READING BETWEEN THE LINES: ARISTOTLE’S VIEWS ON RELIGION*

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ABSTRACT

The article attempts to deduce Aristotle’s views on religion. The information we have on these views from Aristotle’s treatises is incomplete, particularly since he believed that perplexity on issues concerning piety should be resolved by law rather than argument, a view comparable to that of his master Plato. Aristotle’s belief in a supreme God is well known, but the article suggests that Aristotle’s God is not a ‘heavenly narcissist’, but exercises some divine providence over the universe. The article looks at the hymn Aristotle wrote on the death of his friend Hermias and suggests possible reasons for the charge of impiety Aristotle faced in relation to that hymn. The article adopts the view that Aristotle believed in personal immortality, and notes that he possessed some respect for Homer and the tradition of Greek religion. He also seems to have given religious significance to the life of philosophical contemplation, for he taught that it was lived in virtue of something divine within us.

Introduction

In Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* you will find detailed discussion of various virtues that Plato was interested in: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. There is, however, a curious omission. You will not find Aristotle’s opinion on an important question, the key issue of Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro* (Jowett 1970:41), namely, what is piety? From this one of two conclusions follows: either that Aristotle didn’t believe in piety, or that for some reason he did not see fit to include his views on piety in his major philosophic work on the virtues.

If we lay aside the evidence of Aristotle’s pious action on the death of Hermias, holders of the first view must work out why, if Aristotle disagreed with Plato on piety, no discussion of this appears in his extant philosophical writings. What seems arguable, whatever view we take, is that the religious

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views of Aristotle cannot be simply and straightforwardly read out of his surviving works. He has remained silent about them to some degree. To find out about them, we need to read between the lines. What did Aristotle believe in?

We might use Plato’s views as a point of departure. Since Aristotle was a pupil of Plato, he may be presumed to have similar views, except where there is evidence of dissimilarity. This is based on parsimony. Where there is no evidence of the similarity or dissimilarity of Plato’s views to Aristotle’s, we take the simplest hypothesis, that is, concord rather than controversy. Parsimony, however, does not mean being too simplistic about available data (Burnam 1975:201). It goes without saying that there is evidence of difference between Plato and his pupil on many subjects. Yet, when we interpret Aristotle, are we perhaps inclined to over-stress distinctions in areas of ambiguity? Did Aristotle believe, for example, in the immortality of the soul? Bolton (1978:266) proposes an interpretation of Aristotle compatible with the idea. Yet, the interpretation of Aristotle as a denier of immortality is centuries old (Whittaker 1982:49). As will be seen, my approach is to assume minimum deviation from Plato. I argue that Aristotle did, in fact, believe in immortality. The presumption of concord rather than controversy, moreover, does not only apply to issues on which Aristotle has not spoken. It also applies to areas where he has spoken, but a more pro-Platonic or more anti-Platonic reading of what he has said is possible.

In this article I will indicate what I think Aristotle’s views were on religion. Yet, before discussing such ideas in detail, it is well to ask about the meaning of Aristotle’s areas of silence. This will influence how we interpret what is left behind. Let us consider this from seven major points of view.

1. Aristotle’s silence on religion

Our information on Aristotle’s views on religion is in the first place incomplete because, unfortunately, we have lost his dialogues. Like Plato, Aristotle wrote philosophical dialogues, which were once much read, but of which only fragments remain (Jaeger 1948:31-32). From the way others responded to them, we may infer that their viewpoint had similarities to Platonism. The Neo-Platonists accepted them as uncontaminated Platonism, while others distinguished between the exoteric and esoteric side of Aristotelianism. Alexander of Aphrodisias viewed Aristotle’s treatises as containing his true views, while his dialogues were viewed as containing the false views of others.

