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Graeco-Latina Brunensia. 2013, vol. 18, iss. 1, pp. [57]-74

ISSN 1803-7402 (print); ISSN 2336-4424 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/127196>

Access Date: 20. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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PRESOCRATIC PHILOSOPHY AND THE ORIGINS OF RELIGION

*Even though there is a large body of scholarly articles devoted to individual Presocratic philosophers and their reflections on the nature of Olympic gods and Greek religion, as well as some good general monographs mapping the “theology” of Greek philosophers (e.g., Jaeger’s *Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers* or, more recently, Drozdek’s *Greek Philosophers as Theologians*), Presocratic hypotheses focused on the origin of religion have received comparatively minor attention. This paper examines the thoughts of Xenophanes, Democritus, Prodicus and the author of the Sisyphus-fragment (traditionally identified as Critias but also more recently as Euripides) in regard to the origin of religious belief while attempting to sketch some connections and similarities between ancient hypotheses and modern theories developed in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.*

Key words: Religion, Philosophy, God(s), Presocratics, Xenophon, Democritus, Prodicus, Critias

Of all that was done in the past, you eat the fruit, either rotten or ripe.
– T. S. Eliot, *The Rock*

I

To better understand the merits of Presocratic speculation on the origins of religious belief, it is helpful to realise that the reflective approach to religion is not something we should be taking for granted. Epic poetry, which had been educating the Greeks about the nature of gods for centuries,¹ declares the song to be the gift of the Muse, since only divine beings

¹ This much is admitted even by the greatest Homeric critics, Xenophanes (ἐξ ἀρχῆς καθ’

really “know” (θεαί ἐστε πάρεστε τε ἴστε τε πάντα); the poet is only a vessel channelling the flow of the divine “truths” which are revealed to his audience (κλέος οἶον ἀκούομεν οὐδέ τι ἴδμεν).² This general framework for communicating knowledge about the gods surely does not leave much room for doubts, criticisms or dissent.

Presocratic tradition broke the spell of epic poetry. The first cracks could be ascribed to the Milesians, but it was Xenophanes of Colophon who, as one of the first Western philosophers, explicitly and critically reflected upon the origins of religion.³ His devastating critique of the Homeric gods gravitates around the moral conundrums arising from a careful analysis of epic poetry. Anthropomorphism is identified as the underlying cause of the creation of the gods and a proposal for a reformed theology that would comply with the demands of growing rationalism is put forward.⁴ Accordingly, extant fragments pertaining to religion can be loosely divided into three groups: the first group (e.g., B 11, B 12) comprises a straightforward critique of Homer and Hesiod while pointing out to the glaring inconsistencies in the behaviour of Olympian deities; the second group (e.g., B 14, B

¹ Ὅμηρον ἐπεὶ μεμαθήκασι πάντες, *DK* 21 B 10) and Plato (τὴν Ἑλλάδα πεπαίδευκεν οὗτος ὁ ποιητής, *Resp.* 606e2–3).

² Homerus, *Il.* 2.484–486.

³ This, of course, might be an illusion created by the fragmentary nature of Presocratic writings. Plato suggests that the “School of Elea” started with Xenophanes and “even earlier” (ἀπὸ Ξενοφάνους τε καὶ ἔτι πρόσθεν ἀρξάμενον, *Soph.* 242d4–5), most probably pointing out, as PALMER (1998: 27) notes, to Orphic theology. Persian religion might have been another possible source of inspiration for Xenophanes, since, if we are to believe Herodotus, the Persians did not worship anthropomorphic gods (οὐκ ἀνθρωποφυεᾶς ἐνόμισαν τοὺς θεοὺς κατὰ περ οἱ Ἕλληνας εἶναι, *Hist.* 1.131), viz GEMELLI MARCIANO (2005: 133). HALFWASSEN (2008: 293) argues for the influence of Anaximander’s philosophical works.

⁴ Quite surprisingly, some scholars deny this. EISENSTADT (1974: 143) claims that Xenophanes’ critique of traditional religion does not entail any significant change in regard to the social status and the importance of Olympian gods, being nothing more than “amused detachment”. He even argues (1974: 147) that Xenophanes “warmly approved of the forms and practice of traditional Greek religion”. GEMELLI MARCIANO (2005: 125) suggests that Xenophanes’ critique is connected with the rhapsodic performance rather than intellectual implausibility and logical incoherence of Greek myths. FEYERABEND (1986: 214) refuses Xenophanic critique of the traditional religion as unfounded, since Homer allegedly never voiced any claims on absolute truth – which is indeed true, I might add, but completely irrelevant, since no distinction has been made between “absolute” and “subjective” truth, only between ἀλήθεια (“truth” as memory) and λήθη as (“non-truth” as forgetfulness), see DETIENNE (1990). I am inclined to share the position expressed by GARCÍA LÓPEZ (1986: 49) and HALFWASSEN (2008: 282), who jointly view the Xenophanic critique of the traditional mythological picture as one of the most acute and biting ones in the whole of Antiquity.

