

## The Problem of Theodicy in Classical Athens

### 1. Protagoras

περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι, οὐθ' ὥς εἰσὶν οὐθ' ὥς οὐκ εἰσὶν οὐθ' ὁποῖοί τινες ἰδέαν· πολλὰ γὰρ τὰ κωλύοντά με εἰδέναι, ἢ τε ἀδηλότης καὶ βραχὺς ὢν ὁ βίος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. (B4 DK; D10 LM)

About the gods I am able to know neither that they exist nor that they do not exist nor of what kind they are in form: for many things prevent me from knowing this, its obscurity and the brevity of man's life.

### 2. Euripides, *Bellerophon*

φησὶν τις εἶναι δῆτ' ἐν οὐρανῷ θεοὺς;  
οὐκ εἰσὶν, οὐκ εἶσ', εἴ τις ἀνθρώπων θέλει  
μὴ τῷ παλαιῷ μῶρος ὢν χρῆσθαι λόγῳ.  
σκέψασθε δ' αὐτοί, μὴ ἐπὶ τοῖς ἑμοῖς λόγοις  
γνώμην ἔχοντες. φήμ' ἐγὼ τυραννίδα  
κτείνειν τε πλείστους κτημάτων τ' ἀποστερεῖν  
ὄρκους τε παραβαίνοντας ἐκπορθεῖν πόλεις·  
καὶ ταῦτα δρῶντες μᾶλλον εἰσ' εὐδαίμονες  
τῶν εὐσεβούντων ἡσυχῇ καθ' ἡμέραν. (F 286)

Does anyone say then that there are gods in heaven? They do not exist, they do not exist, if anyone wishes not to be a fool and believe an ancient story. Consider, you yourselves, not forming an opinion on the basis of my words. I say that tyranny kills very many and takes away possession and sacks cities in transgression of oaths. And doing these things they are happy more than those acting piously in quiet every day. I know small cities that honor the gods which obey larger, more impious ones because they are ruled by the number of greater arms.

### 3. Aristophanes, *Clouds*

a. ΣΤ τοῦτον γὰρ δὴ φανερῶς ὁ Ζεὺς ἴησ' ἐπὶ τοὺς ἐπιόρκους.  
ΣΟ καὶ πῶς, ὦ μῶρε σὺ καὶ Κρονίων ὄζων καὶ βεκκεσέληνε,  
εἵπερ βάλλει τοὺς ἐπιόρκους, δῆτ' οὐχὶ Σίμων' ἐνέπρησεν  
οὐδὲ Κλεώνυμον οὐδὲ Θέωρον; καίτοι σφόδρα γ' εἶσ' ἐπίορκοι.  
ἀλλὰ τὸν αὐτοῦ γε νεῶν βάλλει καὶ Σούνιον, ἄκρον Ἀθηνέων,  
καὶ τὰς δρυὺς τὰς μεγάλας, τί μαθῶν; οὐ γὰρ δὴ δρυὺς γ' ἐπιорκεῖ.  
ΣΤ οὐκ οἶδ' ἄταρ εὖ σὺ λέγειν φαίνει. (397-403)

*Strepsiades*. It is quite evident that Zeus throws this [his thunderbolt] at perjurers.

*Socrates*. How could this be, you idiot stinking of the Cronia, older than the moon! For if he really does strike perjurers, why then hasn't he burned up Simon or Cleonymus or Theorus? For they're major perjurers! But then he strikes his own temple and Sounion, the cape of Athens, and the great oaks – what's he thinking? An oak surely doesn't commit perjury!

*Strepsiades*. I don't know, but it appears you speak well.

b. ΗΤ οὐδὲ γὰρ εἶναι πάνυ φημὶ Δίκην.  
ΚΡ οὐκ εἶναι φῆς;  
ΗΤ φέρε γὰρ, ποῦ ἴστιν;  
ΚΡ παρὰ τοῖσι θεοῖς.  
ΗΤ πῶς δῆτα Δίκης οὐσίας ὁ Ζεὺς  
οὐκ ἀπόλωλεν τὸν πατέρ' αὐτοῦδήσας; (902-6)

*Worse Argument*. I say Justice does not exist at all. *Better Argument*. You say it does not exist? *Worse*. Come on, where is it? *Better*. Among the gods. *Worse*. Then how, if Justice existed, was Zeus not destroyed for binding his own father?

