Classical Greek Atheism

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of philosophical atheism in Classical Greece, with a chronological focus on the late fifth century to the mid-fourth century BCE. Assessing the sources from this period from the ground up, it is argued, against a recent tide of scholarly opinion, that there were genuine atheists in Classical antiquity. Our best evidence for atheism, Plato, and a chorus of corroboratory sources, indicate that there were a limited number of Athenians who denied the existence of any gods, proposing as an alternative that the universe was formed by chance, and that the idea of god was a human fiction invented in early civic communities. In addition to its advocacy for the existence of Greek atheism in antiquity, however, this thesis explores the kind of mentality required for atheism, the intellectual and social conditions that were favourable to atheism in Classical antiquity, the extent to which scientific and sophistic literature in Athens catalysed atheism, the likely social diffusion of atheism in a society that was hostile to unbelief, and the evidence for related forms of irreligious behaviours among the educated elite of Socrates and Plato's time.

The introduction of the thesis (Chapter 1) offers a case study from Euripides to underscore the difficulties in studying a phenomenon like ancient atheism, before threading a survey of the scholarly literature on how ancient Greek atheism in the Classical period has been studied and evaluated. Chapter 2 surveys the accusations for atheism in this period, which could be often vague and unreliable as a testimony for real unbelievers, while it is concluded that the presentation of atheism in Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* rings like a true testimony. To test this suspicion, however, the remainder of the thesis is dedicated to exploring whether the intellectual and social conditions for atheism vindicate Plato's lifelike, and richly conflicted, portrayal of

atheism as an inter-generational phenomenon in Classical Athens. Accordingly, Chapters 3 and 4 examine the thought world for Greek atheism, while Chapter 5 turns to the remarkable challenges to tradition of the late fifth century as a social background for the florescence of fifth-century atheism. This is followed by a conclusion on the philosophical responses to atheism from Plato and Epicurus.

Acknowledgements

Like a treacherous vine, this study of Greek atheism found its origin in one slender branch that quickly proliferated into other areas; one paper on a verse by Aristophanes about a famous 'atheist' in antiquity, Diagoras of Melos, soon led me to wonder what we knew about atheists in Classical antiquity, which was a stimulus to write further articles and notes before starting this DPhil thesis. These pieces, for the most part, embodied a kind of methodological atomism, sifting through ancient evidence *particulatim* not so much to advance a decisive interpretation of this material but to get a sense of the best evidence for atheism and examine the sources that dealt with similar concerns; an 'atomic stage' of writing inspired by the philological methods of Marek Winiarczyk in his scholarship on Diagoras. Without discarding this approach, this DPhil thesis has tried to glimpse at the bigger picture by considering the wider intellectual culture of fifth-century Greece and the social world that atheists inhabited in Socrates and Plato's day, which has been spurred by a rewarding challenge set by an article from Thomas Harrison and, more generally, my journey at Oxford.

In navigating this 'macroscopic stage' of writing about Greek atheism, my thanks goes to my supervisor Bill Allan for skilfully coordinating the project and offering helpful suggestions throughout the course of writing this thesis. I thank the generous donors of Corpus Christi College, and Oxford University Press, for jointly funding my Clarendon-Harrison Classics scholarship, without which this research would have been altogether impossible. I am also grateful for Merrick Anderson, Rachel Barney, Joshua Billings, Jan N. Bremmer, Michele Corradi, Thomas Coward, Martin J. Cropp, Bruno Currie, Peter Groves, Constanze Güthenke, Leofranc Holford-Strevens, Emily Hulme, Alexandre Johnston, Emily Kearns, Adrian Kelly, Stavros

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Editions and Abbreviations

Names of ancient authors and titles are abbreviated according to conventions in the online *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 5th edn (*OCD*5); in the bibliography, all journal titles follow the abbreviations in *L'Année Philologique*. The texts cited for Plato are from the J. Burnet *OCT* (1900–1907), and the editions for the Classical dramatists are as follows: M. L. West's revised Teubner edition for Aeschylus (1998); H. Lloyd-Jones and N. G. Wilson's 1990 *OCT* for Sophocles; J. Diggle's *OCT* for Euripides (1984–1994); and N. G. Wilson's 2007 *OCT* for Aristophanes. The Greek Hippocratic texts cited derive from the Loeb Classical Library editions (*Hippocrates: Works*, 11 vols., Cambridge, Mass.–London 1923–2018). Finally, the editors of the six-volume *Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta* (1971–2004) are cited by the first letter of their surname after the fragment number, so that Snell is cited as S, Radt as R, and Kannicht as K.

Arrighetti	G. Arrighetti (ed.) *Epicuro: Opere*, 2nd edn (Turin 1973).
Bailly	A. Bailly (ed.) *Dictionnaire grec-français*, 26th edn (Paris 1963).
Barigazzi	A. Barigazzi (ed.) *Favorino di Arelate: Opere* (Florence 1966).
Blass	F. Blass (ed.) *Andocidis Orationes* (Leipzig 1880).
Cary	C. Cary (ed.) *Lysiae Orationes cum Fragmentis*, 2nd edn (Oxford 2007).
CGL	J. Diggle (ed.) *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon*, 2 vols (Cambridge 2021).

Cougny	E. Cougny (ed.) *Epigrammatum anthologia Palatina cum Planudeis et appendice nova*, 3 vols (Paris 1881–90).
DGE	F. R. Adrados et al. (eds) *Diccionario Griego-Español* (*DGE*) (Madrid 1980–).
Di Marco	M. di Marco (ed.) *Timone di Fliunte: Silli* (Rome 1989)
Diels	H. A. Diels (ed.) *Simplicii in Aristotelis physicorum libros octo commentaria*, 2 vols (Berlin 1882–95).
DK	H. A. Diels and W. Kranz (eds) *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th edn (Berlin 1952).
FGrH	F. Jacoby (ed.) *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (Berlin; Leiden 1923–).
FHS&G	Fortenbaugh, W. W., P. M. Huby, R. W. Sharples, and D. Gutas (eds) *Theophrastus of Eresus: Sources for His Life, Writings, Thought and Influence*, 2 vols (Leiden; Boston 1992).
Henrichs	A. Henrichs (ed.) 'Die Kritik der stoischen Theologie im *PHerc.* 1428', *CErc* 4: 5–32 (1974).
Jebb	S. Jebb (ed.) *Aelii Aristidis Adrianensis: Opera omnia*, 2 vols (Oxford 1722–30).
KA	R. Kassel and C. Austin (eds) *Poetae Comici Graeci* (Berlin; New York 1983–).
Laks	A. Laks (ed.) *Diogène d' Apollonie: la dernière cosmologie présocratique*, 2nd edn (Sankt Augustin 2008).
LM	A. Laks and G. W. Most, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 9 vols (Cambridge, MA 2016).

LSJ	H. G. Liddell, R. Scott et al., *Greek–English Lexicon*, 9th edn (Oxford 1996).
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Mayhew	R. Mayhew, *Prodicus the Sophist: Texts, Translations and Commentary* (Oxford 2011).
Obbink	D. Obbink (ed.) *Philodemus, On Piety: Critical Text with Commentary* (Oxford 1996).
Passow-Crönert	F. Passow (ed.) *Passow's Wörterbuch der griechischen Sprache*, völlig neu bearbeitet von W. Crönert (Göttingen 1912).
Pendrick	G. J. Pendrick (ed.) *Antiphon the Sophist: The Fragments* (Cambridge 2002).
Schober	A. Schober (ed.) *Philodemi Περὶ εὐσεβείας libelli partem priorem restituit Adolf Schober*, doctoral dissertation (Königsberg 1923).
Schorn	S. Schorn (ed.) *Satyros aus Kallatis: Sammlung der Fragmente mit Kommentar* (Basel 2004).
Smith	M. F. Smith, 'New Fragments of Diogenes of Oenoanda'. *AJA* 75(4): 357–89 (1971).
Smyth	H. W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Boston 1956).
SSR	G. Giannantoni (ed.) *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae*, 4 vols (Naples 1990).
SVF	H. von Arnim (ed.) *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (Stuttgart 1903–5).

TR	G. Canziani and G. Paganini (eds) *Theophrastus redivivus*, 2 vols (Florence 1981).
TrGF	B. Snell, R. Kannicht, and S. Radt (eds) *Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta*, 6 vols (Göttingen 1971–2004).
TW	T. Tsiampokalos and G. Wöhrle (eds) *Archelaos von Athen*, with contributions by E. Wakelnig (Berlin; Boston 2025).
Vassallo	C. Vassallo (ed.) *The Presocratics at Herculaneum: A Study of Early Greek Philosophy in the Epicurean Tradition* (Berlin; Boston 2021).
RE	A. Pauly, G. Wissowa, W. Kroll, K. Witte, K. Mittelhaus, K. Ziegler (eds) *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft: neue Bearbeitung* (Stuttgart 1894–1980).
Wallace	R. W. Wallace, *Reconstructing Damon: Music, Wisdom Teaching, and Politics in Perikles' Athens* (Oxford 2015).
Wehrli	F. Wehrli (ed.) *Die Schule des Aristoteles*, 10 vols, 2nd edn., with 2 supplements from 1974–1978 (Basel 1967–9).
Winiarczyk	M. Winiarczyk (ed.) *Diagorae Melii et Theodori Cyrenaei reliquiae* (Leipzig 1981).

1. Introduction, Problems, Intersecting Approaches

The study of ancient atheism is not a straightforward matter, and there are traps at every turn. Just as there are false friends with words like 'Gift' in German as the word for 'poison', there are also false friends in the religious discourse of the Greeks, where expressions of atheism can appear to be modern statements of atheism but are in fact something else.

Euripides' *Bellerophon* offers a profound example of this problem, and its discursive presentation of atheism can be read on multiple levels. The tragedy, which was probably authored during the first half of the Archidamian War and only survives in around 100 lines of spoken verse and some choral passages, featured a hero not only past his prime as a warrior but now deeply unfortunate and bitter about his fate.[1] Apparently dressed in rags on the stage, as a physical marker of his abjection, Bellerophon lamented at the opening of the drama that 'I say it is much better for a mortal to have never been born' (κράτιστον εἶναι φημὶ μὴ φῦναι βροτῷ).[2] There was a time where he was a prosperous and successful hero, but that time had now passed.[3] Despite the hampered preservation of the fragments for this drama, which often fail to name the characters speaking the lines, it seems safe to say that the indignant feeling of Bellerophon was getting the better of him. The fragments hint that one *topos* in the play

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[1] Collard and Cropp 1995: 98–120 and Curnis 2003: 253–74 offer different plot reconstructions for the drama; cf. Collard and Cropp 2008: 289–93.

[2] Eur. *Beller.* fr. 285.2 K, cf. [Thgn.] 1.425; Bellerophon's costuming is suggested at Ar. *Ach.* 426–9.

[3] Eur. *Beller.* fr. 285.18–20 K; Hom. *Il.* 6.196–200 suggests that Bellerophon had angered the gods.

was the problem of envying the success of the more fortunate, φθόνος, and some editors have wondered whether Bellerophon was accused of this, so that he replied, 'in the past I've seen even honourable supporters of justice (δίκης παραστάτας | ἐσθλούς) overcome by that base thing, envy'.[4]

It seems unfair to charge Bellerophon with simple jealousy, but he was no doubt experiencing a personal decline through the lens of a peculiarly moralistic anger, an anger that he would take out on the gods. An important passage of his dialogue which aggressively criticised the idea of the gods as enforcers of justice has been preserved by chance thanks to the unknown Christian author of *De monarchia*, who tried to attack polytheism by presenting poets like Aeschylus and Euripides as already privy to the falsehood of Greek religion. In the speech Bellerophon pointed to the undeserved misfortunes of mortals and the prosperity of the unjust, and insisted, to whoever would listen, that the gods did not exist:

> **[BE.]** φησίν τις εἶναι δῆτ' ἐν οὐρανῷ θεούς;
> οὐκ εἰσίν, οὐκ εἴσ', εἴ τις ἀνθρώπων θέλει
> μὴ τῷ παλαιῷ μῶρος ὢν χρῆσθαι λόγῳ.
> σκέψασθε δ' αὐτοί, μὴ 'πὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖς λόγοις
> γνώμην ἔχοντες. φῆμ' ἐγὼ τυραννίδα
> κτείνειν τε πλείστους κτημάτων τ' ἀποστερεῖν
> ὅρκους τε παραβαίνοντας ἐκπορθεῖν πόλεις·
> καὶ ταῦτα δρῶντες μᾶλλόν εἰσ' εὐδαίμονες
> τῶν εὐσεβούντων ἡσυχῇ καθ' ἡμέραν.
> πόλεις τε μικρὰς οἶδα τιμώσας θεούς,

[4] Eur. *Beller.* fr. 295 K (responding to fr. 294 K), translated by Collard and Cropp 2008: 307; Collard and Cropp 1995: 107 envision an exchange here between Bellerophon and an opponent in argument, possibly in a litigious context; Curnis 2003: 192–3 agrees that Bellerophon answers in fr. 295 but differs on the background.

αἳ μειζόνων κλύουσι δυσσεβεστέρων
λόγχης ἀριθμῷ πλείονος κρατούμεναι.[5]

[BELLEROPHON]

Who could really say that there are gods in heaven? They do not exist, they do not! Unless a person wants to be a fool who has fallen for an ancient fable. But take a look for yourselves — don't just accept an opinion, taking me at my word! I submit that a tyranny butchers the many and takes their wealth, and they violate oaths when they ransack cities. And although they commit these deeds, they are more fortunate than those who lead pious, quiet day-to-day lives! I also know of small cities that honour the gods, who heed bigger [cities] that are impious themselves, prevailed over by a greater number of military might.

From an intellectual history point of view, this could be seen as an argument for atheism in the modern sense, reading Bellerophon as claiming that no gods exist, and with evidence to prove it. From this perspective, we could make much of the fact that Bellerophon presented a rhetorical syllogism which omitted a premiss that was generally understood by his audience: the gods enforce justice. It is true that Bellerophon seems to have recast this notion as an iron law in contrast to the majority of the Greeks, who usually appealed to mortal ignorance or complained about arbitrariness of the gods when they perceived injustice in the world, but Bellerophon built upon a general assumption nonetheless.[6] Read this way, Bellerophon derived a

[5] Eur. *Beller.* fr. 286.1–12 K.

[6] This builds on Whitmarsh 2015: 111, who reads a full syllogism: 'if (a) any gods who exist preside over justice in the world and (b) justice is not rectified then (c) there can be no gods'; Billings 2023: 146–50 also diagnoses the form as a *modus tollens*. Read as an enthymeme in Aristotle's sense, Aristotle would not have accepted Bellerophon's argument as necessarily true; following *Rhet.* 1.2.1357b17–21, he would have viewed

negative conclusion from the argument that 'if the gods exist, the pious would be rewarded, and tyrants and villains would be punished'. And if this was clearly false, does it not entail that the idea spawned from the human imagination? Bellerophon claimed that the gods were an old fable, a παλαιὸς λόγος, which can only be read as contemptuous,[7] and he even dismissed believers as fools ('morons') with the contempt of a proto-Richard Dawkins. All this has prompted the suggestion that Euripides may have cribbed the argument from a prose book which originally promoted philosophical atheism.[8] And there is more fuel for this suspicion. Some poorly preserved lines follow, when Bellerophon continued his tirade against gods and believers alike:

> οἶμαι δ' ἂν ὑμᾶς, εἴ τις ἀργὸς ὢν θεοῖς
> εὔχοιτο καὶ μὴ χειρὶ συλλέγοι βίον,
>
> < >
>
> τὰ θεῖα πυργοῦσιν αἱ κακαί τε συμφοραί.[9]
>
> And I suppose that all of you, if someone were lazy and prayed to the gods and did not bother to work to make a living, … and wretched misfortunes exalt the divine.

---

the absence of justice as indecisive evidence, in his words only an 'indicator' (σημεῖον), not a proof (τεκμήριον). Notoriously, Aristotle rejected the idea of gods as account book managers who kept track of justice as 'laughable' (γέλοιος): *Eth. Nic.* 1178b10–2.

[7] Contrast, e.g., Pind. *Nem.* 1.34 ἀρχαῖον … λόγον.

[8] Whitmarsh 2016, developing a proposal by Bergk 1884: 473.

[9] Eur. *Beller.* fr. 286.13–5 K; the lacuna and syntax are read in line with Riedweg 1990: 45.

Bellerophon would take another swipe at religious believers, seemingly presenting prayer as a substitute for hard work. Then a brief lacuna follows, and Bellerophon added that the religious tendance of the gods, τὰ θεῖα, was bolstered by human misfortunes, αἱ κακαὶ συμφοραί. It would be reasonable to conjecture that there was a stronger parallelism in the original text where Bellerophon said that a lazy man prayed instead of working, which led him to poverty, and poverty 'and misfortunes' further strengthened religiosity through adversity. Laziness from piety, begets poverty, poverty begets desperation, and desperation begets piety; rinse and repeat. This argument doubtless has an anthropological, non-theistic ring: religion, on this view, was the consequence of mortals coping with misfortune or avoiding accountability, worshipping the gods out of ignorance, indolence and desperation.[10] So, again, a scholar in the spirit of the intellectual historian might read Euripides as drawing upon anthropologically minded thinkers like Prodicus or Democritus, taking Bellerophon to mean that the gods were an illusion created by human stupidity and weakness.[11]

And so, it might seem that Bellerophon was a vehement atheist who rejected the gods with the 'Problem of Evil' (in the form of a rhetorical syllogism), who dismissed them as a literary invention and recast religion as a cipher for coping with life's problems while simultaneously avoiding the real issues. There were, it is true, other voices in *Bellerophon* more sympathetic towards traditional religion, and the chorus seem to have offered a counter-weight to the moralistic atheism of Bellerophon when they said, foolishly in Bellerophon's view, that unjust men would always get punished

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[10] Cf. Polymestor in Eur. *Hec.* 956–60, but he presents this claim as compatible with belief in the gods; he suggests that the gods sow discord to make humans blindly worship them.

[11] See Egli 2003: 147 on this passage: '[e]s gibt keine Stelle im Werk des Euripides, wo die Götter ähnlich deutlich abgelehnt und der Ursprung der Religion so klar im Unglück der Menschen gesehen wird, wie in diesem Fragment'.

eventually.[12] But the hero could not rely on these commonplaces when he was looking for answers, and seeking moral accountability. Bellerophon mounted his winged horse Pegasus with the goal of flying to Mount Olympus to protest to the gods,[13] but soon enough the audience would learn that he was struck from his flying horse at the orders of Zeus, causing him fatal injury. Scholars often read this as the dramatic answer to Bellerophon on Euripides' behalf, reminding mortals that the gods are powerful and deserving of our respect.[14] For those who read Bellerophon's argument as forcefully atheistic, in light of this plot development, however, it might be conceded that his later actions imply that he recognised the existence of the gods, but this sort of inconsistency was common for the theological views of Euripidean characters that shifted according to the dramatic situation, which was further informed by the limitation that Greek tragedy generally worked within a heroic world in which the gods obviously existed.[15] At the precise moment that Bellerophon made his argument, by contrast, it stands to reason that he was defending strong philosophical atheism.

1.1 Why was Bellerophon Always Pious?

But there is a difficulty in this interpretation. From the conventions of Greek tragedy about violence, and a surviving verse from *Bellerophon* which functioned as a stage direction,[16] we can surmise that the hero was wheeled out onto the stage during his final

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[12] Eur. *Beller.* fr. 303 K.

[13] Eur. *Beller.* frr. 306–8 K.

[14] Yunis 1988a: 98; Riedweg 1990: 53, cf. Lefkowitz 1989: 75; Whitmarsh 2016: 185.

[15] For the first point see e.g. Lloyd 1992: 88; on the latter see Yunis 1988a: 76.

[16] Eur. *Beller.* fr. 311 K.

moments. Commenting on a passage from the drama, Aelian wrote that Bellerophon addressed himself heroically while he was on the brink of death:

> ἦσθ' εἰς θεοὺς μὲν εὐσεβής, ὅτ' ἦσθ', ἀεὶ,
>
> ξένοις τ' ἐπήρκεις οὐδ' ἔκαμνες εἰς φίλους.[17]
>
> You were always pious towards the gods, when you were alive,
>
> And a service to guests and not a burden on your friends.

Why would an atheist claim he was 'always pious' towards the gods when he had just denied their existence a few moments ago? Modern scholarship has tried to reconcile these facts. One scholar rejects that Bellerophon could have made his earlier argument, and attributes it to another character on the grounds that '[t]he same character cannot praise his piety on his deathbed after he has previously rejected the gods' existence'.[18] Another proposes that ὅτ' ἦσθ' is restrictive, meaning 'when you were (truly) alive' in Bellerophon's prime.[19] But there is little doubt that these strategies for saving the phenomena impose an unnecessary strain on the evidence, by unseating a credible character attribution for the argumentative dialogue or downplaying the major theme of piety in the drama. Since these were probably two emotional peaks of the tragedy, Bellerophon's tirade against the gods and his heroic exit from this world, the original audience of Euripides would have likely been forced to consider Bellerophon's self-reported piety through the lens of his words and actions in the work. It is one thing,

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[17] Eur. *Beller.* fr. 310 K *ap.* Ael. *NA* 5.34 (which provides the dramatic context); cf. Riedweg 1990: 52–3.

[18] Dixon 2014: 498.

[19] Riedweg 1990: 53.

potentially, for a tragic character to speak about the gods inconsistently, but there must be a dramatic logic behind why Bellerophon was forcefully blasphemous in one part and pious in another.

The real reason why Bellerophon could passionately embrace his piety is that even his most 'atheistic' statements earlier in the drama discursively belonged to a religious framework, and in the original context of the drama he would have been critiquing the gods because he believed in them and recognised their power over the world.[20] He was, like a handful of Euripides' quixotic characters, insistent upon the moral perfection of the gods in spite of their troubling misdemeanours in the heroic world, and it was probably Bellerophon who said the line, 'if the gods commit any disgraceful act, they are not gods' (εἰ θεοί τι δρῶσιν αἰσχρόν, οὐκ εἰσὶν θεοί).[21] This might raise the question of why a moral fundamentalist of Greek religion like Bellerophon would abuse the gods in a tirade that sounds atheistic, but in some sense this is akin to asking why people speak hyperbolically when they are angry, or how a dramatist could find any human interest in these emotional displays. In the same way that someone disappointed in a judgement in a lawcourt might say, 'there is no such thing as a legal system in this country! Lawyers only exist to make money, and judges are corrupt!', or when Cleon in Thucydides said it was easy to apprehend the Spartan enemy at Pylos 'if the generals were (truly) men',[22] Bellerophon was holding someone

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[20] On criticism of the gods as a means of preserving traditional beliefs in Greek religious discourse, see Parker 1996: 210; cf. Harrison 2025: 103.

[21] Eur. *Beller.* fr. 286b.7 K; for parallels where Euripidean characters deny the reality of divine immorality see Eur. *HF* 1341–4, *El.* 583–4, *Ion* 429–51, *IT* 391; Curnis 2003: 250 rightly suspects Bellerophon's self-styled piety was genuine but idiosyncratic; Mastronarde 2010: 173–4 reads him as religiously 'aspirational', with high standards of divine behaviour.

[22] Thuc. 4.27.5: ῥᾴδιον εἶναι παρασκευῇ, εἰ ἄνδρες εἶεν οἱ στρατηγοί.

to account. In the language of pragmatics, his tirade was an expressive speech act which was also *directive*, as a reminder that the gods were falling short of the standard that Bellerophon had expected of them.[23] Another less heated example of this rhetoric is to be found in Euripides' *Electra*, when Orestes tried to assure his sister that they would get their revenge for the murder of Agamemnon:

> **Ορ.** σύμμαχός γέ σοι μόνος.
> ἢν δ' ἀνσπάσωμαί γ' ὃν μετέρχομαι βόλον
> < > (*post* 582)
> πέποιθα δ'· ἢ χρὴ μηκέθ' ἡγεῖσθαι θεούς,
> εἰ τἄδικ' ἔσται τῆς δίκης ὑπέρτερα.[24]
>
> **ORESTES**
>
> I am your only ally. Well, if I can land the catch that I am looking for […] I am confident; otherwise, we should no longer believe in the gods, if injustice will prevail over justice!

Regardless of the lacuna, the meaning is clear. Orestes expressed confidence *in* something (expressed with the perfect πέποιθα, even though the indirect object is missing), and he promised his sister that they would get their revenge. Moreover, although his wording is existential, Orestes was really presenting an *adynaton*: the

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[23] Cf. Stinton 1976: 62–3, who noted that sceptical/existential statements in Greek poetry often express surprise or are directives ('if you are *really* my son, you will do *x*'); on the value of considering the 'illocutionary force' behind atheistic statements in Greek literature, see Harrison 2025: 97–103; for directive and expressive speech acts defined, see Searle and Vanderveken 1985: 55–6, 58–9.

[24] Eur. *El.* 581–4.

siblings would get their revenge on Clytemnestra or 'hell would freeze over'. He was trying to encourage, rather than terrify Electra, and unlike Bellerophon, he used the image of atheism to anticipate an impossible outcome.

There was also a deeper cultural foundation to all this rhetoric, since the railings of Bellerophon came from a wellspring of traditional criticisms of the gods focused on the uncomfortable reality of worldly injustice.[25] In the traditional popular theology of the Greeks, which was already operative in the *Iliad*,[26] the gods were conceived as the enforcers of cosmic justice, and in the personifying tradition of Hesiod one daughter of Zeus was Δίκη, Justice, who sat next to Zeus' throne and bade him to punish human wrongdoers.[27] Hesiod asserted that kings who dispensed good judgements that did not deviate from justice (δίκαιον) would be rewarded by Zeus with a flourishing city of peace and prosperity, but cities of wicked kings would be met with pestilence and war.[28] But the research of Henk S. Versnel has shown that Greek religious discourse on the topic of divine justice was equally contradictory and shifted according to the situation faced by the speaker, with the consequence that if a Greek recognised a fair outcome they would praise the justice of Zeus, but in the opposite scenario they complained

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[25] For the need to contextualise more extreme 'atheistic' statements like those in Euripides' *Bellerophon* within a broader religious discourse around divine justice, see Ford 2024: 91.

[26] *Pace* e.g. Finley 1977: 140, there was no 'revolution' from the *Iliad* to *Odyssey* where Zeus transformed 'from the king of a heroic society to the principle of cosmic justice'; this notion was disproven in Lloyd-Jones 1983 and Allan 2006, but Versnel 2011: 151–237 encapsulates how this justice was often construed in paradoxical terms; for a balanced assessment of this issue see Ford 2024: 74–6.

[27] Hes. *Theog.* 901–6, *Op.* 248–74; Aesch. fr. 281a R, *Sept.* 662–3, *Cho.* 948–52; Soph. *OC* 1381–2; Ar. *Av.* 1238–40.

[28] Hes. *Op.* 225–31.

about his ruinous arbitrariness.[29] For this reason, rebuking the justice of Zeus in Greek epic often assumed the form of momentary, emotional protests directed at the gods,[30] and such protests could already assume a speculative character in the tradition of the Archaic elegists:

> Zeus, my good friend, I am puzzled with you (θαυμάζω σε); for you reign over all, possessing your honour, and pre-eminent might; and you are well aware of the minds and hearts of every man; and your power is the loftiest of them all, O King. So how can it be, son of Cronus, that your mind dares (τολμᾶι νόος) to hold corrupt men and the righteous man in the same esteem, regardless of whether minds of men are turned towards temperance or towards insolence, with men persuaded by unjust deeds? Is nothing determined by divinity for mortals (οὐδέ τι κεκριμένον πρὸς δαίμονός ἐστι βροτοῖσιν), and is there no path to follow that will appease the immortals (οὐδ' ὁδὸν ἥντιν' ἰὼν ἀθανάτοισιν ἄδοι)?[31]

The old elegist first drew attention to the attributes of Zeus — his supreme power and his knowledge of human intentions — while omitting the fact that Zeus enforces cosmic justice as implicitly obvious. But why, in that case, had the justice of Zeus fallen short? The elegist made no attempt to present his poetic persona as an emotionally disinterested party, telling Zeus bitterly that he dared (τολμᾶι) to allow injustice to

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[29] Versnel 2011: 230 characterised this thought pattern as '*chains of sequences* of gnomic wisdom', expressed here as 'a pervasive *co-existence* of images of supernatural justice on the one hand, and various sorts of natural or supernatural arbitrariness or fatalism, on the other'; Mastronarde 2010: 153–206 terms this phenomenon in Euripides the 'dialectic of hope and despair'.

[30] Hom. *Il.* 3.364–8; 21.272–6.

[31] [Thgn.] 1.373–82.

continue unpunished (377).[32] The righteous anger of the piece was only reinforced by the poet's hyperbolic rhetorical question put to Zeus, of whether the gods have any moral standards for mortals (βροτοί) to follow (381–2). In this sense, the anger and the hyperbolic rhetoric of Bellerophon were steeped in traditional Greek concerns about the role of divine justice in the world. Bellerophon went too far in this challenge, naturally, but his paradoxical piety was genuine.

It would be another step to claim this was the only ancient reading of *Bellerophon* that would have mattered, and that if we try to suspend our modern assumptions and reconstruct the 'perceptual filters' of the ancient audience watching the play, we would be left with an overreaching but ambivalently 'pious' protagonist who embodied a discourse internal to religion: that the drama concerned religious 'problematisation' rather than atheism.[33] But this further move of interpretation, while right to suggest that a Euripidean play could easily provoke a general audience response, is a partial evaluation of the ancient evidence. It would be fair to say that Greek audiences watching *Bellerophon* could have recognised the dramatic subtext that the protagonist was a tortured believer in the gods, as they were no doubt familiar with hearing rhetorical complaints about the gods onstage. But there is no sense in denying that during his time, Euripides *was* sometimes read literally. It was a running joke in Aristophanes that some Greeks took Euripides' scandalous themes and dialogue as literal ideas that he endorsed through his characters, and Aristotle provided a clue into this mentality when he related that Euripides was accused of impiety for promoting perjury with a line of dialogue in the *Hippolytus*.[34] Unbelievable, perhaps, but not for the thought process it represented, and in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* (411 BCE)

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[32] Cf. Groningen 1966 on [Thgn.] 1.377: 'le verbe est assez impertinent, "avoir l'audace"'.

[33] This conveys the general approach of Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: 297–300.

[34] Arist. *Rhet.* 1416a28–34; cf. Eur. *Hipp.* 612.

a merchant who sold festive garlands accused Euripides of teaching others that the gods did not exist, reducing the demand for her business.[35] In spite of the symbolism of Bellerophon's religious struggle, which should be taken as a primary problem of the drama, it seems unlikely Bellerophon's tirade was never considered as a philosophical argument by *any* Greeks in the audience. The idea was presented in such a sustained and dogged manner that it risked overshadowing the rhetorical subtext, which seems not out of step with Euripides' gift for shocking his audience with novel ideas, and accorded with a medium like tragedy where an audience would expect to be challenged.[36] That this could be presented as a view is also suggested in another tragedy by Euripides, in a passage where men who are said to believe that no gods exist (ὁρᾶθ', ὅσοι νομίζετ' οὐκ εἶναι θεούς) are condemned as doubly mistaken (δὶς ἐξαμαρτάνοντες) for denying the gods' existence and the reality of divine punishment.[37] So, was Bellerophon's speech a religious struggle, or an argument for atheism made from without? In some sense, the dominant, dramatically sensitive reading does not entirely foreclose the second. It is not a question of whether we fully *agree* with this literal reading, as exegetes of Euripides; the speech could suggest atheism to contemporaries, and for all his dramatic intent Euripides could not have been ignorant of the literal force of his dialogue as he composed it.

1.2 Greek Atheism Contested: Mirage versus Reality

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[35] Ar. *Thesm.* 450–1; on Euripides' ancient reputation for atheism and impiety, see Lefkowitz 1987.

[36] On the informal 'license' of Attic tragedians to deal with scandalous and disturbing ideas, comparable to the comic 'license' of mocking the gods, see Yunis 1988a: 14.

[37] Eur. fr. 912b (= *TrGF* adesp. fr. 624) S/K.

The tirade in *Bellerophon* offers a glimpse into some of the difficulties which face the student of pre-modern atheism, and the risks of sighting a red herring are significant. If there is a charged religious subtext behind the complaints of Bellerophon, and more so than we might have initially expected, could the same not be said for *all* the reports about atheism in the ancient world? Was there even such a thing as atheism among the Greeks, or is this a mare's nest of modern scholarship? This is a source of ongoing controversy among specialists of philology, religion, literature and philosophy in the ancient Greek world, and intersects with greater and still unresolved scholarly controversies about whether atheism existed in any pre-modern cultures. This is particularly evident in the *Cambridge History of Atheism* (2021), a capstone of scholarship with chapters in the first volume which marshal evidence for atheism in ancient Greece and ancient India. Yet by the time the reader reaches the second volume, one contributor suggests that 'there is a strong case to be made that atheism is an inherently modern outlook … [since] atheism is made *possible* and *intelligible* by certain specifically modern epistemological assumptions'.[38] Some disagreement is common in multi-edited volumes, particularly ones of this size (it runs to almost 1,200 pages), but this is profound and indicative of a general, enduring reluctance to regard atheism as a real phenomenon before it gained more obvious traction in seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century Europe.

It should first be clarified, however, what 'atheism' is the subject of controversy. In ordinary language the term does not necessarily mean the same thing to everyone, and in recent scholarly parlance it can more broadly describe non-religious beliefs and attitudes, including apathy towards religion and agnosticism.[39] Some amalgamation between atheism and sceptical views on religion is also present throughout Tim Whitmarsh's lively popular treatment *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*

[38] Hyman 2021: 639.

[39] Bullivant 2013.

(2015), which proposes 'a kind of archaeology of religious skepticism' which recovers (and speculatively reconstructs in some cases) the views of ancient freethinkers found in the Archaic period and up to the age of early Christianity. In the volume, Whitmarsh rejects the idea that atheism was 'unthinkable' in premodern periods as an 'illusion' and concludes that it is not a 'historical anomaly' exclusive to the modern, secularised West.[40] In the wake of *Battling the Gods*, however, it has been pointed out that some distinctions need to be drawn.[41] There is general assent with Robert Parker's view that 'certain forms of doubt, criticism and revision were, in fact, traditional' for the Greeks.[42] No one could deny that poets and thinkers like Xenophanes, Heraclitus and Pindar were perceptive critics of certain popular beliefs who operated within a flexible framework of religious thinking, and the absence of any creed in Greek religion gave them room to deny that the gods had a human form, or to reject that they could wage internecine warfare or commit immoral actions, or to dismiss some rituals as absurd and ineffective.[43] There were even Greek philosophers, Aristotle included, who expended little effort to synthesise their views of the gods with those of Greek religion, and cases to this effect prompted A. B. Drachmann in his *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity* (1922) to propose, contentiously, that the main version of 'atheism' in antiquity was not a rejection of divinity in general but only the gods of popular belief.[44] There is also

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[40] Whitmarsh 2015: 11, 242.

[41] Yu 2017: 448; Bremmer 2018: 374.

[42] Parker 1996: 210.

[43] Garland 1994: ix characterises the absence of church dogma for the Greeks as part of a 'negative catechism of everything that mainstream Greek religion wasn't'; cf. Burkert 2011: 411: 'Glaubensbekenntnis bleibt den Griechen so fern wie Inquisition'; Versnel 2011: 542.

[44] Drachmann 1922: 1. This definition of 'atheism' is hard to use in practice, however, as one Greek philosopher's attempt at improving (in their view) the gods of popular belief *could be seen by others* as discarding them, as the trial of Socrates shows. By

no question that even stronger forms of unbelief could be imaginatively imputed to other people or characters in a drama,[45] and in the late fifth century this 'discursive' expression of atheism was not restricted to the exaggerated and emotive rhetoric seen earlier in *Bellerophon*. Consider a contemporary example from Greek comedy when two statesmen who are 'slaves' to the Athenian populace have a witty exchange in Aristophanes' *Knights* (424 BCE):

[Slave I]	What, do you really believe in the gods (ἐτεὸν ἡγεῖ γὰρ θεούς)?
Slave II	Yes, I do.
Slave I	What evidence have you got? (ποίῳ χρώμενος τεκμηρίῳ)?
Slave II	Because I am loathed by the gods! That seems reasonable, no?
Slave I	You've completely won me over.[46]

Long after the *Knights* was first performed, ancient editors identified the second slave of *Dēmos* as Nicias and his irreligious foil as the general Demosthenes, which need not have been the case for the joke to succeed.[47] On any reading, this exchange shows that atheism was of contemporary interest in late fifth-century Athens, even if mentions of

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contrast, seemingly realistic cases of 'local atheism' in Classical sources (especially Pentheus' militant 'atheism' towards Dionysus in Euripides' *Bacchae*) read like self-conceived philosophical positions, and could be studied accordingly.

