

Sallustius' On Gods and the Universe *A Manual for Teachers of Platonic Philosophy?*

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Abstract

This paper identifies Sallustius' *On Gods and the Universe* as a manual written for teachers offering a basic course in Platonic philosophy. Evidence found in the text in support of this identification is presented and comparisons are proposed with other such manuals from Greek and Roman literature in Late Antiquity, manuals written for teachers of rhetoric (Quintilian), Platonic philosophy (Alcinous, Proclus) and Christian doctrine (Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine). Conclusions are drawn concerning the implications of this identification for the interpretation of Sallustius' text.

The short text generally known today under the title *On Gods and the Universe* and attributed in the manuscript tradition to a certain "Saloustios the philosopher" has been variously and somewhat vaguely described in modern studies as being a "manifesto of paganism", or an "official catechism of the pagan empire", as a "handbook", an "introduction" (*isagoge*), or "a teaching manual for pagan priests".¹ Without going into questions as to the identity of this Sallustius and the title of the work – I will assume the common view today that the work reflects Neoplatonic philosophy in the form it took with Iamblichus and seems to relate to circles around Julian the Emperor² – the following pages will argue for the thesis that the work is to be identified more precisely as a manual destined for teachers who intend to offer a basic course in Platonic philosophy.³ In the first part of this paper I will present evidence in support of this thesis, moving then, in the second part, to a comparison with other such manuals dating from the Roman imperial period and concluding with some comments

* I am happy to offer this modest token of appreciation of the work of Concetta Luna and am indebted to my Valaisan friends for our discussions of Sallustius and most especially to Adrien Lecerf, who, while disagreeing with me, allowed me with his detailed comments to clarify my argument.

¹ See D. Melsbach (ed.), *Die pagane Theologie des Philosophen Salustios*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2022, pp. 7-10; I. Tanaseanu-Döbler, "Religious Education in Late Antique Platonism", in I. Tanaseanu-Döbler – M. Döbler (ed.), *Religious Education in Pre-Modern Europe*, Brill, Leiden 2012 (Numen Book Series 140), p. 124 n. 108 (with bibliographical references); A. Lecerf, "Salustios' Schrift als Propagandadokument", in Melsbach (ed.) (as above), pp. 69-72, who however points out that Sallustius' text does not support the idea that it would be a manual for teaching pagan priests. In what follows I will use the Greek text of Sallustius in the slightly modified version of the editions by A.D. Nock and G. Rochefort published in Melsbach (ed.), *Die pagane Theologie des Philosophen Salustios*.

² See Melsbach (ed.), *Die pagane Theologie des Philosophen Salustios* (above, n. 1), *passim*.

³ Tanaseanu-Döbler, "Religious Education" (above, n. 1), p. 127 suggests that, among other purposes, "additionally, he [Sallustius] may also have envisaged his little treatise as a potential handbook for people attempting to instruct others". As grounds for her suggestion Tanaseanu-Döbler points to the fact that Sallustius does not directly address potential readers, but "speaks of them as a group to be educated; the potential teacher could fill the gap and apply and personalize Salustius' information". I wish to provide here further support for this insight.

as to the bearing the thesis might have with regard to the interpretation of Sallustius' little book. I will avoid making inferences from the (supposed) identity of the author ("Saloustios the philosopher"), his social and political status, in defining the nature of the book, but will confine myself to the internal evidence to be found in the book itself.

But first, by way of a brief preliminary, it might be useful to mention some features which we can expect to find in a manual destined for teachers of a discipline or science (later we will consider specific ancient examples). Such a manual, we can suppose, will discuss such things as the kinds of students with which the teacher will be dealing, the appropriate pedagogic methods to be applied in teaching these students, a syllabus of the topics to be covered in teaching the discipline, brief overviews of the subject-matter. The teachers envisaged by the manual can be assumed to have some competence in their field and so will be able to fill out and supplement what is provided in a brief overview. Or they may be referred to further literature where more information can be found. Examples of a lecture or lectures may be provided, which the teachers can use or adapt in relation to their specific needs. We will later meet these and other features of such manuals for teachers when we consider specific examples. But first let us examine Sallustius' text.

I.