15, B 16), as we shall see shortly, deals with species- and culture-specific anthropomorphism; and lastly, the third group (e.g., B 23, B 25, “Lebedev fragment”)⁵ explores new vistas for an internally coherent notion of deity that will exert profound influence on subsequent Western theological approaches. Considering the aims of this paper, our main focus will lie with the second set of fragments.

Fragments of Xenophanes bear witness to the shifting tendency from *mythos* to *logos*,⁶ or what could be considered as a “reflective approach” with respect to the matters of religion. Epic poetry is no longer protected by the veil of “revealed truth” and Xenophanes recognises the asymmetry between what the gods traditionally stand for and what they actually do in Homeric and Hesiodic poems: perceived (at least in part) as paragons for moral conduct,⁷ they commit shady and shameful acts (ὄνειδεα καὶ ψόγος)⁸; as safeguards of *themis*, divine justice, they act to the very contrary of their assumed role (ἀθεμίστια ἔργα)⁹. This much will be obvious for anyone looking critically at epic poetry, but Xenophanes goes further – dissatisfied with a trivial description, he is eager to identify the underlying cause of this asymmetry, only to find it in what we now usually term “anthropomorphism”.

Xenophanes established anthropomorphism as the cause and origin of the traditional Greek conceptions of gods. They are created (or born), they have human voice, wear human clothes and look just like us (ἀλλ’ οἱ βροτοὶ δοκέουσι γεννᾶσθαι θεοῦς, | τὴν σφετέρην δ’ ἐσθίητα ἔχειν φωνὴν τε δέμας τε)¹⁰. A slight reformulation of an old wisdom summarises the central thesis of Xenophanes admirably: *et creavit homo deos ad imaginem suam ad imaginem homini creavit illos masculum et feminam creavit eos* (*Gen.* 1.27). This much is found in every discussion of Xenophanes and his philosophy, but I would like to dwell on the issue of anthropomorphism a little longer in

⁵ For the so-called “Lebedev-fragment” (not included in *DK*), an important piece of evidence for Xenophanes’ systematic and argumentative approach, see LEBEDEV (2000).

⁶ FOWLER (2011) provides an up-to-date critical examination of this dichotomy. BRIS-SON (2004: 162) comes to a (seemingly) ironic conclusion that the process of rationalization and allegoric interpretation of myths found in many philosophers of Antiquity actually helped the myth as a narrative form to survive, albeit in a modified form.

⁷ Although the connection between Olympian gods and moral order is more tentative than in some other religious traditions, it would be a mistake to deny it completely. For the “moral” functions of Homeric gods, see YAMAGATA (1994: 3–21).

⁸ *DK* 21 B 11 = Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* IX, 193.

⁹ *DK* 21 B 12 = Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* I, 289.

¹⁰ *DK* 21 B 14 = Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromata* V, 109.

order to show an interesting dichotomy – having been long forgotten, it has only recently begun to resurface in religious studies.

In fragment B 15, Xenophanes, like philosophers do time and again, carries out a peculiar thought experiment. He tries to imagine what it would be like if cattle, horses or lions were capable of expressing their ideas about gods. He does not credit them with speech (wisely enough, since, as his later colleague Ludwig Wittgenstein famously asserted, “If a lion could speak, we could not understand him”),¹¹ but grants these animals the ability to draw (or paint). Xenophanes thinks that cattle, horses and lions would represent their gods as boomorphic, hippomorphic and leontomorphic, respectively. The form (and other important attributes as well, if we might conjecture further) of these animal-gods would be similar to the forms of the animals themselves (καί <κε> θεῶν ιδέας ἔγραφον καὶ σώματ’ ἐποίουν | τοιαῦθ’ οἷόν περ καὶ τοὶ δέμας εἶχον <ἕκαστοι>).

In the fragment B 16, Xenophanes turns to yet another aspect of anthropomorphism in religious representations. He notes that the inhabitants of Africa represent their gods as having black complexion and a flat nose, while Thracians, on the other hand, represent their deities as having light-blue eyes and red hair. This suggests that clear differences can be found in the representations of gods between different races and geographical areas.

When considered jointly, these two fragments (B 15 and B 16) reveal a not-so-obvious feature of our religious representations. The fragment B 15 establishes what is now commonly termed “cross-cultural differences” in representations of gods and it seems that these has been arguably quite as wide in Xenophanes’ time as in our own. I would like to term this aspect of anthropomorphism “culture-specific”. Yet the fragment B 16 operates on the level at which many significant features of cross-cultural representations converge as universal and characteristic for the human race, in contrast with other animals – if they would not, no comparison between the collective representations of the gods of humans, cattle, horses and lions would be possible. This aspect of anthropomorphism could be then identified as “species-specific”. In other words, Xenophanes seems to recognise the differences in the representations of gods have both a cultural and biological basis – cultural differences are clear from empirical observations while biological differences are hypothesised via thought experiment.