[45] Bremmer 2021: 106–7; cf. Harrison 2025: 106 n. 77.

[46] Ar. *Eq.* 32–5; the names Nicias and Demosthenes are here omitted, *pace* the Wilson *OCT*.

[47] On the identity of these comic slaves/politicians, see Biles and Olson 2025: 130, 134–5.

this idea often assumed a rhetorical colouring that was not strictly logical.[48] (And in the *Knights* atheism is treated casually, since the first slave was quickly persuaded by the *bon mot* of the other). But still the question remains. Did any Greeks disbelieve in the existence of the gods, and stick to this unbelief as a worldview?

This is the real centre of the controversy across Classics as a discipline. Up to the present, scholars are divided over whether anyone in the age of Socrates and Plato accepted atheism understood as 'the negation of the existence of any type of deity or supernatural forces',[49] or, as Plato lucidly described it in the tenth book of *Laws*, 'to believe in absolutely no gods at all' (τὸ παράπαν θεοὺς οὐδαμῶς νομίζειν).[50] With this idea in mind some specialists in Greek religion have conceded that there was a rare 'exceptional individual' who dared to express their unbelief, but they downplay the likelihood that such views had a collective or social character.[51] In his handbook on Greek religion, Walter Burkert allowed for a 'speculative atheism' accepted by some Greeks which never escalated into the refusal to practise religion.[52] But other, no less prominent commentators in this field have denied that atheism was ever accepted by

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[48] There were also dramatic references to atheism as a view held by others in Greek sources; see, e.g., Eur. *Phrixos* B fr. 820b.2 K, an excerpt of dialogue which condemned 'those who claim that chance exists, but not gods': οἵ φασιν εἶναι τὴν τύχην ἀλ[λ᾽ οὐ] θεούς.

[49] For this definition of ancient atheism see Winiarczyk 1990: 8; cf. Winiarczyk 2016: 63, 66, 113, 130.

[50] Pl. *Leg.* 10.885c7. For this reason, another definition for naturalistic atheism in the Greek world would be, 'the point of view that absolutely no gods exist at all', which describes the same phenomenon as Winiarczyk's definition, but rhetorically underscores that the concept could be expressed in antiquity in these terms.

[51] Bremmer 2007: 11; cf. Versnel 2011: 553–4.

[52] Burkert 2011: 411, 493 labelled this 'theoretischer Atheismus'.

any fifth-century Greek, characterising such a phenomenon as the 'spectre of atheism',[53] or, in more provocative terms, as 'fundamentally, a scholarly mirage'.[54] Amidst these controversies, there has also been a scholarly attempt to cut the Gordian knot and redefine atheism as any beliefs and practices about the gods which militate against common norms, which discounts the fact that the debate concerns a phenomenon and not a term.[55] We should heed E. E. Evans-Pritchard when he said that 'terms are only labels which help us to sort out facts of the same kind from facts which are different', 'the facts will be the same without their labels'.[56] For this reason, while conceiving of ancient atheism in a broad sense is not always unhelpful, reflecting the fact that the Greeks often viewed unbelief in a highly normative, vague and accusatory manner, this definition cannot be a tool in a controversy about a self-maintained philosophical worldview.[57] What is really at stake is whether a typically 'modern' understanding of the world has any concrete parallel in antiquity.

Related to this attempt to redefine atheism has been a recent tendency in some scholarship to exaggerate the popularity of atheism in Classical antiquity, which can in turn introduce the danger of over-correction. The two most recent books on the subject, *Battling the Gods* (2015) by Tim Whitmarsh and *Atheism at the Agora* (2024) by James C. Ford, have presented the history of atheism as a moral issue where the

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[53] Eidinow 2022: 190.

[54] Harrison 2025: 88.

[55] Ford 2024: 17, 170 proposes to redefine ancient atheism as 'the various forms of unbelief in the right gods and/or the failure to worship them in appropriate ways'; Bremmer 2024: para. 7 also critiques Ford's definition.

[56] Evans-Pritchard 1937: 11.

[57] I.e., the vague understandings of 'atheism' in Greek religious discourse which will be explored in ch. 2.1 not infrequently resonate with Ford's definition, but Plato's description of philosophical atheism discussed in ch. 2.2 is different.

legitimacy of unbelief in part hinges upon atheism 'having a past'. Although *Battling the Gods* is more coherent in this regard, since it democratically reflects a familiar understanding of atheism and freethought, both these contributions have arguably oversold the popularity of atheism in antiquity due to terminological imprecisions surrounding atheism.[58] In addition, both these works share the understanding that presenting atheism as an unpopular belief in history can risk minimising it as a deviation from religion, marginalising atheists in the present day.[59] These concerns should not be dismissed lightly, and it is true there are some residual biases that remain in the scholarship, particularly in the more unnecessary and polemical characterisations of atheism cribbed from Lucien Febvre's *The Problem of Unbelief*. On the other hand, the study of atheism in history should aim to be descriptive, pushing contemporary concerns about the legitimacy of modern unbelief to the margins. In my opinion, the philological work of Marek Winiarczyk is a good model for this approach in the scholarship of Greek atheism, which recognises the existence of Greek atheism

[58] Whitmarsh 2015 and Ford 2024, to be read alongside the reviews of Yu 2017, Bremmer 2018; Bremmer 2024 and Henry 2024a.

[59] Whitmarsh 2015: 7: '[h]istory confers authority and legitimacy […] the deep history of atheism is then in part a human rights issue'. This concern, which is presented as supplementary in Whitmarsh, is exaggerated into a primary agenda in Ford 2024: 17: 'the narrowing of definitions [for atheism in antiquity] represents an artificial restriction built on a deeply prejudicial and othering tradition that atheism is an "extreme" and unsophisticated position'. For this reason, Bremmer 2024: para. 7 has criticised Ford 2024 as a somewhat 'ideological' study for its 'hyperbolic' conception of atheism.

by the end of the fifth century but does not overstate its popularity or extrapolate too much from limited evidence.[60]

On the other end of the spectrum are the schools of thought which hold that philosophical atheism was not real in Classical Greek antiquity, or at least that there is insufficient evidence for it. This view has gained traction in recent years, casting the representation of atheism in our sources as a 'mirage' or a 'spectre', or as a completely elusive entity concealed in a 'haze' of religious anxieties. Similar to the fiery twentieth-century controversies over whether the Ranters were a real group of heretics in Interregnum England or a boogeyman created by paranoid religious pamphleteers, some quarters of Classical scholarship have concluded that atheism in antiquity was nothing more than an empty slander that modern scholars have been too eager to cite as evidence for the existence of atheists in Protagoras or Plato's time.[61] Esther Eidinow reasons that hunting for ancient atheism to vindicate its antiquity is perilous, and once the 'spectre of atheism is disinvited', in her words, ancient philosophers like Protagoras can be seen to explore different questions about the gods.[62] Thomas Harrison argues in an article, 'Greek Atheism: A Mirage', that some concepts are insuppressibly modern and cannot be imposed upon the past, and the oft-cited evidence for atheism in Classical Greece ultimately communicates a different religious concern. From here, Harrison ventures that ancient Athens was a polytheistic society which could never have spawned a heresy like atheism, which was '*scarcely* thinkable' at the time, and he concludes that the notion of atheism as a lived doctrine in antiquity resides only in the

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[60] See in particular Winiarczyk 1990: 12 and Winiarczyk 2016: 74; the cautionary principles for studying ancient atheism in Winiarczyk 2016: viii–xii are also valuable in this regard.

[61] For the controversial argument that there were no Ranters in the seventeenth century, except as a polemical discourse (misread by moderns), see Davis 1986.

[62] Eidinow 2022: 188–90, quoted at 190.

wishful thinking of classicists: Greek atheism is 'fundamentally, a scholarly mirage'.[63] Joshua Billings has proposed on more aporetic lines that the ancient evidence is too limited, and the fifth-century moral panic around atheism too pervasive, to establish whether there were real atheists in antiquity. On this view Greek atheism is not necessarily a 'mirage', but whether it existed or not, as Protagoras would say, is unclear.[64]

In addition, these controversies rest on what is meant by 'belief' in an ancient religion, and there is no shortage of discussion about whether one can speak of belief in Greek religion if they lacked an explicit creed. The twentieth century saw many specialists stress the primacy of ritual over belief in Greek religion, but the more extreme position that 'belief' was a late Christian invention only emerged as a disciplinary concern after the anti-Christian crusade of Simon Price, a scholar of Greek religion who saw Classical scholarship as a minefield of 'Christianising' assumptions and proposed a number of verbal prescriptions as a remedy, such as the abolition of terms like 'monotheism' and 'polytheism' or the abandonment of 'religion' used in the singular.[65] But it was belief that was Price's original target, and famously so. In a monograph that attracted much readership among scholars of Greek and Roman religion, Price argued in *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (1984) that 'belief' was a Christian concept which had no applicability to ancient religion, and in his train a number of surveys on Roman religion pursued a similar line of thought.[66] On the other hand, this school of thought never reached a consensus, and

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[63] Harrison 2025: 93, 99.

[64] Billings (forthcoming).

[65] Price 1999: ix, 11, 67.

[66] Price 1984: 10: '"[b]elief" as a religious term is profoundly Christian in its implications; it was forged out of the experience which the Apostles and Saint Paul had of the Risen Lord'; cf. Price 1999: 3: '[p]ractice not belief is the key, and to start

after the turn of the century it became more difficult to sustain the view that Graeco-Roman religion was merely a series of 'empty cult acts', or, in Price's ambiguous formulation, that ancient religion was nothing more than a 'public cognitive system' realised through ritual.[67] On a methodological level the definition of 'belief' in this short-lived fad was parochial and its empirical coverage necessarily partial, and the wide spectrum of religious beliefs in the Greek world was never given its due. Thomas Harrison showed in *Divinity and History* (2000) that the thought world of Herodotus was proof that the Greeks had a vast inventory of religious beliefs about divination, epiphanies, the divide between gods and mortals, and divine retribution, and he made the case that 'belief' was an indispensable category in the study of any culture.[68] In the scholarship of Roman religion it was replied that the Romans had religious beliefs but they organised them into a different system compared to modern credal religions, and in later years, it was argued that their performance of sacrifices and prayers implied a cluster of beliefs about their social obligations and (often, if not necessarily) a tacit 'folk theology'.[69] From the Greek side of things, another blow was dealt against naïve behaviourist understandings of ancient polytheism by Henk S. Versnel in an appendix in *Coping with the Gods* (2011), and now it seems a settled matter that the Greeks believed in their gods, which has heartened scholars of Greek religion to frame discussions around Greek theology and personal religion, or to study Greek religion in

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from questions about faith or personal piety is to impose alien values on ancient Greece'. Price's concern was informed by older anthropological literature that problematised the concept of belief, above all Needham 1972 (cited by Price 1984: 11), but as Mackey 2022: 34–5 noted, Price's relativist understanding of belief as a Christian notion was less extreme than Needham, who rejected belief as an incoherent category.

[67] Price 1984: 9.

[68] Harrison 2000: 18–22, and *passim*.

[69] The first proposition is argued by King 2003; the second, Mackey 2022.

parallel with findings from the disciplinary paradigm of the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR).[70] For our purposes, then, the ramifications for the study of Greek atheism are clear. If it can be said that the Greeks held a general, if often tacit, belief in the existence of their gods — that when Achilles prayed to Zeus in Homer, or Xenophon inspected a sacrifice before a campaign, they shared an informal theology that there were gods who could communicate with mortals and grant them favours — then there was material for Protagoras to problematise, and even for an atheist to reject.[71] What has proved to be more controversial in recent scholarship, however, are the *kinds* of beliefs that the Greeks could entertain about their gods.[72] This is not a trivial question of classification, since if the Greeks could not hold consistent non-religious views or express firm doubts in their private lives, it might be argued that the Greeks believed in their gods but not in a way that allowed any of them to accept atheism.[73]

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[70] Versnel 2011: 539–59 *contra* Giordano-Zecharya 2007; for more recent surveys on the relevance of belief to Greek religion, see Harrison 2015; Harrison 2015a: 167–8, 170–4; in Euripides, Allan and Swift 2024: 25–36; for the application of personal religion and theology in Greek religion, see Kindt 2015, Kindt 2016, and Kindt 2025; for CSR and Greek religion, see Larson 2016 and the contributions in the *Journal of Cognitive Historiography*.

[71] *Pace* Price 1999: 126–7, who believed that atheism could have only developed from a modern credal religion. Alternatively, Yunis 1988a: 38–58 rightly noted that there are religious beliefs which were generally assumed in everyday Greek ritual, which Larson 2016: 13 terms an 'implicit theology'; for fundamental beliefs recoverable from ritual in a Roman context, cf. King 2003: 287–8; Mackey 2022.

[72] As noted by Harrison 2015a: 171–2.

[73] Harrison 2025.

This study aims to disassemble such assumptions, which will be shown to rely on an incomplete evidential base and a heterodox view of Greek philosophy.[74]

In miniature these are the positions on the table concerning the reality of Classical Greek atheism, although casting the debate in these terms can risk excluding another valuable approach to the study of ancient atheism which has different stakes. Despite the fact that these methods can be reconciled, a line in the sand should be drawn between 'philosophical' studies of ancient atheism, which have been a familiar approach since the earliest studies on the topic, and 'discursive' studies of ancient atheism, which have been comparatively recent.[75] These methodological questions can be organised into a *status quaestionis* from the origins of the discipline at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the work of Paul Decharme, before moving to recent works in the scholarship which go beyond traditional intellectual history.

1.3 Philosophical and Discursive Approaches, Past and Present

Although brief treatments of atheism in the age of the sophists can be found in older reference volumes of philosophy, such as Zeller,[76] the first go-to discussion of Greek atheism in Classical antiquity was written by Paul Decharme in a richly detailed study, *La critique des traditions religieuses chez les Grecs des origines au temps de Plutarque* (1904), which inaugurated the familiar 'philosophers and impiety trials' narrative of

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[74] These critiques are developed in ch. 4 and ch. 5.2, below.

[75] I have developed this view in conversation with Joshua Billings, who refines the discursive approach to studying ancient atheism in Billings (forthcoming).

[76] Indeed, Zeller, *Phil. d. Gr.*[6] I.2, 1406–10 concluded that atheism and the denial of providence was the inevitable outcome of the anthropocentric turn of the sophists, rather than a potential development from their thought.

Classical freethought in a convenient reference volume which included a spectrum of philosophical criticisms of traditional Greek religion over a wide chronology. In a chapter on natural philosophy and sophistic thought and its family relationship with fifth-century atheism, Decharme applied a 'philosophical' approach to this evidence conventional for the time, weighing up the extent to which there were atheists in Classical Greece. Decharme found that some Greek poets and scientists were atheists, such as Critias, Diagoras of Melos and Hippon of Samos, and he concluded that the 'progrès de l'incrédulité' in fifth-century Athens was suggested by Plato's attack on intellectual atheists in Book 10 of his *Laws*.[77] However, although he acknowledged that fifth-century challenges to religious belief brewed during the 'trouble morale' of the Peloponnesian War, reflecting a then-widening rift between popular superstition and a small emergent group of freethinkers, Decharme did not develop this cultural observation (already made by Lewis Campbell) but pursued an intellectualist and biographical approach.[78] It is true that he was also more trusting of ancient testimonies of atheism than most scholars writing today, but Decharme showed no eccentricities of judgment compared to his contemporaries and before *Critique* there was no overview on these issues in a modern language. Less satisfactory than Decharme in this respect was A. B. Drachmann's *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity* (1922), a superficial work first conceived as an encyclopedia entry for atheism that evolved into a book originally written in Danish.[79] Although Drachmann criticised Decharme's work as 'not fertile in

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[77] Decharme 1904: 113–40; for his treatment of *Laws*, see 138–40.

[78] Decharme 1904: 129–30, citing Campbell 1898: 295–6, who wrote that '[t]he invasion of Athenian territory and the desolating effects of the plague at once reinforced the scepticism of strong minds, and drove the weak into wilder superstition', but concluded that many Athenians would have had a 'mingled state of mind'.

[79] The initial project is mentioned at Drachmann 1922: 1.

new points of view',[80] it has to be said that *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity* introduced few useful innovations, above all in its terminological choices, which could have been useful but in practice failed to distinguish between rejecting the existence of gods and heterodox theologies which rejected the gods of popular religion.[81] In addition, this led Drachmann to develop categorisations that failed to engage meaningfully with the ancient evidence. This included describing Aristotle as an 'atheist' without exploring the hostile ancient reception of his theology, or taking into account that other etic religious categories might have been better for describing his opinions about popular religion.[82] Drachmann's chapters on criticisms of Greek religion in the fifth century also dramatised a 'philosophers and impiety trials' narrative similar to that in Decharme, but the shallowness and philosophical imprecision of *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity* resulted in an inferior work. On the whole, it would be misleading to suggest that the modern scholarly interest in Greek atheism started with Drachmann.

In the later twentieth century the study of ancient atheism continued to be philosophical in the sense presently defined, but it underwent a series of philological

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[80] Drachmann 1922: 153.

[81] Drachmann 1922: 1 defined ancient atheism as 'the point of view which *denies the existence of the ancient gods*' (italics original), generating later confusion. It is said that the atheism in *Laws* 10 is 'sheer atheism' (62) which 'undermined the belief in the old gods' (63), and an intelligent reader who already digested Drachmann's definition of 'atheism' in his introduction could be left with the false impression that Plato outlined the views of heterodox theologians rather than global atheists.

[82] Drachmann 1922: 86: '[a] point of view like that of Aristotle would, I suppose, hardly have been called atheism among the ancients, if only because the heavenly bodies were acknowledged as divine. But according to our definition [!] it is atheism'. For the ancient reception of Aristotle as ἀσεβής, by contrast, see the testimonies later gathered in Winiarczyk 1984: 161; Winiarczyk 1992: 306.

refinements and absorbed a wider appreciation for the cultural and religious background to ancient challenges to religious belief.[83] Wilhelm Fahr published a much-admired study on the evolution of the terminology for atheism in Classical antiquity, *ΘΕΟΥΣ NOMIZEIN: Zum Problem der Anfänge des Atheismus bei den Griechen* (1969).[84] *ΘΕΟΥΣ NOMIZEIN* was a philosophical study of atheism, in that Fahr concluded that the terminology for atheism found by the late fifth century was an indicator that a novel, sophistic idea had taken root in ancient Athens, but atheism never became a mass movement, even if it had increased in popularity by the time Plato wrote his *Laws*.[85] Pursuing a parallel philological line of inquiry, the Polish classical scholar Marek Winiarczyk has worked through evidential puzzles concerning atheism in Classical antiquity since the 1970s, with a number of studies which debunked the atheistic credentials of Diagoras of Melos, publishing a critical edition for the ancient testimonies about Diagoras and Theodorus of Cyrene, collating ancient references to individual 'atheists', and suggesting a number of methodological guiding principles for the study of ancient atheism.[86] Although Winiarczyk has made his stance clear that

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[83] The second aspect was forecasted in a review of Drachmann 1922, which argued (Halliday 1923: 189) that Drachmann did not draw out the social, 'civic character' of Greek religion or factor in the moral strain imposed by the Peloponnesian War as necessary background for understanding the impiety trials of late fifth-century Athens.

[84] Fahr 1969; the earlier treatments of Derenne 1930: 217–23 and Tate 1936 also merit a mention in this regard.

[85] Fahr 1969: 170–1, 172–4.

[86] Studies on Diagoras: Winiarczyk 1979, Winiarczyk 1980, Winiarczyk 2016; edition for Diagoras and Theodorus: Winiarczyk 1981; collected testimonies for individual 'atheists' in antiquity: Winiarczyk 1984, Winiarczyk 1992; methodological discussion: Winiarczyk 1990; Winiarczyk 2016: viii–xii, 61–74. Winiarczyk 2013 also critically

there were atheists by the turn of the fifth century, much of his work pours cold water over the ancient testimonies of atheism, and in this sense his approach to the evidence is philosophical but geared for a negative result when it is suggested. More sceptical in this regard is the scholarship of Jan Bremmer, who influentially adapted Lucien Febvre's thesis on the unfeasibility of sixteenth-century atheism to ancient Greece and Rome in the early 1980s and qualified his position over the years, showing an interest in the reality or unreality of philosophical atheism in Greek antiquity but filtered through his background in the study of Greek religion.[87]

In Anglophone scholarship the philosophical study of atheism in ancient Greece experienced an upsurge in the 2010s, and for the first time the controversy was not solely confined to the groves of the Academy. In a book chapter which was sensitive to the question of the social diffusion of atheistic ideas in Classical Athens, David Sedley developed the argument that we cannot name any individual atheists from antiquity, but in his mature years Plato reacted against an 'atheist underground' in Athens who traded atheistic ideas in secretive groups.[88] Although Winiarczyk had already underscored the reliability of Plato's testimony in contrast with the ancient catalogues of atheists, Sedley was original in developing a perceptive philosophical analysis of Plato's treatment of atheism and proposing a compelling, if overstated, model for how atheism circulated in Classical Athens.[89] In *Battling the Gods: Atheism the Ancient World* (2015) Tim Whitmarsh brought these controversies into the popular consciousness, making the case for the prevalence of atheism in antiquity and

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investigated the alleged 'atheism' of Euhemerus of Messene, a Hellenistic thinker who sits outside the chronological scope of this present study.

[87] Bremmer 1982; Bremmer 2007; Bremmer 2020; Bremmer 2025; for discussion on Febvre's contentious applicability to Classical Athens, see ch. 1.4, below.

[88] Sedley 2013.

[89] For a proposed refinement of this argument, see ch. 5.2, below.

developing a number of pluripotent, thought-provoking ideas along the way, such as casting the persecution of ancient freethinkers and atheists as a form of cultural marginalisation, restationing atheistic texts as part of a literary culture and not merely intellectual history, and bringing the debate about the universality of religious belief into the study of ancient atheism.[90] Compared to other works in the scholarship *Battling the Gods* is important as an 'inaugurator' of ideas, and despite its overextensions in argument — too many Greek thinkers (such as Hippon, Diagoras, Prodicus and Protagoras) are argued to be atheists when the ancient evidence is insufficient or points to the contrary — it is an ingenious case of the philosophical approach in action.

Since then, an outcrop of scholarship has tried to transcend the question of whether there were individual unbelievers (or anonymous groups of atheists) in antiquity, investigating how atheism (and adjacent topics such as theodicy and Greek education) were discussed and explored in ancient public discourse. While a philosophical approach to Euripides' *Bellerophon*, for example, might consider the drama as a test case for whether there were atheists in Athens, a discursive approach would alternatively examine how such atheistic ideas were nestled in a wider religio-cultural context in Classical Greece, and how these views were represented in the play. This move could be deployed to suggest the provisional interpretation, as seen earlier in the introduction (ch. 1.1), that *Bellerophon* does not map perfectly onto familiar understandings of philosophical atheism and intersects with broader Greek concerns around traditional theodicy. Simultaneously, a specimen of atheism in a source like *Bellerophon* could be analysed in this manner without committing to a view about

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[90] Whitmarsh 2015; Whitmarsh has also developed these arguments *seriatim* in various articles and chapters in edited volumes, such as Whitmarsh 2014, Whitmarsh 2016, and Whitmarsh 2020; for a later overview of atheism in the Greek world, more methodologically considered than Whitmarsh 2015, see Whitmarsh 2021.

whether there were any atheistic sources used by Euripides (as Whitmarsh proposed) or whether Euripides had a small audience of freethinking sympathisers (as Decharme speculatively suggested).[91] A few recent works have pursued this line of inquiry to varying degrees of success. An outstanding example can be found with Nicole Hartmann's chapter on atheism in the Roman Empire from *The Cambridge History of Atheism* (2021), who proposes 'a discursive and less definitional approach by looking closely at how ancient authors present and employ what they call atheism in their time'.[92] A parallel approach is proposed in James C. Ford, *Atheism at the Agora* (2024), a book title which reflects Ford's commitment to exploring the public manifestations of Greek atheism, 'civic discourse rather than individual beliefs',[93] and a commitment to situating public representations of atheism in wider cultural issues: 'discussions and evidence of atheism will be embedded in discourses on civic education, morality and justice, intra- and inter-polis political feuds, and attitudes towards foreigners'.[94] Consistent with this aim, *Agora* is most effective when it explores cultural umbrella topics like traditional modes of Greek education or (especially) the hostile and moralised depictions of unbelief in Greek literature.[95] On the other hand, *Agora* overextends the 'discursive' approach by drawing the net of atheism too wide, identifying it with ideas distinct from atheism such as divine unknowability or soft criticisms of religion.[96] Then *Agora* proceeds to use this concept of 'atheism' to resolve

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[91] Whitmarsh 2016; the suggestion of Decharme 1904: 121–9 applied for the ancient reception of Euripidean drama, but also the Sisyphus fragment.

[92] Hartmann 2021: 101.

[93] Ford 2024: 169.

[94] Ford 2024: 7.

[95] Henry 2024a.

[96] Cf. Bremmer 2024: para. 7: 'Ford has rightly drawn attention to questions of doubt and unknowability in Greek religion and its plasticity, but to associate all these features with atheism is not really helpful'.

the controversy over whether atheism existed in antiquity,[97] when this is not a valid response for scholars who maintain there were no total unbelievers in Classical Greece.[98] This is to say the 'philosophical' problem of whether atheism was *accepted* in antiquity should never be confused with the 'discursive' question of how it was publicly *represented*. In a forthcoming article by Joshua Billings this distinction has been adapted at length, yielding more coherent methodological results. Billings takes an agnostic view on whether there were atheists in Socrates' day, concluding that the evidential base for the problem is insufficient for a positive or negative finding. Alternatively, he analyses Greek atheism as a 'moral panic' which underwent changes in the late fifth century, identifying the root of the public concern with atheism in concerns about divine justice, and the fear that a world without divine causation could have catastrophic implications for the social order.[99]

A fusion of these philosophical and discursive approaches can equally be found at opposite ends of the 'mirage versus reality' controversy over Greek atheism. This is certainly the case for Thomas Harrison in his article 'Greek Atheism: A Mirage', who contends that there were no atheists in Classical antiquity and that the ancients who referenced the idea were misrepresenting the views of others while they affirmed a

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[97] As concluded by Ford 2024: 168: 'atheism has turned out to be far from unthinkable in the ancient Greek city: atheism is indispensable for the study and the mechanics of ancient religion and it has incredible explanatory value in many of the major "mysteries" of the Greek world'.

[98] This would be akin to a historian of early modern thought replying to Lucien Febvre that atheism in the sixteenth century 'existed' because it was a stock accusation and a topic of discussion, which is not a meaningful engagement with Febvre's original thesis that no pre-Enlightenment Europeans could escape their religious conditioning; on Febvre's uses in Classical Greek thought, see ch. 1.4, below.

[99] Billings (forthcoming).

partisan moral stance of their own, rather than articulating a neutral doxographic summary; so that Greek atheism, by Harrison's lights, was 'a mirage generated out of a *religious* discourse'.[100] To arrive at this point, Harrison's methodological priority of tracing the representation of Greek atheism is used to challenge the very notion that this 'atheism' was anything *but* a discursive representation. This present study, by contrast, is a response to Harrison's negative verdict on Greek atheism, which poses an admirably clear challenge that is often suggestive in the problems of interpretation that it raises. In the following chapters it will be argued that Greek atheism was a reality — or, to be more precise than this provocative soundbite, there is solid evidence for Greek atheists in Plato's time amid a chorus of misleading, hyperbolic or indecisive testimonies of atheism.[101] Looking back to the studies of Decharme and Winiarczyk, I have taken the view that more empiricism is needed in this controversy rather than less, and without seeking to develop a comprehensive model for religious belief or atheism in antiquity, this study takes into account the hostile and discursive portrayals of atheism alongside the ancient testimonies which point to something more than a hostile representation (discussed in Chapter 2). However, before we venture into the controversies around atheism in the fifth and fourth centuries, it will be necessary to consider the main historiographical tradition which is prone to exaggerating the pervasiveness of religious belief in pre-modern cultural history, which traces back to the work of Lucien Febvre on the possibility of pre-modern atheism in Europe and informs the critical assessments of Bremmer and Harrison. Lucien Febvre arrived relatively late to the study of Greek atheism in the early 1980s, but the influence of his argument in subsequent scholarship is hard to overstate.

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[100] Harrison 2025: 102 (italics original), speaking here of 'atheism' in the Psalms but by extension 'atheism' (in his view) in Classical Greek antiquity.

[101] As argued (in summarised form) in Henry (forthcoming).

1.4 Lucien Febvre in Athens and the Monolithic Fallacy

In *The Problem of Unbelief: The Religion of Rabelais*, first published in 1942 as *Le problème de l'incroyance au 16e siècle: la religion de Rabelais*, Lucien Febvre argued that atheism was a modern phenomenon which was inconceivable in sixteenth-century Europe. He reasoned that Christianity was so pervasive in this period that he styled it as 'the century that wanted to believe'.[102] Conversely, the most extreme contrary of religion, atheism, was consigned to the dustbin of historical irrelevance on the grounds that Febvre saw the feasibility of atheism as dependent on a combination of various historical conditions which did not obtain in many cultures, the sixteenth century included. In effect, Febvre's historicism about unbelief was meant to banish the very notion from serious intellectual histories of pre-modern Europe. At the same time, though Febvre argued about how humanists read their own views into Greek and Latin authors and considered the use of Latin as a potential intellectual tool for reasoning one's way towards atheism — in our disciplinary terms, he dabbled in Classical reception, and only briefly — his argument did not explicitly extend to antiquity.[103] The suggestibility was there, however, and his denial of the relevance of pre-modern atheism in the sixteenth century would have ramifications for controversies in other areas of intellectual history. If the circumstances were not ripe for atheism in the sixteenth century, would this not equally apply for other societies that were predominantly religious? It has been suggested by scholars of early modern thought that Febvre's negative findings contributed to a reluctance among twentieth-century scholars to accept any accusations or testimonies of atheism as genuine in seventeenth-century Britain.[104]

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[102] Febvre 1982: 455.

[103] Latin: Febvre 1982: 364–7; the reception of Greek philosophy: 371–9.

[104] Wootton 1988: 15–21; Hunter 2023: 6–7.

Febvre's historicist theory of unbelief was first applied to Classical Greece in 1982 by Jan Bremmer in a chapter which argued that the rise of literacy in the fifth century had a profound but restricted impact on the development of ancient Greek religious criticism. Bremmer would conclude that despite these innovations, ancient critiques of religious belief fell short of promoting atheism as a realistic lifestyle alternative to practising religion in the *polis*, concluding in the piece that the 'virtual absence of practised atheism' as a 'life option' in Greece lent itself to Febvre's view that atheism was impossible in sixteenth-century Europe.[105] In a later contribution in the *Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (2007), Bremmer stated that Lucien Febvre was applicable to Greece but also Rome. He wrote,

> Subsequent research has modified Febvre's findings to some extent, but his main findings still stand. Antiquity was not that different from the Middle Ages in this respect. The ancient Greeks and Romans also moved in a landscape where temples were everywhere, where gods adorned their coins, where the calendar went from religious festival to festival, and where religious rites accompanied all major transitions in life. Consequently, atheism never developed into a popular ideology with a recognizable following. All we have in antiquity is the exceptional individual who dared to voice his disbelief or bold philosophers who proposed intellectual theories about the coming into existence of the gods without, normally, putting their theories into practice or rejecting religious practice altogether. If we find atheism at all, it is usually a 'soft' atheism or the imputation of atheism to others as a means to discredit them.[106]

In more recent years Bremmer has partly moved beyond Febvre by investigating ancient atheism as a form of youthful rebellion in the late fifth century, writing about

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[105] Bremmer 1982: 51–2.

[106] Bremmer 2007: 11.

speculative unbelief in this period as a minor cultural phenomenon against his earlier view that atheism in antiquity was restricted to 'the exceptional individual'.[107] On the other hand, there remain strong Febvrian continuities in his most recent work. Bremmer has stressed that there were no practising atheists in Classical antiquity who refused to participate in religious practices, and for this reason he speaks of 'atheistic' ideas in the late fifth century BCE, but denies that there were any 'atheists'.[108] Bremmer's caveat assumes that a practical element is necessary to any definition of 'atheist', and he has denied that there were total unbelievers by appealing to the Febvrian ubiquity of religion in Greek life. This can be questioned, however, on the grounds that defining 'atheist' in practical terms ignores the importance of secrecy in the history of atheism in antiquity and modernity, which has often been concealed from public life for prudential reasons.[109] In this study I have taken the view that if someone believes that no gods exist at all, they are an atheist *sensu proprio*, which has the advantage that it aligns with ordinary English (see below, ch. 5.3). As best I can tell, this is what Bremmer meant by the 'exceptional individual' in the *Cambridge Companion*.

Febvre has equally been recruited for Greece in the scholarship of Thomas Harrison since his monograph *Divinity and History: The Religion of Herodotus* (2000), in which he challenged various attempts in twentieth-century scholarship to modernise Herodotus, such as imputing to him an urbane distrust of miracles or a freethinking scepticism about how much humans can comprehend about the gods.[110] In the course of his argument against these modernising approaches, Harrison stipulated that

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[107] Bremmer 2020.

[108] Bremmer 2025: 40–1, 45.

[109] For clandestine atheism in early modern Europe see Schröder 2012; on atheism in modern Islamic countries see Eller and Khazaal 2025; the question of whether atheism requires public expression to be genuine is explored at ch. 5.2, below.

[110] Harrison 2000: 1–30.

Herodotus lived in an age where 'complete unbelief' was 'scarcely imaginable', effectively drawing a sharp Febvrian line between the secular unbelief of the modern world and the unavoidable and all-pervasive religious life of Classical antiquity.[111] Returning to this controversy in his *Greece and Rome* article in 2025, Harrison revived the spirit of Febvre with a series of arguments which resonate with the main tenets in *The Problem of Unbelief*, and especially its historicist characterisation of atheism: '[p]erhaps the most central lesson of Febvre's account, from which all others hang, is his conviction that atheism is not a timeless condition that can be diagnosed across the centuries'.[112] For Harrison, it is not simply the case that Herodotus was not an atheist, as he concludes that the ubiquity of religious belief and ritual in Greek civic life actively prevented *anyone* from accepting atheism in Classical Greece, or, at the very least, such environs would have made an idea like atheism powerless and irrelevant. Thus, by the time the historiography of atheism in ancient Greece developed a cultural self-consciousness in the 1980s, imported from scholars of Greek religion, Lucien Febvre found himself in a surprising new destination.

As David Wootton has pointed out, Febvre did not argue in *The Problem of Unbelief* that there were no lone unbelievers in the sixteenth century, but their opinion would have been so out of step with the social omnipresence of religion and the intellectual climate of the times that this form of atheism would have been too marginal to count as a serious historical phenomenon in the time of Rabelais.[113] In other words, Febvre's final verdict on sixteenth-century unbelief was not so much existential as value-based or *axiological*, in that Febvre reasoned that even if atheism were accepted by the occasional 'precursor', any expressions of pre-modern unbelief were 'without significance' and 'inconsequential' on a social and intellectual plane, and 'did not

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[111] Harrison 2000: 22–3.

[112] Harrison 2025: 93.

[113] Wootton 1988: 701–2.

matter, historically speaking'.[114] Any people who held this view would have been irrelevant ramblers that no one would have seriously listened to, comparable to a drunken beggar in tenth-century Trier shouting about the existence of jet planes or quantum mechanics. As might be guessed, this dismissive approach to analysing a socially marginal phenomenon has caused problems of interpretation in the historiography of atheism and debates about the existence of atheism in ancient Greece, and it will be argued in the final chapter (at ch. 5.3) that this value-laden terminology — 'insignificant', 'inconsequential', 'does not matter' — should be permanently retired in the historiography of atheism. Philosophical atheism either existed in the past, or it did not. To say otherwise reduces intellectual history to a popularity contest, and it assumes a monolithic uniformity of religious belief when a historian could technically be satisfied that they have successfully captured a majority perspective from the past that admits some exceptions. Nor should it be forgotten that Febvre's harshness towards pre-modern atheism was inversely correlated with his excessive admiration for the unbelief of his own times, as he considerably overestimated the intellectual conditions that were necessary for philosophical atheism (as will be argued in ch. 4.4). What Febvre did get right, however, was his diagnosis of atheism as a historical phenomenon that depends on specific conditions to arise, and like Febvre studying unbelief in the sixteenth century, scholars of pre-modern atheism in other periods should consider critically investigating what a pre-modern accusation of atheism signified, and whether the intellectual and social conditions of the time were favourable to atheism. This is Harrison's challenge addressed to scholars of Greek atheism in 'Greek Atheism: A Mirage', and it is the task of this study.