The text begins with the following indications:

Those who wish to learn (*ἀκούειν*) about the gods need to have been well educated from childhood and must not be bred up among foolish ideas (*ἀνοήτοις ... δόξαις*);⁴ they must be naturally good and reasonable (*τὴν φύσιν ἀγαθοὺς εἶναι καὶ ἔμφρονας*), in order that they may have something in common with the subject. Further, they must know common opinions (*κοινὰ ἔνοιαι*), by which I mean those in which all men, if rightly questioned, would concur; such opinions are that every god is good and impassive and unchangeable [...] Such must be the student (*ὁ ἀκούων*), whereas the words of teaching (*λόγοι*) should be of this sort (*τοιούδε*).⁵

The text thus specifies at the start the qualities required of one who is to receive teaching on the subject of the gods. The student must have the appropriate natural virtues so as to be able to relate to the teaching being proposed. These natural virtues we can identify as the first level in the later Neoplatonic hierarchy of virtues, which ascended from natural virtues to ethical, political, purificatory and yet higher levels of virtue. Being "well educated from childhood" corresponds to the level of 'ethical' virtue, which results from a correct moral training of children prior to access to the rational control of the passions given by the 'political' virtues.⁶

⁴ An anonymous reader of this paper has seen in this phrase an anti-Christian allusion, but the reference may be more general and not just concern a Christian education; see Plato, *Republic* 466 B 7-8, *Philebus* 12 D 3 for the Greek phrase.

⁵ I quote the English translation given by A.D. Nock, *Sallustius Concerning the Gods and the Universe*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 1926, with some modifications.

⁶ On the later Neoplatonic hierarchy of virtues, as developed by Iamblichus, I might refer to my book *Platonopolis. Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2003, pp. 46-9. The distinction between 'ethical' and 'political' virtues can be found in Sallustius in the chapter on virtues (ch. X), where the mutual implication of what Plotinus, in *Ennead* I, 2, chs. 1-2, calls the 'political' virtues (i.e., those defined in Plato's

The student is required furthermore to know “common opinions” about the gods. ‘Common opinions’, in later Neoplatonism, were regarded positively, as truths innate in the human soul which could be reactivated so as to bring the soul back to a knowledge which it had lost in its descent to the body.⁷ This reactivation can be brought about by the recourse to argument, what Sallustius mentions as words “of this sort” (τοιούδῃ). The arguments which Sallustius then cites - showing that the gods are not generated, not made of bodies, not circumscribed in place, not separated from the First Cause or from each other - are extremely abbreviated and, to be intelligible at all, would have required additional explanations from the teacher and are not the sort of material that can be put directly in the students’ hands.⁸ What we have then is more a list of sorts of arguments rather than the arguments themselves. With a view to activating the students’ discursive thought, our text then discusses, this time at some length (Chapters II-IV), the question as to why the “ancients” used myths, rather than such arguments, in speaking about the gods (I return to this matter below).

The text then enumerates, in chapter V, the subjects to be learnt, after the generalities about the gods: the First Cause and the orders of the gods coming “after” (i.e. below) the First Cause; the nature of the universe; the being of intellect and of soul; providence, fate and chance, virtue and vice and the political constitutions (good and bad) which derive from virtue and vice. We thus have a short syllabus of topics to be taught, a syllabus which goes from the domain of ‘theology’ (metaphysics) – the hierarchy of gods going down the ranks from the highest and first – to that of physics (the world) and of ethics/politics,⁹ in other words a syllabus which covers the range of later Neoplatonic philosophy, the theoretical sciences (theology and physics) and the practical sciences (ethics and politics).¹⁰

The following chapters (up to chapter XII) discuss the listed topics one by one. But before this Sallustius comments:

Each of these topics requires many long discussions, but there is perhaps no reason why we should not treat them in a summary way, so that they [i.e. the students] may not be completely ignorant (ἀνηκόου) of them.

The syllabus given by Sallustius could easily have entailed studies lasting years, as was the case of the full *curricula* offered in the later Neoplatonic schools in Athens and in Alexandria.

Republic Book IV) is contrasted with the lack of such mutual implication in the ethical virtues; on this theory of the mutual implication (ἀντακολουθία) of the virtues as applying to the hierarchy of virtues in later Neoplatonism see my *Platonopolis*, p. 47 n. 29 (V. Vacanti, *Salustio. Gli Dei e il Mondo*, Il leone verde, Torino 1998, in her note on Ch. X, p. 82, refers to the earlier history of the question of the mutual implication of the virtues, going back to Plato). Purificatory virtue can be found later in Sallustius, in Ch. XXI.

⁷ On this see my *Sur les traces de l’Absolu. Études de philosophie antique*, Cerf, Paris 2013, pp. 145-7. The note on this subject in Melsbach (above, n. 1), p. 60 n. 3, is somewhat misleading. These ‘common opinions’ should not be confused with the “foolish ideas” mentioned earlier in the text (at note. 4).