The writings of Aristotle which survive are the philosophical treatises. Barnes (1995:13, 15) rejects the idea that they were lecture notes. He pro-
poses instead that we should interpret them as we interpret notes which a philosopher writes for his own use. Aristotle’s treatises thus contain mostly notes about philosophical teaching. They would naturally have been drier than his dialogues. A dialogue offers more room for literary display and mythological allusion than a philosophical treatise of the kind Aristotle has left behind. In Plato’s dialogues there is a significant degree of mythological material, particularly the dream of Er in the Republic (Jowett 1875:511-19), which allows us to learn a lot about Plato’s religious views. Similar material may have existed in Aristotle’s dialogues, displaying allusions to piety that would be lacking in a philosophical treatise. Plato’s situation with regard to posterity is almost the reverse of Aristotle’s. Importantly, his dialogues have not been lost. Yet his formal philosophical teaching to some extent escapes us, because he left it unwritten, as ἄγραφα δόγματα (‘unwritten dogmas’ or opinions) which were never reduced to manuscript form (Taylor 1949:503). Thus, if we know less about Aristotle’s views on religion than Plato’s, this may be to some extent a function of the literary form of what either philosopher left behind.

The above assessment suggests that philosophy and piety in Aristotle were separate categories, distinguished as a Christian academic might distinguish his faith and his science. Is this an anachronism? I say no. My basis for this is what Aristotle says on the examination of theses in the Topics (105a; cf. Ross 1928). He indicates that not every thesis should be examined. He distinguishes three areas concerning which one may be puzzled:

1. One may be puzzled about issues of simple sensible fact, e.g. whether snow is white. In this case one solves the issue by perception;
2. one may be puzzled about some issue that is resolved by argument (presumably this would be a philosophical or scientific issue); or
3. one may alternatively be puzzled about whether or not to honour the gods or one’s parents. In this case the issue is resolved not by argument, but by punishment! Both of these are matters of piety, and Aristotle clearly requires that punishment by law rather than philosophical discussion is the best means to resolve these things.

The absence of a discussion of piety in Aristotle’s treatises, comparable to his discussion of other virtues, is therefore by design rather than accident. For him, the spheres of philosophical argument and piety are separate and doubts in either area have separate means of solution.
2. The views of Plato on religion and the law

Aristotle’s view that piety issues are to be resolved by punishment, not argument, from the modern standpoint appears shocking. Yet, a look at Plato’s *Laws* reveals that Aristotle’s views were possibly related to those of his master (Saunders 1970:410, 413, 444-45). In the *Laws* we find exception taken to three views: 1. that the gods do not exist; 2. that there is no divine providence; and 3. that the gods’ favours may be won by prayers and sacrifices even for evil persons.

Plato’s decision to criminalise the third view will be more easily understood once we realise that he links it with witchcraft. Plato views simple dialectical argument against these views as time-consuming, and prefers to punish them legally. He distinguishes between the sophistic proponent of impious views, who must die, and the holder of impious opinions who is nevertheless upright in his conduct. For the latter, Plato prescribes the milder remedy of admonition and incarceration. Plato therefore adopts a view comparable with that of Aristotle in the *Topics*, that disagreements on impiety should be resolved by punishment.

Aristotle’s silence on religious issues may thus be explained by a belief that such issues are better resolved by punishment rather than philosophical argument. Yet Aristotle not only believed in religious intolerance, but risked suffering from religious intolerance himself. For as we shall see later (Section 4), he was charged with impiety because of the poem he wrote for his friend Hermias. So, if he did hold some views at odds with popular piety, this would be an additional reason for him to keep his religious views out of his philosophical treatises. It may seem curious that Aristotle should believe in punishing impiety, yet at the same time depart from what popular piety would find acceptable. Yet such a thing is not impossible. A philosopher may disagree with the people on which religious views should or should not be punished. He may be in the position of endorsing penalties for impiety – but not for his own views. Every enthusiastic Platonist of ancient times who agreed with *Euthyphro* and the *Laws* simultaneously must logically have been in this position.