On the other hand, an overly schematic approach in Classical scholarship towards religious belief should not be exclusively blamed on Febvre. Rather, Febvre's recent resurrections in the scholarship should be taken as an indication that there are

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[114] Febvre 1982: 352.

other generalisations in the scholarship of Greek religion which assume uniformity in ancient religious beliefs and attitudes which should be questioned. It seems to me that there is a tendency in quarters of Classical scholarship, the study of Greek religion included, to minimise differences in religious belief in antiquity by forming a consensus of ancient views out of a paucity of evidence, or especially to deny the historicity of a belief reported or endorsed by an ancient author with the argument that this aberrant religious perspective really stands for another, more popular opinion or discourse found elsewhere in ancient sources: what can only be called 'the monolithic fallacy'. In its more populist form this often happens when a scholar who investigates a popular intellectual trend or common religious institution expends most of their exegetical energy on understanding this dominant phenomenon and easily dismisses deviations from these trends or institutions as 'sporadic and insignificant in the overall picture'.[115] Such thinking informs the recent argument that hostile interpretations of Presocratic natural theology and the summary of philosophical atheism in Plato read similarly, and to avoid multiplying entities unnecessarily, one should conclude that only Presocratic natural theology existed alongside its hostile responses.[116] It is surprising to hear that parsimony is a useful tool for capturing a diversity of views or reports of views about religion, when normally the opposite applies in practice. But the monolithic fallacy is not confined to discussions about atheism in antiquity. It informs the view that authors like Herodotus and Thucydides had the same convictions about divine providence or showed the same intellectual attitude towards oracles, resulting less in a faithful

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[115] To quote the verdict of Price 1984: 121 on the dissenters who disbelieved in imperial cult in the Greek world, to be read with Mellor 1986: 297.

[116] Janko 2022: 180: 'David Sedley has argued that, in opposing atheism in *Laws* 10, Plato was targeting an "atheist underground" that existed in Athens, but *this is to posit entities unnecessarily* [italics mine]: materialist Presocratics like Anaxagoras were neither underground nor "atheists" in any modern sense'.

treatment of Thucydides than a curious composite image of two thinkers.[117] As a speculative exercise, it informs the view that the mutilators of the herms or the mock celebrants of the Mysteries in 415 BCE were *either* not particularly superstitious *or* aware they were provoking the gods, when there were dozens of Athenians implicated in these scandals and a number of conjectural reasons for their involvement which did not require a party uniformity in religious belief.[118] It informs the curious view, common in the scholarship on Greek religion but seldom reconciled with the scholarship on Presocratic natural philosophy, that the Greeks were beholden to the view that the gods are unknowable.[119] Although this fallacy cannot be identified *a priori* because there can be uniform beliefs in groups and across authors, we should be on our guard against applying an overly schematic blueprint onto what the Greeks believed about the gods and chipping away at the recalcitrant evidence that remains. The Greeks believed in their gods, but in a slice of Athenian history from the Peloponnesian War up to the decades subsequent to the restoration of the democracy, there were firm exceptions to the rule that can be treated as a serious object of study.

1.5 Conclusion

Febvre's challenge to unbelief in the sixteenth century still resounds throughout the debate about atheism in fifth- and fourth-century Greece, and the current state of scholarship remains unsure on whether such a thing as atheism existed in antiquity. This present study is partly Febvrian, in a sense, as it does not present atheism as something 'as old as the hills' or as 'culturally contingent' but so principally broad that

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[117] This trend of interpretation, common since the 1980s, is criticised in Appendix A.

[118] See below, ch. 5.1.2.

[119] See below, ch. 4.1.

it could be found anywhere.[120] On the other hand, a historicist understanding of atheism should not automatically rule out pre-modern atheism but first of all direct inquiry towards the best evidence for it, and it is not good historical practice to reduce marginal beliefs recorded from the past to different modes of the same dominant discourse. Responding to the best challenge to date against the existence of Greek atheism, Thomas Harrison's 'Greek Atheism: A Mirage', therefore, this study will seek to show, in quasi-Febvrian terms, that some Greeks in the time of Socrates and Plato believed that no gods existed at all. Harrison's contention can be divided into three theses which reflect the priorities of Febvre in *The Problem of Unbelief*: that atheism in Classical antiquity was an empty accusation, that the intellectual conditions of the time were governed by a flexible religious mentality, and that Greek societies were too pervaded by religious life for atheism to gain any meaningful currency. But these same specifications from Febvre can be used to show that atheism did exist in a pre-modern epoch like Classical Greece, turning *The Problem of Unbelief* on its head. In the next chapter it will be argued that some accusations of atheism in this period have a plausible urgency, reading between the lines of Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*, and in the following chapters this will be tested against the intellectual conditions of the late fifth century into the fourth century (Chapters 3–4) and the turbulent social and emotional circumstances of the Peloponnesian War (Chapter 5).

[120] Whitmarsh 2015: 4; Ford 2024: 170, respectively.

2. What the Accusation of Atheism Meant in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries

> At present we are combating a trend. But this trend will die out, superseded by others, and then the way we are arguing against it will no longer be understood; people will not see why all this needed saying.
>
> — LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN[1]

The first problem to consider is what a fifth- or fourth-century Greek would have understood by an accusation of atheism. We have seen how a declaration in Euripides' *Bellerophon* wore the rhetorical shell of atheism to convey an essentially religious experience, that is, righteous indignation towards the gods 'in heaven', but it remains to determine whether all the references to atheism in Classical Greek literature belonged to different modes of religious discourse which neither explored atheism per se, nor alluded to any proponents of the idea. As to the latter, an unqualified Febvrian interpretation would give no credit to pre-modern accusations of atheism of any sort, but as a preliminary caution, this blanket approach has misled past scholars of atheism and is not the only tool of analysis for dealing with pre-modern, negative discourses around atheism, which could manifest as a mix of fact and fiction. It will be argued in this chapter that although there are unreliable reports of atheism in our ancient sources, Plato's testimony was different and seems to react to philosophical atheism as a genuine intellectual current or trend. Without reading Plato in the context of his other dialogues and his historical background, in my opinion, it is easy to miss this, and to fail to recognise what was at stake for Plato and how he was critically engaging with a view

[1] Wittgenstein 1980: 43e.

that existed outside of himself. While literal scholarly interpretations of atheist discourse in premodernity are given to overstating the currency of atheism, it would be a rash generalisation, veering to the point of distortion, to conclude that Greek atheism was the product of an endless discourse that failed to reflect any real changes in the philosophical landscape of late fifth-century Athens.

2.1 'Let Us Be Suspicious of the Words of the Past'

In his revised essay 'Of Atheism' (1625), Francis Bacon pointed out that '[t]he contemplative atheist is rare', 'yet they seem to be more than they are; for that all that impugn a received religion, or superstition, are by the adverse part branded with the name of atheists'. Be that as it may, years before Febvre's *The Problem of Unbelief*, Abel Lefranc, a French historian of literature, was quick to read Rabelais as 'a modern Lucian' because he had a reputation for atheism and freethought among other literary men.[2] In his book which responded to Lefranc, *The Problem of Unbelief*, Febvre denied that any of these imputations had any serious force to them, laying down the law that we should never take past historical statements at face value. As he put it, in the form of a Nietzschean aphorism, 'let us be suspicious of the words of the past'.[3] Calling someone an atheist in the sixteenth century was a 'supreme insult', and when one humanist author accused another of denying God, he was in fact participating in a comical, mischievous game in which no one was really an atheist.[4] Even if Rabelais was accused of atheism, these charges assume a different character when we realise that he

[2] Cf. Lefranc 1953: 201–3.

[3] Febvre 1982: 146.

[4] Febvre 1982: 135–6.

accused contemporaries of the same thing, and on the most specious of grounds: 'it was used in whatever sense one wanted to give it'.[5]

This suspicion about such discourses has been directed by Classical antiquity by Harrison, who concludes that none of the accusations of atheism in this period can be read as reliable testimonies for atheism.[6] Conversely, it will be the task for this chapter to pinpoint where this general scepticism gets things right, and suggest where it goes against the grain of the ancient evidence with the most detailed discussion on atheism in Classical antiquity, Plato, whose *Republic* and *Laws* are our main site for quarrying evidence about this worldview. Although this testimony might have sounded more credible were it drip-fed across half a dozen sources rather than two, numbers are not everything when the limited material available is rich in information.

2.1.1 Catalogues of Atheists, the Genealogy of Ἄθεος

Seemingly straightforward accusations of atheism against fifth-century intellectuals can be found in catalogues of atheists recorded in post-Classical philosophical texts. In line with Aristotle's philosophical method of surveying earlier opinions on a subject, not unlike our 'literature review' in modern scholarship, Greek and Latin authors who wrote about theology were able to consult earlier doxographic lists which catalogued different opinions about the divine, and the names on these lists changed according to context and the period when the author was writing. Updated versions of the atheist catalogue can be found in Cicero's *De natura deorum* (45 BCE) and the Imperial period

[5] Febvre 1982: 132.

[6] Harrison 2025: 95–103.

authors Aëtius and Sextus Empiricus,[7] but the earliest surviving version comes from Epicurus, who was quoted by the Epicurean contemporary of Cicero, Philodemus. In Book 12 of *On Nature* (*c.* 300 BCE), Epicurus blamed Prodicus, Diagoras and Critias for 'eliminating the gods from the things which exist' and abused them for their 'utter madness', likening them to raving bacchants.[8] The Epicureans were notorious for being colourful polemicists, and it is not hard to find old insults of rival Hellenistic philosophers as dreamers or madmen, but this was harsh even for them. It is generally thought that this accusation of πᾶσα μανία (col. 19.1 Obbink) implies that Epicurus saw atheists as mentally deficient for failing to recognise the 'manifest' (ἐναργής) and universal mental impression that the gods exist, deviating from the universal consensus of religious belief; this was similar to Plato, who in his *Laws* called atheism a 'disease' which was only found among young men blinded by error.[9] Like Plato, Epicurus had a philosophical response to atheism in mind, as his Book 12 included an anthropological discussion about how 'the first human beings' (οἱ πρῶτοι ἄνθρωποι) first encountered the 'notion' (νόημα) of the gods and their immortal, incorruptible nature.[10] Given that two ancient authors on the list explored this historical problem

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[7] Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.2, 63, 117, 3.89 (= Diag. testt. 40–2, 36 Winiarczyk); Aët. *Plac.* 1.7.1 (= Diag. test. 47 Winiarczyk); Sext. Emp. *Pyr. hyp.* 3.218 (= Diag. test. 56 Winiarczyk), *Math.* 9.50–3 (= Diag. test. 57 Winiarczyk, Prodic. test. 74 Mayhew).

[8] Phld. *Piet.*, *P.Herc.* 1077, cols. 18.30–19.15 Obbink (= Epicur. fr. 27 [2] Arrighetti, Prodic. test. 70 Mayhew; cf. Diag. test. 39 Winiarczyk); τοὐ̣[ς θεούς] (col. 19.3) is quoted here following Vassallo 2018a: 156 n. 5.

[9] Epicur. *Ep. Men.* 123.7–8 Arrighetti; cf. Obbink 1996: 356–7 and Akhonen 2014: 196–7; for prior associations of unbelief and madness (either unbelief restricted to the state gods or expanded to gods generically) see Ar. *Nub.* 1476–7 (μαίνεσθαι), Pl. *Leg.* 10.888b7–8 (νόσος); on *Laws* see the discussion below, ch. 2.2.

[10] Phld. *Piet.*, *P.Herc.* 1077 col. 8.23–9 Obbink (<Epicur. fr. 27 [1] Arrighetti).

(Prodicus and Critias), it is likely Epicurus challenged their views on the origins of religion.[11]

This raises the question of whether Epicurus was the inventor of the *index atheorum*, and the recent consensus on this issue inclines towards a negative. Since it is manifestly unlikely that his books were the fount of new doxographic material, Epicurus' *On Nature* likely relied on the earlier industry of Aristotle's student Theophrastus, and scholars now credit him as the probable inventor.[12] This would fix the first atheist list somewhere in the late fourth century in Athens, and for some scholars this might lend it more credibility as a source: it stands to reason that Theophrastus would have had local knowledge about notorious figures like Diagoras, as well as a library at his disposal for the offending writings of Prodicus and Critias. On closer examination of each of these figures, however, this optimism is arguably misplaced, as each 'atheist' under attack has been misrepresented in a different way which can be reasonably conjectured. Interrogating the sources about Prodicus suggests that he probably did not explicitly cast out the gods; Diagoras was no doubt guilty of mocking the Eleusinian Mysteries, but his reputation for philosophical atheism was likely an extrapolation from his actions, and perhaps some heterodox but non-atheistic views echoed in Greek comedy; and Critias loses his credentials for atheism when we realise that he was only associated with philosophical atheism for writing a character in a drama who espoused an atheistic theory about the origins of

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[11] Epicurus suggested this was accomplished by their tampering with divine names, which implies that he viewed etymology as a conceit which could be used to reject the gods as a human creation: Phld. *Piet.*, *P.Herc.* 1077 col. 19.15–23 Obbink (≠ Arrighetti); cf. Obbink 1996: 306.

[12] Mansfeld 1993: 187–8; Sedley 1998: 166–85, Sedley 2013: 329–30.

religion (which was surely critiqued in Epicurus).[13] Such charges of atheism, in sum, have no more authority than those directed against Hobbes or Spinoza by rival religious authors, and they are primarily of interest nowadays for what they convey to us about atheism as a discourse. Otherwise, the earliest ancient catalogue of atheists was rooted in slander and polemic, and furnishes an example of one of the downsides of literacy in the ancient world where texts could take on a simple 'unchallengeability', as G. E. R. Lloyd put it.[14] A great many ancient readers would have absorbed these catalogues without questioning them, and the sheer number of times these lists were quoted does not make them any more believable as a testimony for atheism.

The weaponisation of atheism in philosophical texts points to a widespread bias against unbelief that periodically flared up in the late fifth and earlier fourth centuries, and which has been recently characterised as a 'moral panic'.[15] In part this was a reaffirmation of the traditional concern to uphold the respect for the gods, which was but one of the core expectations for living a moral life in a Greek civic setting; as Isocrates once famously advised a young man in a paraenesis, 'fear the gods, honour your parents, feel shame before your friends, and obey the laws' (τοὺς μὲν θεοὺς φοβοῦ, τοὺς δὲ γονεῖς τίμα, τοὺς δὲ φίλους αἰσχύνου, τοῖς δὲ νόμοις πείθου).[16] Although the weighting of these considerations would have differed according to the individual — not many Greeks would have followed the disinterested zeal of Euthyphro in Plato, for example, when he resolved that piety towards the gods was more important than respecting his father — the fear of the gods and fear of the laws were seen as moral

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[13] On the ancient charges of atheism against Prodicus and Critias, see ch. 3.3.2; against Diagoras of Melos, see ch. 5.1.2.

[14] Lloyd 2014: 125.

[15] Pinel Martínez 2022: 145–51; Billings (forthcoming).

[16] Isoc. 1.16; for similar moral advice that linked conventional respect for the gods with filial piety and justice, see Aesch. *Supp.* 704–9; cf. *Eum.* 269–72, 538–48.

inhibitors against breaking oaths and other crimes with religious sanctions attached. In a society in which lawfulness was so often linked with conventional piety there was little room in antiquity for the wishful thinking of John Lennon for a world with 'no religion, too', so that even a harsh critic of oracles like Thucydides saw a city state that failed to sacrifice to the gods as less a liberated utopia than a body politic which was wracked by civil war or disease.[17] For this reason, by the late fifth century the act of denying the existence of the gods or disbelieving in their power over human affairs was implicated in Greek moral discourse with immoral attitudes and behaviours such as sacrilege, hedonism, disrespect towards familial bonds and the sanctity of life, and oath-breaking, making it a handy slur to hurl at enemies rather than an objective philosophical label for self-identification.[18] This is equally evidenced by the Greek terms ἀσεβής and ἄθεος, 'impious' and 'godless', which were items in the popular Greek lexicon for describing actions, beliefs and speech which were thought to transgress conventional piety. One need only focus on the word for 'atheist', ἄθεος, which had three meanings by the Classical period, and each of them negative. Most surviving uses of the term describe some form of immorality on a religious plane, referring to wrongdoers who violated divine laws, or their irreligious actions: 'godless', 'impious', and the privative alpha could also express more literally 'without god', suggesting that a person was 'godforsaken'. By the late fifth century, however, ἄθεος could take on a third, philosophical colouring, referring to persons who denied the existence of the gods.[19]

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[17] For Thucydides and his repeated association of irreligious behaviour with social 'stasis', see Appendix A, below; cf. Ford 2024: 10–1.

[18] On the popular association between immorality and impious views, including 'atheism', see Ford 2024: 49–63.

[19] For lexica on ἄθεος see LSJ, Passow-Crönert, Bailly, *DGE* (the best entry to date) and *CGL* s.vv. ἄθεος; for discussions see Tate 1936: 5; Latte 1968: 10; Fahr 1969: 15–7; Renehan 1975: 15–6; Winiarczyk 1990: 4–5 (cf. Winiarczyk 2016: 61–2); Whitmarsh

The *locus classicus* for this meaning is found in Plato's *Apology*, which is often considered by scholars as the first obvious example of the usage:[20]

> Well then; by the same gods, Meletus, who you claim are the point at issue, please speak more clearly now for me and the jury here. As I cannot tell whether you are saying that I teach people to recognise that some gods exist (εἶναί τινας θεούς) — and in that case I recognise there are gods and I am not fully godless (οὐκ εἰμὶ τὸ παράπαν ἄθεος), and do not break the law in this respect — albeit not the same ones that the state recognises, but other ones, and this is what you charge against me, that they are different; or do you claim that I do not accept the existence of any gods whatsoever and teach this view to others (ἢ παντάπασί με φὴς οὔτε αὐτὸν νομίζειν θεοὺς τούς τε ἄλλους ταῦτα διδάσκειν)?
>
> —That is what I say; that you do not recognise any gods at all (ὡς τὸ παράπαν οὐ νομίζεις θεούς).[21]

As the response of Meletus confirms, 'completely godless' (τὸ παράπαν ἄθεος) here means someone who 'does not believe in gods at all' (τὸ παράπαν οὐ νομίζειν θεούς).[22] This pointed adverbial qualification with ἄθεος is not found in other authors from Plato's time, but because Socrates was grilling Meletus on the particulars of the charges in a close cross-examination before the jury, a more precise philosophical colouring to

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2020: 293–6, 306–7; Pinel Martínez 2021; Henry 2026; Bremmer (unpublished manuscript): 7–8.

[20] See in particular Fahr 1969: 133–9; Winiarczyk 1990: 4–5 (cf. Winiarczyk 2016: 62).

[21] Pl. *Ap.* 26c1–7.

[22] Cf. Fahr 1969: 138.

this use is to be expected.[23] The context of the passage seems to imply Socrates was originally called ἄθεος at his trial, fashioning him as a civic enemy.

Although Plato's *Apology* is the oldest obvious example for ἄθεος as 'atheist', the philosophical meaning of ἄθεος did not come out of a vacuum. In the mid-fifth century, the term could already be used in a legal accusation to promote a biased religious point of view, paving the way for the accusers of Socrates at the turn of the century. The chorus of the Furies in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* (458 BCE), for example, condemned Orestes as a 'godless man' (ἄθεος ἀνήρ) and accused him of flouting his unconditional obligations to his parents, which they tried to prosecute with considerably less leniency than the upstart Olympian pantheon.[24] In this quasi-legal context, murdering a parent was 'godless' as it implied an absence of fear and respect towards the gods and their divine laws.[25] However, when atheism became topical in Athens while they traded blows with Sparta in the late fifth century, the Athenian discourse around impiety (ἀσέβεια) could also include accusations of atheism, which was absorbed into the semantic field of ἄθεος as a term of blame and transgression. In turn ἄθεος could be used as a philosophical pejorative associated with fifth-century intellectuals such as Socrates and Euripides,[26] and the latter was accused of promoting

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[23] On Socrates' elenctic method against Meletus, see McPherran 1996: 119–26.

[24] Aesch. *Eum.* 150–2: νέος δὲ γραίας δαίμονας καθιππάσω, | τὸν ἱκέταν σέβων, ἄθεον ἄνδρα καὶ | τοκεῦσιν πικρόν, 'you are a young [god, i.e. Apollo] who has trampled over the divinities of old, paying respect to a godless man [i.e. Orestes] and a bane to his parents'; cf. Aesch. *Eum.* 539–41 (a generalisation which refers to Orestes by metonymy).

[25] Thus, for Latte 1968: 10, ἄθεος described someone 'der sich um die Götter nicht kümmert'.

[26] It is also conceivable that ἄθεος was used against Anaxagoras and Diagoras in the fifth century, but these labels might have came later in the ancient doxographic

atheism and having 'godless habits' (ἀθέων τε τρόπων) by the female participants of the Thesmophoria festival in Aristophanes.[27] Given the negative force of ἄθεος against non-conformist thinkers like Euripides and Socrates, Tim Whitmarsh has occasionally likened ἄθεος to modern slurs,[28] and the categorisation could be narrowed down further to religious slurs like 'heretic', 'infidel', 'heathen' or '*kafir*'.[29] Just like these terms, ἄθεος could be used in broadly to stigmatise any target with the blemish of impiety. This notwithstanding, even the best lexica for ἄθεος in Classical Greek (LSJ, *DGE*) have managed to overlook another, early fourth-century philosophical use of ἄθεος associated with Socrates which was vague and not restricted to denying the existence of the gods. This is found in *Alcibiades* by Aeschines the Socratic, a conversational piece likely written in the 380s in which Socrates anticipated a charge of impiety for taking the view that human individuals wield most of the power to shape their own destinies. Conversing with the young Alcibiades, who believed that he could coast on his natural talents and good fortune to work at the same high level of the great statesmen of Athens before him, Socrates denied that the actions of a great man like

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tradition: see Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 2.14.2–3 (= DK 59 A113) and Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.63 (= Diag. test. 41 Winiarczyk); cf. Winiarczyk 1984: 159–60; 164–6.

[27] See Whitmarsh 2020: 295–6 on Ar. *Thesm.* 670–2: '… an example of insolence, unjust deeds and godless ways: and he will claim that the gods obviously exist' (παράδειγμ' ὕβρεως | ἀδίκων τ' ἔργων ἀθέων τε τρόπων· | φήσει δ' εἶναί τε θεοὺς φανερῶς); cf. Ar. *Thesm.* 450–1 (where Euripides is accused of atheism by a widowed merchant who sells garlands in the Agora). For another, early example of ἄθεος as a philosophical pejorative (if more vague) see [Lys.] 6.32; cf. Fahr 1969: 107 and Pinel Martínez 2021: 104–5.

[28] E.g., Whitmarsh 2015: 124.

[29] For religious slurs in Medieval Europe see Wagner 2024.

Themistocles, or his downfall, could be straightforwardly credited to fortune or the gods:

> And do not accuse (καταγνῷς) me, Alcibiades, of being eccentric and godless towards fortune and divine affairs (πρὸς τὰς τύχας καὶ τὰ θεῖα πράγματα ἀλλοκότως καὶ ἀθέως ἔχοντος) if I attribute knowledge to [Themistocles] about everything which he did and I believe that fortune (τύχην) was not remotely the cause for his actions, as I would be in a better position to prove (ἀποδεῖξαι) that those who believe the opposite to me are the godless ones rather than myself (τοὺς τἀναντία ἐμοῖ δοξάζοντας ἀθέως ἔχοντας ἢ 'κεῖνοι ἐμέ)![30]

Aeschines also attended the trial of Socrates, and this reasonably suggests that Socrates was given another posthumous opportunity to deny that he was ἄθεος in Socratic literature.[31] Thus, as did Socrates in Plato's *Apology*, Aeschines' literary puppet of Socrates denied that he was 'godless', although instead of εἶναι ἄθεος he used a phrase with a reasonably similar meaning, ἀθέως ἔχειν.[32] On the other hand, while Socrates affirmed his innocence when he argued that it would be more 'godless' to believe that good and bad people could be allocated the same fate from the gods (παρὰ τῶν θεῶν), Aeschines used the term in a more impressionistic sense to Plato, so that his ἀθέως ἔχειν did not describe the denial of the existence of the gods but holding impious

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[30] Aeschin. Socr. *Alc.* fr. 8 Dittmar (= *SSR* VI-A 50) ll. 53–9.

[31] Pl. *Ap.* 33e1–2: ἔπειτα Λυσανίας ὁ Σφήττιος, Αἰσχίνου τοῦδε πατήρ; cf. Henry 2026 and Bremmer (unpublished manuscript), 7–8.

[32] I.e., ἀθέως is an adverb of quality with ἔχειν, here to express a disposition (= 'to be godless (in attitude/disposition)'): see Smyth §1438; cf. Isoc. *Paneg.* 98: οὐδεὶς δὲ πρὸς ἡμᾶς οὕτως ἔχει δυσμενῶς, 'no one holds such a grudge towards us'.

beliefs.[33] According to this more diffuse understanding of intellectual impiety, the view that either the gods intervened too little in human affairs or intervened too much could be 'godless', and whichever understanding was more ἀθεώτερος would have depended upon who you asked. Certainly Lucien Febvre would have also appreciated that Aeschines' Socrates made a similar, recriminating chess move to Rabelais and his literary rivals when he anticipated the charge of having an impious view, but retorted that 'those who believe the opposite to me are the godless ones rather than myself' (τοὺς τἀναντία ἐμοῖ δοξάζοντας ἀθέως ἔχοντας ἢ 'κεῖνοι ἐμέ).[34] *Tu quoque*, in other words; in the Classical period, the charge of atheism or 'godlessness' was a philosophical hot potato, which has vanishingly little to do with modern unbelief.

2.1.2 Μετεωρολογία, Kainotheism, Agnosticism = Impiety

It did not help that natural philosophers were also associated with impiety in the popular imagination of the fifth century, which could multiply the odds that ancient accusations of atheism against natural philosophers and their readers are a misleading testimony.[35] In Classical parlance, a 'meteorologist' or μετεωρολόγος was an expert who discoursed about 'the things on high', τὰ μετέωρα, a topic of investigation which included not merely astronomy but also explanations for weather phenomena. Among conservative circles in Athens the scientific explanations of the μετεωρολόγοι could be offensive to traditional religious sensibilities, as there was a perception that the

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[33] Aeschin. Socr. *Alc.* fr. 8 Dittmar (= *SSR* VI-A 50) ll. 59–62.

[34] Aeschin. Socr. *Alc.* fr. 8 Dittmar (= *SSR* VI-A 50) ll. 53–9.

[35] On the popular fifth-century link between meteorology and ἀσέβεια see Capelle 1912: 437–9, Capelle 1935: cols. 317–9; Derenne 1930: 14–6, 24; Parker 1996: 209; Winiarczyk 1990: 13 (cf. Winiarczyk 2016: 8–9); Harrison 2025: 100–1.

streamlined theories of these experts divested the traditional gods of their existence and power. This perception was not so much invented as it was reinforced (and travestied) by Aristophanes' *Clouds*, which featured the zealous proselytiser of Ionian thought Socrates presenting multiple proofs for the non-existence of Zeus in the form of overriding natural explanations for rain, thunder and the thunderbolt.[36] But the μετεωρολόγοι were particularly resented for replacing the visible gods such as Helios with lifeless, unintelligent matter, which brought a storm of controversy on Anaxagoras, and if Plato was not mistaken, these ideas were falsely imputed to Socrates in his trial. In the *Apology* Socrates told the Athenian jury that he had been slandered as a μετεωρολόγος for many years, which was a damaging accusation as it was often assumed that these investigators 'did not recognise gods' (οὐδὲ θεοὺς νομίζειν).[37] At least a few years before the trial of Socrates, a similar sentiment to Socrates' elaboration of Meletus' view was expressed by a chorus in an unknown Euripidean drama who chided the μετεωρολόγοι as foolish unbelievers who failed to acknowledge that the cosmic order was divine in their futile quest to bypass the limits of human understanding: 'who, looking upon these things [sc. the heavens] can fail to apprehend god, having thrown into oblivion the unrighteous delusions of scientists who investigate the skies (μετεωρολόγων)? Their tongues go on at random about unseen matters, with no share at all in sense (περὶ τῶν ἀφανῶν | οὐδὲν γνώμης μετέχουσα)'.[38]

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[36] Ar. *Nub.* 365–411.

[37] Pl. *Ap.* 18b1–c3; cf. Pl. *Leg.* 12.966d6–967a5; Plut. *Nic.* 23.2–3 (= DK 59 A18).

[38] Eur. *TrGF* fr. 913 K; without broaching the topic of theology, Hippoc. *VM* 1.1 also dismissed meteorology (περὶ τῶν μετεώρων) as a futile field of enquiry concerned with imperceptible and untestable material (τὰ ἀφανέα τε καὶ ἀπορεόμενα), albeit from the perspective of a Greek physician who objected to importing fundamental principles of natural philosophy into medicine.

As Plato implied, these suspicions against the μετεωρολόγοι had some legal sanction behind them. This had its origins in the popular resentment towards the scientific thought introduced to Athens by Anaxagoras (*c.* 500–428 BCE), who had moved from Asia Minor to Pericles' city at a disputed date in the fifth century. Without necessarily seeking trouble, Anaxagoras courted controversy in Athens when he proposed that the sun was a 'molten stone' or 'stone' (μύδρος, λίθος) and the moon was made of earth (γῆ), which communicated to the Athenians that Anaxagoras rejected the existence of the visible gods Helios and Selene.[39] Arguably, weighing up the testimonia about his legal troubles in Athens presents the most intricate thicket of source problems in the entire study of ancient Greek atheism, which can only be summed up briefly here. There was a tradition known already to the historian Ephorus (*c.* 405–330 BCE) that Anaxagoras was accused of ἀσέβεια and put on trial in Athens, although in fuller, Hellenistic-era descriptions of this trial there are a morass of contradictory claims.[40] It seems obvious that Anaxagoras was suspected of impiety by the Athenians for his meteorological views, but the historicity of his trial was questioned by an optimistic twentieth-century school of thought which concluded that intellectual freedom in Classical Athens was relatively lenient, so that thinkers like Anaxagoras only faced popular 'resentment' instead of imprisonment or exile at the

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[39] Pl. *Ap.* 26d4–e2 (= DK 59 A35); cf. Diog. Laert. 2.8 (<DK 80 A1).

[40] Sotion reported that Anaxagoras was accused of ἀσέβεια by Cleon for teaching that the sun was a hot stone, and after Pericles represented him in court Anaxagoras was fined five talents and exiled; Satyrus, however, held that Anaxagoras was accused by Thucydides (son of Melesias) of ἀσέβεια but also Medism, and subsequently Anaxagoras fled from Athens and was sentenced to death *in absentia*; see Diog. Laert. 2.12 (<DK 59 A1; Sotion fr. 3 Wehrli; Satyrus fr. 16 Schorn); further unsupported details (namely, the otherwise unattested edict of Diopeithes) can be found in Plut. *Vit. Per.* 32.1–3, 5–6 (= DK 59 A17 [1]); cf. Plut. *Vit. Nic.* 23.4 (<DK 59 A18).

hands of a popular jury.[41] On the other hand, a number of contradictory details surrounding an event need not mean it never happened, and there is much to be said for the trial of Anaxagoras as a historical reality which has been poorly recorded. There is an arguable reference to it in *Apology* when Meletus called Socrates an 'atheist' because he said that the sun is a stone (λίθος) and the moon is earth (γῆ), while Socrates dismissed this as a misattribution and asked Meletus if he had 'accused' (κατηγορεῖν) Anaxagoras of impiety instead.[42] This can be taken to suggest that the legal process against not acknowledging the state gods was an innovation in Athenian ἀσέβεια law in response to scientists like Anaxagoras before the charge ever reached Socrates,[43] and one can tentatively conclude that 'atheism' towards the state gods, meteorology and ἀσέβεια law were likely associated in Athenian popular thought before the outbreak of the Archidamian War. Beyond this territory, however, lies a dangerous sea of conjecture. Like the Galileo affair, the controversy over Anaxagoras can be presented in some scholarship as a dramatic science-versus-religion narrative, and the romantic view that Anaxagoras was scapegoated during the plague of Athens in 430 BCE is a modern construction which was not documented by any known ancient historian.[44] On the other hand, Anaxagoras was certainly the first impious μετεωρολόγος in Athenian

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[41] Dover 1975 and Raaflaub 2000; cf. Wallace 1994 and Filonik 2013.

[42] Pl. *Ap.* 26d4–e2 (= DK 59 A35); cf. Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 32–3.

[43] On the nature of Athenian impiety law (esp. its discretionary vagueness) see Thalheim 1896: col. 1529; Lipsius 1908: 360; MacDowell 1986: 199–200; Cohen 1991: 207–8; Pecorella Longo 2011: 47–8; Bowden 2015: 335; for a dissenting view that ἀσέβεια law was systematic and clear, see Rudhardt 1960. For the likely conjecture that unbelief towards the state gods was a fifth-century addition to Athenian ἀσέβεια law, see Derenne 1930: 22–3 (*contra* Lipsius 1908: 360); MacDowell 1986: 200; Pecorella Longo 2011: 50 (*contra* Cohen 1991: 211).

[44] This modern styling of the Anaxagoras affair is critiqued in Appendix B.

public discourse, and without intending it, his challenging theories compelled the Athenians to think about impiety through a new scientific lens.

These suspicions are in a sense misleading because these scientific thinkers were theologians who not only included gods in their intellectual systems but also showed a debt to their wider religious context. The unrivalled power of Zeus, who could shake Mount Olympus by nodding his head (Hom. *Il.* 1.528–30), was a commonplace in Greek religion that got a fresh coat of paint in the depersonalised theologies of Xenophanes and Anaxagoras, who asserted in different ways that there was a nameless primary god who willed change in the cosmic order as a supreme, self-governing mind. These undeniable continuities vouch for the suggestion of Julia Kindt that Presocratic theologies were a form of personal religion in the Greek world, occupying a distinctive area between traditional religion and an individual worldview.[45] Anaxagoras, of course, sold to his readers as a conclusive finding that god was an immortal Mind (νοῦς) who generated movement outside the material universe, but in his wake there was a trend among natural philosophers to equate divinity with fine elemental substances like air and aether inside the world. This fad was most famously burlesqued in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, in which the comic intellectual Socrates and his school of researchers in the Thinking Chamber only recognised airy gods such as Clouds, Air, Aether, Chaos and Respiration.[46] Although Anaxagoras and Diogenes of Apollonia did not attribute personal qualities to their gods like those of the traditional Greek pantheon, their gods

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[45] Kindt 2015: 39–41; cf. Allan and Swift 2024: 26–7.

[46] Clouds, Air and Aether: Ar. *Nub.* 263–6; Chaos and Tongue (an exception to the rule, personifying rhetorical ability): *Nub.* 422–3; Aspiration: *Nub.* 627. To comically oversell the subversiveness of these views, Socrates' religion assumed a kind of Second Temple exclusivism where only his aerial divinities were real at the expense of the traditional gods: *Nub.* 365: αὗται γάρ τοι μόναι εἰσὶ θεαί, τἄλλα δὲ πάντ' ἐστὶ φλύαρος.

nonetheless had attributes like immortality, supreme intelligence and unrivalled power, which has prompted the suggestion that the conservative backlash against Anaxagoras or the aerial theologians was grounded in crude misinterpretation. This was, in the view of Wilhelm Capelle, 'die Verständnislosigkeit des Philisters',[47] and in a similar vein Marek Winiarczyk asserted that associating the μετεωρολόγοι with impiety was a mistake made by 'simple and uneducated people'.[48] This rather harsh assessment likely takes its cue from the violent ending of the *Clouds* when the comic fool Strepsiades intended to harm Socrates for his impiety and blamed him for leading him down a false path: 'I cast out the gods because of Socrates' (ἐξέβαλλον τοὺς θεοὺς διὰ Σωκράτη, *Nub.* 1477). On the whole, however, the popular understanding of natural philosophers as 'atheists' was not the product of intellectual failure so much as a different cultural perspective, and from an Archimedean standpoint claims such as 'Anaxagoras was pious' or 'Anaxagoras was ἄθεος' cannot be arbitrated by a modern scholar as true or false when these views depend upon competing value-laden discourses in antiquity that can only be articulated rather than accepted or refuted. Only within an ancient discourse could one determine whether a Greek philosopher was fundamentally continuous or discontinuous from ancient thought in this sense, assessing not merely their thought but also their conduct. This is evident from the comic stereotype of Euripides in Aristophanes, who was drawn to the fad that the gods were not personal powers but elements or concepts. There was a running joke in the *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs* that Euripides was simply unable to swear an oath to the traditional gods but only his 'personal gods' (ἰδιῶται θεοί) drawn from natural philosophy and rhetoric,

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[47] Capelle 1912: 433, relying on Plut. *Nic.* 23.2–3 (= DK 59 A18); cf. Capelle 1935: col. 318.

