OLYMPIODORUS’ INTERPRETATION OF STOICISM

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Abstract. The author, a well-known researcher in the field of the Stoic heritage, establish in her paper a clear point of view about the Neo-Platonism in connection with the Stoic roots in the School of Alexandria, especially in Olympiodorus Commentaries to Plato’s Dialogues concerning the wise man.

Among the commentators of Plato’s dialogues, the one who is regarded as the last pagan philosopher is Olympiodorus, named the “younger”. Before presenting our argument about his interpretation of Stoic philosophy during his teaching in relation with the Platonic dialogues, let us discuss briefly the surroundings of Alexandria, where Olympiodorus lived and taught.

Since the times of the Ptolemies as is well known, Alexandria was in parallel with Athens, a bustling workshop of culture and propagation of philosophy. We already know that Ptolemy was the one who (according a report\(^1\)) invited Demetrius of Phaleron to Egypt from Athens in order to offer his rhetorical and political services to Ptolemy. Demetrius, also, became his cultural advisor. Demetrius was a prolific author and an adherent of the Peripatetic School of Aristotel. This fact reflects the interest of the Library of Alexandria in the works of the Stagirite philosopher. Demetrius died at 284 BC, after realizing his dream to create the Museum in a place of research and knowledge, in the city of Alexandria. The foundation of the Museum shows that Demetrius aspired to the fame of the two Athenian Philosophical Schools, the Academy and the Lyceum. Later, perhaps, in the place of the Museum, several cultural events were organized even after the Roman conquest\(^2\).

\(^1\) According a report of Eirineus. According other information, that of the Letter of Aristeas, which it is ought to 2\(^{nd}\) century BC, the time of completion of the work, in the period in which king was Ptolemy Philadelphos. Cf. M. el - ABADI, Life and Fate of the Ancient Library of Alexandria. Paris, UNESCO/PNUED, 1992 (Greek transl., L. Kassimi) Athens, Smili, 1998, pp. 88–89.


Following this, one cannot fail to notice that eminent personalities of the Museum served often in important political posts. While some kind of decline can be noticed in the literary production of the Museum, on the other hand a reanimation towards of philosophy becomes also evident, especially in the personalities of Philo the Jewish and Plotinus. The occupation with philosophy owes a lot to the interest of the Romans in religion and, generally, in questions referring to religion. It is worth while to notice that during this period, on the pagan side we can see signs of a tendency to incorporate Christianity into the pagan milieu. This is reminiscent of the way Egyptian gods were incorporated into the Greek religion in the Hellenistic period. This fact reveals a tendency towards a peaceful coexistence of different peoples. It is quite certain that emperor Alexander Severus worked for the same goal, when, accordingly to the information provided by Eusebius (History of Eccles., 6, 21, 3) "he had kept in his private temple, statues of Abraham, Orpheus, Jesus and Apollo, these four great prophets, as he used to say, to whom he had a great respect". Very soon Alexandria became the universal centre of philosophy because of the reanimation of the interest of religion and philosophy, which was elevated to a crucial factor for the existence of the Museum and the Library. We could say that in those two institutions and in the environment created by eminent teachers and professors, the last refuge for the cultivate pagans was created. The pagan professors of philosophy revitalize the power of that discipline, until the end of the fifth century. In those days, the production of annotated and commented editions of Plato and Aristotle was impressive. This scholarly tendency reveals the names of Ammonius, Olympiodorus or John Philoponus, who, later, became Christian. The reason for Egypt can be called a country of mixed cultures and ideas, as Canfora says, is due to the fact that the Chaldean and Persian wisdom of had acquired the aspect of Hellenism, Neo-Platonism and, finally, of the wisdom of the Gnostics. For the same reasons that Egypt became the country of mixed cultures and ideas, it also became the country where the Greek intellect was preserved. In the University of Alexandria throughout the 5th century AD and in the beginning of the 6th century professors, like the author of the Life of Severus, who usually were pagans, taught the Aristotelian theories. Alexandria became the last bastion of the cultivated pagan world. By the end of the 5th century many pagan philosophers lived in the city, but the philosophic families were already a mere handful. The teaching of philosophy apart from being a profession had created, in a way, a society for the promotion of

4 Cf. R. REMONDON, L'Egypte et la suprême résistance au christianisme (Vc.-VIIe siècle), BIFAO, 51, 1952, pp. 63-78, especially, p. 64.
science, and conservation of the ancient religion. In this way, generations of
sophists, from father to son, impart this belligerent disposition against the new
religion. On the other hand attachment to the ancient thought, and the tendency
towards supporting further research of philosophical texts, comes from the
Egyptians as well.