3. Aristotle and God

We have been assuming minimum deviation from Plato in Aristotle. We have also noted that Aristotle believed in resolving issues of piety by means of the law. We may thus suggest that Aristotle, like Plato, viewed the three categories of dangerous view outlined in the *Laws* as relating to piety. And we may also suggest that Aristotle believed in resolving these issues by law,
not argument. Aristotle's full views on these matters, then, do not appear in
the treatises. The treatises do not give his full views on the existence of the
gods, on divine providence, or on the significance of prayers and sacrifices.

Aristotle's extant views on divinity show clearly enough that he believed
in one supreme divinity or prime mover. However, he did not rule out other
subordinate movers of the heavens (Metaph. 1073a). Aristotle would
probably be better described as a henotheist rather than a monotheist, viewing
the supreme God as first among many.

Concerning creation, Aristotle seems to have believed with Democritus
that 'all things cannot have had a becoming', that is, the universe was not
created (Ph. 251b). But what did he believe about divine providence?

A widespread view is that Aristotle’s God was a ‘heavenly narcissist’
ignorant of everything below himself and therefore not in a position to
exercise divine providence (De Koninck 1994:472). Yet Aristotle’s universe
is a teleological one. The first movers move as objects of desire, that is, as
ends (Metaphysics 1072a; Barnes 1995:105). We read in the Physics (198b) that
Empedocles, in a view reminiscent of Darwinism, argued that the teeth and
other parts of the body arose by chance and survived by happening to be
organised in a fitting way. Other beings in the universe, not well organised,
perished. Aristotle argues, against this view, that natural products are all for
an end (199a).

But how can natural products be for an end without being intelligently
produced, or at least dependent on influences that are intelligently produced?
How do we reconcile an improvident heavenly narcissist with a purposeful
universe? One approach is to articulate a theory whereby things uncon-
sciously seek an end, being moved by God as though by an object desired.
Yet it is not clear how an unconscious being would have a desire for God, or
anything else. Aquinas argued that an unintelligent agent does not act for an
end unless moved by an intelligent agent, for example, an arrow does not
reach its mark unless shot by an archer (Summa Theologica 1 q2a3). Can we
assume that this consideration did not occur to Aristotle? Or if it did, then is
it possible that Aristotle did, in fact, believe in intelligent design? And that
his rejection of Empedocles’ chance universe is comparable to the rejection

De Koninck (1994:474, 475) argues that Aristotle's theology allows God
to know things below himself. This is because the Aristotelian God as a

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1 The text consulted for references to the Metaphysics in this article is the edition of Gigon 1960.
2 The translation of the Physics consulted for this article was that of Hardie & Gaye 1930.
perfect being cannot be ignorant of anything. Ignorance would be an imperfection. Guthrie (1950:139) argues that the Aristotelian God cannot be free of movement if he applies his thought to moving objects. This does not, however, logically follow, since stages in a motion can be viewed timelessly or immutably. Moreover, Guthrie concedes that the Aristotelian God is a ‘perfect being’, from which a lack of ignorance in God does seem to logically follow. So it seems possible that Aristotle’s views on divine providence, on which he remained largely silent as a piety issue, may include some knowledge by God of the universe below him. Ross, according to Guthrie argues that Aristotle does not follow the line of thought whereby God’s knowledge of self includes knowledge of the world (Guthrie 1950:139). Yet we may question this on the grounds that Aristotle’s treatises do not give a full account of Aristotle’s theology, seeing that piety is not their central business.

There are two further hints that Aristotle possibly believed in divine providence, one weak and one stronger.