[48] Winiarczyk 2016: 8: 'for simple and uneducated people such an interpretation of natural occurrences seemed impious, as did indeed philosophical studies of nature in general'; cf. Winiarczyk 2016: 124.

such as Aether, Tongue, and Nostrils,[49] but in the *Thesmophoriazusae* this was criticised by his in-law Mnesilochus, who questioned the legitimacy of Euripides' gods:

> **EURIPIDES**
>
> In that case, I swear by Aether, home of Zeus.
>
> **EURIPIDES' IN-LAW**
>
> Why that, rather than Hippocrates' apartment block?[50]

For our purposes, it is telling that Mnesilochus was no comic fool like Strepsiades, and for modern readers raised on the conceptual baggage of monotheistic religions there is still something to recognise in Mnesilochus' joke: whatever god is, god is not an element revolving in the sky, and if a sophistic intellectual wanted to invoke air or aether as a 'residence of Zeus', they might just as well swear by an apartment block.[51] Although Greek 'personal religion' should not generally be considered as the polar opposite to

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[49] Ar. *Ran.* 892: ἴθι δὴ προσεύχου τοῖσιν ἰδιώταις θεοῖς. For Euripides' first oath to Aether see Ar. *Thesm.* 13–8, esp. 272: ὄμνυμι τοίνυν αἰθέρ', οἴκησιν Διός, and for his oath to Aether, Tongue and Nostrils see *Ran.* 892–4; for Euripides' public reputation as an aether-worshipper see Egli 2003: 80–1.

[50] Ar. *Thesm.* 271–2.

[51] Cf. Sommerstein 1994 on Ar. *Thesm.* 273: 'Inlaw, unlike Euripides, does not regard *Aither* as a god, and to him an oath by "the dwelling place of Zeus" is as meaningless as would be an oath by some earthly dwelling'.

official *polis* religion,[52] the theologies of fifth-century scientists could be condemned as unlicensed and illegitimate from one Greek point of view.

While it is true that Greek polytheism was an 'open system' which could admit new gods into the pantheon of a city state,[53] the hostile fifth-century reception of μετεωρολογία shows that this tolerance had its limits, and the elemental theologies of the natural philosophers could be seen as discontinuous with the gods of civic religion and therefore threatening and alien. As a rule legitimate new gods shared the personal and anthropomorphic qualities of the existing Greek pantheon, and in Athens official religious innovations were couched in the language of tradition and required a stamp of approval from the popular assembly.[54] This goes some way to show why, from a certain conservative standpoint, the alleged new gods of the μετεωρολόγοι could not be assimilated with the civic gods nor viewed as respectable innovations. After all, how could an element be accepted within the social order of the *polis* as a benefactor, and a recipient of sacrifices and prayer? How could it supervise an oath, or punish perjurers? If this was not blatant philosophical atheism, the recognition of unlicensed new gods could be seen as a non-theology which undercut ordinary civic norms, which clues us into how Meletus could so easily accuse Socrates of believing in new gods and no gods

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[52] As noted by Kindt 2015: 40–4, who cautions against playing 'personal religion' and official civic religion against each other as antagonists in Greek religion.

[53] Burkert 2011: 271: 'Polytheismus ist ein offenes System'; this was no less true for Athens, as a city renowned for accommodating foreign new gods: Strab. 10.3.18.

[54] On introducing new gods in Athens see Versnel 1990: 102–31; Garland 1992; Anderson 2015; the paradox that new gods were observed in 'hereditary custom' (πατρίους παραδοχάς) was already marked by Teiresias (about the new god in Thebes, Dionysus) at Eur. *Bacch.* 201.

in the *Apology*: the first view could be seen to implicitly slide into the other.[55] Accordingly, when Socrates was charged with introducing 'different new divinities' (ἕτερα καινὰ δαιμόνια) in 399 BCE,[56] it is telling that his accusers did not condescend to call these beings gods (θεοί). The image of the new 'gods' in the *Clouds* was surely conjured up by these ambiguous, insinuating words, and the charge may have been lodged against other intellectuals before Socrates.[57] That this was also imagined as a practical offence and not restricted to belief is illustrated by Xenophon's *Apology*, in which Socrates denied he had ever sacrificed to (or sworn by) new divinities (καινοὶ δαίμονες) at the expense of normal civic gods like Zeus and Hera.[58] On the other hand, if Socrates' more likely historical religious views are taken into account — above all, his Xenophanean moralism and his conviction that the gods could speak to him through his δαιμόνιον — it is doubtful these views would have always been seen in the eyes of an Athenian as irreconcilable with the gods of the state; otherwise, we would have a

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[55] Parker 1996: 203: '"kainotheism" is not an alternative to atheism but the form it takes'; cf. Harrison 2025: 100.

[56] Diog. Laert. 2.40 (<Favorinus fr. 34 Barigazzi, *SSR* I-D 1) reports the charges recorded on a stele in the Athenian marketplace: τάδε ἐγράψατο καὶ ἀντωμόσατο Μέλητος Μελήτου Πιτθεὺς Σωκράτει Σωφρονίσκου Ἀλωπεκῆθεν· ἀδικεῖ Σωκράτης, οὓς μὲν ἡ πόλις νομίζει θεοὺς οὐ νομίζων, ἕτερα δὲ καινὰ δαιμόνια εἰσηγούμενος· ἀδικεῖ δὲ καὶ τοὺς νέους διαφθείρων. τίμημα θάνατος. The erroneous quotation of this γραφή in Giordano-Zecharya 2007: 327 and Versnel 2011: 554, which misplaced τοὺς θεούς as a personal accusative to ἀδικεῖ, should be ignored. For the similar charges quoted in the Socratic authors, see Pl. *Ap.* 24b8–c1; Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.1, *Ap.* 10–1.

[57] Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 34–6; but this does not exclude the likelihood that Socrates was targeted for his personal convictions about his δαιμόνιον: cf. Pl. *Ap.* 31c7–d5.

[58] Xen. *Ap.* 24–5.

hard time explaining why he had a near-split vote during his trial. Given that thinkers like Socrates held a variety of views that were both continuous and at variance with traditional Greek beliefs, and there was no credal formality to these beliefs, it would be out of the question to conclude that Socrates was genuinely guilty or not guilty of impiety in Athenian law. Impiety law was too subjective, and Greek personal religion too varied, to allow for any univocal second-order answer on this matter. His conviction, on this score, was 'not even wrong'.[59]

So too could other forms of questioning the existence of the gods be fluidly equated with ἀσέβεια and atheism, and a recurring victim of this associative religious thinking was the agnosticism of Protagoras. According to an ancient biographical tradition, Protagoras read out a book on the gods in Athens and made an announcement: 'on the gods, I am unable to know whether they exist, or whether they do not' (περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι οὔθ' ὡς εἰσίν, οὔθ' ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν).[60] This was thought to have caused a scandal throughout Athens, and Protagoras was expelled from the city on the charge of impiety, and his books were seized from Athenian citizens and hurled into a bonfire that blazed in the Agora.[61] In a flawed tradition embraced by a rigid establishment figure in Athens, the Atthidographer and seer Philochorus (*c.* 340–260 BCE), Protagoras was said to have fled from Athens but perished in a shipwreck, which was a fate commonly expected for polluted and impious men like perjurers and

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[59] *Pace* Burnyeat 1997, who famously argued that Socrates was technically guilty of the charges of impiety in an Athenian court of law; my point of view on this issue most closely mirrors that of Ober 2011: 141.

[60] Diog. Laert. 9.51 and Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 14.3.7 (<DK 80 B4); some sources held that Protagoras read out his book in the Lyceum or the house of Euripides: Diog. Laert. 9.54 (<DK 80 A1).

[61] See Diog. Laert. 9.52 (<DK 80 A1), Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.63 (= DK 80 A23 [2]), Philostr. *V S* 1.10 (<DK 80 A2, Timon fr. 5 di Marco).

murderers.[62] While this is not a reliable testimony, it doubtless reflects genuine local resentment towards Protagoras which must trace back to fifth-century attitudes; one need only remember that Protagoras was unfavourably linked with impious meteorology in a 421 BCE comedy by Eupolis.[63] Some later philosophical tradition also tendentiously read him as an atheist, such as the Epicureans, although this suspicious reading of his thought was not a universal one in antiquity.[64]

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[62] Diog. Laert. 9.55 (<DK 80 A1, Philoch. *FGrH* 328 fr. 217); cf. Philostr. *V S* 1.10.3 (<DK 80 A2) and Sext. Emp. *Math.* 9.56 (<DK 80 A12; Timon fr. 5 di Marco); Diogenes Laertius also reported a tradition according to which Protagoras died of old age on this voyage; on the conservative bias in Philochorus' *Atthis* see the arguments of Müller 1967: 156–9, modified in Corradi 2018: 83–5; on shipwrecks and divine punishment see e.g. Aesch. *Sept.* 602–4; cf. Parker 1983: 9.

[63] Eupolis, *Kolakes* fr. 157 KA (<DK 80 A 1, 11); in this fragment Protagoras was described as a 'sinner who babbles about heavenly things': ὃς ἀλαζονεύεται μὲν ἀλιτήριος | περὶ τῶν μετεώρων. The term ἀλιτήριος (aspirated in Eupolis as a crasis for ὁ ἀλιτήριος) suggests that the speaker believed that Protagoras was loathed by the gods and suffered at their hands, as the term describes a polluted individual who had committed a religious offence and was doomed to be punished by the gods; cf. Andoc. 1.51, [Lys.] 6.53; LSJ s.v. ἀλιτήριος and the remarks in Furley 1996: 109.

[64] Diog. Oen. fr. 16 Smith (= Diag. test. 62 Winiarczyk); cf. Lib. *Ap.* 153 (= Diag. test. 23 Winiarczyk); this hostile philosophical tradition on Protagoras is critiqued in Barnes 2015. This tradition does not, however, support the strong claim of Ford 2024: 8: 'there is no evidence that the ancient Greeks thought of agnosticism and atheism as distinct and incompatible positions regarding belief in gods'. Protagoras and Plato would have disagreed, and the Academic sceptics generations later.

2.2 'Too Emotional?' Introducing Plato on Atheism

False charges, slander towards 'unbelievers', insinuations and equivocal thinking, abuse, legal threats. To a student of ancient atheism, this chorus of accusations might seem so tendentious, vague and misleading that it would be impossible for any of them to be a response to genuine philosophical atheism. Could this mean that Febvre's universal suspicion is the best fit for the ancient evidence? This is the opinion of Harrison, who surveys this material and concludes that the 'testimonia to atheism cannot simply be taken at face value'.[65] And as a rule this is salutary, since more than a slew of charges against a Prodicus, Diagoras or Critias are needed to establish whether Classical atheism had any currency; after all, no one trusts Meletus in the *Apology*. On the other hand, this Febvrian suspicion towards pre-modern accusations of atheism has led to overstatements and errors in other quarters of scholarship outside of Classics where scholars have failed to take into account that discourses of atheism from the past were a polymorphous blend of accusation and earnest unbelief. This is exemplified in *Atheism in France, 1650–1729* (1990) by Alan C. Kors, who argued that atheism only existed as a polemical fiction in the seventeenth century, which was in effect an age of 'atheism without atheists'.[66] In the scholarship subsequent to Kors, on the other hand, this conclusion has been critiqued for smoothing over difficult counter-evidence such as the remarkable clandestine manuscript *Theophrastus redivivus* (1659), a Latin text authored in France which argued for the non-existence of any god in over three

[65] Harrison 2025: 97–8, comparing Hipp. *Morb. sacr.* 3–4, a colourful piece of interdisciplinary diatribe which condemned traditional healers as atheistic magicians who either denied the existence of the gods, or at the very least their power.

[66] Kors 1990: 81–109.

hundred pages.[67] Given the level of effort he invested in promoting a single idea, it seems unlikely that the anonymous author of *Theophrastus redivivus* was a lone voice in his time. As a cautionary point, this shows that atheists could still surface in a period when heterodox thinkers across Europe like Thomas Hobbes were slandered as 'atheists' on often specious grounds, and these slanders were themselves an opaque reflection of an anxiety that had some basis in reality.

This is a salutary warning for scholars working in the Classical period, as here too the sources are not equally unreliable or equivocal about atheism, as might be imagined from reading 'Greek Atheism: A Mirage'. Amidst all the backlash against natural philosophers and sophists are the political dialogues of Plato, who responded to atheism in his *Laws* negatively but with more philosophical clarity, psychological insight and ambivalence than any other contemporary testimony about atheism. If it is agreed that fifth-century drama demonstrated some contemporary interest in atheism in its outer rhetorical shell, as seen in Euripides' *Bellerophon* and the conversation between the slaves in Aristophanes' *Knights*, Plato's political dialogues went further by presenting atheism as a culturally active force in Athenian life, and in *Laws* he mentioned philosophical atheists who could argumentatively promote their views to others. For this reason, weighing up whether Greek atheism was real depends upon how we read Plato, and whether his portrayal of atheism resonates with the intellectual and social conditions of his time and adequately contextualises the oblique references to atheism in earlier, fifth-century Attic drama.[68] The following discussion will explore Plato's portrayals of atheism in chronological order.

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[67] On the ramifications of *Theophrastus redivivus* for Febvre and Kors, see Paganini 2020: 52–8.

[68] Book 10 of *Laws* is often regarded as the best testimony for Classical atheism in modern scholarship, contextualising the references to atheism from fifth-century drama: the best method, in other words, is to read *ex Platone, per fabulas*. Cf.

2.2.1 Adeimantus' Trilemma in *Republic*

Given the circumstances around the trial of Socrates, Plato had his reasons for resenting atheism, and his confrontations with the idea were animated by a conviction that his pious teacher was accused of atheism and paid the penalty but not the real atheists lurking in Athens. Toeing the party line for the literary proselytisers of Socrates' legacy, Plato relied on his dialogues to rehabilitate Socrates' piety and shield him from accusations of atheism, which consisted of a hydra of philosophical atheism, kainotheism and 'atheism' limited to the state gods. The *Apology* attacked this deliberate incoherence directly, introducing (or perhaps refining) a *seriatim* argument that Plato's teacher truly believed in gods. If Socrates was charged with recognising ἕτερα καινὰ δαιμόνια, reasoned Plato, he certainly had to believe in gods given that he recognised δαιμόνια πράγματα, which further implied a belief in spiritual beings (δαίμονες), which in turn suggested a belief in their forebears, gods (θεοί).[69] But Plato did not settle for defending the piety of Socrates, and with the same zeal he went after his prosecutors by condemning them as hypocritical 'atheists' who were guilty of perjury. Turning the tables, as did Aeschines in the *Alcibiades*, Plato's Socrates told the jury, 'for I recognise [the gods], men of Athens, as none of my accusers do' (νομίζω τε γάρ, ὦ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, ὡς οὐδεὶς τῶν ἐμῶν κατηγόρων).[70] Decades after this

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Winiarczyk 2016: 74: 'the theory that atheism, as the rejection of all gods and supernatural phenomena, appeared in Athens towards the end of the 5th century BC does seem probable, as this is testified in Book X of Plato's Νόμοι'; Sedley 2013 has also argued that Book 10 painted a realistic philosophical portrait of atheism.

[69] Pl. *Ap.* 27b3–c10; cf. Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 119–24.

[70] Pl. *Ap.* 35d6–7.

literary skirmish had run its course in the *Seventh Letter*, Socrates' accusers were abused for 'inflicting the most unholy charge on Socrates, who deserved it the least of all', which suggests the obvious corollary that there were scores of impious men in Athens who were more deserving of the fate of Socrates.[71]

Plato would also glance at atheism amid the 'immoralist challenge' discussion of *Republic*, a dialogue with a dramatic setting during the Peloponnesian War.[72] After Socrates was challenged by Plato's brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus to praise justice 'in and of itself' (αὐτὸ καθ' αὑτό), Socrates took on the burden of showing that a life of genuine justice was more advantageous and conducive to human happiness than curating a mere reputation for justice.[73] To formulate the strongest imaginable challenge to this thesis, Glaucon entertained a thought experiment that put considerable pressure on pursuing justice as an authentic ideal, asking Socrates to imagine a 'perfectly unjust man' (ὁ τελέως ἄδικος) who benefited from a good reputation but committed injustice in secret.[74] In his own contribution to this challenge, Adeimantus turned in a satirical direction by highlighting the decadent values and corrupt practices of the Athenian upper classes, comically assuming a rhetorical persona in his argument who cheerfully took these things for granted. This included their opinions about the gods, which Adeimantus wove into his argument. How could committing injustice in secret possibly benefit an individual if their crimes

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[71] Pl. *Ep.* 7.325b5–c5; even if this epistle is not genuine, the sentiment is common among the Socratic authors who defended the unexampled piety of their teacher.

[72] On the conjectural composition dating and the dramatic setting of *Republic*, see Sansone 2023: 5, 12–5.

[73] Pl. *Resp.* 2.358d3. Note that here Socrates is not asked to justify the intrinsic desirability of justice without an eye to its consequences, which would have forced him to ignore its beneficial effects for the truly just person: see Anderson 2020.

[74] Pl. *Resp.* 2.361a6.

were noticed by the gods? Adeimantus anticipated this objection by introducing a trilemma:

> 'But still, it is impossible to escape notice of the gods or overcome them with force'. And yet, if the gods do not exist (εἰ μὲν μή εἰσιν), or they are indifferent towards human affairs, why should we worry about evading them? But if they *do* care for human affairs, is it not the case that everything we know or have heard about the gods comes from the laws and the poets who trace their genealogies? But these same people claim that the gods can be won over, persuaded by friendly prayers and offerings, of which both claims should be accepted or neither of them. But if both claims *are* accepted, we should commit injustices and give sacrifices on account of our wrongdoing.[75]

Evidently, the form of Adeimantus' argument was a satirical spin on the 'exhaustive division' argument pioneered by the sophist Gorgias, which involved outlining a series of possibilities and contending that each scenario led inexorably to the same conclusion.[76] Adeimantus' version of this argument (see Figure 2.1, below), however, was distinctive in its aim to rule out any theological convictions which might prudentially inform one's moral decision-making, leading him to argue in a sophistic mode that only three possible outcomes could be true of the gods, and *all of them*

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[75] Pl. *Resp.* 2.365d7–366a1.

[76] This method of argument in Gorgias' *Helen* and *Palamedes* is summed up nicely by Rodriguez 2019: 88: '[Gorgias] often makes an exhaustive division, then shows how each possibility points towards a single conclusion, allowing him to show how *no matter which way you go* his desired result follows'. Gigon 1947: 254 saw a reference to Protagoras in the Adeimantus trilemma, but Görgemanns 1960: 86 n. 3 was right to detect a Gorgianic thought pattern ('Satz I gilt nicht, gilt Satz II nicht usw.').

relieved the unjust man of any fear of divine punishment if he wished to commit injustice undetected: (1) either the gods do not exist, or (2) they care nothing for human affairs, or (3) they exist and care about human affairs, but could be bribed.[77] However, immediately before he introduced this argument, Adeimantus further implied that the kind of man who might hold these views to override his religious scruples was the same person who would attend private clubs in elite circles and benefit from the expensive education of the sophists:

> 'But hang on', someone might say, 'it is not *always* easy to be a wicked person and get away with it'. But we can reply that nothing is easy when it comes to great deeds; but more than that, if we plan to be successful, we have to take the path that the arguments allow for. So, in order to escape punishment, we will band together in elite political clubs and societies (ἐπὶ γὰρ τὸ λανθάνειν συνωμοσίας τε καὶ ἑταιρίας συνάξομεν), and there are teachers of persuasion who can (for a fee) provide us with skills in public speaking and the law courts, and in so doing, we will use persuasion to get what we want, and force for others, so that we can outdo others and avoid punishment.[78]

Because Adeimantus assumed a rhetorical persona in his argument, he distanced himself from the impious ideas posed in his trilemma but nonetheless included them, implying that atheism, the denial of providence and the notion that the gods could be bribed were objectionable but familiar beliefs among educated circles in

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[77] Vegetti 1998: 222–5 otherwise labels this the 'Adeimantus Theorem'; the design of Figure 2.1 adopts the same layout as the diagrams for Gorgias' 'exhaustive division' arguments by Rodriguez 2019: 103–6.

[78] Pl. *Resp.* 2.365c7–d6.

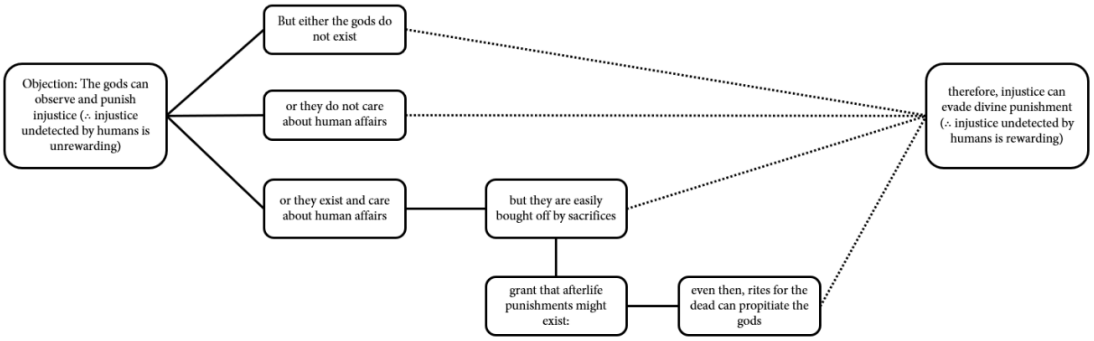


Figure 2.1. The argumentative structure of the 'Adeimantus trilemma' (*Resp.* 2.365d7–366b3).

Athens.[79] The rationale for Adeimantus' allusion to such ideas was to encourage Socrates to defend the authentically just life without appealing to how a wrongdoer was perceived by other humans *and the gods*,[80] and this meant that the question of the omniperception of the divine had to be set aside. A successful response to the 'immoralist challenge' had to show that the soul benefited from pursuing justice, regardless of how society or the gods recognised the truly just individual. On the other hand, there is good reason to suspect that Plato's positions on the three kinds of impiety underwent several stages of composition and that Plato was already developing responses to each item of Adeimantus' trilemma while he worked on his *Republic*. His appeal to the health of the soul was a theologically neutral reply to the 'immoralist challenge', to an extent,[81] but Plato probably suspected that there were different

[79] Socrates recognised the irony of Adeimantus at Pl. *Resp.* 2.368a7–b1; cf. *Resp.* 10.612c9–d1.

[80] As marked at Pl. *Resp.* 2.366e6: καὶ λανθάνον θεούς τε καὶ ἀνθρώπους.

[81] By contrast, Plato avoided conceiving of the forms as individual gods or calling them by that name, but he wove them into the same tapestry of the universe, describing them already in *Republic* as transcendent, eternal and divine beings. By Plato's own lights this could be taken to assume the point at issue; because Socrates

pathways to responding to the problem of why one should act morally, and just as importantly, that there were different justifications for acting morally which would resonate depending on his intended audience. His appeal to the psychic health of the individual might have made less of an impression for some compared to the dramatic Myth of Er, but there was not enough theological substance in *Republic* to sustain the assumption that the gods had to be moral enforcers in the afterlife. This impression is strengthened when one considers the public-facing uses of religion in *Laws*, in which Plato presented the admiration for the gods as a powerful stimulus for good conduct and the fear of the gods as a safeguard against impiety and injustice. This much suggests that Plato was already pondering how to respond to each item of Adeimantus' trilemma by the time he was composing *Republic*, but he did not commit them to writing until the opportunity came along when he tackled impiety in his *Laws*. The fact that he alluded to the same three forms of ἀσέβεια can also be taken to suggest that Plato lectured about atheism for years, which is consistent with the passionate but seemingly weary familiarity with the topic shown by the Athenian speaker in the tenth book of *Laws*.

2.2.2 Accusation and Self-Correction in *Laws*

Plato returned to the problem of atheism in his old age. His arguments against atheism were presented in the tenth book of *Laws* in a discussion about legislating against impiety, ἀσέβεια, and his evident hostility towards atheism in this text had seemingly

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had already argued at *Ap.* 35d6–7 that he surely believed in the gods because he already believed in δαιμόνια, it is possible that Plato sensed that some critics might counter that he has argued his case for a divine hierarchy of values precisely the wrong way around.

hardened from the religious conservativism of his mature years, which did nothing to ease his longstanding bitterness about the false accusations of 'atheism' made against Socrates. It could also be the case, too, that the phantasmic accusations of atheism against him continued to haunt the philosophers of post-imperial Athens, so that there was some pressure felt by Plato to correct the record. Regardless, by the time he was writing in the 360s or 350s BCE the idea was all too familiar for Plato, and the main speaker of *Laws* addressed atheists as the bearers of a well-worn creed: 'neither you, nor your friends have been the first to originally hold this opinion about the gods' (οὐ σὺ μόνος οὐδὲ οἱ σοὶ φίλοι πρῶτοι καὶ πρῶτον ταύτην δόξαν περὶ θεῶν ἔσχετε).[82] The dramatic setting of the dialogue is Crete, where a conversation took place between three elderly men on a long walk who came to the topic of how to design an ideal law code for a settlement on the island. The most talkative character in the piece, the Athenian Visitor, was an obvious self-insert for Plato in his twilight years, and he philosophically steered the conversation in the company of two non-philosophers from Crete and Sparta, Cleinias and Megillus. At his disposal he had the learning and sophistication of an Athenian, but he equally recognised the vices of his city and hoped, like Plato, that other city states in the Greek world could be socially engineered so as to avoid them.

Together the trio envisioned a mixed constitution in Crete which was presented as less perfect than the utopia sketched in *Republic* but more attainable in reality,[83] and

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[82] Pl. *Leg.* 10.888b6–c3; cf. Sedley 2013: 347: '[the Athenian] does not mean that there have been atheists throughout history. Rather, as he goes on to make clear, he is speaking of what happens again and again in his own generation'. Sedley did not cite the trilemma at Pl. *Resp.* 2.365d7–366b3, but it supports his verdict that Plato saw atheism as a fifth-century phenomenon that continued into his time.

[83] Pl. *Leg.* 5.739b3; ranked in terms of quality (ἀρετή), the ideal constitution developed in *Laws* was the 'second constitution' (πολιτεία δευτέρα), but of course its

the fictitious city in Crete that would hypothetically assume this constitution, Magnesia, is noteworthy for its isolation from the world and its extreme religious conservativism.[84] It was not a large city, being mostly occupied by rural landholders who lived miles away from the luxury and moral decadence found in commercial and cosmopolitan centres like Athens,[85] and its inland position (see the map of Crete at Figure 2.2) made it less susceptible to the corrupting effects of seafaring and commerce.[86] In line with this vision Plato's Athenian imagined that Magnesia existed above all to promote civic morality, leading him to stipulate that the hidden purpose



Figure 2.2. The city of Magnesia in Plato's *Laws*. Map data © OpenStreetMap contributors.

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worldly instantiation in Magnesia was the third-best πολιτεία in Plato's view; as ever, the ideal model was superior to the execution.

[84] Murray 1925: 110 not unreasonably called Magnesia a 'City of Refuge', and with limited success, Plato perhaps tried to temper this impression, e.g. *Leg.* 12.949e3–950d4; on the latter, Schofield 2006: 175, 311–12 has characterised Plato's Magnesia as a 'theocracy'.

[85] But Plato certainly reserved the hard labour of farming for slaves: *Leg.* 7.806d7–e2; cf. Cambiano 1971: 243; this was usual among the ancient writers on agriculture.

[86] This map (Figure 2.2) adopts the conjectural location of Magnesia suggested in Morrow 1960: 31, 95; cf. Saunders 1970: 15.

behind every Magnesian law was to foster virtue (ἀρετή).[87] This led the trio to design Magnesia as a stronghold of piety and public morals where religion was instilled in every aspect of family and civic life, and the civic gods would be asserted as moral exemplars for the civilians to follow.[88] The spatial layout of the city reinforced this vision of the city as a citadel for religion, as the territory was divided into twelve sections with one Olympian god corresponding to each part, and in the centre was a walled acropolis with a sacred enclosure for the civic patron deities Hestia, Zeus and Athena.[89] Only one foreign influence had any impact on the daily life of the Magnesians, and naturally this was Delphi, which authorised the sacred laws and the gods licensed for worship in Magnesia.[90]

This close assimilation of piety with morality would leave no room for deviant views about the gods, and Plato's spokesman condemned atheism and its heretical cognates as morally corrosive forces that induced young men (νέοι) to commit crimes such as disrespecting sacred property, striking parents (a breach of 'filial piety') and temple robbery.[91] As a safeguard against such heterodoxy, the Magnesian law code for ἀσέβεια was drafted to prosecute heresy with an unusually precise set of laws and

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[87] Pl. *Leg.* 4.705d3–706a4; cf. Annas 2017: 110 on *Leg.* 6.770c7–e6.

[88] Pl. *Leg.* 4.716c1–d3; on the gods of the state as 'traditional moral exemplars' in the constitution of *Laws* see Bartninkas 2023; cf. Bartninkas 2023a: 157–83.

[89] Pl. *Leg.* 5.745b6–c2; cf. England 1921: 535–6.

[90] Pl. *Leg.* 5.738b5–d1, 6.759c6–d1; cf. Pl. *Resp.* 4.427b1–c5 for the exclusive authority of Delphi in the religious laws of Plato's καλλίπολις. On civic religion in Magnesia and its relationship with Delphi, see Reverdin 1945: 56–68, 89–106; cf. Morrow 1960: 434–57.

[91] Pl. *Leg.* 10.884a1–885b2.

penalties for an impiety law code in a Greek city state.[92] The opinions from Adeimantus' trilemma resurfaced in the preamble, although they were recast as the three intellectual conditions that make individuals behave or speak impiously:

> No one who believes that the gods exist as custom dictates (θεοὺς ἡγούμενος εἶναι κατὰ νόμους) has ever committed an impious action or uttered lawless speech on purpose (πώποτε οὔτε ἔργον ἀσεβὲς ἠργάσατο ἑκὼν οὔτε λόγον ἀφῆκεν ἄνομον). However, he who has must suffer from one of three conditions (τῶν τριῶν πάσχων): either he does not believe in the aforementioned gods (ἢ τοῦτο, ὅπερ εἶπον, οὐχ ἡγούμενος), or the second, that the gods do not care for human affairs, or the third, that they are easily appeased and can be manipulated by sacrifices and prayers.[93]

In this reformulation Plato's Athenian Visitor cast impious behaviour in strict intellectualist terms, taking the view that if anyone believed that the gods exist and impartially punish impiety, he or she would never voluntarily sin against the gods. In this ideal scenario the Magnesian who held orthodox religious views would appreciate that the gods were perfectly good and worthy of pious observance and acknowledge that the gods punish impiety, such that this awareness would automatically guarantee conventionally pious behaviour. From another point of view, however, it might be objected that reducing impious behaviour to mistaken ideas about the gods would be too neat. The lessons of Greek mythology would suggest that it *was* possible to acknowledge the existence and power of the gods and rebel against them, and in historical cases of temple thefts or vandalising cult images in the Greek world there

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[92] On ἀσέβεια law in Book 10 see Reverdin 1945: 208–41; Saunders 1996; Mayhew 2008: 193–213.

[93] Pl. *Leg.* 10.885b4–9.

must have been considerable mental compartmentalisation and theological apathy involved which would not necessarily fit into a Platonic scheme. More generally there is a concern that a disrespectful, impious attitude could coexist with Plato's orthodox beliefs, and that perhaps the disposition or feeling directed towards the gods or their worshippers would be more causally fundamental to an impious action than any belief. What if an impious Magnesian *resented* the gods for how good they were? Or how could Plato account for the fact that most atheists today do not vandalise church property?[94] Nonetheless, this was not how Plato tackled the problem, and he believed that philosophical argument was far more important for rehabilitating impiety than teaching people to be respectful towards the gods by having them repeat a series of ritual actions, or forcing them to undertake a holistic moral education. To this end, Plato's Athenian set out to include counter-arguments against each impious view in his preamble for impiety, which reflected his aim, expressed earlier on, that the preambles of Magnesia should rationally persuade its citizens to follow the laws and pursue virtue.[95] Often these preambles read as forcefully prescriptive and fail to live up to this utopian expectation, although the introductory discussion for ἀσέβεια has a certain pastoral element to it. Even Plato recognised this, to an extent, when the non-philosopher Cleinias suggested to the Athenian that the opening section to the law

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[94] For modern scholarly discussion about the kinds of beliefs which motivated incidents of ἀσέβεια like the mutilation of the herms or the parodying of the Mysteries in 415 BCE, a discussion which has been influenced by Plato's *Laws*, see ch. 5.1.2, below.

[95] Pl. *Leg.* 4.718c8–d4; the extent to which the preambles in *Laws* relied upon rational argumentation or emotional manipulation has been vigorously debated, especially given that Plato did not insist upon rational persuasion as consistently in the other preambles; on this controversy see Morrow 1953: 244, Morrow 1960: 557–8; Bobonich 1991; Mayhew 2007; Annas 2017: 91–105.

could be consulted by heretical Magnesians who needed the religious instruction.[96] But the liberal packaging of this preamble should not deceive us, as the heretics of Magnesia had no choice but to listen to its contents while they were imprisoned, and execution awaited the reoffenders who were not 'rehabilitated' by this indoctrination.[97] When he set out to combat these impious beliefs in his *Laws*, Plato's heart had hardened against any theological differences of opinion, and through his philosophical avatar he made no attempt to conceal his raw hatred for the atheists. It made little difference that the atheist was normally a young man (νέος), practically a boy (παῖς), and that atheism for Plato was in essence an involuntary condition, as a disease (νόσος) which had never been diagnosed in men who reached old age.[98] What was really galling for Plato's representative was the fact that the atheist seemed entirely insensible to the important religious conditioning he had received since early childhood. How could someone reason with those who had the audacity to reject the existence of the gods, despite the fact that the truth had been handed to them from the very beginning?

> Well then, how can someone argue that the gods exist without getting heated (θυμῷ) about it? For surely one must get furious and hate (χαλεπῶς φέρειν καὶ μισεῖν) those

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[96] Pl. *Leg.* 10.890e4–891a7; Reverdin 1945: 11 characterised Book 10 of *Laws* as a 'véritable livre sacré de la cité des Lois, est une manière de catéchisme divisé en quatre parties'.

[97] Pl. *Leg.* 10.907e6–908a2, 908a7–8; cf. Mayhew 2008:195.

[98] Pl. *Leg.* 10.888a7–b1, 888b6–c3; on the connection drawn between youth and atheism in Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* see the discussion in ch. 5.1.3, below.

> men who have been to blame and are now to blame for the fact that we make these arguments.[99]

Surely, all this counts against Plato as a reliable testimony for atheism, this bilious, cantankerous old man. By the time he got to *Laws*, he was 'too emotional', and his accusations of atheism had the same rhetorical flimsiness as all the others.[100] This is the position of Harrison, who reasons that Plato did not respond to any real atheists but emotively inferred atheism on the basis of their objectionable behaviour. He also compares this polemical strategy to the figure of the Fool in the Psalms. Just as the Fool in the Bible who 'says in his heart, "there is no God"' (Ps. 53.1) was not a modern atheist but a *perceived* wrongdoer who was *assumed* to resist (= deny the existence of) God, Harrison concludes, atheism in Plato's *Laws* 'is less a philosophical position than an inference from atheist behaviour'.[101]

Does this reading put the report about atheism in Plato into its full context? There are, to say the least, some limitations involved in comparing a thorny philosophical work like Plato's *Laws* to the simpler moral message found in the Psalms. Certainly, their concepts of atheism should not be conflated too lightly, since Plato's polemic targeted a group of impious men which also included outspoken philosophical atheists. The view of the non-philosopher Cleinias that atheism was caused by

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[99] Pl. *Leg.* 10.887c7–d2; for the phenomenon of getting too emotional in a public or private philosophical debate, which Plato thought could be physically harmful, cf. *Ti.* 88a2–7.

[100] Parker 1996: 213 n. 58: 'Plato was too imaginative and too emotional to be a very careful reporter of other people's views'.

[101] Harrison 2025: 99.

