

Andrey Darovskikh

The Aetiology of the Soul-Body Connection in Nemesius of Emesa's Embryology*

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ABSTRACT. This paper addresses the problem of the ruling agency responsible for the union of the soul with the body in the formation of a human being. The author focuses on the concepts of *providence* and *nature* as two possible causes of this union referred to in the literature of the Late antiquity. Such aetiological considerations are prominent in embryology of Nemesius of Emesa, a fourth-century Christian thinker, who was a pagan philosopher previous to his conversion and had excellent knowledge in contemporary medicine and biology. The author argues that Nemesius exhibits a remarkable ambiguity of thought when he describes the aetiology of the soul-body connection. This is complicated by the use of many different sources — philosophical, theological and medical —, which form his intellectual background. The problem seems worthy of historical study since it reveals the complexity of an issue relevant to many authors and branches of knowledge in one particular treatise. Given his Christian background, Nemesius understands the cause of the descent of a pre-existing soul into a body in terms of God's *consent*, or divine *providence* as the bishop of Emesa puts it. However, the study of medical and philosophical texts has apparently led Nemesius to believe that the ruling agency of the mixture of intellectual and corporeal substances forming a particular human being is nevertheless *nature*.

KEYWORDS: Nemesius of Emesa, Galen, Porphyry, embryology, aetiology, nature, consent, ruling agency.

The question I aim to address in this paper is the problem of the *ruling agency* responsible for the union of the soul with the body in the formation of a human being. This can be formulated as a question

© A. Darovskikh (Binghamton). adarovs1@binghamton.edu. The State University of New York at Binghamton.

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about the efficient cause of a certain stage in an embryo's development. I will consider this problem in the context of late antique philosophy and early Byzantine thought. In particular I will focus on Nemesius of Emesa and will argue that in his main text Nemesius exhibits a certain ambiguity of thought that is further complicated by the vagueness of the sources, which formed his intellectual background. At first sight, it seems to be evident that for Nemesius, a Christian bishop, efficacious causation should not be of concern. It is not surprising that Nemesius reserved only a little space in his treatise to discussing the *tropos* and *aitia* of unification. However, there is one passage that ought to make us consider this question in more detail. The content of Nemesius' teaching about the nature of the soul and the body puts the problem in such a way that it is necessary to answer the following two questions: 1) what is the cause for the *descent* of the pre-existing soul? 2) how does the soul get brought into the body?

Nemesius concludes the third chapter by stating that owing to the nature of the incorporeal the unity of the substances comes about *ἀσυγχύτως*, and adds:

Moreover, the way of unification is not a kind of consent as it seems to some influential men, but nature is the cause. For one may plausibly say that putting on a body happens through the consent. But the fact is that what has been unified as not confused does not occur according to consent but according to God's own nature.¹

Two causes are mentioned here: divine consent and nature. What is perplexing is that Nemesius goes on to say that nature, rather than divine consent, is the uniting agency. The ambiguity within the passage is reflected by diversity of its treatment in the secondary literature. Given that the themes of the soul-body connection and the union of Christ's two natures overlap considerably, it is difficult to tell which

¹ οὐκ εὐδοκία τοί νυν ὁ τρόπος τῆς ἐνώσεως, ὡς τισιν τῶν ἐνδόξων ἀνδρῶν δοκεῖ, ἀλλ' ἡ φύσις αἰτία. τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἀναλαβεῖν σῶμα κατ' εὐδοκίαν εἶποι τις ἂν εὐλόγως γεγενησθαι· τὸ δὲ ἐνούμενον μὴ συγχυθῆναι κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ φύσιν, οὐ κατ' εὐδοκίαν γίνεται (Nat. hom. 44.15–18; here and elsewhere the text is referenced according to Morani 1987; all translations are mine unless otherwise indicated – A.D.).

of the two topics Nemesius is addressing here: the soul-body connection or the connection of the Word with human nature. There are two main reasons for reading this passage as talking about the latter type of union, which have been put forward by a number of scholars.² One of the reasons is Nemesius' reference to some *influential men*. All scholars insist that one of the men referred to here is Theodore of Mopsuestia, the author of the treatise *On the Incarnation*, where he argues that the cause of Christ's descent was not God's nature but rather his good will and consent.³ The second reason to stick to the Christological context is that in the following sentence Nemesius says that the union is due to the nature of God (κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ φύσιν). However, some scholars, for example Sharples and van der Eijk express some doubts about the correct context of the fragment, suggesting that it is unclear in how far it relates to Christology and in how far to anthropology (Eijk & Sharples 2008: 86).