⁸ For example, the claim that the gods are not made of bodies is supported by the affirmation that even the powers of bodies are incorporeal. The latter affirmation is the conclusion of an argument current in Platonist schools (to the references given in Melsbach (ed.), *Die pagane Theologie des Philosophen Salustios* (above, n. 1), p. 60 n. 5 add Alcinous, *Didaskalikos*, Ch. 11), an argument which would be needed here as a supplement so as to explain why gods are not made of bodies.

⁹ The three domains are also alluded to later, at the beginning of Ch. XIII.

¹⁰ Logic is not included here. On the question of the place of logic in the hierarchy of philosophical sciences, see below at n. 20.

But our text tells us here that the topics may also be covered much more briefly, in a course which we can imagine could be given in a semester or a year. Such a course is suitable, not for ambitious students who undertake to devote years of their life to becoming well-trained philosophers in the leading Neoplatonic schools, but for people to whom Sallustius refers later as “those who neither can be steeped in philosophy nor are incurably diseased in soul” (Ch. XIII). Such students, if they have the prerequisite virtuous disposition, may be given a basic course in Neoplatonic philosophy, as compared to others who might seek a much fuller and quasi-professional training. Sallustius indicates that the material presented in his text is adequate or sufficient for the purposes of the basic course and the needs of the student in the course, whereas more information can be found in other works which treat more fully of specific topics (see also Ch. VI and Ch. VII). Finally, Sallustius adds some “brief” considerations about additional subjects (ch. XVI, on sacrifices) and adds further arguments (going beyond the argument provided in Ch. VII) proving that the world is eternal, in response to those who require “stronger” arguments for this position (ch. XVII).

The text ends (ch. XXI) with the indication that those who rise in the hierarchy of the virtues, who have purified themselves (*καθαραί*) of the body, will share in the life of the gods, but that those who have not risen so high, yet live according to virtue (I think that this must refer to the ‘political’ virtues), may also have a share in happiness, a happiness which later Neoplatonists were to call ‘political happiness’.¹¹ Such people, we can suppose, are in the first place those who take a basic course in Platonic philosophy such as that which Sallustius sketches, whereas those who undertake a full philosophical training in the leading schools of Platonism can hope to reach the higher happiness brought by the purificatory and theoretical virtues.

II.

Perhaps sufficient evidence has been provided above in support of the identification of Sallustius’ text as a manual written for the benefit of teachers of Platonic philosophy, teachers intending to give basic courses to students who do not envisage a complete professional training in philosophy. In what follows, for purposes of comparison, I would like to introduce other examples of such manuals for teachers of a discipline such as can be found in the literature of the Roman imperial period. As far as I can tell, this kind of text has not been discussed in a systematic and comprehensive way in modern scholarship and so my brief treatment of the subject will necessarily be sketchy and far from complete.

The impressive growth of professions in various skills, disciplines and sciences in the Greek classical period was accompanied by the appearance of teachers of these disciplines and the composition of manuals (*technai*) for learning these disciplines.¹² Leading teachers of some disciplines also trained others who would in turn themselves teach. This teaching of teachers we can find in the political project of Plato’s *Laws* (811 DE), where the ‘minister of education’ instructs the teachers of the city, providing them with teaching materials and guidelines. In the Roman imperial period, the tremendous development of higher-level schools throughout the empire, in particular in the teaching of rhetoric, philosophy, medicine

¹¹ See my *Platonopolis* (above, n. 6), p. 90.

¹² M. Fuhrmann, *Das systematische Lehrbuch*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1960.

and law, led not only to the composition of various kinds of materials to be used by students of these disciplines (epitomes, introductions, summaries, etc.), but also to the preparation of works destined for teachers of these disciplines. Such works could be intended for teachers offering courses of varying ambition, from elementary courses to much more comprehensive curricula. I mention here some of these works.

A well-known example (in Latin) is Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*. In this work Quintilian provides, at the end of the 1st century A.D., a comprehensive and very full and detailed guidance and instruction for teachers of grammar and rhetoric as to how they should teach their discipline. As he says, "non enim doceo, sed admoneo docturos" (I, 4, 17).¹³ Among many other pedagogical matters, he discusses the natural aptitudes needed in pupils (I, *Prol.* 26-27) and how it is better to start teaching with what is brief and simple (VIII, *Prol.* 1). In his general preface, Quintilian also indicates that the work is pertinent to guiding a parent in organizing the education of a child. Thus works teaching parents about how to educate their children, for example Plutarch's treatise *Quomodo adolescens poetas audire debeat*, are parallel to, and can in some cases overlap with works teaching teachers how to teach a discipline.