In those days Egyptian fell into nostalgia for ancient Egypt, and this
manifests a faith in tradition and the religion of the ancestors. For such
philosophers, being truly Egyptian means being pagan; in the same way being
Coptic means being heretic. This could explain the fact that eminent promoters of
intellectual paganism, by the 5th century, were Egyptians who resisted until the
very last moment the propagation of Christianity. Nevertheless, the paganism of
the philosophers of the capital, about 5th century, did not appear as a marginal
anarchism without foundations. The question refers to a paganism related to a
part of the population, which finds in paganism its intellectual expression. About
the end of 4th century AD, Christianity seems to acquire considerable strength.
Pagans are far less in numbers compared to Christians. They remain however
organized for yet another half century. About 450, the balance leans towards the
Christians. In 485 AD, the Christians got scared by the threat of the revenge of Isis
refused to take away the statue of the goddess from her temple. The fact that in the
Upper Egypt streets have the name of Isis, Serapes or Theoris, is regarded as a kind
of "revolt" of limited extent. After the 450s we are talking about a diminishing
number of Pagans who survive in the province, but also in Alexandria as well. At
the same time in Panopolis, for instance, where to a great number of pagans travel,
Aristophanes' play, the Birds was performed. In Alexandria the ancient Greek
philosophy is also taught. In a strange way, Egyptian communities, even at a late
date, join Hellenism, because there, they found allies for preserving paganism.
Therefore, paganism, as we can see, has a difficult and turbulent life. It is
exhausted, deprived of its temples, of its priests or worshipping ceremonies. It
survives in Egypt, however, through isolated people or in small groups, unnoticed,
until the Arab conquest. J. Swartz writes: "Mr. Drioton remarks that at Saqqara,
the presence of a branch of palm over a corpse manifests a pagan forced to hide his
own convictions."

Olympiodorus was born in Alexandria (c. 495) late in the fifth century and
died after 565. We are not sure about the year of his death; although we know that
in 565 he was still teaching. He was both a Neo-Platonist philosopher, teacher and
commentator of Plato's dialogues, and also an astrologer. He had been a pupil of
Ammonius. According to H. J. Blumenthal, Olympiodorus had heard a lecture (or

7 Cf. J. MASPERO, Horapollon et la fin du paganisme égyptien, BIFAO, 11, 1914, pp. 163–195,
8 All these information has been drawn up from the article of R. REMONDON, op. cit., pp. 68–71.
9 Cf. H.J. BLUMENTHAL, Alexandria as a Centre of Greek Philosophy in Later Classical
lectures) on Plato’s Gorgias given by Ammonius, in 510 AD and also on Phaedo\textsuperscript{10}. Ammonius himself was an erudite commentator of the Aristotelian works, and he also gave lectures on Aristotle’s Metaphysics, according to the testimony of Asclepius\textsuperscript{11}. As we have already mentioned, in those years pagan philosophy was taught by a restricted circle of erudite thinkers, who follow the same vocation from father to son. This is the case of Ammonius, and his father Hermeias (who flourished by the second half of the 5\textsuperscript{th} century AD and he wrote commentaries on Phaedrus).

Olympiodorus is often confused with other namesakes. This happens naturally because in the same period of time existed three other thinkers by the same name. One was born in the Egyptian Thebes, “a prominent figure in imperial politics and a scholar connected by personal and professional links to the Blemmyes of Nubia”. This cultured pagan missionary dedicated his historical work to Theodosius II and, was in turn, the dedicatee of the Historian Hierocle’s, De Providentia\textsuperscript{12}. Another is a deacon, to whom Anastasius Sinaite gives the title of “the Great Philosopher”, author of a series of commentaries on the Bible\textsuperscript{13}. And, finally, Olympiodorus, Proclus’ teacher, who offers to his star pupil, Proclus, the hand of his daughter\textsuperscript{14}.