The Gods Do Not Exist (885c5–899d3)		*The Gods Do Not Care for Human Affairs* (899d4–905d3)		*The Gods Can Be Appeased with Sacrifices/Prayer* (905d3–907b4)	
Open (908b4–c1)	*Covert* (908c1–d7)	*Open* (908e3–5)	*Covert* (908e3–5)	*Open* (908e3–5)	*Covert* (908e3–5)

Figure 2.3. Plato, *Laws* 10 and the three causes of impiety (ἀσέβεια).

hedonistic perversity was in fact rejected by Plato's avatar as too simplistic,[102] and Plato's alternative explanation for atheism was intellectual, in that hedonistic and impious actions were an expression of atheism and other impious views but not the cause. The Athenian Visitor held instead that atheism is rooted in serious philosophical ignorance (ἀμαθία), which explains why he considered philosophical argumentation as a method for rehabilitating atheists in Magnesia.[103] On the other hand, it might be pointed out that Plato nonetheless moralised this ignorance, and just as Euripides described ἀμαθία about the gods as a kind of hubristic insensibility, Plato's aetiology of impiety was hardly a value-free enterprise.[104] This much is true, although even this subtler moralising is complicated by what Plato had to say at the end of Book 10 of *Laws*. As he was given to do in his later works, Plato subdivided the categories he started with, so the three types of impiety developed first in *Republic* were doubled into

[102] Pl. *Leg.* 10.886a6–b5, as summed up by Friedländer 1969: 434: '[for Plato's Athenian] it is also too simple, too "Doric," as it were, to assume that an irreligious life is due to the licentiousness of impulses'; cf. Stalley 1983: 167.

[103] Pl. *Leg.* 10.886b6–e3; for Plato's aetiology of impiety outlined, see Mayhew 2008: 64: '[i]mpious ideas → rejection of a proper religious and ethical outlook → lower (or no) resistance to acting on strong desires (e.g. for sex and wealth) → impious actions'.

[104] E.g., Eur. *Bacch.* 490; my thanks to Emily Kearns for this point.

individuals who held an impious opinion openly or in secret (see Figure 2.3, above).[105] The Athenian Visitor presented open atheism as a philosophical life option that did not always guarantee immorality, and he only justified this new division by appealing to atheists in particular, not the other groups of the impious. Was this simply explained by the logical order of his discourse, tackling atheism first, or did Plato feel compelled to make an exception for them?

> As for the impiety (περὶ ἀσέβειαν) of these [people], there are three causes (αἰτίαις μὲν τρισίν) which we have already examined; and among these there are two for each cause, which should form six categories worth differentiating for people who sin against the gods, and all of these [categories] do not require the same or similar penalty. After all, the moral character of someone who does not believe in any gods at all can naturally incline towards justice (ᾧ γὰρ ἂν μὴ νομίζοντι θεοὺς εἶναι τὸ παράπαν ἦθος φύσει προσγένηται δίκαιον), with such people despising the very existence of wrongdoers, and unable to tolerate injustice or to commit deeds of such a kind; and they flee from the unjust among men and have affection for the just (τούς τε μὴ δικαίους τῶν ἀνθρώπων φεύγουσι καὶ τοὺς δικαίους στέργουσιν).[106]

This is a limited concession, in a sense, because the decent speculative atheist would still be imprisoned in Magnesia to prevent atheism from morally corrupting others. But it is surely a profound admission when considered alongside the deeply entrenched biases directed against unbelievers in Classical antiquity and above all Plato's own personally and ideologically motivated hatred of atheism. It also takes us some distance away from the 'mind-reading' unbelief in the Psalms, since Plato was dealing with a different problem: he was forced to concede something about a philosophical life

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[105] Pl. *Leg.* 10.908b4–e5.

[106] Pl. *Leg.* 10.908a7–c1.

option and did not describe a sinful person who symbolically 'resists' God. This impression is confirmed when Plato further added that candid atheists were open about their unbelief in the gods, openly mocked sacrifices and oaths, and, with their scornful self-assurance, were even capable of persuading others to atheism:

> But for those who hold the view that 'everything is empty of gods' (πρὸς τῇ δόξῃ τῇ θεῶν ἔρημα εἶναι πάντα) and are beset by a lack of self-control towards pleasure and pain, and have a strong memory and sharp faculties of learning at their command (μνῆμαί τε ἰσχυραὶ καὶ μαθήσεις ὀξεῖαι παρῶσι), the disbelief in the gods is a condition which proves to be instinctively common to both [i.e. types of atheist]; but in terms of their harm towards other men, one is less of a threat, but the other who practises wicked deeds is more so (τὸ δὲ πλείω κακὰ ἐργάζοιτ' ἄν). For one is filled with candour when he talks about the gods and sacrifices and oaths (ὁ μὲν γὰρ λόγῳ τε ἂν περὶ θεοὺς παρρησίας εἴη μεστὸς καὶ περὶ θυσίας τε καὶ ὅρκους), and given his mockery towards his opponents, he could quickly win over others to his cause (καὶ ὡς τῶν ἄλλων καταγελῶν τάχ' ἂν ἑτέρους τοιούτους ἀπεργάζοιτο), provided that he goes unpunished; but the other who holds the same beliefs as the former is a so-called man of genius, and filled with deceit and treachery (εὐφυὴς δὲ ἐπικαλούμενος, δόλου δὲ καὶ ἐνέδρας πλήρης).[107]

It is difficult to imagine the mental gymnastics required for inventing an idea, condemning and refuting that idea over a long essay, and finally admitting reluctantly that some exponents of that invented idea are better people than might have been expected, and it is more likely that Plato knew a handful of atheists in Athens and stereotyped them as two stock characters, the philosopher and the dissembler. Perhaps for Harrison, Plato's 'open atheist' could still have a proselytising function for an

[107] Pl. *Leg.* 10.908c1–d3.

intellectual who was trying to strengthen his belief in the gods, and the theological discourse in *Laws* was really medicine for a momentary doubter in the Academy, not hardened atheists. But is that the same thing as reducing this character to that function and divesting the figure of any historical relevance, of any currency particular to his time? Do we turn to the Fool of the Psalms, a character 'boxed into a narrative that is implicitly proselytizing', and 'a phantom generated for that single purpose'?[108] The much closer parallel to Plato's just atheist is the proponent of the 'might is right' doctrine in the *Gorgias*, the young Athenian gentleman Callicles, whom Plato viewed with a similar mix of horror and admiration. As he did the open atheist, he praised Callicles for his candour (παρρησία),[109] and E. R. Dodds mused that Plato may have seen Callicles as his potential self, had he not met Socrates.[110] But no scholars will deny the parallels between Callicles' *Realpolitik* and the wartime conditions of the late fifth century, so memorably reflected in Thucydides, and it would be a curious hermeneutic method to read the *Gorgias* and reduce Callicles to one protreptic function. For Plato, the force of Callicles consisted in his immediate historical vitality: he was part of the harsh cultural landscape of Athens, and his menace disappears if he was completely a literary construct.[111] There is no reason to take the philosophical atheist in Plato as different in this regard.

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[108] Harrison 2025: 101–3.

[109] Pl. *Grg.* 492d1–3; on the often-suspected sympathy between Plato and Callicles see Jaeger 1944: 137–8; Dodds 1959: 14–5; Doyle 2006: 95. There is also the overlap between the libertine and anti-traditional stance of Plato's atheists and Callicles, for which see Sedley 2013: 344–5.

[110] Dodds 1959: 14.

[111] For the telling, if stylised portrayal of Callicles as a man of fifth-century Athens see Menzel 1922: 45–75; Dodds 1959: 14–5; Ostwald 1986: 245–6; well summed up in Hobbs 2000: 147–8.

Plato, then, was forced to self-correct, suggesting that some of his accusations against atheism corresponded with reality and had to be modified accordingly, and by the same token, this implies that the earlier, rhetorical allusions to atheism in Attic drama are not straightforwardly misleading testimonies. On balance, it seems that Febvre's grandiose suspicion towards all pre-modern accusations of atheism would be too sweeping to apply to the Classical evidence, and a better fit for the material comes from the scholarship of Michael Hunter, who cautions against simplistic readings of the stock figure of the atheist in early modern England: '[a]s with more recent "moral panics", hostility to a specific stock figure could encapsulate a wider range of anxieties, and only a sensitive appraisal can do justice to the mixture of real and exaggerated phenomena involved'.[112] These caveats are particularly apt when it is considered how adjacent phenomena to atheism in Plato can be studied in a similar way to Hunter's 'mixture' of fact and fiction. Take, for example, Plato's allusion to oligarchic clubs in *Republic*, which surfaces in the same context of his three classes of impious belief. These clubs were associated with conspiracies and nightly meetings that aimed to subvert the democracy, and in the 420s BCE Cleon was notorious for accusing political rivals of being involved in these groups.[113] Presenting a balanced assessment on this topic, W. Robert Connor observed that the public invective against these clubs was 'drearily paranoid rhetoric', pointing out that most private clubs among the Athenian elite were social gatherings that were not inherently political or dangerous.[114] But he adds that these concerns could have some basis in reality after the 420s BCE when these private clubs 'become in some cases *synomosiai*, bands of sworn revolutionaries, determined to overthrow the democracy'.[115] Reflecting upon these events during the comparatively stable period of Athenian history when he wrote *Republic* and *Laws*, Plato associated

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[112] Hunter 1985: 157 = Hunter, 2023: 56.

[113] Ar. *Eq.* 475–9; cf. *Vesp.* 417, 463–507.

[114] Connor 1971: 26, 107 (quoted).

[115] Connor 1971: 197; cf. ch. 5.1.1, below.

private clubs with wrongdoing and impiety and presented conspiracy as a capital offence in his law code for Magnesia.[116] Why, in that case, should atheism in Plato be subject to a less subtle analysis than this, if he showed investment in the idea which indicates that he was engaging with a phenomenon that existed outside of himself? In view of the awkwardness of his concession that there are naturally good atheists, only after expressing his hatred and hurling a series of arguments against them, the reservations of modern scholars that Plato was 'too emotional' to be reliable are misplaced. Arguably, he was too emotional to be wrong.

2.3 Conclusion

Recent doubts surrounding the existence of Classical Greek atheism are most strongly validated by the sheer number of unreliable accusations of atheism and impiety that are preserved in sources from this period, ranging from untrustworthy catalogues of atheists, charges of godlessness from observing immoral and impious actions, and the conflation of various heterodox beliefs with atheism. In this chapter I have not intended to minimise the seriousness of these misgivings, and the study of this topic should generally take into account that the wider public discourse around atheism could be vague and unreliable as a testimony for real atheism 'on the ground' in Athens. But to advance the strong claim that *all* the accusations of atheism are therefore false is certainly reductive and recreates errors that have since been refuted in other schools of historiography for later periods. The polemical tenor of *Republic* and *Laws* suggests that Plato was reacting against a phenomenon that was subject to a 'moral panic' but

[116] Pl. *Resp.* 2.365c7–d6; *Leg.* 9.856b1–c8; when Plato sermonises that Calliclean immoralism is a byproduct of atheistic teachings in Book 10, his political rhetoric (στάσεις at *Leg.* 10.890a7) recalls the seditious activity of these groups.

nonetheless real, in the same way that private clubs in fifth-century Athens were often accused of conspiring against the democracy when this was only rarely the case. On its face, we have at our disposal a mixed testimony for ancient atheism.

3. Intellectual Conditions, I: Desanctifying Nature and Culture

> The universe, that vast assemblage of every thing that exists, presents only matter and motion: the whole offers to our contemplation nothing but an immense, an uninterrupted succession of causes and effects; some of these causes are known to us, because they either strike immediately on our senses; or have been brought under their cognizance, by the examination of long experience; others are unknown to us, because they act upon us by effects, frequently very remote from their primary cause.
>
> — BARON D'HOLBACH[1]

> The secret of theology is anthropology.
>
> — LUDWIG FEUERBACH[2]

More work, however, remains to be done. In his polemic Plato *sounds* like he was responding to real atheism, in spite of his marked theological hatred, but this reading must be tested against the wider intellectual and social conditions of Athens. Could these circumstances have allowed for genuine atheists for Plato to react against? If this neo-Febvrian criteria is met, I submit, we have reasonable grounds for suspecting that atheism was not just a spectre. As a point of departure, this chapter will investigate two notions that shaped the concept of philosophical atheism in the late fifth century, that is, the understanding of nature as devoid of any gods or divine causation, and the idea that the gods are an early human invention. These were not the only philosophical beliefs that contributed to the genesis of Classical Greek atheism, but they are the most salient aspects in Plato's account and need their own detailed analysis. The other

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[1] Holbach 1889: 15.

[2] Feuerbach 1854: 267.

intellectual ingredients for atheism in *Laws*, particularly the binary argumentative framework in which these views were presented, will be explored in the next chapter.

On the other hand, the intellectual conditions for fifth-century atheism should be specified without conceding too much to the more exaggerated perspectives on this issue. When he criticised other historians for recruiting Rabelais to the cause of atheism too casually, Lucien Febvre claimed that atheism could only historically arise from a specific set of intellectual conditions, but he pursued this line of thought in an absolutist way that can no longer be accepted. On his view, every culture had its own 'mental toolkit' (*outillage mental*) which determined what inhabitants of a culture could believe and embody in their everyday lives, but Febvre made a point of contrasting those available in the sixteenth century with the tools only accessible to Europeans after the scientific breakthroughs of the nineteenth century. '*Not as ours*' was the historicist mantra across *The Problem of Unbelief*, as Febvre made a series of points on the incommensurable difference between the 'intellectual equipment' of modern Europe and what came before it.[3] This equipment was thought to include language, the availability of certain concepts, values, and thought-patterns, but for Febvre, none of the tools in sixteenth-century Europe were quite sharp enough for atheism: the (French) language in this period was verbose, missing scores of abstract terms required for analytic thought, 'philosophy then was only opinions, a chaos of contradictory and wavering opinions', and the scientist was not a worker in a rational, collaborative program but an eccentric tinkerer: 'a cobbler in his shop'.[4] Here the anti-religious bias of Febvre is evident, and these are not conditions that must be met for a historical study

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[3] Febvre 1982: 150, 143, 424: 'neither their modes of reasoning nor their requirements for proof were the same as ours', 'their minds did not follow the same steps as ours do', 'quite far removed from us in every aspect of their intellectual equipment. Its very structure was not the same as ours'.

[4] Febvre 1982: 355–63, 379, 418–20.

of atheism. As will be seen in the next chapter, it is misleading to suppose that atheism in history requires a precedent of modern scientific (and even quasi-algebraic) thinking, and a more fruitful question to put to the evidence is whether a dominant religion in a given culture can be subjected to simple forms of reductive and propositional reasoning that do not merely complement but *actively override* thinking about the divine as persons or powers. The fact that this form of theological thinking is not a historical universal does not so much vindicate Febvre as it does complicate the assumption baked into *Unbelief* that atheists are somehow more coherent thinkers than believers in their thought processes.[5] By the same token, the binary distinction between the natural world and the supernatural is an organising principle that only pops up in some cultural circumstances, but it is doubtful that the distinction requires anywhere near the high specifications that Febvre demanded.

Significantly, Febvre never asserted that the intellectual conditions for atheism were non-existent in antiquity, although others have since made the contentious leap. In his chronologically ambitious survey *Histoire de l'athéisme* (1998), Georges Minois said that antiquity had its atheists, such as Diagoras and Theodorus, but atheism in antiquity had its limits: it could have never competed with Christianity in later antiquity because the ancient understanding of atheism was too diffusely polemical and the intellectual conditions for atheism were not sharp enough.[6] Putting aside the intellectualist assumptions of his conclusion — many theories in Greek theology and natural philosophy were sophisticated and intellectually viable for some ancients, but unpopular for all sorts of social and cultural reasons — Minois did not factor in the precision and the coherence of the atheistic worldview challenged by Plato. The key ingredients of Plato's atheistic narrative will be articulated in this chapter, which develops the thesis of David Sedley that Greek atheism surfaced in the Classical period

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[5] See ch. 4.4, below.

[6] Minois 1998: 67.

but needed the 'indispensable hothouse conditions' of the later fifth century to emerge as a substantive theory, relying on innovations from natural philosophy and the anthropological thought of the sophists.[7] But it will be argued, *pace* Sedley, that the literary source for this view was not an anonymous corpus of texts written by atheists.[8] Perhaps such texts existed in antiquity, but this possibility is not supported by the present evidence. Rather as Plato seems to suggest, Classical atheism belonged to the reception of theistic or non-atheistic authors who wrote about natural philosophy and cultural topics in a way that could suggest atheism to readers.

3.1 Texts as Catalysts, Atheism as Reception

As seen in the previous chapter, Plato's aetiology of impious actions and speech in *Laws* was intellectualist, attributing every deliberate instance of ἀσέβεια to mistaken ideas about the existence or nature of the gods, and this made it necessary for Plato's trio of elders in Crete to refute these misconceptions in the preamble for their impiety law code. Plato dramatised this task as a competitive dialectic between two generations in which the pious side of the argument was represented by elders of varying philosophical competence, the Athenian and his two interlocutors, while the impious opposition was imagined by the Athenian as scornful youths who hoped to score points in an argument. Here, again, was another triad of heterodoxy for Plato, but no longer

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[7] Sedley 2013: 347; cf. in older scholarship Decharme 1904: 138–40 and Drachmann 1922: 62–3; Winiarczyk 1990: 14 (cf. Winiarczyk 2016: 113–4, 130) added to these factors the 'criticism of the anthropomorphism and immorality of the Olympian gods' and the 'rationalistic criticism of myths'; Pinel Martínez 2022: 583–1093 also includes ancient criticisms directed against rational theologies and traditional ritual.

[8] Sedley 2013: 337, 341.

glimpsed at in passing as it was in Adeimantus' trilemma from *Republic*. The Athenian Visitor imagined that convinced atheists in the cohort would disdainfully 'challenge' (προκαλεῖν) the Athenian and his company to rationally persuade them with convincing proofs (τεκμήρια ἱκανά) that the gods exist.[9]

For the non-philosopher Cleinias, a man of simple piety from Crete, the existence of the gods was obvious and easy to demonstrate in an argument. As a reply to the atheist challenge, he put forward two proofs for the existence of the gods:

> πρῶτον μὲν γῆ καὶ ἥλιος ἄστρα τε καὶ τὰ σύμπαντα, καὶ τὰ τῶν ὡρῶν διακεκοσμημένα καλῶς οὕτως, ἐνιαυτοῖς τε καὶ μησὶν διειλημμένα· καὶ ὅτι πάντες Ἕλληνές τε καὶ βάρβαροι νομίζουσιν εἶναι θεούς.
>
> As a first point, the earth, sun, stars, the sum of everything, and the seasons are arranged in such a beautiful way, the divisions by years and months included; and the fact that everyone, both Greeks and barbarians, recognise that gods exist.[10]

Although these τεκμήρια can be read as two logically distinct claims, one appealing to the beautiful order of the natural world (a cosmo-teleological argument) and the other appealing to the universal recognition of the gods (a *consensus omnium* argument), Plato and Cleinias would have seen them as interdependent. The notion that 'barbarians' worshipped gods in the sky, the earth and rivers was a common *topos* in Classical thought, and as an ethnographic point of interest this was proof that nature worship was the common factor between Greek and non-Greek religion.[11] For the

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[9] Pl. *Leg.* 10.885c5–d3.

[10] Pl. *Leg.* 10.886a2–5.

[11] Ar. *Pax* 406–11; Sext. Emp. *Math.* 9.52–3 (<DK 84 B5, Prodic. test. 75 Mayhew); Pl. *Cra.* 397c8–d6; cf. Kearns 2022: 140–1.

religiously inclined Greek it would stand to reason that this universal practice was grounded in *something* real, and Cleinias was no different in this regard. For him, the existence of the divine was evident from the uniformity and majesty of the natural world; his proofs were therefore cosmo-teleological and anthropological in focus.

Perhaps Plato could have left matters there, but the Athenian Visitor responded in an intriguing way when he implied that these arguments were already worn clichés by the fourth century which were not up to the task for refuting the atheists of his day. The Athenian warned Cleinias that they had a formidable opposition before them, and the philosophical ignorance (ἀμαθία) of the exponents of atheism was particularly grave and deep-rooted.[12] It was not a fleeting emotion like pleasure that beguiled the atheists to think in the way they did, as though they could be convinced that the gods exist if there were some material reward for doing so. On the contrary, the Athenian was adamant that the atheists had come to accept certain false notions about the gods from what they had heard from prose authors and poets. When Cleinias asked the Athenian how this happened, the Athenian referred to two pools of literature: one consisting of works about traditional theogony, and the other in more recent books about natural philosophy. The first group of authors is mentioned in a strangely diffident manner:

> Among us there are accounts in writing that are available (εἰσὶν ἡμῖν ἐν γράμμασιν λόγοι κείμενοι) which are not, I have found, available to you due to the excellence of your civic order [at Crete and Sparta]; there are some written in poetic verse, and others not, that discourse about the gods (οἱ μὲν ἔν τισι μέτροις, οἱ δὲ καὶ ἄνευ μέτρων λέγοντες περὶ θεῶν), and the oldest ones detail how the first substance of heaven and everything else came into being, proceeding shortly after to treat a

[12] Pl. *Leg.* 10.886a2–5; cf. Görgemanns 1960: 88: 'es sind populäre, keine wissenschaftlichen Argumente'.

> theogony from the beginning, describing the gods, once born, in their relations towards one another.[13]

Plato's Athenian refused to criticise these books at length due to their antiquity (παλαιοῖς οὖσιν), but he did condemn the ancient stories that sent the wrong message about caring for parents and the honours owed to them (γονέων τε θεραπείας καὶ τιμάς).[14] This reserve about the old theogonies might recall the discourse about the traditional gods in *Timaeus* when Plato's spokesman aggressively shielded the traditional Greek gods from criticism,[15] but at least in that work Plato had good reasons for mentioning them: as is well known, *Timaeus* is the only dialogue in Plato that outlined all his ontological commitments in theology, uneasily incorporating the cosmic gods and the gods of traditional theogony into one world picture.[16] This raises the question of why the Athenian Visitor should mention these older writings at all, and there is much to be said for the view that Plato's diffidence towards tradition betrays a concern that the ancient tales of the poets were a possible secondary cause of ἀσέβεια which could bear directly on philosophical atheism itself.[17] Plato was not clear

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[13] Pl. *Leg.* 10.886b10–c4.

[14] Pl. *Leg.* 10.886c6–8.

[15] Pl. *Ti.* 40d6–41a3; note, on this score, the forceful series of verbal adjectives here: 'so it is impossible not to trust the children of the gods' (ἀδύνατον οὖν θεῶν παισὶν ἀπιστεῖν), 'tradition must be trusted' (τῷ νόμῳ πιστευτέον); their views 'must be maintained and expounded' (ἐχέτω καὶ λεγέσθω).

[16] Bartninkas 2023b identifies the tensions in Plato's acceptance of the cosmological gods of *Timaeus* and the traditional Greek gods of poetry and civic cult, with the latter grouping of gods generally lacking 'direct cosmological support' (251).

[17] Rightly Tate 1936a: 49: 'the theogonies and theomachies of the ancient poets are […] neither true nor conducive to piety towards parents […] they rank as one of the

on this point, of course, but as a conservative he had every reason to be uncomfortable. His logic would seem to be this. A young man with sensitive moral convictions reads or hears a poem about the origins of the gods such as Hesiod's *Theogony*, and in a moment of reflection he considers the ramifications of a story like Cronus castrating Uranus, or Zeus overthrowing Cronus by an ingenious deception.[18] Like Xenophanes or Socrates in the *Euthyphro* and *Republic*, the youth cannot accept these stories or repurpose them symbolically, so he must dismiss them as a sordid poetic fabrication; a lie invented by Hesiod, or another ancient authority, who was more interested in entertaining an audience rather than telling the truth.[19] However, the danger in this approach is that the young man could become radicalised by his scepticism and disbelieve in *all the other myths about the gods*, and in turn question the existence of the gods who figure in them. Arguably, this is confirmed by the Athenian's remarks a little further on. During his tirade against atheism, he said that the atheists had not been persuaded by the myths (τοῖς μύθοις, 10.887d2) related to them in childhood, and their disenchantment with religion had led them to renounce the gods. This is a plausible ancient testimony for the suggestion of Marek Winiarczyk that the philosophical expurgation of myth had some role to play in the development of fifth-century atheism.[20]

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causes of the first kind of atheism — simple disbelief in the existence of the gods'; less precise on this point, Reverdin 1945: 11; Annas 2017: 134 speculates that the old theogonies were 'presumably seen as primitive and naïve', but Plato seems to underscore their falsehood from a moral perspective.

[18] Cronus castrating Uranus: Hes. *Theog.* 174–82; Zeus overthrowing Cronus: *Theog.* 70–4, 492–500.

[19] Xenophanes, DK 21 B11–12; cf. the paraphrase of Sext. Emp. *Math.* 1.289; Pl. *Euthyphr.* 5e7–6a3; *Resp.* 2.377e–378a2; cf. *Leg.* 3.701c2–3.

[20] Winiarczyk 1990: 14 (cf. Winiarczyk 2016: 113–4, 130).

The Athenian Visitor, however, mostly reserves blame for the clever moderns (νέοι σοφοί, 10.886d2–3) who had induced the youth to believe that the cosmos is governed by nature and chance, to the exclusion of the existence and power of the gods. The identity of these νέοι σοφοί has been the source of a recent controversy which has concrete implications for whether Plato was responding to real atheism or tilting at windmills. David Sedley has argued that atheism was not openly promoted by any Greek philosophers or poets, but in his *Laws* Plato was responding to a literary corpus in Athens that consisted of a series of 'prose and verse texts' which fronted an 'anonymous literary defence of atheism'.[21] Thomas Harrison, by contrast, has replied that Plato was more likely responding to a coalition of strawmen, presenting a 'tendentious interpretation of very identifiable authors and works' which included theistic writers like Anaxagoras who had already been slandered for 'atheism'.[22] However, it seems likely that neither of these readings adequately account for the polemical tenor of Plato in his *Laws*, who was writing as an educator and a moralist. Both Sedley and Harrison seem to interpret Plato's Athenian Visitor as addressing his literary opponents on his same level, but to my mind the polemic is triangular, with Plato's avatar addressing young atheists directly, but in reference to the earlier sources of the atheists' ideas. Just as he was concerned with how poets and prose authors distorted contemporary morality in his *Republic*, Plato was focused on the net social effect of literature in *Laws*, which makes the divide between the source of an idea and its expression less rigid for his purposes.[23] This is plain from the Athenian's response

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[21] Sedley 2013: 337, 341.

[22] Harrison 2025: 94–5, 101; for Anaxagoras' reputation in fifth-century Athens as the original, and indeed exemplary, impious μετεωρολόγος, see ch. 2.1.2, above.

[23] Parker 1996: 213 (very) tentatively suggested that 'hearers of philosophers and sophists' (rather than philosophers) could be the target of Plato's *Laws*; Betegh 2016: 30–1 proposes this in a more textually specific way: 'the Athenian seems to make a

to Cleinias' two proofs for the gods' existence. According to him, the young atheists would have a quick reply at the ready, as they would reject the divinity of the natural world, rendering the universal consensus on this issue null and void. Specifically, they were materialists who believed that the universe is composed of lifeless matter, excluding the existence of any divine forces. Plato believed that this materialist worldview of the atheists was catalysed by the works of the νέοι σοφοί, and he described these authors in terms of the effects they produced on their impressionable readers:

> Well then, the arguments of such [clever] men have this effect (τόδε οὖν οἱ τῶν τοιούτων ἐξεργάζονται λόγοι): whenever we present proofs that the gods exist, pointing to same phenomena, namely that the sun, moon, and the stars and the earth are divine beings and gods, those who have been convinced by clever men would reply that these same things are made of earth and stones, with no capacity whatsoever to care for human affairs.[24]

Strong causal verbs get the point across. For Plato's Athenian, the spread of philosophical atheism comes from authorities in natural philosophy whose works *bring it about* (ἐξεργάζεσθαι, ἀπεργάζεσθαι) that young men will accept atheism, and in turn the honest and outspoken atheists in this cohort can mockingly *change* (ἀπεργάζεσθαι) others into atheists as well.[25] Plato evidently thought there was something suggestible in these works which fostered atheism in young minds, and it only took a reader with intellectual interests and a dash of scornful charisma to take

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distinction between the views of the atheists on the one hand, and the physical theories that form the basis of the atheists' views on the other'.

[24] Pl. *Leg.* 10.886d3–e1.

[25] Pl. *Leg.* 10.886d3–e1, 10.891e7, and 10.908b4–c1, respectively.

this reading out of Archelaus or the sophists before the idea could spread like a virus. When he presented these two pools of literature as an influence on atheism, Plato was like the pastor in Victorian England who admitted that some stories in the Bible are objectionable but added that the true cause of atheism came from books that undermined religious belief more fundamentally, such as Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Whether or not such a book promoted atheism is beside the point, since it worked as a catalyst.[26]

After he rebuked the natural philosophers for encouraging atheism, Plato's Athenian went on to outline the atheistic worldview to meet the atheist's challenge on their own turf. This led him to relate an ambitious timeline of the universe that started with the chance formation of the material universe, continued to the dawn of earth and the origins of life, and ended with a sweeping cultural history of humanity which recast the gods as an invention by ancient lawgivers from various cities.[27] It remains, then, to expound this worldview critiqued in *Laws*, and then to articulate the intellectual conditions of the fifth century that corroborate and account for it. Consistent with Plato's presentation on the issue, it is likely that atheistic interpretations of natural philosophy and anthropological thought were artefacts of ancient reception.

3.2 A Material Cosmos without Gods

To dismantle this worldview effectively the Athenian singled out the logical basis of atheism and the earliest phase in its timeline, that is, the materialist cosmology shaped by the theories of the νέοι σοφοί. In Plato's terms, this consists in the view that the

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[26] For the idea of texts as catalysts, which influences this argument, see Holmes and Shearin 2012.

[27] Cf. Sedley 2013: 346.

universe was formed 'by chance' (τύχῃ) and 'by nature' (φύσει), which was an abbreviated way of saying that the atheists conceived of the universe as a self-existent totality that formed out of automatic and chance processes. It seems best to address this idea in Plato first, which is the fullest expression of atheistic naturalism in any ancient Greek author compared to the piecemeal references one finds elsewhere.

3.2.1 Τύχη and Φύσις: Overriding Materialist Explanations

When Theaetetus was asked in Plato's *Sophist* whether the cosmos was formed through an automatic and natural process, or shaped by the intelligent design of a god, he replied with candid uncertainty: 'possibly because of my age, I often switch between the two views'.[28] The atheists in *Laws*, on the other hand, took a firm stance and erased the divine from the universe, rejecting the idea that the cosmos was the product of intelligent design, or in Plato's vocabulary, τέχνη. These differences in the reception, and the levels of confidence in, the discordant theories of the natural philosophers have a lived-in plausibility to them, and suggest that such ideas could be used to support natural theology or atheism, but so too were there dilettante students of natural philosophy like Theaetetus who preferred to sit on the fence.

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[28] Pl. *Soph.* 265c7–d4: ἐγὼ μὲν ἴσως διὰ τὴν ἡλικίαν πολλάκις ἀμφότερα μεταδοξάζω. In the famed 'autobiography' passage, Socrates similarly explained that he only pursued scientific investigation (περὶ φύσεως ἱστορίαν) when he was young. For a time he was a voracious student of biology, but also inquiries into the soul and into the heavens (τὰ περὶ τὸν οὐρανόν), but eventually he fell into the same abyss of indecision as Theaetetus: καὶ πολλάκις ἐμαυτὸν ἄνω κάτω μετέβαλλον σκοπῶν πρῶτον τὰ τοιάδε (Pl. *Phd.* 96a6–c2 ≠ DK; but see LM D7).

All three positions are strongly attested in Plato. Unlike the wavering Theaetetus or the hardened atheists, Plato used his characters to defend an assertive natural theology in his mature works *Timaeus* and *Laws*, embracing a conception of the universe that was crowded with gods in every corner of the observable and unobservable world and imprinted everywhere with signs of intelligent design. In *Timaeus* he claimed that the cosmos was crafted by a divine mind which he called the demiurge, the poet or the father of the cosmos, albeit from Plato's perspective, this figure was only one of the many gods in existence.[29] In this direction, we learn from *Timaeus* that Plato further recognised the cosmos as a deity endowed with a soul by the intelligent craftsman, and to this pantheon of two he added the visible heavenly bodies, and, in a strategically unspecified capacity, the gods of civic and theogonic tradition.[30] In *Laws*, however, Plato did not reproduce this synoptic theology from *Timaeus* but only a defensive theology which was much narrower in scope, although it would be fair to say that his exposition of atheism in *Laws* was clearly developed with *Timaeus* in mind.[31] For instance, both the world picture of *Timaeus* and the atheistic cosmology of *Laws* shared in common that there are four elements, but the atheistic cosmology differently dispensed with the existence of the craftsman and the cosmic souls within

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[29] God as a divine δημιουργός/ποιητής/πατήρ of the cosmos: Pl. *Tim.* 27d5–29b1; a divine νοῦς rules the universe and orders the years, seasons and months: Pl. *Phlb.* 30a3–d8.

[30] The endowment of soul of the 'created god', the cosmos: Pl. *Ti.* 34a8–b10; the heavenly/visible gods, termed οὐράνιον θεῶν γένος, θεοὶ ὁρατοί: *Ti.* 39e7–40d5; conventional gods: *Ti.* 40d6–41a6.

[31] Similarly Schofield 2006: 324–5 calls this the 'philosophical limitation' reading which 'assesses the *Laws*' theology as it does relative to its function in the dialogue'.

his creation.[32] These commonalities have encouraged the popular view that the atheistic narrative in *Laws* was a 'Platonic construction' which misrepresented earlier natural philosophers (and sophistic thinkers) so that they could serve as a simplistic counterpoint for Plato's mature theological thought.[33] This reading, however, has been challenged for underselling the philosophical richness of the atheistic position in *Laws*,[34] and ultimately it equates two quite distinct claims. Certainly, Plato relied on his own theoretical assumptions and vocabulary when he presented the ideas of others, and there is no question that he selected an extreme position with which to oppose his own; this was a common debating practice before Plato's time in the fifth century. But just as it is problematic to suggest that Plato created the materialistic view of the soul in *Phaedo* when he used his own evocative imagery for describing it and deployed it as an obvious dialectical foil for his stance that the soul is immortal, the atheistic position in *Laws* should not be casually reduced to Plato's presentation of it on the trivial grounds that he presented the view in his own language.[35]

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[32] Pl. *Ti.* 52d4–53b7; cf. Mayhew 2008: 79: 'Plato's model for atheism is in part the *Timaeus* conception of earth, air, fire and water, only without the demiurge'.

[33] To use the phrase of Laks 2022: 144; see earlier Solmsen 1936: 209–10; Mahieu 1964: 45; Stalley 1983: 168; Zeppi 1988, esp. 230–3; Parker 1996: 213 n. 58; Schöpsdau 2011: 385; Harrison 2025: 101.

[34] Sedley 2013: 334: '[w]hen the Athenian speaks of large numbers of atheists, we can allow for some McCarthyite exaggeration, but it is hardly plausible that Plato has simply invented them wholesale. It seems to me rather clear that he is describing an intellectual trend which he has directly encountered at Athens'.

[35] Cf. Simmias' 'lyre objection' to Socrates at *Phd.* 86b7–c2; the imagery presented in this objection is undoubtedly Platonic, but this understanding of the soul was accepted by some of his contemporaries (i.e., that the soul supervenes upon the body and perishes when it dies).

The cosmogony that Plato's Athenian implicated with atheism took the following course. According to most authorities of natural philosophy, there was a period of primitive stasis before the formation of the universe when all the matter in existence was packed together in a motionless mass. In this shadowy, pre-cosmic past, 'everything was together' (τὰ πάντα ὁμοῦ γενόμενα).[36] However, as one of the foremost prosecutors against these reductive experiments in natural philosophy, Plato was not satisfied that an atheist could explain how the mass could have moved without the involvement of a divine agency, and it ought to have stayed put in its lonely, chaotic state.[37] Nevertheless, there is enough substance to Plato's outline of the atheistic narrative that it can be assumed his atheist opponent would have replied that the first motion occurred naturally. Earlier in his summary, Athenian explained that the atheists believed that matter had different properties like hardness and softness, or warmth and cold, but these opposites could in turn attract opposites, and through a kind of law of attraction the matter moved (φέρεσθαι) and clustered together (συμπίπτειν) to form bigger composite bodies, and presumably they were repelled from similar qualities.[38] No doubt this was how Plato's atheists would say that the initial stasis broke down: there was a blind chain reaction where different properties in the mix could not but interact and cause motion. The initial motion did not need to be divine.