Firstly, we may consider the last words of Book Α of the Metaphysics (1076a; Gigon 1960), which refer to Homer’s Iliad (2.204): τὰ ἀδέ ὑπολείπεται πολυτεύεσθαι κακῷ οὐκ ἀγαθόν πολυκοιρατόν εἰς κοίραιν ἔστω (‘But beings do not wish to be governed badly: “the rule of many is not good; let there be one ruler’’). Aristotle here describes the first principle of the universe as a ruler. Yet, surely, God cannot rule without taking at least some thought for the universe. Certainly, the Greek ἀρχή means both ‘principle’ and ‘rule’ and this is to some extent why Aristotle uses the government analogy in describing the universe’s first principle. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s analogy is weaker if God does not, in fact, rule the universe consciously, as Agamemnon ruled the Greeks. But, if God does govern the universe consciously, his rule is more legitimately comparable with the rule of Agamemnon in the Iliad, which Aristotle’s quotation refers to.

Secondly, we may look at some evidence, perhaps outside the more usual spheres of classical study, but no less suggestive. We have in certain patristic authors descriptions of the beliefs of the Peripatetics, who were still around in their time. In his work Contra Celsum Origen says, ‘I wish that Epicurus, and Aristotle who is less irreligious about providence, and the Stoics who maintain that God is a material substance had heard of this doctrine, that the world might not be filled with a doctrine that abolishes providence, limits it, or introduces a corruptible first principle that is corporeal.’ (Chadwick 1980: 21). He mentions here three philosophies which correspond to the three false views with which the quotation ends. Epicurus is the one who abolishes providence. Aristotle is ‘less irreligious’ and limits providence. The Stoics introduce a corporeal first principle. From this it follows that Origen knew
Aristotelianism not as a philosophy which denied divine providence, but as one which limited it. Elsewhere, Origen draws a similar threefold parallel, saying that Epicurus denies providence, the Peripatetics deny that providence has a care for us, and the Stoics hold God to be corruptible (Chadwick 1980:178). Aristotelianism, therefore, does not deny divine providence as such, but only divine providence towards humanity. Origen refers to the Peripatetic belief that prayers and sacrifices to God have no effect. The Peripatetics only pretend to pray in order to accommodate themselves to the multitude (Chadwick 1980:79, 449). We know from the *Laws* that Plato himself believed in divine providence, but did not believe that the gods could be manipulated by prayers and sacrifices. So Aristotle’s belief is closer to that of his master than the ‘heavenly narcissist’ reading of his philosophy would suggest, if Origen’s idea of his philosophy is correct.

In Tatian’s *Oratio apud Graecos* we have a confirmatory and more specific view. Aristotle is said to have set a limit to divine providence; and the Peripatetics are said to exclude providence from sublunary affairs (Whittaker 1982:5, 7). If this Peripatetic perspective is related to Aristotle’s view, the ‘heavenly narcissist’ position must be modified. To be sure, Aristotle did indeed set a gulf between God and human affairs. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he denies there can be friendship between God and man (Thompson 1956:241). Yet, if the beliefs Tatian ascribes to Aristotle and the Peripatetics accurately reflect Aristotle’s own views, then Aristotle did not deny that God superintended the universe in a more general sense. Thus the purposefulness of nature is not the unconscious seeking of an end, but more a sort of Deistic intelligent ordering of the universe.

We conclude this section by arguing that Aristotle probably believed in divine providence. The reasons leading us to this conclusion are as follows: to begin with, we assume minimum deviation from Plato; secondly, Aristotle’s doctrine of God as perfect seems to imply knowledge of sub-divine things; thirdly, we may interpret Aristotle’s belief in a purposeful universe with ‘one ruler’ (*Metaph*. 1076a) in terms of divine design and government; and finally, the patristic evidence relating to Aristotelian teaching attributes belief in divine providence to Aristotelianism.

However, we are not yet finished with the gods. There is the problem of the charge of impiety levelled against Aristotle for the hymn he wrote for his dead friend Hermias, to which we now turn.