I do not think it really matters what exactly Nemesius had in mind there, because in this chapter he regularly switches from the topic of the soul-body connection to topics in Christology and promiscuously uses the consequences of one discourse in order to prove the other. Even if what he actually has in mind is the Christological discourse, the legitimacy of its application to anthropological questions should not evoke any doubt. However, I believe that in the relevant passage Nemesius does speak about the union of the soul and body rather than about incarnation, because:

1) It would be inconsistent for him to close the chapter περὶ ἐνώσεως ψυχῆς καὶ σώματος with the argument about incarnation, although it

² For Christological context cf. scholars such as Telfer (Telfer 1955: 303) and Beatrice (Beatrice 2005: 67–69).

³ "It is by consent that he also accomplishes the in-dwelling" (*De incarnatione*, PG 66.973c, trans. by P.J. van der Eijk and R.W. Sharples. Theodore was a bishop of Mopsuestia from 392 to 428, therefore by arguing that 'influential men' refers to Theodore scholars commit themselves to a certain dating of Nemesius' text. Telfer notes that *On the Incarnation* was an early work of Theodore but later on he changed his mind on this subject. Another solution suggests that *On the Nature of Man* can be reasonably dated to the middle of the fifth century. Cf. Telfer 1955: 303; Eijk & Sharples 2008: 86.

is obvious that Nemesius considers these two types of mixture to be analogous.

2) The phrase from the preceding sentence μηδὲν παραβλαπτομένης τῆς θειοτέρας ἐκ τῆς ὑποδεεστέρας (“the more divine suffers nothing from the more inferior”) implies nothing but the mixture of soul and body. For it would be quite odd for Nemesius to describe the divine nature of Christ by using a comparative form of the adjective *divine*, however the wording makes perfect sense if what he is doing is describing the nature of the soul.

3) The mention of Origen, in the last sentence of the chapter,⁴ suggests a reference to his idea that the descent of human souls into bodies is a kind of punishment, rather than (as Telfer suggests) to the exceptional status of Christ’s soul, which did not undergo the fall.⁵

Given the above concerns, it is unclear why Nemesius mixes the causes of consent and nature, and how the reader should appreciate this issue. I would like to put forward my own hypothesis, which has so far never been proposed in the secondary literature. Briefly speaking, the cause of the descent of the pre-existing soul into the body is God’s consent, or divine providence, as Nemesius puts it; whereas the ruling agency of the union of intellectual and corporeal substances, which form a particular human being, is nature. The former supposition can be explained by appeal to the dominance of the Christian point of view, the latter is a result of the influence that prominent medical and philosophical teachings circulating prior to the time of his life, and which continued to be relevant and influential during his lifetime, had on Nemesius.

⁴ “For the ranks of the souls and their ascents and descents, which Origen introduces, as not suited to the divine writings, not in harmony with Christian dogma, one passes them over” (Nat. hom. 44.19–20).

⁵ Part of Origen’s doctrine on the pre-existence of souls is the idea that Christ’s soul was the only one remaining in an unfallen condition, obedient to God from the beginning, and was designed to be the clue for the incarnation. According to Telfer, Nemesius makes a hint here at Theodore’s concept, which implies the same notion of Jesus as was proposed by Origen (Telfer 1955: 303).

To prove the adequacy of my first suggestion it is sufficient to observe how Nemesius copes with this problem elsewhere in his treatise. First, it is worth looking at the passage at 31.16–32.19. Nemesius picks up Eunomius’ teaching about providence as a cause for the soul’s existence and subjects it to severe criticism. Eunomius and Nemesius have the same starting point, assuming that God’s creativity is confined to the period of initial creation.⁶ But unlike Nemesius, Eunomius states that the universe is not complete and intellectual beings are constantly being added to it, by the providence of God. In terms of Nemesius’ philosophy, providence is only able to change things which already exist; that is why he concludes that souls are sent into the bodies by providence, although they exist as substances before that, viz. at the moment of intellectual creation.⁷ I agree with Telfer that according to Nemesius “a soul, once for all in the beginning created by the Logos, comes into actuality when God grants conception of its predestined body”.⁸ The justification of why I reconcile the semantics of the terms *προνοία* (providence) and *εὐδοκία/συγχώρησις* (consent) is Nemesius’ usage of these categories as interconnected, at least through the genera-species paradigm. For instance, in response to Appolinarius’ claim that the idea of God’s involvement in the process of conception automatically makes him an accomplice of adulterers,⁹ Nemesius in a manner of speaking prefers to suspend the argument, but notes:

Let us leave what is born from adultery by the decision of providence (*τῷ τῆς προνοίας λόγῳ*), because it is unknown for us. But if one must make conjectures about providence, God surely knows that one which is born [because of adultery] will be useful either for life or for Himself and because of this he consents the ensoulment (*καὶ διὰ τοῦ τοῦ συγχωρεῖ τὴν ἐμψύχωσιν γίνεσθαι*).¹⁰

⁶ Cf. Gen. 2:2 (the idea of God’s repose upon accomplishing his creative job).