It has been mentioned above, that the commentaries on Aristotle’s Metaphysics, Α’μειξεν and Α’ἐλλαξ (υπὸ Ασκληπιινοῦ απὸ ϕωνὶς Αμμονίου τού Ερμείου) had been written by Asclepius, after listening to Ammonius’ lectures. As we all know, Ammonius, apart from the commentary on the De interpretatione (perhaps a sort of dissertation) is not known to have written any major work. His lectures however, circulated, partly under his own name and partly under those of Asclepius or Philoponous\textsuperscript{15}. This is a typical case with the greatest part of commentators\textsuperscript{16}, and they are many who did not leave anything written by themselves. Hence, it is their pupil’s duty to write down their teachers’ lessons.

Our Olympiodorus, the Younger, lived in the late years of the Roman Empire. He was one of Ammonius’ successors\textsuperscript{17}; as was Asclepius as well, and the both seem to have been pagan. After Justinius Decree, of 529 AD, by which

\textsuperscript{10} “our own professor” (ο δε φιλόσοφος ο καθ' ημίς ψηφίν ότι διανοί) 6 § 3, W.


\textsuperscript{12} Cf. F. P. ATHANASSIADI, Persecution and Response in Late Paganism: The evidence of Damascus, J.H.S., CXIII, 1993, 1-29, esp. p. 18 and n. 126.


\textsuperscript{14} Cf. P. ATHANASSIADI, op. cit., p. 6.


\textsuperscript{16} It is evident (that the phrase «από ϕωνίς» points out that Asclepius wrote his teacher’s oral lesson; cf. ibid., p. 194.

\textsuperscript{17} His first successor seems to be the mathematician Eutocius, and then Olympiodorus, cf. A. CAMHOM, The Last Days of the Academy at Athens, Proceedings of the Cambridge Philosophical Society, 195, 1969; cf. H. J. BLUMENTHAL, op. cit., p. 322.
he closed Plato’s Academy in Athens and other pagan schools\textsuperscript{18}, Athens ceased to be the only city of philosophy. While the intellectual differences between Athens and Alexandria still existed, it is true that the major figures of the Late Greek Neo-Platonism passed through Alexandria in the course of their education\textsuperscript{19}, before going to the Academy of Athens to teach. As one of the major differences between the two schools we could mention the Athenian rigid anti-Christian Platonism, with Aristotelian logic as its handmaiden; in Alexandria, on the contrary, we observe an harmonization of Platonism and Aristotelianism as a foundation for a monotheistic philosophy, independent of pagan cults\textsuperscript{20}. This is the cause, perhaps, that after Olympiodorus’ death, the School passed on to the hands of Christian Aristotelians, and that it, eventually moved to Constantinople. Olympiodorus himself was able to survive the persecution suffered by many of his peers. We know that after the period that Olympiodorus taught in the School of Alexandria, the School itself passed on to the hands of his three pupils, already Christian, Elias, Sthephanus and David, the Armenian\textsuperscript{21}. Olympiodorus wrote Commentaries on Plato’s dialogues (on Phaedo, Alcibiades Prior and Gorgias); he wrote also on Aristotle, Meteorologica and Categories and a Life of Plato\textsuperscript{22}, that takes the place of a general Introduction to his Commentaries in Alcibiades Prior.

As we know, by the division of his Commentaries on Plato, (and it is in this part of his works, exactly, that we will now focus), during his lectures, Olympiodorus imposed almost fixed “mechanic” divisions. This is how the long tradition of a scholar way of teaching is testified\textsuperscript{23}. This way of teaching, on the other hand, namely a repetition of the dialogues followed again by other repetitions, in both, theoria and lexis proves that these lectures were addressed to novices\textsuperscript{24}. It seems that the first dialogue to teach in Olympiodorus courses, was Alcibiades Prior, which, according Westerink\textsuperscript{25}, was an introductory lesson, followed by Gorgias, as a lesson of life and society, and finally, Phaedo, as a study of death.