Echoing his basic ontology in his *Timaeus*, Plato had it that the universal narrative of the atheists started with four elements. It is not clear whether these elements should be understood as fundamental materials or elements that could be broken down into further primitive elements or atoms, but this point of detail could

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[36] Pl. *Leg.* 10.895a6; on the Anaxagoras/Archelaus allusion, cf. Tate 1936a: 53; Betegh 2016: 25–6.

[37] For Plato's anti-materialist objections against atheism, see ch. 6, below.

[38] Pl. *Leg.* 10.889b5–c2.

have been left vague on purpose to retain the generality of the summary.[39] More important is what comes next. While Plato thought that divinity was suffused throughout the cosmic order and governed all the orderly motions within it, he was clear that the atheistic opposition would deny any divinity or life to their four elements. This represents a remarkable break from the earliest traditions of natural philosophy, and Plato did not hesitate to point it out. For the first Greek natural philosopher Thales, 'everything is full of gods' (πάντα πλήρη θεῶν εἶναι), but the Athenian attributed the opposite idea to the atheists, inverting the dictum of Thales as though to suggest that they betrayed the original cause of Greek philosophy: 'everything is empty of gods' (θεῶν ἔρημα εἶναι πάντα).[40] Condemnatory rhetoric indeed, but as a testimony this shows equally that Plato's atheists not only denied *divine causality*, but also *divine identity*, since for them there were no divine forces that existed in the cosmos, and the heavenly bodies and the elements were lifeless, unintelligent matter. Their uncompromising naturalism was summed up by the Athenian:

> They claim that fire, water, earth and air all exist by nature and by chance (φύσει πάντα εἶναι καὶ τύχῃ φασίν), and none of these by art (τέχνῃ δὲ οὐδὲν τούτων),

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[39] The point is not irrelevant, as Plato reduced his four elements to geometrical atoms in *Timaeus*. Fifth-century anticipations of this multileveled mode of explanation are not lacking either; Democritus recognised the four elements but reduced them to atoms (Diog. Laert. 9.44 <DK 68 A1, Democr. fr. 271 Luria) and Diogenes of Apollonia broke down the four elements into air (Simpl. *in Phys.* pp. 151.31–152.7 Diels = DK 64 B2, fr. 4 Laks).

[40] Thales *ap.* Arist. *De an.* 411a7–8 (<DK 11 A22); contrast Pl. *Leg.* 10.908c2, 10.899b8–9; if there were any doubt that Plato presented atheism as a betrayal of philosophy, Pl. *Tht.* 174a4–8 (= DK 11 A9) celebrated Thales as an archetypal, politically disengaged philosopher-cum-astronomer.

> and then after this the [heavenly and terrestrial] bodies (καὶ τὰ μετὰ ταῦτα αὖ σώματα), in regard to the earth, the sun and the moon and the stars, which come into being through these [elements] that are completely lifeless (διὰ τούτων γεγονέναι παντελῶς ὄντων ἀψύχων). And each of the elements is moved by chance (τύχῃ δὲ φερόμενα) each from the force imposed from their own power, and by means of this they clustered together, joining together in ways suitable to them (ᾗ συμπέπτωκεν ἁρμόττοντα οἰκείως πως), hot to cold or dry to moist or soft to hard (θερμὰ ψυχροῖς ἢ ξηρὰ πρὸς ὑγρὰ καὶ μαλακὰ πρὸς σκληρά), and howsoever everything blended together it was from the union of opposites according to chance, out of necessity (καὶ πάντα ὁπόσα τῇ τῶν ἐναντίων κράσει κατὰ τύχην ἐξ ἀνάγκης συνεκεράσθη).[41]

The exposition of the Athenian Visitor that followed is terse in some respects, and it fails to spell out the logical connection between the interaction of the opposites and the formation of the cosmos. It was explained in general terms that the process of repulsion and attraction was the original cause of motion, but the type of motion intended can only be assumed on the basis of common assumptions in the late fifth-century cosmologies that also happened to deny the divinity of the heavenly bodies. If these scientific models are taken into account, which will be detailed in the next section, it can be concluded that the original matter, once it got going, would have rotated in a vortex. What happened next is suggested by the reported view of the atheists that the sun, moon and stars were composed of stones and earth, since the conventional cosmological assumptions of this period would have it that these heavy bodies were swept into the vortex when the cosmos formed.[42] On this view, the heaviest bodies

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[41] Pl. *Leg.* 10.889b2–c2.

[42] Pl. *Leg.* 10.886d3–e1; as Graham 2013: 127–8, 185, 202 noted, the fifth-century understanding of the cosmos as a vortex was intended to accommodate the observation that the sun, moon and stars were heavy bodies that required a robust

would have sunk into the centre of this rotary motion, forming the earth, while the lighter material, particularly the air, was pushed outwards, comprising the material for the surrounding skies. However, after this short lacuna of explanation the Athenian concluded that the blind chain reaction started by the opposites was the main driver for the movement and formation of the heavens, and indeed the eventual formation of the plants and animals who inhabited it. The process from the original stasis to the present state of the world was complete (see Figure 3.1, below):

> And it is from this and in accordance with it [i.e. the interaction of the elements' opposites] that the entirety of heaven and the sum of things in heaven have come into being (ταύτῃ καὶ κατὰ ταῦτα οὕτω γεγεννηκέναι τόν τε οὐρανὸν ὅλον καὶ πάντα ὁπόσα κατ' οὐρανόν), including all animals and plants from the emergence of all the seasons; not through any intelligence, they claim, nor by a god nor through design (οὐδὲ διά τινα θεὸν οὐδὲ διὰ τέχνην), but as we said earlier, by nature and chance (φύσει καὶ τύχῃ).[43]

The belief that the cosmic order formed over time without any divine interference could take on the semblance of a modern atheistic cosmology. Certainly, it is closer to the modern belief in the Big Bang as a naturalistic event than some forms of early modern atheism which relied on the authority of Aristotle in the claim that the cosmic order had always existed.[44] In Plato's time and earlier, there were no natural

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force to keep them in place. There is little reason to believe that Plato would summarise a similar model that rested on a different assumption.

[43] Pl. *Leg.* 10.889c2–6.

[44] In the seventeenth-century clandestine book *Theophrastus redivivus*, e.g., the Biblical account of Creation was rejected for Aristotle's eternal conception of the

THE ORIGINAL STASIS	THE ELEMENTS START TO MOVE	THE ELEMENTS COMBINE	THE COSMOS IS FORMED
For many atheists, the primordial mixture of elements was stationary and 'kept together' (ὁμοῦ): 895a6.	However, by chance (τύχῃ), the four elements are moved by the interaction of opposites (hot, cold, etc.): 889b1–c6.	The four elements begin to cluster into larger composite bodies (e.g. lumps of stone, earth): 889b3; cf. Mayhew 2008: 80.	(By a rotatory motion), the clustered elements form the earth, sun and moon, and the heavens: 889b1–c6.

Figure 3.1. Plato, *Laws* 10 on the atheistic cosmogony.

philosophers who rejected cosmogony as such, which makes it safe to assume that any speculative atheists in the fifth or fourth centuries who thought about this subject would have considered the formation of the cosmos as a process that needed to be explained.[45] But there are, it should be stressed, key differences in the formal expression of this theory and its broader cultural context which tell against 'modernising' this doctrine too casually. The atheistic cosmogony in Plato held that there was a pre-cosmic stage when all the matter which now exists was once a static mass of elements which had no beginning, but according to the prevailing view in modern cosmology, the matter and energy in our universe can be no older than the Big Bang. Moreover, although it has been noted that there were convergences on several points of detail, there was never a scientific consensus about cosmology in Classical antiquity, but rather a sea of options to choose from among a small, educated minority: hence the indecision of Theaetetus in Plato's *Sophist*. This was compounded by the fact that the pursuit of

cosmos: *TR* 2.4, 241–65; for the same view in the 18th-century *Pitcairneana* see Hunter 2023: 144–57; for atheistic cosmogonical speculation in early modern Europe see Schröder 2012: 291–6.

[45] On the Aristotelian rejection of cosmogony see Solmsen 1958 and Johnson 2019.

the related field of 'meteorology' could be viewed with suspicion by the Athenian public. The cosmogony in *Laws* was an ingenious piece of armchair speculation, but it would have hardly looked convincing for most Greeks in Plato's time.

3.2.2 Fifth-Century Natural Theology as a Catalyst for Atheology

Clearly Plato presented this cosmological naturalism as the logical basis of atheism, but it is a separate issue whether he was responding to a real intellectual current of materialists who, wittingly or unwittingly, could have brought about atheism in some quarters. To this, one can reply in the affirmative: underlying Plato's description of naturalism in his own terms were a couple of scientific models known to Athens from the late fifth century, above all those of Anaxagoras and his pupil Archelaus, which already carried suggestive associations with atheism in the generation before Plato.[46] In this section these ideas will be articulated, but also read as potential catalysts of atheism as a means of independently validating Plato's report.

To explore the origins of fifth-century atheism in its naturalistic form, it is necessary to begin with some relevant examples of 'personal religion' from fifth-century Ionian thinkers, who wove different conceptions of the divine into their thought.[47] Canonically, it is said that the first thinker to bring natural philosophy to Athens was Anaxagoras, who wrote a scientific treatise by the mid-fifth century which aimed to explain the origins of the universe and account for diverse natural

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[46] On the impact of Archelaus on the atheistic cosmological and cultural narrative in *Laws*, see Tate 1936a and Betegh 2016; these studies very much influence the argument developed in this section.

[47] On 'personal religion' and the Greek philosophers, cf. Kindt 2015: 39–41.

phenomena, and in that order.[48] The book commenced with a confident, even dogmatic assertion about the state of things before the formation of the universe, opening with the famous words later echoed by Plato's Athenian, 'all things were together' (ὁμοῦ χρήματα πάντα ἦν). Before the formation of the heavens and the earth, wrote Anaxagoras, the first combination of matter was a motionless and undifferentiated mass swamped in a layer of air and aether.[49] However, as Plato was aware, this theory was scarcely 'empty of gods': outside of the primordial mix was Mind (νοῦς), an eternal, self-governing intelligence which resolved upon ordering the mix into an orderly whole with the power of its thought.[50] Mind initiated the process by telepathically generating a rotation (περιχώρησις) within the mix which allowed the matter inside the mass to move and differentiate at the same time. Simplicius quoted a famous passage from the text that maps out this remarkable process and serves simultaneously as a praise of Mind's unrivalled power over all things. It has often been noted that Anaxagoras'

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[48] Arist. *Metaph.* 984a11–3 (<DK 59 A43 [1]) implies Anaxagoras' treatise was authored somewhat later in his life, at any rate after Empedocles wrote; cf. Mansfeld 1980: 89–95.

[49] Simpl. *in Phys.* p. 155.26–7 Diels (<DK 59 B1); cf. Diog. Laert. 2.6 (<DK 59 A1); cf. Guthrie 1965: 296–8 and Curd 2007: 33–5; on the semblance of dogmatism in Anaxagoras (in view of the showmanship of these surviving fragments, at any rate) see Schofield 1980: 22–33.

[50] On Anaxagoras' innovative dualism between mind and matter see Sedley 2007: 11–2; cf. Guthrie 1965: 276–9. Similarly to Plato's vision of the cosmic soul in *Laws*, however, the νοῦς of Anaxagoras is often a 'mass noun' in his thought, denoting a *stuff*: see Arist. *Metaph.* 984b15–8 (= DK 59 A58) and Barnes 1982: 319. Put differently, sometimes νοῦς in Anaxagoras is an *agent* and sometimes an immaterial *substance* (and the first sense of νοῦς always implies the other).

description of Mind's independence and power has strong religious overtones, affording a glimpse into his 'personal religion':[51]

> The other things possess a portion of everything, but Mind is unlimited and master of itself (νοῦς δέ ἐστιν ἄπειρον καὶ αὐτοκρατὲς), and it has not been mixed with anything but is the only one that is self-existent (καὶ μέμεικται οὐδενὶ χρήματι, ἀλλὰ μόνος αὐτὸς ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ ἐστιν). […] For it is at the same time both the thinnest of all things and the purest (ἔστι γὰρ λεπτότατόν τε πάντων χρημάτων καὶ καθαρώτατον), and in particular it retains the full decision concerning everything and possesses the greatest power (καὶ γνώμην γε περὶ παντὸς πᾶσαν ἴσχει καὶ ἰσχύει μέγιστον); and of the things that have life, whether they are larger or smaller, of these Mind is master (νοῦς κρατεῖ); and Mind has been master of the whole rotation (καὶ τῆς περιχωρήσιος τῆς συμπάσης νοῦς ἐκράτησεν), so that there would be rotation at the beginning (ὥστε περιχωρῆσαι τὴν ἀρχήν). And the rotation began at first from the small, then it rotates more broadly, and it will continue to become even broader. And the things that mix as well as those that are detached and separate out — all these Mind decided (πάντα ἔγνω νοῦς). And as things were going to be and as all things were that now are not, and as all things are now and as they will be, Mind separated and ordered them all (πάντα διεκόσμησε νοῦς), as well as this rotation, which is being performed now by the heavenly bodies, the sun, the moon, the air, and the aether, which are separating out (ἣν νῦν περιχωρέει τά τε ἄστρα καὶ ὁ ἥλιος καὶ ἡ σελήνη καὶ ὁ ἀὴρ καὶ ὁ αἰθὴρ οἱ ἀποκρινόμενοι). And the rotation itself caused the detachment (ἡ δὲ περιχώρησις αὕτη ἐποίησεν ἀποκρίνεσθαι). And from the rarefied the dense separates out, from the cold the warm, from the dark the bright, and from

[51] On the hymn-like quality of the fragment see e.g. Schofield 1980: 4, 7.

> the moist the dry. Numerous are the parts of numerous things; yet nothing is completely detached or separates out from one another, except Mind.[52]

If this narrative left unresolved how this sequence of stasis, rotation and separation accounts for the present position of the earth and the surrounding skies, Simplicius quoted another passage from the text 'a bit further on' (μετ' ὀλίγα) where Anaxagoras explained the process quite clearly. He continued, in a drier expository tone, that the dark and cold materials sank into the centre of the περιχώρησις, while the thinner, warm and dry materials were pushed outward towards the pervasive aether from the original mix. This led Anaxagoras to conclude that the earth was fixed in the middle of the cosmos, as it was kept in place by a regular rotary motion:

> What is dense and what is moist and what is cold and what is dark came together to where earth is now (ἐνθάδε συνεχώρησεν ἔνθα νῦν γῆ), while what is thin and what is warm and what is dry went outward to the farthest part of the aether (τὸ δὲ ἀραιὸν καὶ τὸ θερμὸν καὶ τὸ ξηρὸν ἐξεχώρησεν εἰς τὸ πρόσω τοῦ αἰθέρος).[53]

This accounts for the centrality of earth and the rotation of the heavens, but how did the heavenly bodies come to orbit the skies? Anaxagoras presented another elegant solution. In his view the rotation of the cosmos was sufficiently rapid that it caught stones from the centre, which were whisked into the outer whirlpool of aether. After

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[52] Simpl. *in Phys.* pp. 156.14–5, 156.19–157.2 Diels (<DK 59 B12); adapted translation from LM (Anaxagoras D27); I have, however, departed from this translation by capitalising Mind (νοῦς) to emphasise its special agency in Anaxagoras' thought.

[53] Simpl. *in Phys.* p. 179.3–6 Diels (= DK 59 B15); translation from LM (Anaxagoras D30).

this, the hot upper atmosphere of the aether set them alight, scorching the stones and recasting them as the flaming sun and stars in the sky. A late doxographic epitome of Aëtius provides an admirably clear testimony for this next phase:

> [For Anaxagoras] the surrounding aether (τὸν περικείμενον αἰθέρα) is of fire according to its substance and, having snatched up stones from the earth by the vigour of its rotation (ὑτονίᾳ τῆς περιδινήσεως ἀναρπάσαντα πέτρους ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς) and having ignited them, it has turned them into heavenly bodies.[54]

When he developed this scientific model Anaxagoras was no doubt working within a tradition, and he was not altogether novel in his ambitious system building which encompassed cosmogony and cosmology in a single narrative exposition. His scientific conception of the divine as a device for explaining the order of the cosmos — although no doubt scandalous for some conservative Athenians who would deny that such an impersonal being could count as a god — was already a key working assumption among the earlier Ionian natural philosophers.[55] In other respects, however, Anaxagoras was markedly original, and his theories left a lasting impression on natural philosophy in the late fifth century. He was the first Presocratic philosopher, as Daniel Graham has argued in careful detail, to develop a 'lithic model' in natural philosophy, envisioning the cosmos as a vortex that whisked around heavy bodies of stones (in the case of the sun and stars) and earth (in the case of the moon).[56] In a few respects this model appealed to natural philosophers for its apparent empirical

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[54] Aët. 2.13.3 (= DK 59 A71), adapted translation from LM (Anaxagoras D36).

[55] On the gods in Ionian natural philosophy as 'hypothetical, explanatory entities' which were speculatively inferred from their effects, see Gerson 1990: 2–14.

[56] Graham 2013: 134–6, 201–4.

plausibility: as Aristotle noted in *On the Heavens*, the notion of the universe as a swirling vortex (δίνησις) was supported by analogies with liquids and the air, implying in the former case that the sedimented foam which formed at the centre of a stirred liquid resembled the central position of earth in the vortex.[57] Equally, this analogy could support the Anaxagorean conception of the heavenly bodies, as when a drink is stirred, any solids in the cup which rise to the top will rotate outward, which credits the idea that the heavenly bodies were solids trapped in a stirred cosmic mixture. But it would be wrong to suppose that this view about the heavenly bodies turned upon this conjecture alone. It is likely that the cart-sized meteorite which landed in Aegospotami in 467/466 BCE was used to support Anaxagoras' theory that the sun and stars were stones, and Diogenes of Apollonia expressly appealed to meteorites to support a similar hypothesis.[58] Anaxagoras' student Archelaus left this aspect of his master's system unchanged, and Democritus agreed that the sun and stars were hot stones in a vortex.[59]

One innovation of Anaxagoras that *was* discarded in subsequent fifth century thought, however, was his unique positioning of Mind as an entity separate from the

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[57] Arist. *Cael.* 295a9–21 (>DK 31 A67), cf. Arist. [*Mech.*] 858b4–5; Hippoc. *Morb.* 4.55.3; the ancient observations of this phenomenon were clarified in Tigner 1974: 439.

[58] Capelle 1912: 429; Gigon 1936: 13, 41; Guthrie 1965: 302–4; Graham 2013: 159–65. This conjecture of Anaxagoras can be gathered from Plut. *Vit. Lys.* 12.2 (<DK 59 A12), where meteorites are described as fallen stars violently dislodged from orbit; confirming this point, the testimony on Diogenes of Apollonia draws the connection directly: Aët. 2.13.5, 9 (= DK 64 A12, test. 26c Laks).

[59] Archelaus: Aët. 2.13.6 (= DK 60 A15, Arch. test. 71 TW), which is corroborated in Diog. Laert. 2.17 (<DK 60 A1, Arch. test. 40 TW) and Hippol. *Ref.* 1.9.3 (<DK 60 A4, Arch. test. 32 TW); Democritus: Aët. 2.13.4 (= DK 68 A 85), to be read alongside Diog. Laert. 9.32 (= DK 67 A1; cf. Democr. fr. 393 Luria).

mix of the physical world. This was a break from the dominant Presocratic tendency to imagine the gods as immanent forces in the cosmic order, summed up by Thales' dictum that 'everything is full of gods', and soon enough the pendulum would swing back to the founder of natural philosophy.[60] The alternative, post-Anaxagorean theology that divine air or aether pervaded through the cosmic vortex became immensely popular in Classical thought, and it was easy to retain the idea that a rotation caused the initial separation of materials without committing to the assumption that an external power had to initiate the process. Such Ionian expressions of personal religion travelled so widely in Greek thought that it found some endorsement in Hippocratic medicine.[61] Archelaus and Diogenes of Apollonia confidently identified the divine with air, and through a favourable reading of Homer Diogenes identified Zeus with the same element.[62] The trend was then picked up by Euripides, no doubt a

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[60] Gregory 2008: 102–16 contrasted Anaxagoras with the 'panpsychism' of the earlier Presocratics.

[61] Hippoc. *Carn.* 2; note again the hymnlike terminology conferred on aether, with divine attributes (immortality, omniscience and supreme intelligence) that recall the terminology of Anaxagoras: δοκέει δέ μοι ὃ καλέομεν θερμόν, ἀθάνατόν τε εἶναι καὶ νοέειν πάντα καὶ ὁρῆν καὶ ἀκούειν καὶ εἰδέναι πάντα καὶ τὰ ἐόντα καὶ τὰ μέλλοντα ἔσεσθαι. For a similarly religious veneration of air in Diogenes of Apollonia, which is another plausible influence on this passage, see Simpl. *in Phys.* pp. 152.22–5 Diels (<DK 64 B5, fr. 9 Laks); cf. Laks 1983: 44.

[62] Archelaus: Aët. 1.7.5 (= DK 60 A12, Arch. test. 65 TW): Ἀρχέλαος ἀέρα καὶ νοῦν τὸν θεόν, οὐ μέντοι κοσμοποιὸν τὸν νοῦν. Diogenes of Apollonia: Phld. *Piet.*, *P.Herc.* 1428 fr. 18b.2–8 Schober (= DK 64 A8, T6 Laks, cf. Hom. *Il.* 24.88); cf. Laks 1983: 102. Guthrie 1965: 365 n. 2 cautioned that 'what Diogenes thought of the popular gods is not known', but this passage provides more than a clue. Somewhat differently to these thinkers, the fifth-century atomists may have posited gods which

weather vane for registering these new ideas and fads. A small pile of fragments from his plays imply dramatic circumstances where his characters invoked aether (αἰθήρ) as Zeus, equating him with this heavenly element and praising him for his supreme and all-embracing power over the cosmos.[63] Zeus was equally seen through this lens in the *Trojan Women* (415 BCE) when Hecuba sighted Menelaus and made a hopeful prayer that Zeus would set things aright and punish the adultery of Helen.[64] A funerary epigram dedicated before the Archidamian War, the Potidaea Inscription (432 BCE), had it that the souls of the fallen Athenian soldiers were received into the divine aether.[65] It can be concluded, then, that natural philosophers after Anaxagoras did not deny the existence of the divine and often posited a pervasive intelligent material throughout the cosmos, and it was usual for them to identify this material with the traditional gods and for non-philosophers to repurpose this idea in different directions. There are, it is true, late ancient testimonies that accuse some natural philosophers from this generation of atheism, most notably Hippon of Samos, but his cosmology and psychology can be read to suggest that he construed water (or moisture) as a divine principle in the tradition of Thales.[66]

This picture of Ionian natural philosophy stands in contrast with *Battling the Gods* (2015) by Tim Whitmarsh, who argues that naturalistic atheism was part of the canonical tradition of these philosophers in some areas and a feasible potential in

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were composed out of fiery soul-atoms: see especially Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.120 and Piergiacomi 2017: 17–31.

[63] Eur. frr. 877 K, 919 K, 941 K; cf. Critias *TrGF* fr. 4 S (= DK 88 B19).

[64] Eur. *Tro.* 884–9.

[65] *IG* I^3 1179; for a recent discussion on this funerary epigram, see Nichols 2024.

[66] This interpretation of Hippon is defended in Appendix C, below.

others.[67] But Whitmarsh raises an excellent point about the negotiable conceptual boundaries that surface when a god is identified with a material substance like air. 'There is however a rather more subversive interpretation', Whitmarsh points out, where an element conventionally termed as god is 'no more than a property of the material world itself'.[68] Whitmarsh sees this 'subversive interpretation' as a radical potential behind the original intent behind system-builders of natural philosophy like Anaximenes or Anaxagoras, although we are arguably on firmer ground if we impute this interpretation to ancient readers of this tradition. Indeed, besides the naturalistic doctrine in Plato's *Laws*, there is a fifth-century text which arguably exhibited an atheistic cosmology which confirms that the cosmologies of the post-Anaxagoreans were already twisted in novel atheistic directions in the generation before Plato. The Sisyphus fragment, likely written by Plato's uncle, Critias of Athens (*c.* 460–403 BCE), is a speech from a lost Attic drama which argued that the existence of the gods was a lie devised to quash undetected crime in civil society. The force of this argument will be discussed further on (at ch. 3.3.2), but the scientific terminology used by the speaker Sisyphus is a relevant concern. When he mused that the inventor of the gods chose to locate their abode in the sky to scare mortals into submitting to their divine laws, there is a strange disjunct between the dominant religious interpretation of the heavens as the domain of Zeus and Sisyphus' cool presentation of it. This is not so much asserted as casually implied by the tyrant, in that his vocabulary about the heavens was cribbed from the 'lithic model' of Ionian thought which envisaged the cosmos as a vortex which

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[67] That is, Whitmarsh 2015 argues, in an exploratory vein, that Anaximander, Anaximenes and Anaxagoras *could* have been naturalistic atheists who used theological language as a metaphor (56–9, 64–6), but he presents Hippon of Samos as an atheist proper (63–4).

[68] Whitmarsh 2015: 58.

carried around smouldering, lifeless stones. This is seen when Sisyphus describes the skies as a circuit (περιφορά) and the sun as a hot ingot (μύδρος):[69]

> [The shrewd sage] said that the gods lived in a place where he could terrify people the most, telling this story: from here he recognised what was frightening to mortals, from here were the benefits for their miserable lives, which came from the revolutions high above (ἐκ τῆς ὕπερθε περιφορᾶς), where he caught sight of flashes of lightning, terrifying crashes of thunder, and the starry-faced frame of heaven (τό τ' ἀστερωπὸν οὐρανοῦ δέμας), a fine piece of embroidery from the master craftsman Time (Χρόνου καλὸν ποίκιλμα, τέκτονος σοφοῦ). From here proceeds the radiant molten stone of a star (ὅθεν τε λαμπρὸς ἀστέρος στείχει μύδρος), from here the torrents of rainfall pour down to earth. Such were the fears he circled around humanity, through which he settled the divine in an appropriate place with his well-told story, and quelled lawlessness with laws …[70]

No talk of divine aether or Mind is anywhere to be found in Sisyphus' exposition. Although some might argue that Sisyphus personified the 'wise craftsman' of the heavens as Time,[71] it would be wrong to credit any theological meaning to this. In

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[69] Critias, *TrGF* fr. 19.31, 35 S (<DK 88 B25); On μύδρος in this passage as an allusion to Anaxagoras see Egli 2003: 47 n. 4; Sedley 2013: 340–1; Betegh 2016: 25. That μύδρος could refer instead to a meteorite, so e.g. Davies 1989: 21, is incorrect; as was noted by Cipolla 2003: 245, the descent of the sun here refers to its setting to the west, and στείχειν expresses a steady motion inappropriate for a racing meteorite, which is confirmed in epic diction: cf. LSJ s.v. and Hom. *Od.* 11.17: οὔθ' ὁπότ' ἂν στείχῃσι πρὸς οὐρανὸν ἀστερόεντα (of Helios).

[70] Critias, *TrGF* fr. 19.27–40 S (<DK 88 B25).

[71] Critias, *TrGF* fr. 19.34 S (Χρόνου … τέκτονος σοφοῦ).

everyday Greek idiom calling Time a 'wise craftsman' was a *façon de parler* about devastating changes in the world, such as physical aging, and Time was not a deity in any Greek cult.[72] In the absence of any viable alternative, the atheists in Plato who proclaimed that the heavens were created 'by nature and by chance' provide our interpretive key for this passage: Sisyphus was entertaining a poetic but naturalistic claim that the heavens had formed through a blind process *over time*.[73] If this is right, it can be concluded that fifth-century authors like Critias were already aware of atheistic readings of Ionian scientific models which were more coherent and sophisticated than the suspicious readings of the natural philosophers seen in the second chapter. Ionian naturalism was realised by the late fifth century.

The emergence of atheism from earlier theistic thought is not as remarkable as it might first appear, and if it were impossible, one could never explain how atheism surfaced in any society. At the same time, the textbooks of the natural philosophers were not atheistic manifestos, and the *explanandum* is how their ideas could be creatively reread that way. It is only a starting point to conclude that Ionian natural philosophy was not always cooperative with Greek tradition, and key assumptions in traditional knowledge systems could be rejected by Greek intellectuals in a competitively argumentative spirit, such as the belief in the gods as arbitrary forces in the natural world, or trust in the authority of divination.[74] Xenophanes had already

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[72] Crates, *Anth. Lyr. Graec.* fr. 17 and Diphilus fr. 84 KA (contrast the less satisfactory use of this evidence in Henry 2023: 524 n. 7); on the absence of Chronos in traditional Greek cult, cf. Wilamowitz 1895: 174: 'die Zeit ist etwas viel zu abstractes für den lebendigen Glauben'.

[73] Henry 2023, developing a suggestion from Dillon and Gergel 2003: 392; cf. Pl. *Leg.* 10.889c2–6, quoted above in the preceding section.

[74] On 'fundamental' criticisms and disagreements in Classical Greek thought see Lloyd 1979: 18–20; cf. Lloyd 1996: 47–73.

discarded these assumptions when he denied the godhood of rainbows and St. Elmo's fire, or dismissed the expertise of seers, and in the latter half of the fifth century Anaxagoras did not merely reject divination and natural omens, such as solar eclipses, but mapped out overriding scientific explanations for the same evidence cited by religious experts and their clientele.[75] In the fifth and fourth centuries, the Hippocratic physicians attacked traditional healers with their alternative creed about the origins of disease that 'nothing occurs without a natural condition' (οὐδὲν ἄνευ φύσιος γίνεται),[76] and these meteorological and medical perspectives coloured the reflections of Thucydides, who denied the temptation to read any supernatural significance into the causes of the plague of Athens or the freakish natural catastrophes of the Sicilian expedition.[77] That these overriding explanations could be applied against more fundamental religious beliefs was perilously suggested in Aristophanes' *Clouds* when the 'meteorologist' Socrates refuted the existence of Zeus in three rounds of argument,

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[75] Xenophanes' rejection of minor nature gods: Σ BLT Eust. *Il.* 11.27 (= DK 11 B32); cf. Aët. 2.18.1 (= DK 11 A39); cf. Mourelatos 2008: 149–50; Xenophanes' dismissal of mantic expertise: Aët. 5.1.2, Cic. *Div.* 1.5 (= DK 21 A52). Anaxagoras' competitive rejection of divination: Plut. *Vit. Per.* 6.2–4 (= DK 59 A16; perhaps originally from Stesimbrotus' pamphlet on Pericles and his rival Thucydides); Anaxagoras' reductive position on solar eclipses: Hippol. *Ref.* 1.8.9 (<DK 59 A42); cf. Pericles at Plut. *Vit. Per.* 35.1–2 (<Heraclid. Pont. fr. 47 Wehrli).

[76] Hippoc. *Morb. sacr.* 1, *Aer.* 22 (quoted); see Lloyd 1979: 15–58; cf. Lloyd 1983: 208–9. Both authors present nature as divine in a general sense, but this rendered no disease 'more divine' (θειότερον) than any other.

[77] For this interpretation of Thucydides, see Appendix A.

replacing his powers with a suite of naturalistic explanations and a throng of new gods who bore little resemblance to the old anthropomorphic pantheon.[78]

But at this stage a scientist such as Diogenes of Apollonia or a theologically experimental character in Euripides would demur: 'I hoped to reunite Zeus with his true nature, not to destroy him'. And they would not necessarily be wrong, in this sense; there is nothing inherently atheistic in redefining Zeus as a natural elemental power. But the philosophical process of redefining god could reduce this notion to a very thin concept indeed, and all the more would this apply for the fifth-century cosmologies which removed or reduced the role of divinity in the formation of the cosmic order. It is true that, through Socrates in *Phaedo*, Plato complained that Anaxagoras set too much importance on materialist explanations and neglected to ask why the world was intentionally ordered in an optimal way.[79] But his reliance on efficient causation over final causation would pale in comparison with the more reductive efforts of several later natural philosophers. Anaxagoras' student Archelaus situated divine air within the universe and divested it of the power to create the cosmic order,[80] while the atomists

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[78] Ar. *Nub.* 365–411; this meant that Socrates in the *Clouds* was only an 'atheist' in the sense of Drachmann 1922: 1–2, retaining a belief in airy, if insubstantial deities.

[79] Pl. *Phd.* 97b8–98e5 (>DK 59 A47); Plato's complaint that Mind was too meagre in the system of Anaxagoras was echoed by Gigon 1936: 37–41 and von Fritz 1971. But Plato did not view Anaxagoras as the most egregious catalyst for atheism; in a concession at *Leg.* 12.967a7–d1, the Athenian concedes that *some* materialists allowed for a divine Mind to operate πάνθ' ὅσα κατ' οὐρανόν, in a transparent reference to Anaxagoras that distanced him from the ire directed against the reductive materialists; Solmsen 1942: 91 rightly appreciated this distinction.

[80] Aët. *plac.* 1.7.5 (= DK 60 A12, Arch. test. 65 TW): Ἀρχέλαος ἀέρα καὶ νοῦν τὸν θεόν, οὐ μέντοι κοσμοποιὸν τὸν νοῦν; contrast Anaxagoras in Aët. *plac.* 1.7.6 (≠ DK 59). This testimony can be read in two ways, where (1) is more likely: (1) Mind was a

envisioned the origins of the universe as a chance event which involved no divine forces.[81] These developments should not be considered as potentially atheistic in a vacuum, of course, but Aristophanic comedy shows that many Greeks would not have considered air or aether as worthy of the name of god. When Strepsiades first met Socrates' swarm of cloud goddesses in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, his first reaction was not to bow in their presence but to express surprise that the clouds were anything more than diffuse smoke.[82] In a more incisive way, Euripides' in-law Mnesilochus in *Thesmophoriazusae* was deeply unimpressed with the idea that aether was a god who could safeguard oaths.[83] It can be concluded, then, that the birth of Ionian atheism was the consequence of a negative synthesis of popular and philosophical assumptions: some readers of natural philosophy liked the idea that the cosmos formed over time without any divine agency and embraced the view that the sun and the heavenly bodies were lifeless matter, but they did not share the assumption of the natural philosophers

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causally inert material in the formation of the cosmos, and little more than scattered fairy dust (so Betegh 2016: 30); this is the most reading to take from οὐ μέντοι κοσμοποιὸν τὸν νοῦν. But perhaps (2) Mind *caused* motion in the cosmos, but without any *intent* of ordering it (cf. Laks 1993 for a similar, anti-teleological reading of Anaxagoras' Mind); for Archelaus' Mind as a potential primitive cause of motion, see August. *De civ. d.* 8.2 (= DK 60 A10); cf. Guthrie 1965: 340. Regardless, the materialistic theology of Archelaus was more reductive than that of his teacher, and therefore easier to incorporate into an atheistic understanding of the world.

[81] For the cosmologies of Leucippus and Democritus, see Diog. Laert. 9.30–3, 44–5 (<DK 67 A1, DK 68 A1; cf. Democr. fr. 382 Luria); the atheistic potential in this doctrine has been appreciated by Trépanier 2010: 317, who writes that Democritus never promoted atheism but offered 'the tools for the job'.

[82] Ar. *Nub.* 330.

[83] Ar. *Thesm.* 271–2.

that an inert element could be a god. This is a rough trajectory for how a reader of natural philosophy could leap from a world which was 'full of gods' to 'empty of gods', and while the naturalistic understanding of a godless universe was never going to win any support in Athenian popular belief, it was available to intellectual circles in Athens several decades before Plato waged his polemical efforts against it.[84] Accidentally, and indirectly, 'no religion' was born from Ionian 'personal religion'.

3.3 Gods as Ancient Legal Conventions

The Athenian Visitor challenged materialism as the logical foundation of atheism, and in his rebuttal to the atheists he did not aim to prove the existence of the traditional gods of the state but merely lay down the law that there were invisible divine forces that moved the physical world (see ch. 6, below). However, even if Plato could have stopped at this point to refute atheism, he moved on to relate the next phase in their history of the world, that is, the cultural development of humanity and the emergence of human crafts which could change the natural world and create social constructs like laws, religion and morality. This was surely for a few reasons. One was of course dialectical: Plato wished to prove that intelligence was the ultimate power in the universe, and it made sense to platform the opposing point of view that intelligent design was merely a property of mortal creatures. But Plato had a broader agenda, too. He knew that there were theorists in Athens who wrote prose works that included cosmogony and cultural history in one story, such as Archelaus, and most likely he used these texts as a literary

[84] Cf. Tate 1936a: 53, who argued that Archelaus made Anaxagoras' natural philosophy more 'mechanical' and proposed that Plato's atheists stood for a generation of natural philosophers who did the same thing to Archelaus. Differently, however, I suggest that readers of Archelaus would be capable of the same task.

model to condemn their ideas about nature and culture as suggestive of atheism.[85] The effect of the next half of his atheistic world history is as much a sermon against the literary culture of Athens and the Athenian youth as it is an outline of anthropological atheism, but a serious atheist in antiquity would have had to confront how the gods were worshipped by different cultures if they did not exist, and all the more so if they agreed with Cleinias that religion was a cultural universal. According to their unauthorised version of cultural history, the gods were a social construct created by lawgivers in different city states, which was a distinctively Greek way of anticipating the atheistic dictum of Feuerbach that 'the secret of theology is anthropology'. As he did the hard naturalism which spawned out of Ionian thought, Plato seems to have been reacting against a real, lived-in philosophy.