If the proposed interpretation is correct, the originality and depth of Xenophanes’ thoughts about the origins of religion has been made manifest, since throughout the twentieth century, the biological basis constraining the plausible candidates for religious representations has been constantly and

¹¹ WITTGENSTEIN (2001: 190).

consistently downplayed or ignored.¹² It has only been over the last twenty years that the importance of “species-specific” anthropomorphism has been getting its due attention thanks to the efforts of the Cognitive science of religion (*CSR*).¹³ When Steward Guthrie, one of the forerunners of the cognitive approach, states in no uncertain terms that “religion is anthropomorphism”,¹⁴ the similarity with the basic explanatory framework of Xenophanes can hardly be any more obvious.

The precise structure and content of Xenophanes’ positive theology is not directly relevant to the purpose of this paper; suffice to say that it spawned many mutually exclusive interpretations in the past – best exemplified by the fact that according to Burnet, Xenophanes “would have smiled if he had known that one day he was to be regarded as a theologian”;¹⁵ according to Jaeger, he cannot be understood in any other way¹⁶ – and the situation has hardly changed up to the present day.¹⁷ Yet one important aspect is noteworthy in regard to the subsequent discussion of Presocratic thought on the origins of religion.

Xenophanes identifies commonly held representations of gods as false, but (as far as we can conjecture from the fact that he does develop positive theology) this does not amount to the straightforward rejection of the divinity. The notion of the gods only has to be modified and made to conform to the demands of logical coherence brought to light by the recent shifts in the Greek intellectual space. In other words, Xenophanes wants to rationalise the idea of the god in order to make it more apt for use in the world where

¹² This situation was symptomatic not only for the study of religion, but for social sciences in general. For an illuminating account of the revolution that is slowly but surely taking place, viz BARKOW – COSMIDES – TOOBY (1992), especially the introductory study by TOOBY – COSMIDES (1992: 19–136).

¹³ The constraints of this paper do not allow any detailed discussion of *CSR*, see BOYER (2001) and TREMLIN (2006) for concise general introductions; BURKERT (1996) provides some interesting links between ancient religions and biological phenomena.

¹⁴ GUTHRIE (1993: 178).

¹⁵ BURNET (1920: 129).

¹⁶ JAEGER (1947: 49). The positions of Burnet and Jaeger have been directly juxtaposed as early as VLASTOS (1952: 101), recently again by KIRK – RAVEN – SCHOFIELD (2004: 215).

¹⁷ Scholarly literature is chock-full of mutually exclusive interpretations of Xenophanes’ own ideas about the character of the divine. Some regard him as a monotheist, e.g., GUTHRIE (1962: 375); BARNES (1982: 92); KIRK – RAVEN – SCHOFIELD (2004: 218–219); HALFWASSEN (2008: 276), some strictly deny it, e.g., HERSCHBELL (1983: 130–131); GEMELLI MARCIANO (2005: 127); for some, Xenophanes is a proponent of the pantheistic worldview, e.g., GUTHRIE (1962: 382–383), for others, he is thought to have clearly separated the divine from the world, e.g., HALFWASSEN (2008: 290).

the strength of the mythical picture begins to fade away.¹⁸ As we shall see later on, other Presocratics did not try to have it both ways and started to formulate more or less overtly “atheistic” hypotheses.

II

If Xenophanes had been one of the first philosophers to explicitly criticise the traditional religious ideas of Greeks, then Democritus was the first one to introduce the possibility of an aetiological explanation of the representations of gods based both on his atomistic epistemology and anthropological speculation. Consequently, we find two fairly different hypotheses about the origin of religion in the extant fragments of Democritus. The first one, firmly grounded in the conceptual framework of atomistic philosophy, suggests that our ideas of gods are formed when thin films of atoms (resembling the form of gods) affect our senses. The second hypothesis is more akin to the anthropological speculation (having no immediate connection with atomism) and suggests that the idea of the gods is, loosely speaking, the consequence of our inability to explain meteorological phenomena “naturally”. While not mutually inconsistent, it is not completely clear how these two hypotheses can be united in one single interpretation, which is most likely the reason why scholars usually tend to reject the “anthropological speculation” in favour of the hypothesis with unequivocal connection with atomistic philosophy.¹⁹ I will try to show that both hypotheses can be interpreted in a consistent and mutually reinforcing fashion.

Curiously enough, both explanations of the origin of religion are best attested by the same author, Sextus Empiricus. Sextus first seems to suggest that the origin of religion is to be found in an attempt to explain meteorological phenomena (τὰ ἐν τοῖς μετεώροις παθήματα)²⁰ – our ancestors have been unable to explain some puzzling features of the natural world and subsequently identified them as (caused by) gods. This anthropological hypothesis also seems to be attributed to Democritus by the Epicurean Philodemus in his work *On Piety*.²¹ For both authors, Democritus then ex-

¹⁸ PALMER (1998: 19).