From this introductory dialogue of Olympiodorus’ classes, H. von Arnim has chosen only three fragments concerning stoic moral philosophy. The first fr. 302,

\textsuperscript{19} H.J. BLUMENTHAL, op. cit., p. 322.
\textsuperscript{21} Cf. M. RICHARD, op. cit., p. 314.
\textsuperscript{24} Cf. A.J. FESTUGIERE, op. cit., p. 78 : «il s’agit, semble-t-il, d’un cours élémentaire qui s’adresse à des débutants, auquel on ne craint pas de dire à plusieurs reprises les mêmes choses. Cf. also M. RICHARD, op. cit., p. 199 : « Cette présentation leur donne un caractère pédagogique extrêmement marqué».
\textsuperscript{25} L. G. WESTERINK, op. cit., p. 28: “The Phaedo should follow Alcibiades (introductory) and Gorgias (on life and society).
from the third volume of *Stoicorum Vaerum Fragmenta*, concerns virtues. The second (489) concerns the affections; the third (618), deals with the status of the wise man. Although Alciatiades includes also other references to stoic philosophy and philosophers, it seems rather peculiar that only these three fragments appear to be important in von Arnim's collection.

Let us look in to the reasons of this choice. The first one, as we have seen concerns virtues. Olympiodorus thinks that virtues follow each other, in the sense of one producing the other. Each one of the virtues however, has its own peculiarities. For instance, all kinds of virtue can be united in courage and only then man can really be courageous. The same applies to wisdom and only when all virtues unite to wisdom, man can really be wise. As all gods, says Olympiodorus, when they are in Zeus, they are Zeus-like while in some other case, they may be Hera-like. This happens, because mere is no imperfection in gods, because god having gathered all virtues (qualities) in him or herself, knows what to do at every moment. This applies also to prudence as well. Also prudence, being a virtue, reveals what has to be done in each case. Olympiodorus insisting on courage posits that courage also reveals the practical steps towards its realization. Returning to prudence once again, Olympiodorus writes that any practical inefficiency can trough the power of prudence be overcome. The same exactly applies for justice (S. V. F., III, 302). In the second part of the book three, Diogenes Babylonius, referring to gods, supports the view that it is rather puerile and, in fact, impossible to say that gods have human-like form (παραμικός εἶναι θεούς ανθρωποιδεῖς εἶναι καὶ αδικτὸν). This is so, because if it Zeus, one and the same god, who reveals different aspects of himself, according to every particular natural circumstance. A special name belongs in every natural element. The sea, for instance, takes the name of Neptune; the air takes the name of Hera, although it is about one and same god, namely Zeus, demonstrating his different qualities. This is the reason why Cleanthes in his *Hymn to Zeus* 26, hesitates in addressing Zeus, the most glorious among all gods, with a proper name. Eventually he decides to call him "polyonyme", meaning the one who has various names. It is evident that Stoics have placed their god in a profoundly naturalistic environment, before drawing up from myths related to the popular gods. 27 Through that cultural depository of myth and legends coming down the centuries, they found a way to support their views. For them, myth and divine names were able to discover different hidden meanings. 28

It seems strange that Olympiodorus has chosen to interrupt his teaching about virtues to interpose a lesson on stoic theology. He confirms the existence of Zeus, the one and only god, who includes the totality of divine qualities. This position, as

26 STOBIEUS, Ecl., 1. 12,25,3 (=S.V.F., 1,537)
we have seen, is largely approved by stoic theology. The Stoics multiply the divine nominally, by attributing different names corresponding to the modifications of matter. They hold the view that through matter the pneuma of god is disseminated, while at the same time they firmly believe in the existence of only one god. The philosopher acts indeed, like a soothsayer or a doctor. He attempts to interpret the natural "symptoms" and understand them like a reflection of a hidden reality. Olympiodorus by this example wished to prove that virtues exist as a whole, although they contain different manifestations. He defines virtues as the wisdom of the correct action in every case (πάσα αρετή φρόνης εστίν ας τα πρακτέα ειδοῖα). This phrase leads to Diogenes Laertius VII, 92, where it is confirm that Stoics "recognize among the virtues some primary and some subordinate to these. Wisdom, courage, justice and temperance are primary". According Olympiodorus, every virtue is the prudence because it indicates to the man the correct way to act. And Diogenes Laertius, wishing to define virtue, concludes that "virtue is in one sense the perfection of anything in general". He also distinguishes two kinds of virtues: the non-intellectual (like health) and the intellectual-one (like prudence).