3.3.1 Τέχνη and Νόμος: The Consensus of Ancient Lawgivers

To make a point that the atheists rejected the idea of intelligent design in the universe and dismissed morality and religion as social constructs, Plato's Athenian defaulted to the familiar Greek understanding of τέχνη, namely the idea of a craft as a specialised activity that involved fashioning or modifying something with a productive end in mind. For the Athenian Visitor, the atheists had been taught to believe that only humans and animals could have a τέχνη, which would cease to exist if animal life on earth were destroyed: it was an atheistic tenet that craft is 'mortal, from mortals' (θνητὴν ἐκ θνητῶν).[86] However, even if there was no intelligent design in the universe, this did not mean that Plato's atheists saw every craft as equal in merit. On the contrary, their materialist bias for the products of nature seems to have instilled in them a

[85] Tate 1936a: 53 and Betegh 2016: 3 propose Archelaus as the closest literary model.

[86] Pl. *Leg.* 10.889c6–d4.

Philistine disregard for anything remotely artificial; they dismissed music and painting as trivial tinkering, believing that the only arts of any merit were the ones that synchronised (κοινοῦν) with objective reality, such as farming and medicine. Rather than imitate nature or introduce fictional conventions, these productive τέχναι enhanced basic human survival and could change the natural world, producing serious commodities like food and medicine.[87] Plato situated this evaluation of these arts in the more widely shared assumption that the natural world (φύσις and τύχη) produced the most impressive and appealing things, and the contributions of art (τέχνη) were secondary productions that were neither genuine nor serious. This led them to the understanding that many arts and pursuits, including the art of politics, were largely imaginary impositions on the world.[88]

Although it might sound curious to dismiss the fine arts in this way, Plato was criticising an idea that was familiar to Athenian intellectual circles. The role of the crafts in the history of the world was an active topic of discussion in the literary world of Athens, where one could read books by sophists and natural philosophers which charted the cultural progress of humanity and traced the origins of τέχναι such as weaving, housebuilding or medicine. This included Archelaus of Athens, who wrote about how 'humans separated from the other animals and organised rulers, laws, crafts, cities and other matters' (ἡγεμόνας καὶ νόμους καὶ τέχνας καὶ πόλεις καὶ τὰ ἄλλα συνέστησαν).[89] By the late fifth century, however, there was growing disaffection among Athenian intellectual circles which led to critiques about the artificiality of convention and the frivolity of human crafts in the face of the permanent and causally

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[87] Pl. *Leg.* 10.889d4–6.

[88] Pl. *Leg.* 10.889a4–8.

[89] Archelaus: Hippol. *Ref.* 1.9.6 (= DK 60 A4, >Arch. test. 32 TW), cf. Betegh 2016: 5–6, 31–2; Democritus: Plut. *De soll. an.* 974a6–10 (DK 68 B154, Democr. fr. 559 Luria); Protagoras (but Platonised in the Great Speech): Pl. *Prt.* 321d1–5 (<DK 80 C1).

ultimate force that was nature, φύσις. Often, this was expressed by drawing an unfavourable contrast between nature and convention to expose the flawed thinking behind culturally arbitrary beliefs or spell out troubling cases when convention seemed to force people to act against their natural self-preservation.[90] One manifesto that spoke for this jaded intellectual generation was Antiphon's *Truth*, a late fifth-century sophistic text which stipulated outright that law and natural morality were hostile (πολεμίως) to each other.[91] Although scholars of Antiphon differ on whether the sophist outright promoted reckless lawbreaking or simply set out to examine the tensions between nature and custom in an exploratory way, it can be concluded for our present purposes that these teachings could *suggest* a radical antinomian doctrine to its readers, and Plato, for one, believed that this potential was realised in Athens.[92] That is, Plato took the view that the literary culture of Athens encouraged anti-conventional and heterodox views that turned the youth away from traditional piety and morality, which could be dismissed as an imaginary counterpart to the natural world. Even the Philistine idea entertained in *Laws* that a great number of human τέχναι were impositions which paled in comparison to nature would seem to trace back to

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[90] On the νόμος-φύσις antithesis in sophistic thought, which was deployed for other purposes as well, see Heinimann 1945; Guthrie 1971: 55–134; Bett 2023; on the fifth-century partisans of φύσις see Guthrie 1971: 101–31 and Kerferd 1981: 111–30.

[91] *P.Oxy.* 1364, fr. 1 cols. 2.23–3.18 (<Antiph. fr. 44a Pendrick, quoting col. 2.29).

[92] Lea 2024 takes Antiphon's *Truth* to favour immoralism, but contrast Decleva Caizzi 1999: 327; Gagarin 2002: 78, 91–2; Bonazzi 2020: 84–9. No less enigmatically, Archelaus saw justice as conventional rather than natural: Diog. Laert. 2.16 (<DK 60 A1, Arch. test. 40 TW; cf. *Suda* s.v. Ἀρχέλαος [α.4084] = DK 60 A2, Arch. test. 87 TW): τὸ δίκαιον εἶναι καὶ τὸ αἰσχρὸν οὐ φύσει, ἀλλὰ νόμωι; see Kahn 1981: 102–3; Betegh 2016; Kingsley 2024: 41.

Antiphon, which further reflects the reach of his criticisms.[93] Before the Cynics, there was already a sense that society and its trappings could harm the integrity of the individual, but this did not always have ascetic implications.

These iconoclastic views did not leave the gods unscathed, and the Athenian told his company that the youth of Athens were taught that the gods were social constructs which were created at an earlier stage of cultural history by lawgivers in different city states. On this view the gods were the product of νόμος, invented by practitioners of the political art,[94] which meant that the gods were imaginary social fictions from the past, with no more reality to them than an inheritance law. As Zeller realised, however, the Athenian implied that the atheists appealed in argument to the cultural diversity of gods worshipped in different city states as evidence that gods only 'existed' as objects of human invention and social consensus:[95]

> My dear fellow, they begin by claiming that the gods exist by art, not by nature but rather through laws (εἶναι πρῶτόν φασιν οὗτοι τέχνῃ, οὐ φύσει ἀλλά τισιν νόμοις), and these vary from place to place (καὶ τούτους ἄλλους ἄλλῃ), in whatever

[93] Antiphon had argued that human crafts were weaker and less permanent than the work of nature, appealing to the bizarre and false example of a buried bed. For Antiphon the wood from this bed would eventually sprout a tree, attesting to the immutable power of its natural material: see Harp. s.v. ἔμβιος and Arist. *Ph.* 193a9–28 (= DK 87 B2, Antiph. frr. 15a–b Pendrick); cf. Pendrick 2002: 284.

[94] Pl. *Leg.* 10.889d6–e1; cf. the diagram of Sedley 2013: 348.

[95] Zeller, *Phil. d. Gr.*[6] I.2, 1408: 'die Verschiedenheit der Götter beweise am besten, daß ihre Verehrung nur aus menschlicher Erfindung und Ubereinkunft herstamme'.

> way is agreed upon by each of the lawgivers (ὅπῃ ἕκαστοι ἑαυτοῖσι συνωμολόγησαν νομοθετούμενοι).[96]

The next step, for Plato, was the destruction of justice, which could be dismissed as a socially arbitrary norm that is always subject to revision in different communities:

> But we are not done. What is fine (τὰ καλά) is fine by nature (φύσει), but other matters are by convention (νόμῳ δὲ ἕτερα), and in fact justice (τὰ δίκαια) is not something according to nature, but rather people have continued to dispute amongst themselves on what forms it should take and have always changed it. And whenever they make justice different, it is presented as an authoritative standard (τότε κύρια ἕκαστα εἶναι), despite being created by art and laws rather than anything remotely natural. My good friends, all these ideas are presented to young people from clever men (φίλοι, ἅπαντα ἀνδρῶν σοφῶν παρὰ νέοις ἀνθρώποις) — both prose authors and poets (ἰδιωτῶν τε καὶ ποιητῶν) — who claim that the most righteous thing one can do is conquer by force (φασκόντων εἶναι τὸ δικαιότατον ὅτι τις ἂν νικᾷ βιαζόμενος).[97]

The sermon of the Athenian reached its climax with the realisation of the moral and religious consequences of these teachings from the literary culture of Athens. Once their trust in the gods and natural justice was eroded, the Athenian warned, there would be no reason for the youth to act morally or to respect the gods. As an alternative they would turn to a creed of amoral hedonism with no higher aim but zero-sum acquisition, embracing a lifestyle of self-regard that was known to the elite circles in Athens as 'the

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[96] Pl. *Leg.* 10.889e3–5.

[97] Pl. *Leg.* 10.889e5–890a5.

correct life according to nature' (κατὰ φύσιν ὀρθὸς βίος).[98] And if that were not bad enough, the Athenian continued, the atheists would have no fear of the gods, which would give them licence to commit acts of impiety, ἀσέβειαι.[99]

Such aggressive pulpit-talk of the Athenian is another reflection of the popular Greek bias against unbelief detailed in the previous chapter, where it was noted that atheism was associated with hedonism and a general disregard for divine and human laws.[100] Plato is a suspect commentator in this regard, and when the Athenian Visitor conceded later that he knew of some moral atheists who naturally inclined towards justice, this was already an admission that there were atheists who subscribed to a different code of ethics to the κατὰ φύσιν ὀρθὸς βίος embraced by statesmen from the urban elite. That Plato smoothed over these nuances is unsurprising in view of how often ancient atheists and freethinkers were mischaracterised by religious authors, and one need only recall that the Epicureans in the Hellenistic period or the Cārvāka school in Classical Indian thought were misrepresented as lawless hedonists by their philosophical opponents.[101] On the other hand, this does not warrant the conclusion that Plato's hostile portrait of anthropological atheism is therefore false, as it should be remembered that any real atheists in Classical antiquity would have necessarily recognised some forms of social convention as fictive human creations and included the gods among them. As will be seen in the next section, the notion that the gods were invented by lawgivers would have resonated with a common Greek way of thinking in Plato's time, and it is likely that anthropological atheism was a superstructure built

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[98] Pl. *Leg.* 10.890a8; cf. Pl. *Grg.* 491e7–492a7, which referenced the same egoistic creed in Athens ('the man who lives correctly', τὸν ὀρθῶς βιωσόμενον); on the sorts of elite who warmed to these ideas in Athens, see Dodds 1959 on *Grg.* 487c3.

[99] Pl. *Leg.* 10.890a5–9.

[100] See above, ch. 2.1.1.

[101] Bhattacharya 2011: 125–6, 170–1; cf. Gokhale 2015: 158.

upon older cultural theories from the late fifth century which inquired into the origins of religion.

3.3.2 Telling a Cultural Narrative about Religion

With Plato's exposition in *Laws* shelved for now, we are in a position to repeat the pattern of argument applied to Ionian naturalism: to examine how anthropological atheism in Classical Greek thought came out of a predominantly theological intellectual tradition which was concerned with tracing the origins of religious belief. Although this was probably not an antiquarian pursuit for fifth-century authors like Prodicus, Democritus and Herodotus, it is unlikely that this was a reaction against atheism or the denial of providence, as though to suggest that a Greek philosopher would have ignored thinking about the origins of religion unless it was perceived to be critically under threat.[102] In reality, the fifth-century Greek thinkers were under the spell of a new anthropological and sociological worldview in which every τέχνη and every human institution could be explained by an appeal to basic facts about human social life and their natural environment, and religion was not exempted from this scrutiny.[103] The sheer comprehensiveness of this methodological turn is especially set in relief by Damon of Oa, an Athenian musicologist and an advisor of Pericles. Departing from his mentors, Damon reappraised music as a sociological phenomenon when he reasoned that various styles of music could produce different social and moral effects in a community, with the consequence that changing these styles (τρόποι) would affect the 'standards of civic life of the highest importance' (πολιτικῶν νόμων τῶν

[102] *Pace* Billings (forthcoming), who argues that the anthropological thought of Prodicus and Democritus were defensive responses to moral atheism.

[103] In this sense, I am in closer agreement with Kahn 1997.

μεγίστων).[104] In a time of vigorous interdisciplinary debate when Greek thinkers could redefine old topics in new socio-cultural terms or explain the origins of τέχναι, there must have been many enriching conversations that took place about how convention was shaped by the world and even changed it. This is suggested by the fact that Damon was a friend of Prodicus, who developed a theory on the origins of religion as part of a culture narrative.[105] However, while Damon proposed an early sociological model of how music could have a cultural impact on a city state, Prodicus and many of his peers took an aetiological, anthropological standpoint: in different ways they tried to sketch a plausible culture narrative about how early humans came to discover the gods and worship them in their communities.

This is not to say that every author who undertook this project was equally committed to preserving the gamut of beliefs found in Greek 'folk theology', however, and indeed Protagoras may have written about the origins of religion in a book or display speech attributed to him in later antiquity called *On the Original Condition* (Περὶ τῆς ἐν ἀρχῇ καταστάσεως).[106] He canvassed the same topic as a character in Plato's *Protagoras*, at any rate, touching upon the origins of religion during his famous oration that virtue could be taught, although it is controversial whether this discourse is Plato's invention or a recapitulation of Protagoras.[107] What the speech does

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[104] As paraphrased by Socrates in Pl. *Resp.* 4.424c4–6 (<DK 37 B10, Damon B2 Wallace); for Damon, in the words of West 1992: 246, 'a musical revolution always means a social revolution'; cf. Wallace 2015: 38–9.

[105] Pl. *Lach.* 197d1–5 (= DK 37 B8, Damon A12 Wallace).

[106] Diog. Laert. 9.55 (<DK 80 A1); this title is surely a post-Classical editorial choice, although it may have echoed a phrase from a real Protagorean text.

[107] Pl. *Prt.* 320c8–322d5 (= DK 80 C1). There are different views on the provenance of this myth: (1), the Platonic myth relied on a prose ur-text by Protagoras: Nestle 1942: 282–9 and Barney 2019; (2), Plato lifts the myth from Protagoras (and not a prose

successfully convey, however, is a blend of cultural history and mythic narrative which dramatised a fabled past when the earliest humans existed in a state of barbaric ignorance. For Protagoras, this state of nature ceased when they were gifted by Prometheus with intellectual powers for self-preservation, but the human condition was only rounded out to the sophist's satisfaction once these mythic humans were conferred with social morality by Zeus and Hermes so that they could live together in city states as law-abiding citizens guided by the twin qualities justice and shame.[108] Interestingly for our purposes, however, Plato's avatar of Protagoras foregrounded the instinct for worshipping the gods as the first innovation that came from human rationality, expressing this in the language of myth: 'seeing that the human being shares a divine portion, primarily from their kinship with god (διὰ τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ συγγένειαν), they were the only living creatures who recognised gods (ζῴων μόνον θεοὺς ἐνόμισεν) and tried to set up altars and statues for them'.[109] Understandably enough, this might sound like a surprising claim for an agnostic, although the historical Protagoras may have meant to imply that the human impulse to worship the gods was so thoroughly deep-rooted and primitive that it denied humanity a convenient access point in history when they could test whether their idea of the divine was genuine or

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Kulturtheorie work): Manuwald 2013; (3), the Speech was a Platonic innovation: Kahn 1997: 256–7; cf. Henry 2022: 224–5; developing (3), Plato crafted the myth anew to illustrate Protagoras' concept of social morality more vividly: Bonazzi 2011.

[108] On the lack of logical historical development in Protagoras' (Hesiodic) narrative, in contrast to e.g. the *Kulturtheorie* found in the Sisyphus fragment, see Manuwald 2013: 172–5 and Barney 2019: 137. We are on firmer ground to speak of different *states* (καταστάσεις) of humanity in this narrative rather than stages in history, taking the book title of Protagoras, Περὶ τῆς ἐν ἀρχῇ καταστάσεως, as a guide.

[109] Pl. *Prt.* 322a3–5; on the primordial nature of religion in the Great Speech see Kerferd 1981: 140 and Barney 2019: 142.

merely a product of their creative ingenuity.[110] It is possible, on the other hand, that Protagoras never pushed this idea in his own work; clearly it made little impression on him, and Plato's Athenian would make a suspiciously similar claim about the human affinity with the gods in *Laws*.[111] Plato, nevertheless, presented this notion as characteristic for a sophist like Protagoras to argue, and there were other fifth-century intellectuals who were interested in exploring primitive religion as a psychological phenomenon.

Among them was the sophist Prodicus of Ceos (*c.* 460–*post* 399 BCE), who probably discussed the origins of religion in *Seasons* (Ὧραι), a compendious work which included the Choice of Heracles fable and an encomium that celebrated agriculture as the fount of civilisation.[112] The title of this book, although no doubt post-Classical in origin, suggests that nature and agriculture were the principal themes of *Seasons*, and it is likely that Prodicus personified the seasons as the Horae, the Greek nature goddesses who assisted in the growth of crops over the course of the seasons.[113] Consistent with his focus on the cultivation of nature, Prodicus reasoned that early

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[110] On the 'creative wisdom' (ἔντεχνος σοφία) of Hermes see Pl. *Prt.* 321d1–322b8.

[111] Pl. *Leg.* 10.899d6–8.

[112] Nestle 1936: 153; cf. Nestle 1942: 351–60; on Nestle's view, the *Seasons* would have contained (1) an encomium on agriculture, (2) a *Kulturgeschichte* account on the origins of religion and (3) the Choice of Heracles; but only (3) was explicitly connected with this text in our sources: see Σ Ar. *Nub.* 361a (<DK 84 B1 [1], Prodic. test. 80 Mayhew): φέρεται δὲ καὶ Προδίκου βιβλίον ἐπιγραφόμενον Ὧραι, ἐν ᾧ πεποίηκε τὸν Ἡρακλέα τῇ Ἀρετῇ καὶ τῇ Κακίᾳ συντυγχάνοντα.

[113] Traces of this connection are indicated in Themistius, who praised the products of the Horae and mentioned Prodicus' theory of religion in the same passage: see Nestle 1936: 157 and Kouloumentas 2018: 134–5 on Them. *Or.* 30.349a1–b5 (= DK 84 B5 [4], Prodic. test. 77 Mayhew).

religion originated with the worship of the natural world and its fruits. Cicero and Sextus Empiricus convey this clearly:

> What about Prodicus of Ceos, who claimed that things which are beneficial for human life (*ea quae prodessent hominum vitae*) were held to count as gods; really now, what religion did he manage to preserve?[114]

> And Prodicus of Ceos claimed that 'the ancients (οἱ παλαιοί) believed that the sun, moon, rivers and wellsprings, and above all everything which is useful for our life (καὶ σελήνην καὶ ποταμοὺς καὶ κρήνας καὶ καθόλου πάντα τὰ ὠφελοῦντα τὸν βίον ἡμῶν) were gods on the grounds that these items were offering a service (διὰ τὴν ἀπ' αὐτῶν ὠφέλειαν), just as we find the Egyptians worshipped the Nile', and on this basis bread was worshipped as Demeter (καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τὸν μὲν ἄρτον Δήμητραν νομισθῆναι), wine Dionysus, water Poseidon, fire Hephaestus and still more anything else that could be of service (καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τὸν μὲν ἄρτον Δήμητραν νομισθῆναι, τὸν δὲ οἶνον Διόνυσον, τὸ δὲ ὕδωρ Ποσειδῶνα, τὸ δὲ πῦρ Ἥφαιστον καὶ ἄδη τῶν εὐχρηστούντων ἕκαστον).[115]

> And Prodicus claimed that what was beneficial for life was apprehended as a god, as with the sun, moon, rivers, marshy lakes, grasslands, crops and everything of such a kind (Πρόδικος δὲ τὸ ὠφελοῦν τὸν βίον ὑπειλῆφθαι θεόν, ὡς ἥλιον καὶ σελήνην καὶ ποταμοὺς καὶ λίμνας καὶ λειμῶνας καὶ καρποὺς καὶ πᾶν τὸ τοιουτῶδες).[116]

This theory was clearly an attempt to uncover the original psychological impulse that ignited religious belief, but Prodicus also relied on ethnographic data and (probably)

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[114] Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.118 (<DK 84 B5 [2], Prodic. test. 73 Mayhew).

[115] Sext. Emp. *Math.* 9.18 (<DK 84 B5 [4], Prodic. test. 74 Mayhew).

[116] Sext. Emp. *Math.* 9.52–3 (= DK 84 B5 [5], Prodic. test. 75 Mayhew).

looked into how the gods originally acquired their names. At least it can be said that he appealed to an older religion to clarify the development of a later one, claiming erroneously that the Egyptians worshipped the Nile itself so as to elucidate why the early Greeks worshipped rivers and wellsprings and other natural phenomena.[117] But it is also likely that Prodicus relied on speculative etymology to clarify the origins of Greek religion, which finds some support from the cryptic testimony of Epicurus that Prodicus, Diagoras and Critias 'changed around the names of the gods' (παραγραμμίζ[ουσι] | τὰ τ̣[ῶ]ν̣ θεῶν [ὀνόμα]|τα).[118] How this worked in practice is suggested in a passage from Plato's *Cratylus* which probably owed something to Prodicus' idea that Greek religion originated in the practice of nature worship.[119] Citing this anthropological thesis in a moment of mantic inspiration, Socrates assumed the role of a linguistic expert and proposed that the earliest Greeks came to recognise the gods through the observation of the natural world:

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[117] Cf. Kearns 2022: 140–1; but Prodicus' example was not quite right, as noted by Mark J. Smith *per litteras* (in Henry 2023: 154 n. 2): 'in Egyptian thought, Hapi personified the Nile inundation, not the river itself. The Egyptians believed that the waters of the inundation emerged from two caverns near Elephantine at Egypt's southern border. Their ultimate source was the primordial ocean Nun, which is why the inundation is sometimes called Nun in Egyptian texts'.

[118] Phld. *Piet.*, *P.Herc.* 1077 col. 19.15–22 Obbink; on the meaning of the unusual form for παραγραμματίζειν in this passage, cf. Obbink 1996: 143: 'literally "they respell the names of the gods" (in order to explain the origin of belief in them)'; for discussion on the linguistic interests of Prodicus and its potential connection to this passage, see Kouloumentas 2018: 141–4; cf. Henry 2023b: 159–61.

[119] Roubekas 2017: 43; Kearns 2022: 143; Henry 2023b: 159.

> It appears to me that the first men around Greece (οἱ πρῶτοι τῶν ἀνθρώπων τῶν περὶ τὴν Ἑλλάδα) only recognised those gods which many foreigners (πολλοὶ τῶν βαρβάρων) now believe in: the sun, the moon, the earth, the stars and the sky. Given this, they saw that all of these things would go about in a rapid course and run around (θέοντα), and from their inherent drive to run they named them 'gods' (θεούς). After this, they now comprehended all the others and bestowed upon them this very same name. Does what I claim look to be true or not?[120]

It is not unlikely that Prodicus used this method to clarify the original uses of divine names, which was dealt with halfway through the *Cratylus*. There, the task of Socrates *qua* linguistic expert was to uncover the etymological core of a divine name (which was thought to give its 'correct' original meaning) to recollect the valuable, if limited, knowledge of sages from the past who had more insight into the nature of the gods when they named them (without having available, of course, the original names of the gods, which were unknown even to these lawgivers).[121] This recovery mission demanded some patience and ingenuity, however, as the original meaning of every divine name had transformed over time to sound smoother and more pleasant, unintentionally distorting its meaning; or, at least, this was the normal explanation for the evolution of names in Plato when he reflected on this school of thought.[122] The etymologies that Prodicus proposed are a matter of guesswork, but Tim Whitmarsh has

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[120] Pl. *Cra.* 397c8–d6 (≠ DK, Prodic. test. Mayhew).

[121] For this treatment of divine names in Plato, see *Cra.* 400d1–409c2, esp. 400d6–401a1; here I develop the point of Marianne Wifstrand Schiebe *per litteras* in Henry 2023b: 160 n. 3, made with *Cratylus* in mind, that Prodicus' (conjectural) insistence on the human origins of every divine name need not exclude their correctness.

[122] On the problem of euphony in the quest for the 'correctness of names', see Pl. *Cra.* 414b5–419b4.

made the appealing suggestion that Prodicus argued that Hera (Ἥρα) derived from Air (ἀήρ), which was a not uncommon folk etymology in antiquity.[123] Besides the fact that early humans in Prodicus' theory could have venerated air as the source of life for animals on land, it could be relevant that Diogenes of Apollonia singled out air as the guiding force behind seasonal changes and the cycle between day and night.[124]

More controversial is whether Prodicus posited another stage of religion after this phase of 'commodity worship'. In the Hellenistic period the Stoic philosopher Persaeus (*c.* 307–243 BCE) read Prodicus and accepted another stage of religion in which human benefactors were venerated as gods after their death, although it is disputed whether Prodicus developed this second stage of religion or Persaeus added it himself. The key site of controversy is a passage in the second part of Philodemus' Epicurean tract *On Piety*, and scholars have not merely interpreted the syntax of the text differently but proposed different supplements for the papyrus. I take this passage as compatible with the doxographic traditions that were used in Cicero and Sextus Empiricus, but to adequately address the difficulties involved in interpreting the evidence, this will be deferred to Appendix D. On this interpretation, Prodicus developed the first stage of religion, while Persaeus expressed partial agreement but incorporated a second phase of hero cult into the theory:

> Περσα[ῖος δὲ δ]ῆ|λός ἐστιν [ἀναιρῶν] | ὄντ̣ῳ̣[ς κ]α[ὶ ἐξορί]|ζων̣ τὸ δ̣αιμόνι[ον]| ἢ μηθὲν̣ ὑπ̣ὲρ αὐ|τοῦ γινώσκων, ὅταν | ἐν τῶι Περὶ θεῶν μὴ || [ἀπ]ί̣θανα̣ λέ̣γ̣[η]ι̣ | φαίνεσθαι τὰ περὶ <τοῦ> | τὰ τρέφοντα καὶ ὠ|φελοῦν[τα θεοὺ]ς νε|νομίσθ̣[αι καὶ

[123] Whitmarsh 2015: 93; the etymology for Dionysus at Pl. *Cra.* 406c3–6, 'he who gives wine' (ὁ διδοὺς τὸν οἶνον → Διδοίνυσος → Διόνυσος) is another comparable use of metonymy to Prodicus; for further discussion on Prodicus' treatment of divine names see Kouloumentas 2018: 143–4; cf. Kouloumentas 2025: 313.

[124] Simpl. *in Phys.* p. 152.11–6 Diels (= DK 64 B3, fr. 6 Laks).

τε]τει|μῆ̣σ̣θ̣[αι πρῶτ]ο̣ν̣ ὑ|πὸ̣ [Προ]δ̣[ίκου γ]ε̣γραμ̣|μέ̣[ν]α, μ[ετὰ δὲ] ταῦ|τα τοὺ̣[ς εὑρό]ντας | ἢ τ̣ρ̣οφὰς ἢ [σκ]έπας | ἢ τὰς ἄλλας τέ[χ]ν̣ας | ὡ̣ς̣ Δ̣ήμητρα κ̣[αὶ] Δι|[όνυσον] κα[ὶ] τ̣ο̣[[125]

But it is evident that Persaeus [actually abolishes and rules out] the divine, or he is unable to understand anything about it, when he says in *On the Gods* that it does not seem unpersuasive concerning the fact that nourishing and helpful things were regarded as gods and worshipped, first written by Prodicus, but after this [he says] that the pioneers of food or shelter or the other arts, such as Demeter, Dionysus and also the [Dioscuri … were also recognised as gods].

The fourth-century charges of Epicurus show that Prodicus was read as an atheist, as though to say that the sophist believed that the earliest humans were mistaken to worship natural phenomena and the idea of the gods was based in mere human opinion, δόξα. This subversive interpretation of his thought probably traces back to the fifth century, since in Old Comedy Prodicus was already linked with activities that were comorbid with atheism, such as the meteorology or the corruption of his students.[126] But this does not resolve the matter exactly, as there were later readings of Prodicus in antiquity which saw his theory as compatible with religious belief, in a rare case where ancient readers challenged the literary authority of the *index atheorum* that

[125] Phld. *Piet.*, *P.Herc.* 1428, col. II.28–34 and col. III.1–13 Henrichs, with modifications: see Appendix D below.

[126] Ar. fr. 506 KA *ap.* Σ Ar. *Nub.* 361a (<DK 84 A5, Prodic. test. 5 Mayhew): τοῦτον τὸν ἄνδρ᾽ ἢ βιβλίον διέφθορεν | ἢ Πρόδικος ἢ τῶν ἀδολεσχῶν εἷς γέ τις. Prodicus was associated with meteorology as a μετεωροσοφιστής at Ar. *Nub.* 360–1 (<DK 84 A5, Prodic. test. 66 Mayhew), reflecting the hostile assumptions discussed above at ch. 2.1.2; Ar. *Av.* 692 (<DK 84 A10, Prodic. test. 69 Mayhew) could suggest Prodicus challenged theogonies, following a suggestion from Vassallo 2018a: 157.

was probably handed down from the Peripatetic tradition. Themistius suggested that Prodicus did not so much abolish religion as fix piety (εὐσέβεια) on a firm foundation and explain how humans got their idea (ἔννοια) of the gods.[127]

The current scholarship is divided over Prodicus' stance on the truth value of religion, and it is common practice to follow the catalogue of the atheists or Themistius on this point.[128] On the other hand, in view of how just quickly the Stoics adapted Prodicus in their 'personal religions', it seems more likely that he wrote to explain rather than demolish religion, which resonates strongly with the theistic appearance of Prodicus' theory in Plato's *Cratylus*.[129] While Persaeus was the first Stoic thinker to draw on the anthropological thought of Prodicus, Cleanthes cited 'commodity worship' as the second reason for humans' belief in the existence of the gods,[130] and in Cicero's Stoic discussion in *De natura deorum* the primitive worship of commodities was described as a crude but justified (*non sine causa*) practice which reflected the truth of

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[127] Them. *Or.* 30.349a1–b5 (= DK 84 B5 [4], Prodic. test. 77 Mayhew); cf. Kouloumentas 2018: 135 on Diels' preferable emendation ἔννοιαν over the MSS εὔνοιαν.

[128] Prodicus as an atheist: Henrichs 1976: 21; Mayhew 2011: xvii; Whitmarsh 2015: 83–5; Anderson 2024: 77–81. Prodicus as a speculative theist: Gomperz 1912: 115; Sedley 2013: 330–1; Kouloumentas 2018: 140–1; Vassallo 2018a: 156–7; Wifstrand Schiebe 2021: 153. Moore (unpublished manuscript), by contrast, concludes that Prodicus was ambiguous on this issue.

[129] Moreover, as Gomperz 1912: 115 observed, Persaeus read Prodicus directly, which makes his interpretation more credible than the indirect doxographic reports of his views; cf. Henry 2023b: 157.

[130] Cic. *Nat. deor.* 2.13–6 (= *SVF* I 528); Kouloumentas 2025: 311–4 notes this Stoic concept as a legacy from Prodicus.

the matter that the gods presided over the natural world for the benefit of humans.[131] Most likely, then, Prodicus held in the *Seasons* that there were gods behind the natural world, which was a divine reflection of their nature, but the relationship between the gods and their divine gifts was imperfectly understood by early humans. Prodicus could have been suspected as an atheist, however, if his readers took a subversive message out of his anthropological thesis. Wine and grain were not gods, and if primitive humans were wrong to worship them as such, they might have been wrong about the whole thing.

The anthropology of religion in Democritus, by contrast, was more multidimensional and sophisticated, consisting of two accounts on the origins of religious belief which differed in emphasis but were basically compatible as explanations.[132] In his work Democritus tried to address how early humans came to encounter their first conception of the gods as immortal beings, but he also speculated about how this conception of the gods evolved into the traditional pantheon of Greek

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[131] Cic. *Nat. deor.* 2.59–60 (≠ *SVF*); cf. Kouloumentas 2018: 148 n. 57 and Henry 2023b: 164; earlier Jaeger 1947: 249 n. 29. Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.38–9 (= Persae. *SVF* I 448) presents Persaeus as defending a mean conception of theology rather than an atheistic one, since he claimed (according to the Epicurean Velleius) that commodities were *ipsa divina*.

[132] On the relation between these accounts see Jaeger 1947: 182 (for whom they 'harmonize very nicely') and Taylor 1999: 215 ('in one way or another complementary'); contrast Guthrie 1965: 478 ('[the two accounts] do not seem completely consistent'). The unity of the two accounts is supported by Lucr. 5.1169–94 (>DK 68 A74 [3], Democr. fr. 581 Luria [3]), which should always be read critically alongside the other Democritus *testimonia*.

religion.[133] Another *explanandum* for Democritus was how the gods were generally believed to occupy and control the skies, and he suggested a similar psychological explanation to Prodicus for this universal belief among the Greeks and barbarians. In his view, early humans believed that the regularity of the seasons was caused by Zeus, but they also viewed the gods as the forces behind strange events (ἀπὸ τῶν γιγνομένων … παραδόξων) in the sky, such as solar eclipses and lightning. This shows that Democritus held a more ambivalent view on the origins of Greek religion compared to Prodicus, according to which the gods were perceived as objects of terror and wonder:

> Summer […] winter, and late autumn and all of it was sent from the firmament above by Zeus (πάν|τα ταῦτα ἄν<ω>θεν δι|ειπετῆ γε<ί>νεται); in particular, on these grounds they recognised the maker and worshipped him (σέβεσθαι).[134]
>
> And there are those who have conjectured that we have come to a conception of the gods (ὑπονοήσαντες εἰς ἔννοιαν ἡμᾶς ἐληλυθέναι θεῶν) on the basis of incredible

[133] On the first claim that early humans encountered the gods as images (εἴδωλα), see Sext. Emp. *Math.* 9.19 (= DK 68 B166; Democr. fr. 472a [2] Luria); later Epicurean tradition held that these appeared in peoples' dreams: see Lucr. 5.1169–82 and Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.46. Some have argued that these are the *only* gods in Democritus (Whitmarsh 2015: 68), but it is reasonable to ask where these εἴδωλα were sent from. Probably (with Piergiacomi 2017: 17–31) there were atomic gods in Democritus' system made of a light and fiery material comparable to the aethereal theologies of this period; note Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.120 (cf. *testimonia* in Democr. fr. 472a Luria).

[134] Phld. *Piet.*, *P.Herc.* 1428 fr. 16.2–11 Schober (= DK 68 A74 [2], Democr. fr. 581 [2] Luria; cf. Lucr. 5.1183–5); for an expanded reconstruction of this column see *P.Herc.* 1428 col. 329 Vassallo; this passage is generally regarded a *testimonium* for Democritus: see Henrichs 1975: 98–106 and Vassallo 2018: 108–17.

> events that happen in the natural world (ἀπὸ τῶν γιγνομένων κατὰ τὸν κόσμον παραδόξων), which appears to have been the view taken by Democritus; for he says that, when ancient humans (οἱ παλαιοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων) saw events taking place up in the sky (τὰ ἐν τοῖς μετεώροις παθήματα) such as thunder, flashes of lightning and thunderbolts, as well as constellations and solar and lunar eclipses, they came to fear the gods, supposing them to be responsible for these events (ἐδειματοῦντο θεοὺς οἰόμενοι τούτων αἰτίους εἶναι).[135]

In this phase, the worship of the gods likely took place before the advent of civic life, when the gods were primarily known for their capacity to act upon the natural world. This would eventually change, however, when a few sages (τῶν λογίων ἀνθρώπων ὀλίγοι) reconceptualised these gods as the recognisable Greek gods of the state. Under this reform of the sages, seemingly anticipating the ecumenical council of later, Christian antiquity, the attributes of Zeus were articulated and regular civic worship was instituted, refining the nature worship of old times into something closer to Greek religion as it was practised in a historical age. Still, Democritus distinguished this conception of religion from the rational theologies of his peers and their disciples, contrasting the name of Zeus with his current designation as 'air', in a transparent reference to the popular aerial theologies in the generation after Anaxagoras:

> A few sages (τῶν λογίων ἀνθρώπων ὀλίγοι) raised up their hands towards what we Greeks now refer to as air (ὃν νῦν ἠέρα καλέομεν οἱ Ἕλληνες): 'everything', they

[135] Sext. Emp. *Math.* 9.24 (= DK 68 A75 [1], Democr. fr. 581 [1] Luria); cf. Lucr. 5.1188–93.