¹⁹ HENRICHS (1975: 103) suggests that the anthropological explanation is “less sophisticated”; GUTHRIE (1965: 478) prefers the εἰδωλα-hypothesis, since it is, in his view, “more interesting and individual”.

²⁰ DK 68 A 75 = Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* IX, 24.

²¹ DK 68 A 75 = Philodemus, *De pietate* 5a p. 69 Gomperz. The attribution of this fragment to Democritus has been argued for by HENRICHS (1975: 104) on both contextual

emphasizes the universal tendency of Presocratic philosophy to explain, in a naturalistic fashion, phenomena traditionally associated with the gods of Homeric religion. The inverse of this tendency (namely the positive association of gods and meteorological phenomena) would then serve as a basis for the explanation of the origin of religion.

The second hypothesis, also suggested by Sextus,²² explains the origin of religion via the effects of thin films of atoms (εἶδωλα), which, according to the standard interpretation of the atomistic theory of perception, are “peeled off” from the surface of objects (objects themselves being more or less a stable collections of atoms) and subsequently affect the organs of sense and produce sensations. An important question, obviously, is what exactly is denoted by the notion “εἶδωλα”. Cicero’s exposition in *De natura deorum* offers a variety of possible answers.²³

(1) The first interpretation is to treat εἶδωλα as being synonymous with the collection of atomistic terms denoting thin films of atoms, as specified above, such as δείκελον or ἀπόρροια,²⁴ corresponding to Latin *imagines* found in Cicero. The term “εἶδωλα” then denotes films of atoms “released” or “emanated” by the gods themselves. We can find support for this interpretation in the works of Clement of Alexandria, who (with a monotheistic twist, which is, after all, expected) explicitly specifies that εἶδωλα are being emanated from some (further unspecified) “divine substance” (ἀπὸ τῆς θείας οὐσίας).²⁵

(2) The second interpretation is to treat εἶδωλα as denoting thin films of atoms (as in [1]), but these have no “real” counterparts in gods. This much seems to be indicated by Sextus (quoted above): εἶδωλα cause a sensation (φαντασίαν), but, interestingly enough, they have no extension, no matching correlate in the world: μηδενὸς ἄλλου παρὰ ταῦτα ὄντος θεοῦ. The obvious problem that this interpretation has to solve is the origin of εἶδωλα – if the gods are not causing them by emanation, then what does? We can only conjecture that they are spontaneous temporary combinations of atoms flying through the void.²⁶

and stylistic grounds, in my opinion successfully. The fragment should be therefore classified as “B” in Diels – Kranz.

22 DK 68 B 166 = Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* IX, 19.

23 DK 68 A 74 = Cicero, *De natura deorum* I, 12, 29.

24 DK 68 B 123 = *Etymologicum Genuinum* s.v. “δείκελον”.

25 DK 68 A 79 = Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromata* V, 88.

26 Lucretius (*De rerum natura* 4.735–738) explains the origin of the ideas of nonexistent beings (such as Centaurs) roughly in this manner – either they are formed spontaneously in the air, or they are combinations of the ideas of different provenience: *omne*

(3) The third interpretation takes εἶδωλα to describe the gods themselves. The ontological commitment of this interpretation is the same as in (1), the difference being that εἶδωλα do not denote thin atomic films, but the gods themselves. This seems to be supported by the fragment of Hermippus, who states that Democritus used the term εἶδωλα to describe supernatural beings (εἶδωλα αὐτοὺς [τοὺς δαίμονας] ὀνομάζων).²⁷ More support for this interpretation can be found in Cicero's *De natura deorum* (quoted above), where the speaker suggests that εἶδωλα could, in addition to the films, also denote the object that is emanating these films (*tum imagines eorumque circumitus in deorum numero refert, tum illam naturam quae imagines fundat ac mittat*).

It does not seem that the modern scholarship has settled the issue in favour of one interpretation or another.²⁸ The most plausible solution to the problem, in my opinion, has been presented by Jonathan Barnes,²⁹ which I would like to present here in brief, suggesting a modification in chronology, which I hope will provide a more coherent overall interpretation. Barnes argues that every single relevant fragment pertaining to the origins of religion is ultimately based upon the passage in Sextus quoted above (B 166),³⁰ which, as we have seen, denies that there is any objective correlate to the films of atoms affecting our senses (μηδενὸς ἄλλου παρὰ ταῦτα ὄντος θεοῦ), interpretation (2). According to Barnes, εἶδωλα represent “dream images”, atoms lumped together spontaneously without any more fundamental or stable atomic structure that could account causally for their existence.

How does this square with the anthropological hypothesis introduced at the beginning of this section? Scholars tend to suggest that these two hypotheses are not mutually compatible,³¹ yet Barnes is trying to unite them

genus quoniam passim simulacra feruntur; | partim sponte sua quae fiunt aere in ipso, | partim quae variis ab rebus cumque recedunt | et quae confiunt ex horum facta figuris.

