supra* n.11) I 700. See also Solmsen, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.18) 156.

<sup>28</sup> Compare e.g. 900D1–3 and 901C1f with 899B5–9.

<sup>29</sup> See esp. 887B7–888A4.

<sup>30</sup> See Reverdin's admirable pages (*op.cit.* [*supra* n.12] 53ff) on this subject. Cf. also Morrow, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.11) 400ff (esp.403ff on the deference to the Delphic Apollo). Reverdin describes the religion of the Platonic city as "conçue en vue de son utilité comme en vue de la vérité" (245). It is difficult to separate these facets.

<sup>31</sup> See esp. *Pol.* 6.8, 1322B19; 7.8, 1328B12ff.

discerned even in contemporary practices where the original meaning of sacrifices has by and large become obliterated.<sup>32</sup> While we read of early mankind expressing gratitude to ‘the visible celestial gods’ for their gifts, we glimpse a possibility that ‘in the beginning’ human religion was closer to the philosophical concept of the divine.<sup>33</sup> We should not, however, make too much of this possibility; for here again it is far more important that Theophrastus treats religion in a spirit of understanding and acceptance even while he suggests reforms. And if the discrepancy between philosophical theology and civic religion was no serious problem for Plato, it is *a fortiori* unlikely to have worried Theophrastus; for in the meantime the centrifugal tendencies had become far stronger in philosophy.<sup>34</sup> No doubt the belief in Providence would be ‘politically’ desirable, and a Theophrastean legislator would promote it as eagerly as a Platonic, but if we let ourselves be guided by the evidence of *Περὶ εὐσεβείας*, he would not resort to artifice, lie or manipulation. All that he needed was to develop the healthier tendencies present in existing religious practices.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> For the right attitude see the extracts in Porph. *De abst.* 2.24, 152.18ff; for the decline from the original simplicity *ibid.* 2.5ff, 20, 150.4ff.

<sup>33</sup> For the *φαινόμενοι οὐράνιοι θεοί* see Porph. 2.5, 137.17f: the entire ch. is important. Bernays, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.6) 44, refers pertinently to Arist. *Metaph.* 1074b1 (see also *De philos.* frs.12, 12A,B, 13 Ross). On Theophrastus’ own philosophical position see above p.92. I find difficulties—not merely of a textual nature—in Porph. 2.32. That the substance goes back to Theophrastus is vouched for at 162.17ff. The author argues for a cult of the Earth.

<sup>34</sup> See Wehrli, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.9) X 96, for a “Lockerung der aristotelischen Gesamtlehre” in the second generation of the Peripatus. The movement toward different first principles for every subject begins with Aristotle himself. We cannot here go into details of this development. For Theophrastus’ reluctant attitude to ‘system building’ *cf.* also W. D. Ross in the “Introduction” to W. D. Ross and F. H. Fobes (edd.), *Theophrastus, Metaphysics* (Oxford 1929) xxv.

<sup>35</sup> Note, besides passages previously cited, *e.g.* Porph. 2.12, 142.11 Nauck (the gods cause our food to grow); 19, 149.10; 25, 154.1–4 (the gods are cognizant of our conduct); 31, 162.1ff (*ἀγνὰ θύματα* as cause *τῆς ὀσίας καὶ τῆς παρὰ θεῶν ὠφελείας* for the individual).