In fragment 214 of the third book of S. V. F., virtue is defined like a craft: «τέχνη γαρ η αρετή». Every technē is defined like as a system of intellectual elaboration and training. As regards intellectual elaboration, it helps reason; as for training, it supports habit. As according to the Stoics, we are all born to be able by nature, we all own the means to rise to that status. Another definition of technē is a variation of this description, also held by Olympiodorus, which is also supported by his pupil David: "technē is a system of intellectual elaboration conducing in an end". What is the final aim or end (τέλος) for a Stoic philosopher? Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, in his treatise, On the Nature of Man, was the first one to designate the end as "the life in agreement with nature" (or living agreeably according to nature), which is the same as a virtuous life, virtue being the goal towards which nature leads and guides us.

In a definition attributed to Zeno, by Olympiodorus himself, one can read the two notions technē (craft) and telos (end) connected together in the following way: "Zeno says that craft is a system of intellectual elaboration and acquisition, which

29 Cf. ATHENAG., c. 6 (=DOX. GR., 306).
31 D. L. VII, 90.
32 Loc. cit.
33 In his book, What is the way (ποιν τρόπο) that man are good or bad? Virtue is subordinated by three factors: nature habit and reason.
35 D. L. VII, 87.
attend to an end useful for our life” (σύστημα εκ καλήσεων συγγερμηματένων
απός τι εύχρηστον τον εν τω βίω). In another definition of craft (techne),
attributed to Cleanthes, this time by Olympiodorus, techne is regarded as a
tendency to attain always something methodically (οὐδὲν πάντα ανάλογον). In
effect, the end (telos) of the life of the happy man, as it is defined by the Stoics, is
the smooth current of life (εὔροια βίου), when all actions promote the harmony
between the spirit dwelling in the individual man and the will of him who orders
the universe. But how can the individual man be able to complete actions in
harmony with himself and the universe? Quiet often, man in performing several
actions is in danger of taking wrong decisions because of wrong evaluations of
certain events. These decisions, according Stoic Philosophy, are the result of
passions, originating from bad judgment. A bad judgment is something that
troubles the soul, moves the reason and conducts man to failure. When man fails,
he troubles the cosmic harmony, namely, the harmony that exists between the
human being and God, because man is a fragment of God. Nothing can trouble
cosmic harmony, but vice (pathos). According to the Stoics the only good is virtue;
the only bad is vice. If therefore one due to bad judgement considers something
bad apart from real vice, this is a mistaken action. Mistaken actions easily turn into
vices. So vices when they acquire their own impulsions they start to move the soul,
and trouble it. Chrysippus, the third leader of the Stoic School, in a very descriptive
fragment, says: “vices move the soul unreasonably. They are like someone whom
while running and wishing to stop, his feet refuse to obey him and move forward
for a while against his will”.39 Chrisipus, according Galion, had written a treatise
About Passions (Peri pathon), where he was explaining that passions appear when
the movement of the soul loses its measure (a-metron) and comes out of its axis
(εκ-φορά). He also added that this situation of the soul can be defined as a motion
of the reason, (logos), which takes another direction instead of taking the way of
death (του λογου αποστροφην).40 In a similar way, in his commentaries on
Alcibiades, Olympiodorus gives a merely descriptive example just to indicate the
way of curing passions. The Alexandrian philosopher says that passions are like
bent rod. When we want to make it straight again, we should bend the opposite
way. In this way we succeed in changing its bending. This is how we succeed in
repairing the vice of the soul and re-establish harmony. As regards human