²⁷ DK 68 A 78 = Hermippus, *De astrologia* I 16, 122 p. 26, 13 Kroll–Viereck.

²⁸ GUTHRIE (1965: 482), for instance, thinks that this incoherence reflects Democritus' double allegiance to both “intellectual loyalty to materialism” and to religious and aesthetic values; according to MCGIBBON (1965: 392), Democritus uses the term equivocally, at times denoting thin atomic films, at times gods themselves. VLASTOS (1945: 581, n. 24) suggests (without any further argumentation) that εἶδωλα are “an aetiological explanation of the popular belief in the gods, and nothing more”. The interpretation of Clement (ἀπὸ τῆς θείας οὐσίας) is his own idiosyncratic addition, probably due to the contamination of Democritus' thought with that of Epicurus.

²⁹ BARNES (1982: 460).

³⁰ EISENBERGER (1970: 142) also considers B 166 to be “glaubwürdig”.

³¹ HENRICH (1975: 103); GUTHRIE (1965: 478). If my reading of MCGIBBON (1965:

in a single interpretation.³² According to him, religion first originated as a reaction to meteorological phenomena (“anthropological speculation”) and its core concepts were used later on to explain daunting “dream images” people have been confronted with and baffled by (“atomistic hypothesis”). While the effort to unite both hypotheses is laudable, I do not quite understand the reasoning behind the proposed chronology. It seems to me that the inverse of the chronological scenario proposed by Barnes would make much more sense and provide for better coherence between the two hypotheses: People are *first* confronted with εἰδῶλα or “dream images” and only *then*, once they possess conceptual basis provided by the εἰδῶλα, use these “images” to account for the puzzling phenomena that resist “naturalistic” explanation. The formation of the concept is necessarily a *sine qua non* for its use in an explanation and the inverse chronology is argued for on purely logical grounds.

Far from corroborating the interpretation proposed above (which would amount to untenable anachronism), it is worth noting that the idea echoes yet another fundamental proposition of *CSR*. In connection with Xenophanes, we uncovered one of them, which is the simple fact that religion is not a purely cultural construct; its form is severely constrained by our biological endowment. Another important thesis of *CSR* is mirrored in the chronology proposed by my preferred reading of Democritus, namely, that people *first* spontaneously (and largely non-consciously) create god-concepts (or, to use the technical newspeak of *CSR*, minimally counter-intuitive supernatural agents) and only *then* (once the concepts are in place, *i.e.*, in the human mind) use these concepts to account for the puzzling features of the world around them (*e.g.*, as an explanation of the baffling meteorological phenomena, as Democritus suggests).³³

Leaving *CSR* aside, Democritus also seems to herald some of the basic ideas of the founding fathers of modern anthropology, Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) and James George Frazer (1854–1941), who developed a theoretical framework that eventually came to be known as “Intellectual-

395) is correct, his interpretation is strangely confusing, since he argues (based on the testimonies found under A 75) that Democritus “followed other Presocratics in rejecting the association of the gods with meteorological phenomena” – but A 75 contains precisely the passage in which Sextus suggests that Democritus made a positive and relevant connection between the origin of gods and the explanation of the meteorological phenomena.

32 BARNES (1982: 461).

33 AS TREMLIN (2006: 144) aptly notes, albeit in a different context, “gods are in fact foundational and it is *religion* that is instrumental”.

ism”, “Rationalism” or (much later) the “Neo-Tylorian approach”.³⁴ Tylor, while attempting to account for the origins of religion, suggests that the foundation on which every single religion rests is the existence of supernatural beings (which is implicitly true for every ancient Greek, philosopher or otherwise; it is also true of *CSR*).³⁵ The concept of these supernatural beings, according to Tylor, is derived from our dreams and visions and he positively acknowledges that he can think of no other way of how to arrive to the idea of a supernatural being.³⁶ The only small difference between the approach of Democritus and Tylor in this respect is that the (comparatively) modern scholar adds the concept of soul into the equation (we first experience dreams, then the concept of the soul is formed on the basis of these dreams and lastly we form the concept of god based on the concept of the soul), while Democritus, according to the interpretation introduced above, simply skips the middleman – we experience “dream images” (εἰδωλα) that provide the basis for the formation of our concepts of the gods and we then use these concepts to explain meteorological phenomena.

III

Critias, an unscrupulous Athenian politician, sophist and author, implicated in the desecration of the herms in 415, leader of the Thirty from 404–403 BC and, according to Philostratus, “the worst of the worst” (κάκιστος ἀνθρώπων ἔμοιγε φαίνεται ξυμπάντων),³⁷ has been traditionally identified as the author of 42 verses of an otherwise unknown play preserved by Sextus Empiricus,³⁸ which runs under the name *Sisyphus*.³⁹ However, the fragment, dubbed by Kahn to be “best-preserved example of fifth-century accounts of the origin of religion, and [...] the most outspoken example of fifth century atheism”,⁴⁰ has uncertain authorship.⁴¹ With respect to the aims of

³⁴ VIZ LAWSON – MCCAULEY (1990: 33–37); GUTHRIE (1993: 21–27); BOYER (2001: 10–19) for a critical review.