### 4. The hymn written for Hermias

The hymn Aristotle wrote for Hermias appears as follows in Jaeger (1948:118).
Virtue toilsome to mortal race,
Fairest prize in life,
Even to die for thy shape,
Maiden, is an envied fate in Hellas
And to endure vehement unceasing labours,
Such fruit dost thou bestow upon the mind,
Like to the immortals and better than gold
And ancestors and languid-eyed sleep.
For thy sake Heracles the son of Zeus and Leda’s youths
Endured much in their deeds
Seeking for thy potency.
Through longing for thee Achilles and Ajax came to the house of Hades.
For the sake of thy dear shape the nursling of Atarneus also
Has left the sun’s beams desolate.
Therefore his deeds shall be famous in song,
And he shall be declared immortal by the Muses,
Daughters of Memory,
As they magnify the guerdon of friendship and the worship
of Zeus the hospitable.

This poem venerates virtue as a goddess, links her with the heroes, and
likens Hermias himself, whose residence was Atarneus, to these heroes
(Jaeger 1948:112). The poem ends with a reference to the worship of Zeus.
Aspects of popular Greek piety and religion referred to in the poem include
the worship of Zeus, the heroes, the immortal gods, the ancestors, Hades
and the Muses. Yet this poem was the basis of the charge of impiety referred
to by Ross (1949:6-7). There are two features in it at which a pious Greek
might take offence.

Firstly, by the time the poem was written the cult of the heroes was
already established. The Odyssey’s reference to Heracles had already received
its interpolation linking him with a divine existence on Olympus (Od. 13.602-
04; Stanford 1967:403). Thus, by likening Hermias to the heroes, Aristotle is
in effect making him a demi-god. He even likens Hermias to the heroes by
indicating that his deeds will be remembered in poetry. This veneration
might be held by the standards of Greek piety to be excessive.

Secondly, the divinisation of virtue, an attribute of the human, calls for
comment. Jaeger (1948:108-09, 118) argues that virtue is here worshipped as
a divine form, as would be appropriate in Platonic religion. He thinks that
Aristotle’s religion here parts company with his philosophy. And indeed,
belief in virtue as a Platonic idea seems to contradict the Aristotelian concept
of universals as inherent in things. Nevertheless, parsimony should deter us
from postulating unnecessary complications. We should therefore, as far as
possible, presume against such a contradiction of philosophy and piety as Jaeger postulates.

It seems arguable that by the time of the hymn to Hermias Aristotle had abandoned Platonic idealism. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, written soon after the breach with Plato (*Eib. Nic.* 1096a; Ross 1915), Aristotle was treating virtues as habits without reference to ideal forms (Thompson 1956:63). This suggests that the Platonic forms were no longer important to his idea of virtue, and so no longer believed in. We need not treat Aristotle’s worship of virtue as a sign of Platonic transcendentalism contradicting this, for it is wholly possible for an immanent term to be deified. If Aristotle believed virtue was immanent, it does not follow that he did not worship it.

We may thus give a possible reason why the Athenians took offence at Aristotle’s hymn. If Hermias’ virtue, as immanent in Hermias himself, is divinised, we may certainly argue that Hermias is being equated to the gods, in a fashion that would be unacceptable to ordinary Greek piety. We may recall the portrait of Euripides in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, where he prays to his own tongue and nostrils (Barnett 1964:189). It is clear that Aristophanes wishes to portray Euripides as impious for divinising parts of himself. The divinisation of Euripides’ nostrils and Hermias’ virtue may well have struck the Athenians as both unacceptable ways of divinising parts of the human.

My conclusion is that the charge of impiety against Aristotle is at least understandable. Aristotle’s beliefs in the hymn heroised and divinised Hermias to an extent that ordinary Greek religion did not allow. Aristotle invited the virtuous into the number of the gods and heroes. Is this just a metaphor? If Aristotle had been brought up as a Christian or a modern secularist we might think so. Yet, in ancient Greece the boundary between gods and humans was more fluid than in the modern West, even if Aristotle in fact went too far. Homer admitted a river and a magician to the ranks of the divine (*Il.* 22.263-64; *Od.* 4.384-86, 397; Stanford 1967:279).