#### 4. Unattributed tragic fragment

τολμῶ κατειπεῖν, μήποτ' οὐκ εἰσὶν θεοὶ  
κακοὶ γὰρ εὐτυχοῦντες ἐκπλήσσουσί με. (*adespota* F 465)

I dare to claim that the gods do not exist, for bad people enjoying good fortune shocks me.

#### 5. Thrasymachus

οἱ θεοὶ οὐχ ὀρῶσι τὰ ἀνθρώπινα· οὐ γὰρ ἂν τὸ μέγιστον τῶν ἐν ἀνθρώποις ἀγαθῶν παρεῖδον, τὴν δικαιοσύνην· ὀρῶμεν γὰρ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ταύτη μὴ χρωμένους. (B8 DK; D17 LM)

The gods do not see human matters: for else they would not have overlooked the greatest good for humans, justice. For we see that humans do not practice this.

#### 6. Critias [?], Sisyphus [?]

a. τηνικαῦτά μοι δοκεῖ  
< > πυκνός τις καὶ σοφὸς γνώμην ἀνὴρ  
θεῶν δέος θνητοῖσιν ἐξευρεῖν, ὅπως  
εἴη τι δεῖμα τοῖς κακοῖσι, κἂν λάθρα  
πράσσωσιν ἢ λέγωσιν ἢ φρονῶσι <τι>. (12-15)

Then it seems to me that some clever man, wise in thought, invented the fear of gods for mortals so that there would be some fear among the bad, if ever in secret they do or speak or think anything.

b. διδαγμάτων ἥδιστον εἰσηγήσατο  
ψευδεῖ καλύψας τὴν ἀλήθειαν λόγῳ.  
ναίειν δ' ἔφασκε τοὺς θεοὺς ἐνταῦθ' ἵνα  
μάλιστ' ἂν ἐκπλήξειεν ἀνθρώπους ἄγων,  
ὄθεν περ ἔγνω τοὺς φόβους ὄντας βροτοῖς  
καὶ τὰς ὀνήσεις τῷ τάλαιπῶρῳ βίῳ, (25-30)

He introduced the most pleasant of teachings, concealing the truth with a false story. He said that the gods lived there where most of all he would terrify humans by leading them [?], whence came, he knew, fears for mortals, and the benefits for their wretched life.

#### 7. Prodicus *apud* Sextus Empiricus

Πρόδικος δὲ ὁ Κεῖος “ἥλιον,” φησί, “καὶ σελήνην καὶ ποταμοὺς καὶ κρήνας καὶ καθόλου πάντα τὰ ὠφελούντα τὸν βίον ἡμῶν οἱ παλαιοὶ θεοὺς ἐνόμισαν διὰ τὴν ἀπ' αὐτῶν ὠφέλειαν, καθάπερ Αἰγύπτιοι τὸν Νεῖλον” καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τὸν μὲν ἄρτον Δήμητραν νομισθῆναι, τὸν δὲ οἶνον Διόνυσον, τὸ δὲ ὕδωρ Ποσειδῶνα, τὸ δὲ πῦρ Ἥφαιστον καὶ ἤδη τῶν εὐχρηστούντων ἕκαστον. (*AM* 9.18; B5 DK; D16 LM)

Prodicus of Ceos says, “The ancients considered that the sun, the moon, rivers, fountains, and in general everything that is helpful for our life were gods because of the help they provided, like the Egyptians regarding the Nile,” and [scil. he says that] for this reason they considered that bread was Demeter, wine Dionysus, water Poseidon, fire Hephaestus, and in this way for each of the things that benefited them. (trans. Laks and Most)

#### 8. Democritus *apud* Sextus Empiricus

εἰσὶ δὲ οἱ ἀπὸ τῶν γιγνομένων κατὰ τὸν κόσμον παραδόξων ὑπονοήσαντες εἰς ἔννοιαν ἡμᾶς ἐληλυθέναι θεῶν, ἀφ' ἧς φαίνεται εἶναι δόξης καὶ ὁ Δημόκριτος· ὀρῶντες γὰρ, φησί, τὰ ἐν τοῖς μετεώροις παθήματα οἱ παλαιοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καθάπερ βροντὰς καὶ ἀστραπὰς, κεραυνούς τε καὶ ἄστρων συνόδους ἡλίου τε καὶ σελήνης ἐκλείψεις, ἐδειματοῦντο, θεοὺς οἰόμενοι τούτων αἰτίους εἶναι. (*AM* 9.24; A207 DK; D207 LM)