³⁵ TYLOR (1883: 426–427).

³⁶ TYLOR (1883: 450).

³⁷ Philostratus, *Vitae Sophistarum* I, 501 Olearius = *DK* 88 A 1.

³⁸ *DK* 88 B 25 = Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* IX, 54.

³⁹ Regardless of the question of authorship, it seems evident from the formal analysis that *Sisyphus* is a Satyr play (e.g., the use of diminutives like *χορῳτοί*), viz, e.g., DIHLE (1977: 37); DAVIES (1989: 29); SANTORO (1994: 419).

⁴⁰ KAHN (1997: 248).

⁴¹ Unfortunately, there is no space for a thorough analysis here. The tradition established

this paper, it is only a minor inconvenience, especially so if we factor in the fact that even if the authorship would be settled with any reasonable degree of certainty (which I doubt highly), we would still be left with the inevitable question of whether (or to what extent) a speech from a play represents the true opinions and beliefs of its author.⁴²

The Sisyphus-fragment presents a monologue (the speaker is presumably Sisyphus himself) that has proved to be one of the most creative approaches to religion in Greek philosophy. It describes how our ancestors went from their “natural state” to the creation of society, the establishment of laws and the introduction of religion itself. As was the case with Democritus (viz above), we find a close connection between meteorological phenomena and the origin of religion. The author of the Sisyphus-fragment speaks about fears (δέος, v. 28; δέϊμα, v. 29; φόβους, v. 44, 52) and relates them closely to the characteristic attributes of Zeus (ἀστραπάς, v. 46; κτυπήματα βροντῆς, v. 47–48; ὄμβρος, v. 51). Yet these fears are not substantial for the introduction of religion, only a clever device exploited to give religion an air of plausibility.

The fragment starts with the description of the “natural state” of human affairs, which is “without order, animal-like and governed by brute force” (ἄτακτος ἀνθρώπων βίος | καὶ θηριώδης ἰσχύος θ’ ὑπέρτης, v. 16–17).⁴³

by Wilamowitz argued Critias as the author of the fragment. This is accepted, *e.g.*, by GUTHRIE (1971: 243), who not only claims that Critias is an author, but also that the fragment accurately represents his own philosophical views. In the second half of the twentieth century, the tide turned in favour of Euripidean authorship with the study published by DIHLE (1977: 37 *et passim*); WINIARCZYK (1987: 45) challenged Dihle’s interpretation and argues for the authorship of Critias; YUNIS (1988: 45–46), one year later, supports Euripides (he supports Dihle’s thesis by plotting the connection between two additional lines from a fragment by Euripides and the Sisyphus-fragment); KAHN (1997: 249) recently claimed that the authorship of Euripides is “widely and rightly accepted”, yet as BREMMER (2007: 16–17) points out, the latest edition of Euripidean fragments (*TGFr* 2.658, ed. Kannicht) attributes the play (once again) back to Critias. For a detailed discussion of the problem, viz also DAVIES (1989: 24–28). As it often happens in Classical philology, the problem seems to be undecidable and the best we can do is to simply state that some ancient sources and stylistic criteria point to Euripides, some other to Critias.

⁴² SUTTON (1981: 38); DAVIES (1989: 28). SANTORO (1994: 424, 429) also suggests that the burlesque tone of the fragment is hardly appropriate for the presentation of serious philosophical topics, but I tend to disagree: Straight-face exposition of these undoubtedly dangerous thoughts would run high risks of indictment under the decree of Diopheites – the presentation in the guise of a farce or comedy might have been the only way to expose these thoughts in public.

⁴³ This, of course, sounds strikingly similar to Hobbes’ description of the “natural state” as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”, viz HOBBS, *Leviathan*, p. 76 (Chapter

Since this wretched state is hardly acceptable for the population, people introduce laws to punish wrongdoers – creating the first society – but the problem does not seem to go away. Laws are binding only to the extent to which the society is able to enforce them. Since the permanent control of all individuals is practically impossible, some violations of the law go unpunished and the old problem creeps back through the backdoor. Enter religion.