Although Aristotle went beyond the acceptable ordinary boundaries of Greek piety, it is possible that he was making use of precedents set by Greek piety itself in the divinising of the immanent. There is no reason why Aristotle’s divinisation of Hermias should not have been literal. Neither is there any reason why his designation of the intellect as ἀθάνατον καὶ ἀδιόν, ‘divine and immortal’, should not have been meant literally (*De An.* 430a; Ross 1956:72). Remember, Aristotle was not a Christian monotheist. In divinising immanent reality literally he would have been but following a precedent already set by philosophers like Thales and Heraclitus who divinised the elements (Hack 1969:39, 74). However, in bringing up the divinity of the intellect we touch on another issue relating to Aristotle’s views on religion, namely his belief concerning the immortality of the soul.
5. The immortality of the soul

Since early times Aristotle has been thought of as a disbeliever in the immortality of the soul (Whittaker 1982:49). Alternatively, some have held that he believed in an eternal intellect, but not in personal immortality (Guthrie 1950:145-46). Possibly this is because he believed the soul was the form of the human body, constituting with it not two objects but one, like wax and the impression of its seal (Guthrie 1950:145). Yet there are indications that Aristotle believed the soul could exist apart from the body. In *De An.* 408b he says: ὁ δὲ νοῦς ἐνίκεν ἐγγίνονται οὐσία τις οὐσά καὶ οὐ φθείρεσθαι ('mind seems to be innate, being a certain substance, and not to be corrupted'; Ross 1956:17). In 413b he suggests that the mind can be separated from the body.

In 430a (Ross 1956:72) we have an important quotation:

καὶ οὐτὸς ὁ νοῦς χωριστός καὶ ἀπαθής καὶ ἀμίλης, τῇ οὐσίᾳ ὡν ἐνεργεῖαι ... ἀλλ’ ὁ χρόνος ἐνεργείαν ὁ νοῦς ὅτε δ’ οὐ ὁ νοῦς χωρισθεὶς δ’ ἔστι ἐν μονοῖς τοῦθ’ ὅπερ ἐστὶ, καὶ τοῦτο μόνον ἀθάνατον καὶ ἀείδιον (οὐ μηνομοεύομεν δὲ, ὅτι τοῦτο μὲν ἀπαθῆς, ὁ δὲ παθητικὸς νοῦς φθοράτος).

We may translate this as follows:

And this mind is separate and impassible and unmixed, being by nature in act (or, an operation) ... but it does not at one time think and at another time not think, but having been separated is alone that which it is, and this alone is immortal and eternal. But we do not remember that (or, we do not have any memory because) this is impassible, while the possible mind is corruptible.

Aristotle here contrasts a certain type of mind in us with the corruptible ‘passible mind’. The term χωρισθεὶς is used instead of χωριστός. This signifies something which has been separated from the body, and therefore used to be in it. The term ‘mind’ here is not merely shorthand for ‘the soul’, but is described in 430a as ὡς ἔξις τις, ‘like a sort of habit’, something in the soul which survives (Ross 1956:72).

The πηρασε ὁ χρόνος μὲν νοεῖ ὅτε δ’ οὐ νοεῖ can be interpreted in the sense that the separated intellect is always thinking or conscious (Owens 1976:117). If we adopt this understanding, however, we should add that this consciousness would be unlike our earthly mode of consciousness. For Aristotle elsewhere seems to indicate τῇ τῇ διανοεῖσθαι (thinking), φιλεῖν (love) and μισεῖν (fear) cease when the composite of body and soul is corrupted (*De An.* 408b; Ross 1956:17). Yet, he adds: ὁ δὲ νοῦς ἰσως
(‘but mind perhaps is something more divine and impassible’, 408b; Ross 1956:18). This can be understood in the sense that mind is immortal, but the forms of thinking and feeling we enjoy in the body cease at death, to be replaced with another form of consciousness.