There are some people who think that it was on the basis of the unexpected events that happen in the world that we have come to conceive of gods; Democritus too seems to be of this opinion. For, he says, when ancient men saw what happens in the sky, like thunder, lightning, lightning bolts, conjunctions of stars, eclipses of the sun and moon, they became frightened and thought that gods were the causes of these things. (trans. Laks and Most)

## 9. *On the Sacred Disease*

μέγα τεκμήριον ὅτι οὐδὲν θειότερόν ἐστι τῶν λοιπῶν νοσημάτων· τοῖσι γὰρ φλεγματώδεσι φύσει γίνεται τοῖσι δὲ χολώδεσιν οὐ προσπίπτει· καίτοι εἰ θειότερόν ἐστι τῶν ἄλλων, τοῖσιν ἅπασιν ὁμοίως ἔδει γίνεσθαι τὴν νοῦσον ταύτην, καὶ μὴ διακρίνειν μήτε χολώδεα μήτε φλεγματώδεα. (5)

Another strong proof that this disease is no more divine than any other is that it affects the naturally phlegmatic, but does not attack the bilious. Yet, if it were more divine than others, this disease ought to have attacked all equally, without making any difference between bilious and phlegmatic. (trans. Jones)

## 10. *Airs Waters Places*

τοῦτο δὲ πάσχουσι Σκυθέων οἱ πλούσιοι, οὐχ οἱ κάκιστοι ἀλλ' οἱ εὐγενέστατοι καὶ ἰσχὺν πλείστην κεκτημένοι, διὰ τὴν ἵππασίνην, οἱ δὲ πένητες ἦσσαν· οὐ γὰρ ἵπάζονται. καίτοι ἐχρῆν, ἐπεὶ θειότερον τοῦτο τὸ νόσευμα τῶν λοιπῶν ἐστίν, οὐ τοῖς γενναιοτάτοις τῶν Σκυθέων καὶ τοῖς πλουσιωτάτοις προσπίπτει μούνοις, ἀλλὰ τοῖς ἅπασιν ὁμοίως. [...] ἀλλὰ γὰρ, ὥσπερ καὶ πρότερον ἔλεξα, θεῖα μὲν καὶ ταῦτά ἐστιν ὁμοίως τοῖς ἄλλοις· γίνεται δὲ κατὰ φύσιν ἕκαστα. (22)

This affliction [impotence] affects the rich Scythians because of their riding, not the lower classes but the upper, who possess the most strength; the poor, who do not ride, suffer less. But, if we suppose this disease to be more divine than any other, it ought to have attacked, not the highest and richest classes only of the Scythians, but all classes equally. [...] But the truth is, as I said above, these affections are neither more nor less divine than any others, and all and each are natural (trans. Jones).

## 11. *Euripides, Suppliants*

ἄλλοισι δὴ ᾽πόνησ' ἀμιλληθεῖς λόγῳ  
τοιῶδ'. ἔλεξε γὰρ τις ὡς τὰ χείρονα  
πλείω βροτοῖσιν ἐστὶ τῶν ἀμεινόνων.  
ἐγὼ δὲ τούτοις ἀντίαν γνώμην ἔχω,  
πλείω τὰ χρηστὰ τῶν κακῶν εἶναι βροτοῖς.  
εἰ μὴ γὰρ ἦν τόδ', οὐκ ἂν ἦμεν ἐν φάει.  
αἰνῶ δ' ὅς ἡμῖν βίοντον ἐκ πεφυρμένου  
καὶ θηριώδους θεῶν διεσταθμῆσατο,  
πρῶτον μὲν ἐνθεῖς σύνεσιν, εἶτα δ' ἄγγελον  
γλῶσσαν λόγων δούς, ὥστε γινώσκειν ὅπα,  
τροφὴν τε καρποῦ τῆι τροφῆι τ' ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ  
σταγόνας ὑδρηλὰς ὡς τὰ τ' ἐκ γαίας τρέφει  
ἄρδι τε νηδύν· πρὸς δὲ τοῖσι χεῖματος  
προβλήματ' αἰθόν τ' ἐξαμύνασθαι θεοῦ,  
πόντου τε ναυστολήμαθ' ὡς διαλλαγὰς  
ἔχοιμεν ἀλλήλοισιν ὧν πένοιτο γῆ.  
ἂ δ' ἔστ' ἄσημα κοῦ σαφῶς γινώσκομεν,  
ἐς πῦρ βλέποντες καὶ κατὰ σπλάγχων πτυχὰς  
μάντις προσημαίνουσιν οἰωνῶν τ' ἄπο.  
ἄρ' οὐ τρυφῶμεν, θεοῦ κατασκευὴν βίῳ  
δόντος τοιαύτην, οἷσιν οὐκ ἀρκεῖ τάδε;  
ἀλλ' ἢ φρόνησις τοῦ θεοῦ μείζον σθένειν  
ζητεῖ, τὸ γαῦρον δ' ἐν φρεσὶν κεκτημένοι  
δοκοῦμεν εἶναι δαιμόνων σοφώτεροι. (195-218)