⁷ *προνοίας μὲν γὰρ ἔργον ἐστὶ τὸ ἐξ ἀλληλογονίας διασῶζειν τὴν τῶν φθαρτῶν ζώων οὐσίαν* (31.19–20).

⁸ Telfer 1955: 300.

⁹ *τοὺς γὰρ ταῦτα λέγοντας συνεργὸν ποιεῖν τὸν Θεὸν τοῖς μοιχοῖς* (32.6–7).

¹⁰ Nat. hom. 32.14–18.

Contextualization of the meaning and use of συγχώρησις¹¹ assures the reader that the consent of God is a part of his pervasive providence.

Before Nemesius turns to the explanation of his view about providence in the last chapter of the treatise, he outlines five rival theories about providence with the overarching point that providence concerns universal issues as well as individual ones.¹² Nothing providential is subject to necessity; however, providence was established together with creation; it is undertaken by the same creator and takes care of those who were created. According to Nemesius, if there is no providence, then it is unclear how it could be that man is always born from man and each from its own seed.¹³ The coming to be and the passing away, which sustain the succession of species, is a primary task of providence; furthermore, the continual difference in the forms of individuals is also providential.

Analyzing the scope of providence and the boundaries of its activity, Nemesius introduces the idea that a certain realm is under the control of nature. He refers to the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle elaborates his idea that divine providence is limited to heaven and does not extend beyond the superlunary world; thus, nature is contrasted with providence and rules over sublunar world.¹⁴ Nemesius does not discern between nature and providence as Aristotle does, he only tells us that nature advises human being on the affairs which are advantageous for it. At this point, the underlying discourse of Aristotle becomes more visible. The main point is that the providence of particulars is ascribed

¹¹ I suggest that its meaning is almost identical to εὐδοκία.

¹² For a fairly good account of the concept of providence in Nemesius cf. Sharples 1983: 141–156. At that, I would like to mention that in his last chapters Nemesius deals mostly with the question of providence as it relates to the earthly life of a human being and develops the question of how providence is compatible with human freedom and responsibility.

¹³ πῶς οὖν ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἀνθρώπου καὶ βοῦς ἐκβοῦς αἰεὶ γεννᾶται, καὶ ἕκαστον ἐκ τοῦ οἰκείου σπέρματος φύεται, καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἄλλου, προνοίας ἀπούσης; (123.14–16). Also see 120.25–121.6.

¹⁴ Nemesius refers to the Book 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (127.16). For the discussion concerning the exact place from Aristotle and difference between Aristotle and Nemesius cf. Sharples 1983: 144.

to nature, while providence itself is concerned with the preservation of what exists.¹⁵ The line of demarcation is absolutely unclear: if the domain of nature encompasses only the particular affairs and the practices of people, then conception, which plays part in the preservation of mankind, should be excluded from this domain. Then the ruling agency of the soul-body connection and conception depends solely on divine providence.

However, I still insist on the importance of nature as the cause and path of the soul-body connection. It seems plausible to suggest that in this respect, in his decision to involve nature in the mechanics of conception and the soul-body connection, Nemesius was influenced by certain ideas expressed by Galen and later by Porphyry.

The roots of this idea lie in the understanding of nature as the organizing principle of the body. Galen in his commentary on Hippocrates says that “by the word φύσις we should understand the ability residing in the very bodies that were organized by her”.¹⁷ I would argue that Nemesius at the end of the third chapter is writing with a similar understanding in mind as he tries to present nature as a cause of growth and change; nature as that which nourishes being and makes it grow.¹⁸ The connection between nature and providence in this case can also be considered from a different standpoint. Galen indeed makes use of the term προνοία, which is an attribute of nature, and nature operates with this providence, or foresight.¹⁸ As Jouanna argues, “It is a leitmotiv that unfolds particularly in the *The Usefulness of the Parts*, where we find evoked some seventy times the foresight of nature or, much more rarely, the foresight of the *Demiurge*, a word that is sometimes substituted for φύσις without any real difference in meaning” (Jouanna 2012: 301–302). If one takes for granted that this is exactly the model that Nemesius had in mind when he mentioned both nature and good will, or consent, as causes of the soul-body union then it be-

¹⁵ Nat. hom. 128.12–14.