Note that, according to the interpretation of 430a which I adopt, Aristotle speaks of the mind, not just the soul, as eternal. This suggests that consciousness lasts after death, not just an unconscious spiritual principle. Bolton (1978: 266) tries to reconcile the immortality of the soul with Aristotle’s hylomorphism. He says that Aristotle’s soul, though not necessarily embodied, is the same generic type of act as that found in embodied entities. Thus, the soul is incapable of full function without the body.

Another approach to hylomorphism is to say that hylomorphism prevents the separation of body and soul into two objects, so that we cannot speak of the body and soul of Aristotle as both surviving death. If the body survives the soul does not; or if the soul survives the body does not. A materialist interpretation of Aristotle would favour the first alternative. But the second alternative is not inconceivable. In Aristotelian terms a stone eye or a painted eye is not a true eye, but only equivocally an eye (De An. 412b). We can say that similarly a dead body is a body only equivocally. So it makes sense in Aristotelianism to say that the soul survives death, but the body, in the strict sense, does not.

A quotation shedding light on Aristotle’s view of life after death and relevant to piety is found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The quotation discusses the state of the dead:

*I translate this as follows:*

‘But for [the dead] not to be touched in any way by the fortunes of their descendants and all their friends seems excessively disagreeable and opposed to common opinions’ (cf. Thompson 1956:48-49).

This implies that Aristotle accepts traditional beliefs about the dead. Thompson (1956:48) says the material is not the work of Aristotle himself but based on his teaching. Nevertheless, it seems to point to an Aristotelian belief in ancestral piety. Aristotle’s praise of Hermias reinforces this opinion.

Aristotle discusses how the dead are affected by the deeds of the living in *Eth. Nic.* 1101a34-1101b9. He reckons that whatever gets through to the
dead is not sufficient to make happy those who are not happy, or to take away the bliss of those who are happy. This is an intriguing reference, suggesting that some of the dead enjoy bliss and others do not. Since this is a philosophical treatise and not a dialogue, we do not have any Aristotelian equivalent to the myth of Er, which elaborated in mythical terms the Platonic teaching of the afterlife. We do know, however, that Aristotle disagreed with Plato on an important point. He did not believe in reincarnation (De An. 414a21-24).

6. Aristotle and the externals of Greek religion

As has been seen, the Peripatetics did not believe in the real efficacy of prayers and sacrifices, although they conformed outwardly to public worship (Chadwick 1980:449). According to this position a limitation of divine providence does not rule out recognition of traditional forms of piety. This view may possibly have been that of Aristotle himself, for he shows some respect for the outward trappings of Greek religion. We have already referred to a quotation from Homer in the Metaphysics (Section 3). This is part of a generalised respect for Homer that is visible also in the Poetics (Lucas 1957:187). We may also note the mention of Muses in the hymn written for Hermias.

Did Aristotle view Homer’s works as divinely inspired? If he disbelieved in divine providence in the sublunar sphere, he could not have believed in the Iliad literally. Yet in the Poetics we observe an attitude comparable to that of certain Christians to scriptural difficulties, namely a concern to explain the improbabilities found in poetry about the gods (Lucas 1957:188). Plato was not afraid to openly criticise Homer, here following the example of philosophers before him (Parker 1986:325-26; Jowett 1875:250-51). In the Poetics, on the other hand, Aristotle defends mythological improbabilities (Lucas 1957:188) on the grounds that they conform to tradition. Aristotle therefore had a certain reverence for tradition. We cannot simply ascribe this to an attempt to avoid punishment by the laws. If Plato didn’t have to defend Homer in order to stay alive, neither did Aristotle. But he went ahead and did so anyway.