With other men I labored contending with this kind of speech: for someone said that for mortals there are more of worse than of better things. But I hold the opposite opinion to these, that there are more good than bad things for mortals. For if this were not so, we would not be in the light of day. I praise the one of the gods who separated our living from confused and bestial, first implanting intellect, then giving the tongue, messenger of words, so that we understand voice, and the growth of crops and watery drops from the sky for their growing so that he [the god] grows things from the earth and gives drink to our belly. And in addition to these, defenses against the winter and means of warding off the heat of the god, and expeditions on the sea, so that we have exchanges with others for things the land lacks. And what is unseen and we do not know clearly, prophets foretell by looking into the fire and at the folds of entrails and from the flight of birds. Are we not luxuriant, when the god has given such provision for life, if these things are not sufficient? But thought seeks to be stronger than the god, and having acquired arrogance in our minds we think that we are wiser than divinities.

## 12. Xenophon, *Memorabilia*

a. ...γνώση τὸ θεῖον ὅτι τοσοῦτον καὶ τοιοῦτόν ἐστιν, ὥσθ' ἅμα πάντα ὄρᾶν καὶ πάντα ἀκούειν καὶ πανταχοῦ παρεῖναι καὶ ἅμα πάντων ἐπιμελεῖσθαι.

Ἔμοι μὲν οὖν ταῦτα λέγων οὐ μόνον τοὺς συνόντας ἐδόκει ποιεῖν, ὅποτε ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ὄρᾶντο, ἀπέχεσθαι τῶν ἀνοσίων τε καὶ ἀδίκων καὶ αἰσχυρῶν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅποτε ἐν ἐρημίᾳ εἶεν, ἐπεὶ περ ἠγήσαιντο μηδὲν ἂν ποτε ὧν πράττειεν θεοὺς διαλαθεῖν. (1.4.18-19)

Then you will know that such is the greatness and such the nature of the deity that it sees everything and hears everything alike, and is present in everywhere and takes care of everything.

To me at least it seemed that by these sayings he kept his companions from impiety, injustice, and baseness, not only when they might be seen by people but even in solitude, since they always felt that no deed of theirs could at any time escape divine notice.

b. Πρῶτον μὲν δὴ περὶ θεοὺς ἐπειρᾶτο σώφρονας ποιεῖν τοὺς συνόντας. [...]

Εἶπέ μοι, ἔφη, ὦ Εὐθύδημε, ἤδη ποτέ σοι ἐπῆλθεν ἐνθυμηθῆναι, ὡς ἐπιμελῶς οἱ θεοὶ ὧν οἱ ἄνθρωποι δέονται κατασκευάσασιν; [...]

Τὸ δ' ἐπεὶ τροφῆς δεόμεθα, ταύτην ἡμῖν ἐκ τῆς γῆς ἀναδιδόναι καὶ ὥρας ἀρμοττούσας πρὸς τοῦτο παρέχειν, αἱ ἡμῖν οὐ μόνον ὧν δεόμεθα πολλὰ καὶ παντοῖα παρασκευάζουσιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ οἷς εὐφραίνόμεθα; [...]