¹⁷ In Hipp. Epid. VI comment. 253.19–21 Wenkebach.

¹⁸ Gal. Nat. fac. 1.13, p. 129.6 Helmreich.

¹⁸ Here, I follow the translation of προνοία offered by Jacques Jouanna, cf. “nature acted with foresight” (προνοητικῶς ἡ φύσις ἐργασαμένη) (Jouanna 2012: 302).

comes clear that for Nemesius providence and nature are two sides of the same activity, the one that guides the development of human beings and rules over them from the point of their formation onwards. This idea becomes more justifiable if one tries to explain why Nemesius says that the union of soul and body is due to the nature of God (κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ φύσιν). However, such treatment leaves open another question: why does Nemesius formulate the relation between God's consent and nature in terms of opposition?

I would rather side with an alternative idea. Namely, I suggest that to the Galenic idea of nature as a ruling principle, Nemesius adds the point expressed by Porphyry in his *To Gaurus On how Embryos are Ensouled*.¹⁹ Porphyry's theory developed in this treatise can be summarized as follows. Nature is something transmittable to the offspring from both parents and at a certain point, the offspring's own nature starts to develop, acquiring the position of the chief agent in the formation of the body.²⁰ According to Porphyry, nature is transmitted physically by means of semen.²¹

Further, let the seed have a soul — if someone wishes to call the vegetative power a soul — and let it have this soul from the father either separated off from him or generated by him (<...> however, it is impossible to show that the self-moving soul exists in the seed or even in the embryo because that that soul is not even needed, since the seed's own nature has been obtained for this task.²²

Commenting on this part of the text James Wilberding reasonably mentions that sometimes it seems that the seed has its own φύσις from the father, although at the same time Porphyry insists that the seed is an

¹⁹ The ambivalence of this hypothesis can be explained by a number of reasons. First, at this part of the text Nemesius does not mention Porphyry at all; to complicate matters, it is not clear whether Nemesius was familiar with the mentioned work of Porphyry or not. In the text itself we cannot find any indication of such knowledge.

²⁰ Wilberding 2011: 14.

²¹ Therefore, for Porphyry, the question of responsibility in the formation of the fetus is the question of the parent's responsibility. I suppose that in this sense I can hardly say that Nemesius was a follower of a similar point of view.

²² Gaur. 16.1–2, trans. by J. Wilberding.

inferior product and cannot cause motion by itself, whereas the φύσις possesses this power to give impetus for further development. In terms of Porphyry's thought, Aristotle proclaims that an individual's human nature is transmitted from the father, and upon mixture with the matter provided by female reproductive fluid (καταμήνια), a new human being appears. Porphyry, on the contrary, suggests that semen as an inferior substrate cannot carry a separate nature, but carries something like an impetus from the father's nature. It mixes with the mother's nature and finally, at the moment of birth, it disengages from it in order to blend with the soul and to organize the nature of a particular individual, or, to put it in terms of Aristotle's categories, to reveal a new first substance.²³

I suggest paying attention to a striking similarity between Porphyry's account of the soul's descent into the body and the part of Nemesius's text under scrutiny in this article.

And it in turn at this time immediately gets from outside the captain who is present by the providence of the principle that administers the whole, which in the case of animals would in no way let the vegetative soul come to be bereft of a captain.²⁴

The time in question here is the moment of birth, when the fetus separates from the mother's nature and receives a soul by the providence of the principle. For Porphyry, this principle is the world's soul (according to Nemesius, that is God's providence), and the human soul becomes a captain. This description resembles Nemesius' idea of the soul, which receives the body for its disposal as an instrument for the realization of its faculties. To sum up, I believe that Nemesius' account of the soul-body connection was formed as a profound mixture of theological as well as philosophical and medical ideas of his time. According to Nemesius, the possibility of union is caused by the nature of both substances, while the soul descends to the body through the act of divine providence or consent. It seems difficult to deny the dominant role of philosophical and medical ideas of Late antiquity about nature as the

²³ For a similar interpretation of Porphyry cf. Wilderbing 2011: 12.

²⁴ Gaur. 10.6, trans. by J. Wilderbing.

ruling principle of growth and the formation of the fetus, of necessity strongly affected by the Christian idea of divine providence.

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