36 OLIYMPIODORUS, in Plat. Gorg., pp. 53, 54 (ed. Jahn nov. ann., philol. Supplement,
XIV, 1848, p. 239–240) (=S. V.F., I, 73). Cf. also R. JAKSON, K. LYKOS-H. TARRANT,
p. 239, 240) (=S. V.F., I, 490).
38 D. I. VII 88.0
39 Cf. SENECA, Ad Luc., 113, 23; cf also R. SHARPLES, Stoics, Epicurians and Sceptics. An
Introduction to Hellenistic Philosophy (gr. transl. M. Lipouri and J. Avramidis), Thessaloniki
when the soul is bad, there is only one way to cure it and make it good. This is education. This is exactly the reason why the Stoics affirm, in accordance with Plato, that virtue can be taught. They insist that the proof of that is the case of the bad man who is becoming good. In a remarkable fragment of Cleanthes, we read: "There is nothing in between virtue and vice. This is because in every man the reasons exist by nature, which lead him towards virtue. Men are like the verses of an iamb. When they are not finished, they are in vice; when finished, (completed), they are virtuous." Namely, through education man can turn his ignorance into knowledge. This is how man can move from the status of a bad man into a status of a wise man. This is, Olympiodorus affirms, the role of the teacher: to reveal to his pupil the way to find the truth. According to the Stoics, to be wise means that man has the ability to distinguish falsity from truth. This ability corresponds especially to the wise man - in other words - to the educated one. According to Cicero, what distinguish the wise man from the idiot is focused on the intellectual capacity of distinguishing between truth and false. Olympiodorus precisely emphasizes this Stoic position by offering an example, about the qualities of the wise man. The wise man, the Alexandrian philosopher affirms, is the only ruler, despite the fact that he does not own the instruments of the science of ruling. Only the wise man is rich because he knows how to use wealth while he has not own it. One can believe that this phrase belongs to the Stoics paradoxes, in the way that all good qualities are attributed to the wise man already since the first period of ancient Stoicism. The wise man, according to the Stoics, owns all gifts: "Wise man is a calm one; he is peaceful; he is virtuous in all his life; he is just, benevolent, perfect, an economist, sociable, an orator, a high priest, a good speaker, friendly, decent, a proper general, and also practical." More than that, the wise man, by his power of reasoning is like Zeus himself. All these qualities constitute the portrait of the wise man, while at the same time, they stand for those for the good ruler as well.

As we know, during the times of the Late Roman Empire, like during the Hellenistic period (when Stoicism was founded) the office of kingship was attributed to those who had being good generals and also owned the qualities of a good orator: namely, the man, who was able to attract people. His belonging to a dynasty was of no importance. The only important thing was his abilities on the battlefield and also his ability to rule over people. During the Late Roman Times, it must be said, some sons of emperors, who did not have such abilities, would lose the throne and in their place competent generals had risen. Let us think about the

41 D. L. VII, 91.
42 STOBEUS, Ecl., II, 65, 2. 7 W. (=S. V.F., I, 566).
43 CICERO, Ac. Pr., II. XX, 66.
case of Theodosius or Justinian. Nevertheless, Byzantine Empire did not allow the giving authority to incapable hands.47

The relationship between the wise man and the ruler is rather clear in Stoic Philosophy. The ruler has to rule over his people and in the same way he has also, to direct and rule over his passions assisted by his reason (hegemonic). This is how, Olympiodorus says, he proves to hold the science of ruling. But how can we justify this stoic position about authority and kingship, about wealth and the instruments of royal art, when we know that the Stoics disdain even a royal invitation? Let us read the following paragraph from the same fragment, belonging, this time, to Proclus’ Commentaries in Alcibiades48: “We call carpenter not the man who possesses the carpenter’s instruments, but him who knows the craft of carpentry. In the same way, we call ruler and king the man who possesses the royal science, the man who can rule over many people. The instrument is the power; and he who knows to use this instrument, is also in the habit (hexis) to use it. He who is deprived of the habit he can’t be a ruler or a king”. Concerning the wise man, the number of man he rules over, is not important the number of men who rules. What is important is his ability to rule on his own personality. This may become clear by the following fragment of Philo49: “We say that royalty is the wisdom and that is why we call the wise man, a king”.

In conclusion, we can say that we must not take the word of a ruler (archon) literally in Olympiodorus. According to the Stoics, the ruler is the one who possesses the art and craft of life. This art belongs exclusively to the wise man who, by training the abilities of his reason, is able to reach the wisdom himself. He can see clearly, free of passions, in other words free of judgements. He is certain for what he wants in every moment, in every respect, in every circumstance. He is self-sufficient.

Finally, by teaching Platonic Alcibiades, Olympiodorus, focused only on these three stoic fragmente (III, 302, 489, 618), and it is certain that through these fragments he analyzed the whole corpus of stoic ethics, a very important issue for those uncertain Late Roman times.

48 S.V.F., III, 618.