The speaker of the Sisyphus-fragment introduces us to a very ingenuous and wise gentleman (πικνός τις καὶ σοφὸς γνώμην ἀνήρ, v. 27), who came up with an idea of the divine in order to fix the troubled proto-society once and for all. This divine being – not unlike the Big Brother from Orwell’s *1984* – hears everything people say (ὅς πᾶν τὸ λεχθὲν ἐν βροτοῖς ἀκούσεται) and sees everything they do (<τὸ> δρώμενον δὲ πᾶν ἰδεῖν δυνήσεται, v. 35–36). Religion is nothing more and nothing less than a social construct created to enforce laws and instil fear in the hearts of potential wrongdoers. God, as a divine policeman, strengthens the moral order that society has agreed upon. The origin and the function of religion are clearly correlated with efforts to integrate the society, or, as Guthrie puts it, religion is “political invention to enforce good behaviour”.⁴⁴

This interpretation of the origin of religion has been hugely influential and eventually became more widely known as a remark (in fact a poem) by Voltaire,⁴⁵ in which the French philosopher famously states that if the god would not have existed, we would have to create him (“*si Dieu n’existait pas, il faudrait, l’inventer*”). The reason for this “invention” is strikingly similar to the reasons laid down in the Sisyphus-fragment – so that the mighty shall restrain from inflicting injustice on the poor innocents: “*Mon vengeur est au ciel: apprenez à trembler. | Tel est au moins le fruit d’une utile croyance.*”

However, the influence of this approach on the study of religion and its origins is not limited to occasional remarks in the poems of the philosophers. Considerations in the vein of the Sisyphus-fragment caused profound shifts in the religious studies in the early years of twentieth century and gave rise to the methodology of social functionalism. Émile Durkheim, one of the founding fathers of this approach, gives the following definition of religion in his famous book *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: “système solidaire de croyances et de pratiques relatives à des choses sacrées, c’est-à-dire séparées, interdites, croyances et pratiques qui unissent en une même communauté morale, appelée Église, tous ceux qui*

13, Part 9).

⁴⁴ GUTHRIE (1971: 244).

⁴⁵ VOLTAIRE, *Épître CIV. A l’auteur du livre des Trois Imposteurs*, p. 403.

y adhèrent.”⁴⁶ Of course, there is no explicit distinction of the “profane” and “sacred” in the Sisyphus-fragment, but the rest yields a close match – religion originates and functions as a social glue that keeps the community together by integration and reinforcement of its moral intuitions. Even the critics of social functionalism agree that, according to this approach, religion “is a way to create and maintain social solidarity”,⁴⁷ “was invented to perpetuate a particular social order” and “supports morality”.⁴⁸ Needless to say, these definitions converge very closely to the central thesis introduced, probably for the first time in Western thought, by the Sisyphus-fragment.

IV

Prodicus, a member of the legendary triumvirate of Greek sophists, “justly hailed as one of the earliest anthropologists”,⁴⁹ suggested a hypothesis that tries to explain the origin of religion essentially in a symbolic way. Alongside with the previously discussed Sisyphus-fragment, this manner of treating religious phenomena can be viewed as a practical application of the trademark Sophistic distinction of everything that is given “naturally” (φύσει) and is, therefore, unchangeable and “objective”, from what is given “by law” (νόμῳ), conventionally and “subjectively”. This tendency, clearly evident in Sophistic accounts of religion, is unanimously agreed upon in scholarly discourse⁵⁰ and Plato had already applied the φύσει vs. νόμῳ dichotomy to religious matters in the last book of his *Laws*: Θεοῦς, ὃ μακάριε, εἶναι πρῶτόν φασι οὔτοι τέχνη, οὐ φύσει ἀλλὰ τισιν νόμοις, καὶ τούτους ἄλλους ἄλλη, ὅπη ἕκαστοι ἑαυτοῖσι συνωμολόγησαν νομοθετούμενοι.⁵¹

Unfortunately, the original hypothesis of Prodicus is, throughout the fragments, contaminated with thoughts of another author, namely Perseus, Stoic philosopher active in the third century BC and a favourite student of the founder of the school, Zeno of Citium. We are therefore faced with the problem of drawing the line between the two authors and isolating the original hypothesis of Prodicus from possible later additions by Perseus.

⁴⁶ DURKHEIM (1960: 65).

⁴⁷ GUTHRIE (1993: 16).

⁴⁸ BOYER (2001: 23).

⁴⁹ GUTHRIE (1971: 242).

⁵⁰ BAŃKOWSKI (1962: 12); GUTHRIE (1971: 227); GARCÍA LÓPEZ (1986: 60); WINIARCZYK (1990: 10).

⁵¹ Plato, *Leges* 889e3–5.