We should beware of projecting onto ancient society a too rigid distinction between credulous believers, who took their religion seriously, and philosophic unbelievers, for whom it was all a sham. It is possible to disbelieve in or limit divine providence and still have some reverence for the sacred. In Lucretius’ poem De Rerum Natura divine providence is denied in line with Epicurus. Yet Epicureanism still believes in the veneration of the gods (Bailey 1947a:972). The god-like treatment of Epicurus himself (Bailey
may be somewhat comparable to Aristotle’s treatment of Hermias. Scepticism about myths does not imply a total abandonment of religious respect. Although Origen treats the worship of the Peripatetics as a prentence, there is no good reason to doubt that Aristotle was sincerely pious (Chadwick 1980:449). He showed sincere piety in his respect for Homer and Hermias to an extent not required by law. One, moreover, to whom truth was a greater friend than Plato should not be lightly accused of dishonesty. Thus, Aristotle should be given the benefit of the doubt (Thompson 1956:32). Therefore we should treat his piety as sincere.

7. The contemplative life

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle argues that happiness lies in the contemplative life (Thompson 1956:303-05). Aristotle appears to understand by ‘contemplation’ philosophical activity generally. We are not here dealing with a mystical contemplation distinct from philosophic thought, like the contemplation of St John of the Cross, or St Teresa of Avila. Yet, for Aristotle the contemplative life seems to have religious significance nevertheless. For it is lived ‘in virtue of something divine within us ... the life of intellect must be divine compared with the life of a human creature’ (Thompson 1956:305). We may recall also that Aristotle’s God finds his happiness in the contemplation of himself (Costelloe & Muirhead 1962:398). The Aristotelian God lives a contemplative life; and thus the philosopher, in his own contemplative life, in some way imitates God.

Did Aristotle’s contemplative life concentrate on God alone or did it include contemplation of non-divine things? Aristotle seems, from the quotation above, to view ‘the life of the intellect’ as divine, not just the consideration of God. While discussing the contemplative life in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he does not single out contemplation of God for special attention. So even the study of nature or being as such would be divine for Aristotle. This is not to deny, of course, that knowledge of God would be special in its way. Aristotle says in the *De Partibus Animalium* that there is more delight in even the slenderest knowledge of eternal things (which he calls divine) than in all our knowledge of things here below (*PA* 644b31-34; Page et al. 1961:96-99).

G.K. Chesterton in his book on Aquinas indicates that Aquinas attributed value to being (1943:89). To the saying, ‘To be or not to be – that is the question,’ Aquinas, according to Chesterton, would reply, ‘To be – that is the answer.’ We may possibly link this with Aristotelian realism. According to the argument above, the life of intellect itself was divine for Aristotle. Contemplation of being would thus have been something divine. It is
possible that Aristotle had an awareness of being as sacred and significant, which is echoed by Aquinas’ positive valuation of being.

8. Conclusion

The surviving philosophical treatises of Aristotle do not give a complete picture of his views on religion and piety. This is partly because Aristotle preferred issues relating to piety to be settled by the law rather than by argument (Section 1), a position comparable to the view of his master Plato (Section 2).

We do know that Aristotle believed in a supreme divinity. There is also some evidence suggesting that he believed in divine providence (Section 3). The hymn he wrote for Hermias shows that he had respect for heroes, and divinised virtue. It shows that he was pious, although his piety may have been of a kind that would have offended a traditional Greek (Section 4). It can be argued that Aristotle accepted personal immortality (Section 5). He had some respect for the tradition of Greek religion and should in my view be treated as sincerely pious (Section 6). He taught that happiness was to be found in the contemplative life, which seems for him to have been something divine and therefore of religious significance (Section 7).

So long as Aristotle’s dialogues remain lost, we will never know exactly what they could have told us about Aristotle’s religious views. However, on the basis of the evidence about Aristotle that we presently have, we can still try to ‘read between the lines’ and discover what we can about Aristotle’s views on religion.

Bibliography


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