Another example, this time concerning the teaching of Platonic philosophy in the 2nd century, can be found, it appears, in Alcinous' *Didaskalikos*, a text which is far less extensive than Quintilian's work, but more elaborate than Sallustius' manual. If we translate closely the opening words of this text, we read:

Such would be a teaching (τοιαύτη τις ἂν διδασκαλία γένοιτο) of Plato's main doctrines.

This language gives the impression that what follows is proposed as an example of the sort of teaching that might be given of Plato's doctrines, i.e. that it is a text of which a teacher might make use when planning to give a course on Platonic philosophy. And indeed it has been suggested that the work, among other things, may be "actually intended rather as a manual for teachers".¹⁴ The last chapter of the text may also suggest this:

So much it suffices to say in view of an introduction to Plato's dogma.

The teacher thus could use the work in introducing students to Platonic philosophy. In this case we can see that there is a fine line between an introductory manual written for the use of teachers of Platonic philosophy and such a manual as it might be given to the students themselves.

Moving to the Neoplatonic schools of Late Antiquity in Athens and in Alexandria in the 5th and 6th centuries, we find there introductory lectures to the study of the writings of Aristotle and of Plato which included as series of prolegomena which seem to go back to Proclus.¹⁵ These prolegomena discussed a series of topics preliminary to the study of Aristotle and Plato, at the beginning of a curriculum of courses which extended over a

¹³ See also, for example, *Instit. orat.* I *Prol.* 23-25; 8, 13-17.

¹⁴ J. Dillon, *Alcinous. The Handbook of Platonism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1993, p. XIV.

¹⁵ On these prolegomena see I. Hadot (ed.), *Simplicius. Commentaire sur les Catégories*, Fasc. I, *Introduction, Première partie* (p. 1-9, 3 *Kalbfleisch*), Brill, Leiden 1990 (*Philosophia Antiqua* 50); J. Mansfeld, *Prolegomena. Questions to be settled before the Study of an author, or of a Text*, Brill, Leiden 1994 (*Philosophia Antiqua* 61), pp. 28-39, 161-76; C. Luna – A. Segonds, "Proclus de Lycie", in R. Goulet (ed.), *Dictionnaire des Philosophes Antiques*, CNRS-Éditions, Paris 2021, vol. V, pp. 1546-657, part. pp. 1564-5.

number of years. As regards the study of Aristotle, who was read at the first stage of the curriculum, these topics included subjects such as the division of Aristotle's works, which work was to be read first, the goal of Aristotle's philosophy, the reasons for his obscurity, the qualities required of a good interpreter of Aristotle, the qualities required of the good student. This last subject we have met already in Sallustius' text¹⁶ and we can suppose that it, as well as the subject of qualities of the good interpreter, are directly relevant, not to the student who is starting to read Aristotle, but to the teacher, specifying the standards to be met by the teacher and the dispositions that students should have in order to attend a course in reading Aristotle. We can suppose also that other elements among these preliminary topics provide guidelines to teachers as to what they should cover (and how) in teaching Aristotle.

My two last examples are Christian. The increasing spread of Christianity and its institutionalization entailed the development of catechetical schools for which teachers had to be trained. As a bishop, Gregory of Nyssa had responsibilities in this area, and, for the purpose of guiding catechetical teachers, composed a Catechetical oration, written perhaps about a generation later than Sallustius' manual. The oration discusses adapting teaching to different types of students (*Prologue*), provides arguments which are sufficient for the purposes of teaching, as compared to more ambitious arguments (Chs. 4, 17), and refers to fuller accounts which can be found elsewhere (Ch. 38). Augustine's *De Catechizandis rudibus*, written near the end of the 4th century, responds to the same needs. It is, I think, a most entertaining example of such manuals. Augustine discusses such interesting problems as that as to how the teacher can get over being bored with his own teaching (!). Adapting teaching to the various levels of the student is discussed (VIII, 12), as is the question of what starting-points are to be used (VI, 10). Shorter and longer accounts of the same matter are distinguished (II, 4 and III, 5) and further instructions are offered to the teacher, as well as examples of lectures that can be given (XIV, 24ff.; XXVI, 51ff.). It is not necessary here, I believe, to examine further what must be a very rich literature of manuals destined for Christian catechetical instructors.