What can be stated with certainty is that both philosophers explained the origins of religion in the context of the deification of things (and/or people) beneficial to human kind. This essentially utilitarian interpretation is safely documented in all extant fragments: τρέφοντα καὶ ὠφελοῦντα in Philodemus,⁵² *ea quae prodessent hominum vitae* in Cicero,⁵³ πάντα τὰ ὠφελοῦντα τὸν βίον in Sextus,⁵⁴ *inventis novis frugibus utilitati hominum profuerunt* in Minucius Felix,⁵⁵ πανθ' ὄλως τὰ χρήσιμα πρὸς τὸν βίον in the papyri from Herculaneum.⁵⁶

A closer look at the fragments could, in my opinion, warrant a distinction between two philosophers, although scholars usually tend to accept both approaches as Prodicus' own (yet without any compelling justification).⁵⁷ The remarks by Philodemus, Cicero and Minucius would seem to suggest that Prodicus argued for the deification of beneficial *things* (inventions) as the proper explanation of the origin of religion, while Perseus might have also added the deification of beneficial *people* (inventors). Philodemus, for instance, uses a neuter plural (τὰ τρέφοντα καὶ ὠφελοῦντα) when crediting Prodicus with the authorship of this hypothesis and then continues, using the expression μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα (which might be interpreted as temporal “after that”, or maybe content-related “on the top of that”) and could demarcate the extension to the original hypothesis introduced by Perseus – according to Philodemus, then, not only beneficial things, but also beneficial people were deified by the our ancestors (τοὺς εὐρόντας ἢ τροφὰς ἢ σκέπας ἢ τὰς ἄλλας τέχνας). This seems to be supported by Cicero, who also uses a neuter plural when speaking about Prodicus (*ea quae prodessent*) and a masculine plural when speaking about Perseus (*eos esse habitos deos*), but the interpretation is complicated by the fact that Greeks often made no distinction between “inventors” and their “inventions” and as such remains at the verge of speculation.⁵⁸

52 DK 84 B 5 = Philodemus, *De pietate* c. 9, 7, p. 75 Gomperz.

53 DK 84 B 5 = Cicero, *De natura deorum* I 37, 118.

54 DK 84 B 5 = Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus mathematicos* IX, 18.

55 Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 21, 2.

56 *PHerc* 1428 frg. 19, see HENRICHs (1975) and HENRICHs (1976) for text and detailed interpretation.

57 HENRICHs (1984: 141); GUTHRIE (1971: 239); BREMMER (2007: 15).

58 GUTHRIE (1971: 241) provides a compelling example from Euripides' *Bacchae*: Dionysus is first described as an inventor of wine (ὁ Σεμέλης γόνος | βότρυος ὑγρὸν πῶμ' ἠῦρε, *Bacchae* 278–279), yet, just a few verses later, he is the very wine he was supposed to “invent” (οὗτος θεοῖσι σπένδεται θεὸς γεγώς, *Bacchae* 284). HENRICHs (1984: 145) suggests that this portion of Euripides' play is inspired by Prodicus, which would, of course, undermine Guthrie's argumentation. LEFKOWITZ (1989: 74–75) ar-

Is it possible to identify any parallels between Prodicus' thoughts about the origin of religion and some more recent approaches? I would argue for the positive answer, but the connections are weaker than in the previous cases. Nietzsche in his *Antichrist* discusses a view bearing many similarities with the hypothesis of Prodicus as reflecting the "healthy" stage of the religious thinking before subsequent Christian corruption.⁵⁹ Another aspect of the hypothesis Prodicus advanced – namely, a symbolic or allegorical approach to religion⁶⁰ – has its modern counterpart in the thought of an important sociologist of the second half of the twentieth century, Clifford Geertz, who defines religion in his influential 1973 essay *Religion as a Cultural System* explicitly as a "symbolic system".⁶¹

V

When looking at the Presocratic hypotheses concerning the origins of religion, it would be, of course, preposterous to conflate what are essentially "just-so-stories" of Presocratic philosophers – I have been careful to call them hypotheses, because that is what they are – with full-fledged theories of modern religious studies. Nevertheless, it seems clear to me that philosophers of the antiquity have created gravitational centres for much of the subsequent theorising about the origins of religion – to be specific, they initiated the reflective approach to the religious phenomena while clearly articulating the anthropomorphic basis of religion (Xenophanes); they recognised the important role religion plays in the understanding and explanation of some puzzling features of human experience and reality (Democritus); they emphasised the connection between the origins of religion and the formation of the human society (author of the Sisyphus-fragment); lastly, they called our attention to the underlying symbolism found in many

gues that Euripides himself did not accept Prodicus' hypothesis about the origin of religion; HARRISON (1990: 196–198) hears further echoes of Euripides and Prodicus in Lucretius, *De rerum natura* V, 13–21.

59 I find it worthwhile to quote this in full (*KSA* VI, 182): "Ein Volk, das noch an sich selbst glaubt, hat auch noch seinen eignen Gott. In ihm verehrt es die Bedingungen, durch die es obenauf ist, seine Tugenden, – es projicirt seine Lust an sich, sein Machtgefühl in ein Wesen, dem man dafür danken kann. Wer reich ist, will abgeben; ein stolzes Volk braucht einen Gott, um zu opfern ... Religion, innerhalb solcher Voraussetzungen, ist eine Form der Dankbarkeit. Man ist für sich selber dankbar: dazu braucht man einen Gott."

60 This is also recognised by KAHN (1997: 261).

61 GEERTZ (1993: 90).

religious ideas (Prodicus). As such, they have created a rich narrative space in which study of religion still uses to this day.

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