Τὸ δὲ καὶ ὕδωρ ἡμῖν παρέχειν οὕτω πολλοῦ ἄξιον, ὥστε συμφύειν τε καὶ συναύξειν τῇ γῇ καὶ ταῖς ὥραις πάντα τὰ χρήσιμα ἡμῖν, συντρέφειν δὲ καὶ αὐτοὺς ἡμᾶς; [...]

Τὸ δὲ καὶ τὸ πῦρ πορίσαι ἡμῖν, ἐπίκουρον μὲν ψύχους, ἐπίκουρον δὲ σκότους, συνεργὸν δὲ πρὸς πᾶσαν τέχνην καὶ πάντα ὅσα ὠφελείας ἔνεκα ἄνθρωποι κατασκευάζονται; [...]

Τὸ δὲ τὸν ἥλιον, ἐπειδὴ ἐν χειμῶνι τράπηται, προσιέναι τὰ μὲν ἀδρύνοντα, τὰ δὲ ξηραίνοντα, ὧν καιρὸς διελήλυθε, καὶ ταῦτα διαπραξάμενον μηκέτι ἐγγυτέρω προσιέναι, ἀλλ' ἀποτρέπεσθαι φυλαττόμενον μὴ τι ἡμᾶς μᾶλλον τοῦ δέοντος θερμαίνων βλάβῃ; [...]

τὸ δὲ καὶ λογισμὸν ἡμῖν ἐμφῦσαι, ὃ περὶ ὧν αισθανόμεθα λογιζόμενοι τε καὶ μνημονεύοντες καταμανθάνομεν ὅπῃ ἕκαστα συμφέρει, καὶ πολλὰ μηχανώμεθα, δι' ὧν τῶν τε ἀγαθῶν ἀπολαύομεν καὶ τὰ κακὰ ἀλεξόμεθα· τὸ δὲ καὶ ἐρμηνείαν δοῦναι, δι' ἧς πάντων τῶν ἀγαθῶν μεταδιδόμεν τε ἀλλήλοις διδάσκοντες καὶ κοινωνοῦμεν καὶ νόμους τιθέμεθα καὶ πολιτευόμεθα; [...]

Τὸ δὲ καὶ εἰ ἀδυνατοῦμεν τὰ συμφέροντα προνοεῖσθαι ὑπὲρ τῶν μελλόντων, ἡμῖν αὐτοὺς συνεργεῖν διὰ μαντικῆς τοῖς πυνθανομένοις φράζοντας τὰ ἀποβησόμενα καὶ διδάσκοντας, ἧ ἂν ἄριστα γίγνοιτο; [...]

Ἄ χρὴ κατανοοῦντα μὴ καταφρονεῖν τῶν ἀοράτων, ἀλλ' ἐκ τῶν γιγνομένων τὴν δύναμιν αὐτῶν καταμανθάνοντα τιμᾶν τὸ δαιμόνιον. (4.3.2-14)

In the first place, then, he tried to make his companions prudent toward the gods. [...]

“Tell me, Euthydemus,” he began, “has it ever occurred to you to reflect on the care the gods have taken to furnish human beings with what they need?” [...]

“And since we are need of nourishment, do they give it to us from the land and provide seasons suited to this, which offer us not only many varied things that we need, but also which we enjoy?” [...]

“And water too, worthy of so much, do they give to us so that, with the earth and seasons, it grows and increases all the things that are useful for us, and nourishes us too?” [...]

“And do they provide fire as well for us, a defense against the cold and a defense against darkness, and a helper for every skill and all the things with which humans furnish themselves on account of their usefulness?” [...]

“And does the sun, when it turns in winter, come closer, ripening some [crops], withering others whose time has passed, and having done these things no longer comes closer, but turns away taking care lest it harm us in any way more than necessary by warming?” [...]

“And did they also implant reason in us, whereby, through reasoning and remembering what we perceive, we come to learn how each thing brings benefit and contrive many things by which we take advantage of good things and drive off bad; and did they give expression to us too, by which we transmit all good things to one another by teaching and take part in them, and establish laws and act in government?” [...]

“And in so far as we are unable to foresee what is beneficial for the future, do they assist us through divination by speaking what will turn out to those inquiring and teaching them how it would be best?”

“For these reasons we should not despise things unseen but, realizing their power in their manifestations, honor the divine.” (trans. Marchant/rev. Henderson)