III

It has not been the purpose of this paper to discuss the philosophical doctrines to be found in Sallustius' book or to identify the possible sources (in Iamblichus, Julian the Emperor, and others) of these doctrines.¹⁷ Rather I have sought to identify more precisely what sort of book it is that Sallustius composed. Taking it that *On Gods and the Universe* is indeed a manual destined for teachers of (Platonic) philosophy,¹⁸ in particular those who intend to offer a basic course in this philosophy, what conclusions may we derive from this as regards the interpretation of the text?

¹⁶ As is noted by Lecerf, "Salustios' Schrift" (above, n. 1), p. 91.

¹⁷ For a recent treatment see the essays in Melsbach, *Die pagane Theologie des Philosophen Salustios* (above, n. 1) by A. Lecerf (a broad thematic survey), J. Opsomer (theology), N. Belayche (religion and ritual) and R. van den Berg (myths).

¹⁸ Neither Plato nor Platonism are named in the work; however, the philosophy it summarizes is evidently (Neo)platonism and Platonism was the only philosophy represented in the schools of Late Antiquity.

It has been observed¹⁹ that two different groups of “readers”, on two levels, seem to be envisaged in Sallustius’ book. I would suggest rather that Sallustius’ book is intended for teachers who wish to provide a basic, elementary course in philosophy, while giving these teachers further materials (and further references) if they wish or need to go further into some matters. We might contrast this elementary course with the somewhat more extensive course represented in Alcinoüs’ *Didaskalikos*, which is more than twice as long as Sallustius’ text and which also includes logic, a topic not covered in Sallustius.²⁰ The prolegomena to philosophy of the Athenian and Alexandrian Neoplatonic schools relate to a much more ambitious curriculum, extending over many years, which offered students a complete training in philosophy and an education aiming at bringing them up to the highest levels of virtue and science.

On a number of topics Sallustius presents very brief overviews which, in some cases, are so abbreviated as to require supplementation.²¹ We can explain this by supposing that the teachers giving the course could be expected to have the competence necessary to fill out and illustrate the overviews. Thus, for example, the two sketchy chapters on the virtues and on political constitutions (Chs. X and XI) can be taken to correspond to points to be covered in two lectures, points to be developed by the teacher (with the option perhaps of making use of extracts from Plato’s *Republic*). On topics which receive a more extensive treatment in Sallustius’ book, we can suppose that contemporary conditions, the intellectual circumstances surrounding the course being given, may have called for this. Thus the question as to why “the ancients”, rather than using arguments (such as those Sallustius summarizes), had recourse to myths in speaking about the gods, may be a matter that might puzzle beginning students who are aware of the stories told about the gods in Homer, in Hesiod and in other sources and of their problematic nature. The provision towards the end of the book of a series of supplementary arguments in support of the claim that the world is eternal (Ch. XVII) may have been provoked by the fact that, with the spread of Christianity, the doctrine of the eternity of the world was far from being accepted.²²

It is claimed by Christian sources, by Gregory of Nazianzen and by Sozomen the church historian, that the Emperor Julian thought “to establish schools (*διδασκαλεῖα*) in every city”, to provide “teachers and readers of Hellenic doctrines and exhortations [...] and schools (*φροντιστήρια*) for men and women intending to philosophize”.²³ Sozomen regarded such measures planned by Julian as just reactionary, as emulating Christian institutions such as monasteries, and this is how his text is sometimes translated. But if Julian’s project was to organize schools for philosophy, and not just imitation monasteries, then Sallustius’ book could have been of use to the teachers in such schools.

¹⁹ Lecerf, “Sallustios’ Schrift” (above, n. 1), pp. 69-70.

²⁰ However, Alcinoüs’ account of Platonism is articulated following the tripartition of philosophy (common in the Hellenistic period) into logic-physics-ethics. The question of whether or not logic was a part (or only an instrument) of philosophy was a subject of debate in later Neoplatonism, which standardly divided philosophy into the theoretical (theology, mathematics, physics) and practical sciences (ethics, economics, politics); on this see Hadot, *Simplicius* (above, n. 15), p. 78 n. 68; pp. 183-8.

²¹ See above at n. 8.

²² See Lecerf, “Sallustios’ Schrift” (above, n. 1), p. 74.

²³ Gregory of Nazianzen, *Or.* IV, 111; Sozomen, *Hist. Eccles.* V, 16, 2. These texts were kindly brought to my attention by Adrien Lecerf.

Finally, a word might be offered as regards Sallustius “the philosopher”, as author of the book. If this author is indeed a teacher of teachers of philosophy, we can expect from him a high level of competence which is far from fully showing itself in the book. Pedagogical considerations condition the way the book is written and we need to take these into account in any conclusions that might be derived from modern analysis of the work.