

## Satirized Theodicy: Divine Justice in Lucian's Dialogues

In his caricatures of the Greek gods, Lucian of Samosata frequently calls attention to the discrepancy between the gods' supposed existence and the presence of injustice in the world. This paper argues that Lucian humorously engages with the philosophical topic of theodicy by staging absurd scenarios where existing gods would allow injustice to run rife.

Much scholarship on religion in Lucian has attempted to reconstruct Lucian's own religious views, yielding markedly different conclusions (compare, among others, Caster 1937, who sees Lucian as fundamentally opposed to the religious ideals of his contemporaries, with Berdozzo 2011, who argues that Lucian did not have a religious sensibility at all). In this paper, I step beyond this question by recognizing that it is possible to analyze the rhetorical function of Lucian's dialogues without being certain of his own religious viewpoint (in line with the approach of Branham 1989, who focuses on the mechanics of Lucian's humor via parody of existing generic tropes; see especially pg. 129). Caster (1937, 150-155) offers the fullest treatment of Lucian's engagement with the question of why the gods would permit injustice in the world, showing that Lucian does not engage this question at a philosophical depth on par with other Greek writers. There remains room, however, for exploring how Lucian actually went about engaging this topic in his comic dialogues. Kuin's forthcoming book on religion in Lucian indicates that this is a topic of continuing scholarly interest.

Multiple of Lucian's comic dialogues engage with a version of the "problem of evil." I present this problem in propositional form, with due attention given to the fact that the Greek gods were not viewed as morally perfect, but still expected to uphold some standard of justice. I show how Lucian's assumption that the gods exist (within the bounds of his fictional dialogues)

creates the need to explain why they would allow injustice in the world. Instead of providing rationally substantial explanations (as per normal theodicies), Lucian gives the gods ridiculous reasons for failing to administer justice. While this could be taken as a *reductio ad absurdum* argument aimed at demonstrating the logical impossibility of the gods' existence, it could also merely be a vehicle for humor. After considering this issue at a theoretical level, I move on to analyze Lucian's engagement with the problem of evil in three of his dialogues.

First, I introduce Lucian's treatment of this theme by examining his articulation of the problem of evil in *Iuppiter confutatus* 15-17. I argue that although these remarks are not unique in pointing out how Zeus permits the good to suffer and the wicked to flourish, they are given special flavor because of the humorous context—Zeus being cross-examined and backed into a corner by a human interlocutor. Such recontextualizations of a well-known philosophical topic are what render Lucian's voice on this issue most enlightening.

Second, I examine the theme of divine justice in *Timon*. In 1-6, Timon issues a lengthy complaint to Zeus about he has suffered despite his righteousness (the longest continuous articulation of the problem of evil in Lucian's corpus); in 9, Zeus gives ridiculous excuses for his failure to administer justice (thus providing a laughable pseudo-theodicy); and in the rest of the dialogue, Zeus tries to reward Timon, but in an unwieldy and (arguably) unsuccessful way. I argue that by means of this storyline, Lucian humorously underscores the faultiness of the divine recompensation mechanism.

Third, I show how Lucian's *Iuppiter tragoedus* calls attention to the gods' silence despite the blasphemy of atheists—an issue closely related to the problem of evil. Lucian imagines a scenario where the gods are aware of and concerned about a philosophical dispute about their

existence, but give humorous reasons for not intervening (5, 25, and 32), thus again highlighting the absurdity of existing gods failing to maintain justice.

This paper would contribute to the scholarly discussion of religion in Lucian by addressing how he engages with the topic of theodicy in his comic dialogues. His unflattering portrayal of the gods' inability or unwillingness to do justice on earth yields humor, even if he does not intend to totally deconstruct traditional perceptions of the gods. This paper also encourages further exploration of the ways that Lucian went about wittily contextualizing religious and philosophical themes in his writings.

## References

- Berdozzo, Fabio. 2011. *Götter, Mythen, Philosophen: Lukian und die paganen Göttervorstellungen seiner Zeit*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Branham, Bracht. 1989. *Unruly Eloquence: Lucian and the Comedy of Traditions*, Revealing Antiquity 2. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Caster, Marcel. 1937. *Lucien et La Pensée Religieuse de son Temps*. Paris: Société d'édition "Les Belles lettres."
- Kuin, Inger. Forthcoming. *Lucian's Laughing Gods: Religion, Philosophy, and Popular Culture in the Roman East*. Michigan University Press.