> said, 'is contemplated by Zeus (Ζεὺς μυθέεται), and he knows everything, gives and takes away everything, and he is the king of all' (βασιλεὺς οὗτος τῶν πάντων).[136]

With these *testimonia* set out on the table, it is reasonable to ask whether Democritus saw a kernel of truth in the foundations of religious belief, when early humanity came to believe that the gods were immortal and lived behind the curtain to control the skies, sending down terrifying, awesome meteorological events. It can be ruled out, at least, that Democritus saw these early efforts to understand the divine as entirely wrong, as he had a theology for Cicero's Epicurean spokesman to rail against in *De natura deorum*.[137] On the other hand, as William Winning has observed, the distinction that Democritus drew between the primitive name of Zeus and his current one suggests a distinctively Classical 'self-presentation' in his assumption that the religious beliefs of his educated contemporaries were less naïve and primitive than those of the past. If Democritus saw some rudimentary truth in the histrionic prayers of these early sages, it needed considerable refinement in a later philosophical age.[138] This was not a theory of religious primitivism where later conceptions of religion underwent degeneration, and arguably a similar note of condescension can be detected in Prodicus' evolutionist theory that the early Greeks only worshipped the material world honoured by

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[136] Clem. Al. *Protr.* 6.68.5 (= DK 68 B30, Democr. fr. 580 Luria).

[137] Piergiacomi 2017: 22 also observed that Democritus' attitude towards Greek religion had a destructive and constructive dimension.

[138] Winning (unpublished manuscript); cf. Hippoc. *Carn.* 2 for a similar, 'primitive versus modern' distinction between divine names. Contrast Guthrie 1965: 479, who argued that this testimony does not describe the origins of 'popular anthropomorphic religion' but 'a more refined type that identified God, or Zeus, with air'.

barbarians, which was presented by later Stoic exponents of his theory as grounded in fact but nonetheless ingenuous and naïve.

That these anthropological theories of religion were tools that could inspire more anodyne attempts to explain the origins of Greek religion is shown by Herodotus.[139] Although the chronological relationship between Herodotus and Prodicus and Democritus proves elusive, it is safe to say that Herodotus was drawn into the 'anthropological turn' of the late fifth century, which did not leave his religious views unimpacted. In his second book in the *Histories* on the customs of the Egyptians, Herodotus set out a three-stage account of the origins of Greek religion that started in the pre-Greek world and concluded with the religious innovations of Homer and Hesiod.[140] For Herodotus, the Aegean world of the distant past was populated by the Pelasgians, a semi-mythical ethnic group who were something of a short-hand in Herodotus' time for the native pre-Greek population. During his antiquarian travels in the Greek world, Herodotus was told by the female priesthood at Dodona that their ancestors of the *polis*, the Pelasgians, first worshipped gods who did not have any individual names given to them: 'they used to not recognise a single name or title for any of them' (ἐπωνυμίην δὲ οὐδ' οὔνομα ἐποιεῦντο οὐδενὶ αὐτῶν).[141] Herodotus continued that the Pelasgians named these beings θεοί on the grounds that, 'having established all things in order, [the gods] would keep charge over all distributions as well' (κόσμῳ θέντες τὰ πάντα πρήγματα καὶ πάσας νομὰς εἶχον).[142] By proposing this meaning for the generic divine name θεός, which was meant to reflect the reality

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[139] For recent comparisons in this vein, see Harrison 2022: 94–5, 102–3; Kearns 2022: 140–3.

[140] On the three-stage theory of the origins of religion in Herodotus see Burkert 1990: 26–7; Mikalson 2003: 167–79; Scullion 2006: 198–200; Ellis 2023: 128–30.

[141] Hdt. 2.52.1; cf. 2.53.3.

[142] Hdt. 2.52.1; cf. Scullion 2006: 195.

that the gods have providentially ordered the world and gifted creatures with different abilities to survive, Herodotus was engaged in the same fifth-century etymological speculation about divine names that preoccupied Prodicus.[143] In another point of convergence, Herodotus relied on Egypt as a cross-cultural reference point in the second stage of his account when the pre-Greek population received most (μάλιστα) names of the gods from the Egyptians,[144] where they were 'always' (αἰεί) accepted in the region.[145] To get to this point Herodotus appealed to the famous antiquity of Egypt, drawing a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* inference that Greek religion was substantially borrowed from Egyptian religion since Aegean religion was less ancient.[146] After this, Herodotus moved to the final phase some 400 years before his time when Homer and Hesiod taught the Hellenic population (who now spoke Greek and were no longer dominantly a Pelasgian population) about the nature of the gods in their poems.[147] It can be concluded that though he had some critical things to say about Greek polytheism,[148] Herodotus recognised the existence of the gods and their involvement in

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[143] Cf. Thomas 2000: 277–8.

[144] Hdt. 2.50.

[145] Hdt. 2.50.1–2.

[146] On this mode of inference in Herodotus see Thomas 2000: 193.

[147] Hdt. 2.53.1–3.

[148] Burkert 1990: 21–2 notably argued that Herodotus rejected the divine anthropomorphism of Greek religion; this is accepted by Scullion 2006: 202–3; cf. Bremmer 2023: 110–1; Ellis 2023: 137. According to Burkert, Hdt.'s use of the (supplied) verb for the Greek view of the gods, νομίζειν, implies that the anthropomorphism of the Greek gods was only their conventional belief, and the (alleged) anti-anthropomorphic religion of the Persians was used by Herodotus to obliquely criticise this popular belief: Hdt. 1.131.1: ὅτι οὐκ ἀνθρωποφυέας ἐνόμισαν τοὺς θεοὺς κατά περ οἱ Ἕλληνες εἶναι [sc. ἐνόμισαν].

human affairs,[149] which shows that he saw a fundamental truth at the roots of Pelasgian religion.[150] Digging into the prehistory of religion did not lead him to atheism.

The Sisyphus fragment from the later fifth century, however, is evidence that a more subversive reading of Prodicus and Democritus was not exactly off the radar. Although there remains some contention about whether this excerpt from Greek drama was written by Critias or Euripides, I have taken the view that the philological evidence tips the scale towards Critias.[151] This is not to say, of course, that the anthropological atheism enshrined in the fragment stood for his point of view any more than Eteocles' denial in the *Phoenician Women* that moral terms have any objective basis was a tacit argument from Euripides. It can be further pointed out that Critias was more likely to have been the sort of man to have accused other Athenians of atheism than to have embraced it, as he positioned himself as a public enemy of the new learning of the sophists: it was notorious that, following the Spartans, he banned the teaching of

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[149] E.g., Hdt. 8.106.3; 9.65.2; cf. Burkert 1990: 29 and Scullion 2006: 194; that Herodotus held these beliefs, for Mikalson 2003: 136, 'requires no demonstration'. Herodotus also viewed providence (τοῦ θείου ἡ προνοίη, 3.108.2) as responsible for equipping different animals with resources that prevented mass extinctions from taking place; cf. Kingsley 2024: 137–8. This squares with the Pelasgians' recognition that gods were responsible for maintaining the dispensations of the natural world: πάσας νομὰς εἶχον, Hdt. 2.52.1; cf. Pl. *Prt.* 321c3–5.

[150] Cf. Harrison 2025: 106: for Herodotus, 'the Pelasgians' intuition […] was a wise one'.

[151] See Appendix E, below; the genre of the text is also variously conjectured as a satyric drama (Wilamowitz 1875: 161–72) or a tragedy (Whitmarsh 2014: 111–2). Arguably, the implicit characterisation of Sisyphus too closely resembles Aristotle's comments on Sisyphus as a tragic character to credit a satyric performance context.

rhetoric in Athens as one of the main architects of the Thirty Tyrants regime.[152] However, Critias' personal distance from the speaker of the fragment hardly suggests that the authorship controversy between Euripides or Critias is an arid exercise in textual criticism. Plato shows us that Critias was immersed in sophistic circles since his youth and learnt from Prodicus,[153] suggesting that Critias was in a prime position to appreciate the intellectual culture of his time from an early age and critique the atheistic implications of natural philosophy and sophistic thought in the generation before Plato. Given who he was, Critias' public experiment with sophistic atheism even savours of a man who was moralistically renouncing a part of his old intellectual life. Yet as with Plato, there is some ambivalence towards atheism in the Sisyphus fragment which is reflected in the author's choice of the speaker who articulates the theory: the tyrant of Corinth Sisyphus, a notorious trickster of Greek mythology who featured in quite a number of Attic dramas in the fifth century. This impression is all but confirmed by Aristotle's *Poetics*, which saw Sisyphus as an ambivalent personality who was well-suited to tragedy due to a mix of positive and negative character traits which rendered him compelling for a tragic plot: for Aristotle, Sisyphus was admirably clever, σοφός, and yet he had a dubious character.[154] Like the conniving Athenians who always had an answer at the ready against the pleas of the Melians in Thucydides, the tyrant was a villain whom the Greeks could not help but admire for his genius.[155]

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[152] Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.31: καὶ ἐν τοῖς νόμοις ἔγραψε λόγων τέχνην μὴ διδάσκειν. On the necessity of separating Critias the conservative from the atheism of the Sisyphus fragment, see Sutton 1981 and Santoro 1994; cf. Whitmarsh 2014: 113–4.

[153] *Prt.* 337a1–c6 (DK 84 A13, Prodic. test. 49 Mayhew); *Chrm.* 163b1–d4 (= DK 84 A18, Prodic. test. 55 Mayhew); cf. Centanni 1997: 34–51.

[154] Arist. *Poet.* 1453a1–12; 1456a21–2.

[155] In the same vein Dion. Hal. *Thuc.* 41 uneasily characterised the ideas of the Athenians in the Melian dialogue as intelligent but perverse.

In the original drama the cleverness of Sisyphus was updated into modern sophistry along Euripidean lines, and in the surviving fragment Sisyphus outlined a historical hypothesis on the origins of religion, but unlike Prodicus or Democritus, he derived explicitly atheistic consequences out of his narrative. He conjectured that in its origins the belief in the gods was a convenient fiction to enforce good behaviour when criminals knew they could escape the force of the law:

> There once was a time when human life was disordered and inhuman, and a servant to force: a time where there were no incentives for good people, nor indeed punishments for the bad. And then, I suspect people established punitive laws (κἄπειτά μοι δοκοῦσιν ἄνθρωποι νόμους | θέσθαι κολαστάς) so that Justice could be a tyrant (and prevail over force [?]) and keep violent crime as her slave: so, if any one were to commit any wrongdoing, they would be punished. And then, when there were laws, they prevented people from openly committing crimes with brute force, but they would still commit crimes in secret. And then, I suspect that a shrewd and exceedingly clever man (πυκνός τις καὶ σοφὸς γνώμην ἀνήρ) was the first to discover (ἐξευρεῖν) the fear of the gods for mortals, so that there would be some great object of fear for evil men, even if they went about their actions in secret, or spoke or thought about it. From here, then, he introduced divinity (ἐντεῦθεν οὖν τὸ θεῖον εἰσηγήσατο), claiming that 'there is a divine power who flourishes in eternal life, who hears and sees with their mind, meditating and intent upon all things and bearing the nature of divinity; who hears every utterance of mortals, and has the power to see their every move. And if you even *think* of doing the wrong thing in secret, this will not escape the gods, since the power of the mind is within them'. Saying these words, he introduced the most irresistible teaching of all, concealing the truth with a false story (ψευδεῖ καλύψας τὴν ἀλήθειαν λόγῳ). He said that the gods lived in a place where he could terrify people the most, telling this story: from here he recognised what was frightening to mortals, from here were the benefits for their miserable lives, which came from the revolutions high above, where he caught sight of flashes of lightning, terrifying crashes of thunder, and the starry-faced frame of

> heaven, a fine piece of embroidery from the master craftsman Time. From here proceeds the radiant molten stone of a star, from here the torrents of rainfall pour down to earth. Such were the fears he circled around humanity, through which he settled the divine in an appropriate place with his well-told story, and quelled lawlessness with laws […] So it was, I suspect, that someone first persuaded (οὕτω δὲ πρῶτον οἴομαι πεῖσαί τινα) mortals to believe there is a race of gods (θνητοὺς νομίζειν δαιμόνων εἶναι γένος).[156]

Like the thought experiment in Plato's *Protagoras* or the historical narrative of Herodotus, Sisyphus' anthropological theory of religion exhibited a satisfying three-stage structure. The first stage of the narrative, for Sisyphus, was one of chaos divested of any social organisation, when human life was disorderly and comparable to the lives of beasts (ἄτακτος ἀνθρώπων βίος | καὶ θηριώδης, 1–2). At this stage there were no positive or negative reinforcements to regulate human behaviour, nor any rewards for the good or punishments for the wicked (3–4).[157] Sisyphus moved to the next episode of human history, however, with a conjecture that he was proud to call his own: 'and then it seems to me' (κἄπειτά μοι δοκοῦσιν, 5), he reasoned, that people banded together and set up punitive laws (νόμους | θέσθαι κολαστάς, 5–6) which imposed penalties on criminals who dared to wrong others.[158] At this point Justice was in charge: she was the tyrant (τύραννος, 6) when formerly this was Violence (τήν θ' ὕβριν δούλην ἔχῃ, 7). However, if ordinary positive laws only worked properly when wrongdoers were caught, these could hardly deter the criminals who were confident

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[156] Critias *TrGF* fr. 19 S (= DK 88 B25) *ap.* Sext. Emp. *Math.* 9.54 with alterations (vv. 6, 7, 12, 20, 24, 28, 32); for the Greek text with a selective apparatus, see Appendix E.

[157] For a close parallel see Moschion *TrGF* fr. 6.3–16 K; Diod. Sic. 1.8; cf. Davies 1989: 18–20.

[158] For a similar, assertive use of μοι δοκεῖ in Diogenes of Apollonia, see ch. 4.1, below.

they could commit their crimes without getting caught. This called for a shift in policy which would occupy the third and final stage of Sisyphus' theory: the invention of gods in general (δαιμόνων εἶναι γένος, 42).[159] Rather than a real force in the universe, the gods for Sisyphus were invented to instil fear in mortals to prevent them from secret wrongdoing: 'and if you even *think* of doing the wrong thing in secret, this will not escape the gods, since the power of the mind is within them' (22–4).

The subtext of the speech is close to its surface level meaning: from his position of privilege Sisyphus questioned the value of pursuing a moral life. Looking down at the people of Corinth from his lofty citadel — if not in stagecraft, then certainly in spirit — Sisyphus darkly implied that a choice few elites could be exempted from the morality of the many,[160] and it is tempting to conclude that Sisyphus spoke these lines before carrying out misdeeds in secret, unburdened by any god-fearing piety. Certainly, there was a similar course of events in the earliest modern adaptation of the Sisyphus fragment which has survived in full, the Elizabethan tragedy *Selimus* (*c.* 1590), which

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[159] On the naturalistic atheism of the fragment see Kahn 1997: 248 ('the most outspoken example of fifth-century atheism') and Whitmarsh 2014: 114 n. 36. Some have read the fragment as an explanation for religion which does not necessarily reject some conceptions of the gods: see Pechstein 1998: 307–10 and Kotwick 2023: 269. This is mistaken, since the inventor of the gods is explicitly presented as a liar. The meteorology of Sisyphus is another marker of existential atheism, as his denial of the existence of Helios (replaced with a hot stone or μύδρος, see above, ch. 3.2.2) removes the prospect of the surveillance of any gods in the natural world; for Helios as an all-seeing safeguard of oaths, see Hom. *Il.* 3.276–7; cf. *Od.* 12.323.

[160] As was noted by Menzel 1922: 92–3 and recently by Anderson 2024: 37–8; cf. Billings (forthcoming). This cynical subtext complicates the argument of O'Sullivan 2012 that religion is celebrated as a positive social force in the Sisyphus fragment, although his overall point that the text is not anti-religious is a salutary one.

featured an aspiring Ottoman tyrant as the protagonist who exposited a similar theory about the invention of God in order to purge his anxieties about the prospect of killing the male line of his family in his pursuit of the throne.[161] Exactly how Sisyphus committed his crime will never be known, but it is not out of the question that he cheated the gods and provoked their wrath, which would resonate with Sisyphus' boast from an older, lost Aeschylus drama that he successfully cheated the god of the underworld.[162] Most likely, however, the original work resolved with a tragic περιπέτεια where Sisyphus was subsequently deceived himself, which could find possible corroboration in Aristotle, who pointed out in the *Poetics* that the deception of Sisyphus was a satisfying comeuppance for a Greek tragedy.[163]

This was the likely plot trajectory of the piece, but it remains to consider whether Sisyphus' speculation could have been acceptable to some of his Greek audience, if indeed the drama was ever performed.[164] Although the performance context and composition of its original audience of the drama are beyond our reach, we do have warrant to conclude that some Greeks from the fifth century believed that the gods were invented by lawgivers, as Plato suggested of the atheists in his time. Although he no doubt recognised his own 'personal religion' partly informed by civic religion, Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* saw much of the theological tradition of the poets as an invention to persuade the masses as a useful tool for the laws and the common

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[161] For this *Sisyphus redivivus* in an Elizabethan 'Turk play', see Henry 2024.

[162] Aesch. *TrGF* fr. 228 R; the divine punishment of Sisyphus is alluded to at Aesch. *TrGF* fr. 233 R.

[163] Arist. *Poet.* 1456a21–2; the view that Sisyphus faced divine punishment at the end of the drama reflects the scholarly consensus on the matter: e.g., Dihle 1977: 38; Whitmarsh 2014: 113.

[164] This possibility was first raised by Decharme 1904: 124: 'quelques-uns peut-être se demandaient intérieurement: Sisyphe n'a-t-il pas raison?'.

weal (πρὸς τὴν πειθὼ τῶν πολλῶν καὶ πρὸς τὴν εἰς τοὺς νόμους καὶ τὸ συμφέρον χρῆσιν).[165] But one can go further and note that the Sisyphus fragment repurposed an inventory of common assumptions among the Greeks which would have appealed to a less than religious Greek who was still immersed in their cultural environment. It has been pointed out that Sisyphus creatively drew upon the idea of the 'first inventor' (πρῶτος εὑρετής figure) from Greek mythology, who was often praised (too often, according to Isocrates) by orators for introducing different crafts (τέχναι) to humanity.[166] It has also been argued that the σοφὸς γνώμην ἀνήρ of Sisyphus is a subversive echo of Hesiod as a figure of poetic creativity, resembling the poet who composed the *Works and Days* and depicted Zeus in his verses as an 'omniscient, omniperceptive deity' with more forceful clarity than Homer.[167] These are certainly salient influences on this anonymous figure in Sisyphus' story, but he was not merely a poet or an inventor; equally it is true that he was an unusual variant on the common Greek conception of the ancient lawgiver who proposed a custom or law (νόμος) which was ratified by his community. Without this prevailing view on the origins of convention, which conceived of customs as the product of individual design rather than practices which developed slowly and unconsciously in a community, the Sisyphus fragment could not have advanced such an idiosyncratically Greek conception of atheism.[168] In times of radical questioning of tradition, this understanding could be

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[165] Arist. *Metaph.* 1074b1–14; Sedley 2013: 339–40 noted that Aristotle veered close to the hypothesis of the Sisyphus fragment.

[166] Isoc. *Paneg.* 10; on this figure as an influence in the Sisyphus fragment, see Davies 1989: 19–20.

[167] Whitmarsh 2014, esp. 118–20, comparing Hes. *Op.* 252–69.

[168] For the Greek notion of laws and customs as the creation of an individual genius, see Dover 1968 on Ar. *Nub.* 1421; Kingsley 2024: 60–1 rightly compares Solon in Hdt. 1.29.1–2, who was said to individually frame laws in the interests of the wider community.

upturned in the context of attacking laws and social norms as 'mere' conventions. Refracting this shift in values through the comic lens of the *Clouds* and the *Birds*, Aristophanes singled out the younger generation of Athenian men as gleeful law-breakers who either attacked their fathers or hoped to live somewhere where they could.[169] After Pheidippides was radicalised by Socrates' modern education in the *Clouds*, he challenged the taboo against beating one's own father by appealing to the arbitrariness of social norms. If an individual once proposed a law, there was no reason to regard another fallible human being as somehow more authoritative than people who were alive in a later age:

> Wasn't it just a man like you and me, who set down this custom (τὸν νόμον)
>
> In the first place, and persuaded the ancients (τοὺς παλαιούς) with his speech?[170]

This was how Sisyphus treated the gods in his narrative: he selectively discarded them for a different personal creed of his own, as there was no difference between one person's individual judgement or another. It was a sage man who invented the gods, and as a fellow individual genius, Sisyphus was not obliged to follow the same rules or

[169] For the latter, see the Father Beater who visits Cloud Cuckoo Land in Ar. *Av.* 1337–71.

[170] Ar. *Nub.* 1421–2; cf. Dover 1968 on Ar. *Nub.* 1421 and Kingsley 2024: 60–1.

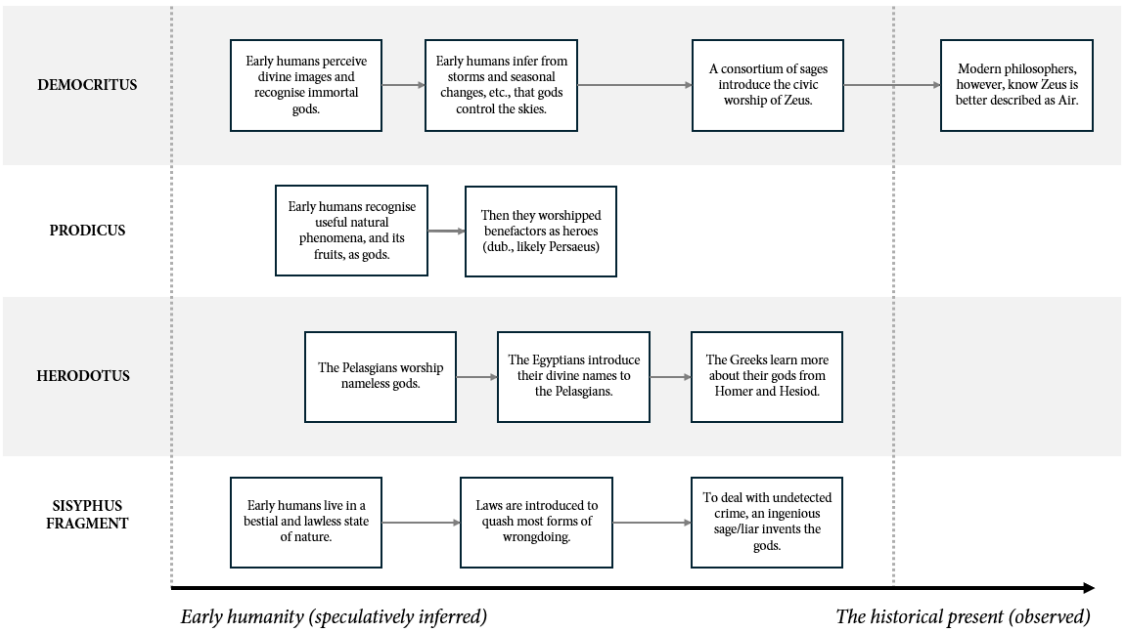


Figure 3.2. Four fifth-century Greek theories on the origins of religion.

believe in the same lies as the majority; he was a tyrant of Corinth, and tyrants did not have to follow the laws of their subjects.

The crucial difference, however, was that Sisyphus was not a relativist about the existence of the gods as he rejected them quite boldly, upholding a theory of cultural history which postponed the gods to the very end. If this was too radical a thesis for most Greeks to accept — and here, perhaps, the disapproving puzzlement of Cleinias is a more representative response than the actively hateful Athenian Visitor — the view that the gods were a human invention was certainly on the radar by the late fifth century and heading into the fourth. In the writings of Democritus, Prodicus, Herodotus, and indeed the Sisyphus fragment, it can be concluded that there were a number of ways that the origins of religious belief could be woven into earlier cultural history (summed up in Figure 3.2, above), and it would be naïve to suppose that the reception of these theories was not as diversely expressed as the different theories themselves. By this stage, the degree of explanatory power in appealing to the creative powers of early human psychology and their interaction with their environment could vary widely, and

this could determine the difference between a *homo religiosus* or a *homo faber*.[171] Thinkers like Prodicus and Democritus seem to have facilitated this thinking without meaning to do so.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed the philosophical account of atheism in Plato's tenth book of *Laws* and revisits David Sedley's argument that Plato's report on atheism is probably a summary of a real worldview in Athens rather than 'Plato's own eclectic pastiche, pieced together by him out of various philosophical materials as a convenient target for attack'.[172] In the first part of this chapter (ch. 3.1), Sedley's argument that Plato was addressing a specific atheistic corpus of texts was challenged. Rather, Plato appears to respond to a current of atheists and identifies the source of their views as authors who set forth ideas that could be suggestive of atheism, just as a pastor in Victorian England could blame Darwin for catalysing atheism or doubt among his congregation. The remainder of this chapter, however, outlined and contextualised the cosmogony and cultural narrative that Plato saw as characteristic of atheism in his time. Taking into account the coherence of this worldview and its resonances with other hotly debated ideas from the late fifth century, this chapter accepts Sedley's thesis that Plato was probably not tilting at windmills when he wrote his polemic. Although Plato had obvious ulterior motives when he summarised both episodes of his narrative — his description of an atheistic cosmogony was a conventional foil for his own theology, and

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[171] Cf. Smith 1982: 89, who pointed out that contemporary religious studies' reliance on methodological atheism tends to promote a *homo faber* understanding of religion, where the idea of god reflects our creative capacities; quoted in Jones 2021: 136.

[172] Sedley 2013: 334.

his survey of the atheistic conception of crafts gave him free rein to moralise about the decadent literary culture of Athens and the rampant impiety and hedonism of the youth — these factors easily coincide with the reality of atheism, which has a worn, even overly familiar appearance in *Laws*. Certain arguments were too old-hat to prove effective against the atheists, as Cleinias soon found; Plato's avatar was anxious not to blame the impious stories in theogonies for the rise of atheism, but he could not help but mention them; he associated atheism with a dangerous hedonistic creed among the Athenian youth, but later confessed that there were just atheists. Clearly, atheistic interpretations of natural philosophy and anthropological inquiry were available for discussion in Athens, and even accepted, and for a long enough time for Plato to reflect upon.

4. Intellectual Conditions, II: Thinking with Atheism

So far it has been discussed how atheism in Classical antiquity grew out of suspicious and fringe readings of natural philosophy and sophistic thinking about the origins of religion, and how such ideas could unseat the gods from the natural world and recast the worship of them as a human invention. Despite the fact that these were cardinal assumptions for atheism, at least in its familiar Greek form, this does not quite present a full picture of how an atheist in antiquity thought about the gods compared to someone who believed in them. Our next topic to consider, broadly, is how an atheist from this period could have thought about the non-existence of the gods, and how they could have argued about it, accepted it, and verbally expressed it.

These questions are not trivial if atheism was vanishingly rare in the ancient world, which has lessons for how we conceive of atheism in the present. In many ancient and modern cultures it is not on the agenda to reflect upon or question the existence of the gods, let alone to entertain unbelief seriously, and it is striking how much mental energy that people invest into critical thought is channelled into other areas of religious discourse. Often we find that religious people do not subject the existence of their god(s) to metacognition, in other words, but they do hold various other kinds of second-order beliefs about them and subject *these* beliefs to critical analysis. For example, when the Greenlandic-Danish anthropologist Knud Rasmussen (1879–1933) asked Aua (an Inuit elder) about his religious beliefs, Aua denied that his tribe 'believed' or 'explained' anything about the gods, but they 'feared' the gods and the spirits of the dead.[1] While it would be wrong to take from this that Aua did not believe in the existence of gods and spirits — in fact, his fear of the gods *presupposes*

[1] Rasmussen 1929: 55–6; referenced in e.g. Rubel 2014: 7.

such a belief, regardless of whether he thought about it — his response to Rasmussen shows that he did not hold a propositional conception of his belief in the gods at the forefront of his mind, as though to say, 'I maintain as true the tenet that gods and ancestral spirits exist, and for reasons *x*, *y* and *z*'. When he considered other kinds of religious belief for reflection, Aua and his community took this datum for granted and were more interested in the gods as personal powers who were to be feared and respected, which has continuities with the daily religious experience of the Greeks. Except for the odd occasion on the Attic stage, there were no ritual contexts in Classical Athens where the existence of the gods was a claim up for critical discussion, like a topic in a debating class. This is because, as Henk S. Versnel suggested, 'in everyday religious practice individual Greek gods were practically never conceived of as powers, let alone as cultural products, but were in the first place envisaged as *persons* with individual characters and personalities'.[2] In the same way that one seldom questions the existence of people they have never met, it could be taken as tacitly obvious that the gods exist, so that even when Odysseus (uniquely for Homer) made an existential claim about the gods in the *Odyssey*, 'father Zeus, truly you gods still exist (ῥ' ἔτι ἐστὲ θεοί) at Great Olympus, if indeed the suitors have paid the penalty (ἔτεισαν) for their reckless violence',[3] he did not so much challenge or problematise the existence of the gods but merely saw the enforcement of justice in the world as a *reminder* that the gods existed to enforce order in the world, with no ontological questioning seriously active in his mind. In a similar way, the subject of a monarch in a remote region of his kingdom could say, 'well, King Edward the Confessor *must be there on his throne*, if he continues

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[2] Versnel 2011: 317; contrast Bremmer 2021: 29–30, who suggests that the gods could be conceived as persons or powers (e.g. disorder, intelligence) depending on the context. I am more inclined to the former perspective that gods and divine powers in Greek religion were perceived as *anthropomorphic* minds that possessed different character traits, will, thought, and intention.

[3] Hom. *Od.* 24.351–2.

to enforce justice in his realm'. Even if a Greek who believed in the gods could reflect upon this as a second-order claim, echoing Socrates' insistence that he acknowledged (νομίζειν) the gods of his city,[4] much of their daily religious thought processes would still consist in a cluster of beliefs that tacitly assumed a belief in the existence of the gods, including beliefs about everyday obligations to the gods ('how should I sacrifice to the gods?', 'how should I pray?') and relational beliefs ('I fear Zeus', 'perhaps Demeter is not happy with my family today').[5] This shows why a common phrase in the late fifth century for recognising the existence of the gods could equivocally suggest *respecting* them (see ch. 4.4), and in this web of beliefs the idea of the gods' existence could not, save for an atheist or an agnostic, merely be an idea to be asserted or denied. This is to say that propositional thinking about the divine certainly has a place in religious thinking, but it could never be the only kind of thinking about it.

How, in that case, could a Greek have disentangled themselves from this cluster of beliefs, casting aside the idea that 'the gods exist' as little more than a false claim? The problem of how to 'think with atheism' in Classical Greece will be the focus of this chapter, which will raise a further series of questions about how the Greeks could intellectually overcome the mystery of the divine to advance a dogmatic position like atheism, and how a claim like 'the gods exist' could be analysed as an existential claim that could be argued from both sides and indeed disbelieved as a consistent view. There is also the question of how the Greeks could describe atheism in language in the absence of abstract terms in Classical Greek to describe this position consistently. To address these points it will be necessary to consider the theological outlook of earlier Ionian natural philosophers, the argumentative methods of the sophists and their engagement with the political landscape of the Greek city state, the consistent non-religious viewpoint of an intellectual like Protagoras, and the degree to which the vocabulary of

[4] Pl. *Ap.* 35d6–7.

[5] For the former, 'deontic' beliefs in Roman religion, see Mackey 2022: 110–35.

the ancient Greeks influenced their discourse about unbelief. In the next section, first, the stark dogmatism of Greek atheism will be considered, and (more briefly) the ontological questions that were distinctive in the Greek intellectual tradition.

4.1 Divine Unknowability and Accessibility, Ontological Thought

Scholars of Greek religion have singled out divine unknowability as a fundamental 'category' or 'principle' in Greek religion, taking the view that expressions of uncertainty about the will of the gods and their nature were integral to the Greek religious experience.[6] The Greeks were often reminded that the gods could not be perceived by direct experience, and when times were tough, the will of the gods was often hard to determine. These limitations informed the problem of how to know whether the gods were behind a given event, and if so, which god or goddess was the agency involved. Despite their more intimate connection with the gods compared to later generations, the heroes in Greek epic already acted in accordance with 'Jørgensen's law', hesitating to invoke a divine name behind a recent miracle or misfortune by relying instead on failsafe generic terms like θεός, θεοί, and δαίμων.[7] Similar question marks surrounding divine causality abound in later Greek literature. When confronted with the lovesick madness of Phaedra, the chorus in Euripides' *Hippolytus* abundantly speculated about whether she had been divinely possessed (ἔνθεος) by some god or another, or whether her strange affliction was a natural

[6] Gould 1985: 9–14, Gould 1994: 94 ('the uncertainty principle'); Harrison 2000: 182–207, Harrison 2006: 139; Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: 20, 292–3, 299; on negative theology in Xenophanes and the Derveni author see Bernabé 2020.

[7] This pattern of theological discourse was identified by Jørgensen 1904; cf. de Jong 2001: 224.

response like jealousy or grief.[8] Still, this problem was not a purely negative one. Appealing to the mystery of the divine also afforded, as Thomas Harrison has argued, a means for sustaining religious belief in the face of contrary evidence.[9] This can be seen in the corpus of anonymous Theognidea, in which the poet who addressed Zeus was puzzled about why the unjust continued to escape punishment. Rather than change his perspective about the concept of divine justice, or abandon the idea altogether for a world without divine providence, the elegist left the problem unresolved and retreated with the sage advice that one should not anger the gods.[10] The commonplace 'God works in mysterious ways', that loose paraphrase of a 1773 poem by William Cowper, conveys something of the convenient protective role that the mystery of the gods could provide: the limits of human knowledge served simultaneously as boundaries to religious criticism. Pious sceptical statements on the obscurity of the divine were also common stock among Greek intellectuals: Xenophanes said that mortals have not, and never will, attain 'clarity' (τὸ σαφές) on the nature of the gods;[11] Herodotus acknowledged that the gods were equally mysterious to all mortals;[12] characters in Plato, on a number of occasions, recognise that the gods could be neither seen nor adequately understood.[13]

It might be wondered what this has to do with the philosophical atheism critiqued in Plato, except perhaps as a foil to the dogmatic assertions of the atheists. But

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[8] Eur. *Hipp.* 141–69; noted in this context by Gould 1985: 11; on the problem of securing the correct divine identity (and divine name) in Greek religion, see Versnel 2011: 37–60.

[9] Harrison 2006: 136.

[10] [Thgn.] 1.373–82, 400; cf. Ford 2024: 77.

[11] Sext. Emp. *Math.* 7.49; Plut. *Mor. Quomodo adul.* 17e7–f1 (= DK 21 B30, 34).

[12] Hdt. 2.3.2.

[13] Pl. *Phdr.* 246c6–d2; *Cra.* 400d6–401a1; *Criti.* 107a7–b4.

recent work in the scholarship of Greek religion has highlighted the ubiquity of divine unknowability in Greek religious discourse as an expedient to question the existence, or relevance, of naturalistic atheism in Classical thought. Thomas Harrison suspects that the atheistic statements in Greek texts like the Sisyphus fragment were radical criticisms only from a religious standpoint, as appealing to the mystery of the divine could domesticate such ideas as momentary, fleeting questions for a religious Greek to ponder over before they could harden into decisive objections:

> Clearly there is a step-up from Apistos or the Fool of the Psalms to more sophisticated expressions of alternative religious viewpoints such as the Sisyphus fragment. We must still, however, ask the question, well formulated by Robert Parker in his *Athenian Religion: A History*, about whether instances of scepticism are 'attacks from without', or whether they form part of an ongoing religious discourse, one which readily accommodates scepticism. The principle that the nature of the gods is unknowable – common to a range of authors — may, in some forms (and within limits), be a manifestation of a sceptical trend of thought — but at the same time it also serves to make traditional conceptions of divinity impervious to challenge, allowing the 'compromise', in Parker's phrase, 'by which traditional forms of cult … are accepted by the educated as the proper way to honour a divine principle that is intellectually quite differently conceived'. If the divine is unknowable, the standard response is, in fact, to proceed as if on the basis of secure knowledge.[14]

[14] Harrison 2025: 103, quoting Parker 1996: 213–4; likewise Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: 299 reasoned that the discourse of divine unknowability ensured that religious criticisms were internally religious 'problematisations' rather than 'challenges' to Greek religion itself.

Harrison's argument can also be repurposed to suggest that the true 'atheism' of the Greeks precisely consisted in this form of doubting within the parameters of unknowability.[15] But this claim is ultimately one side of the same coin, as it too entails that the more dogmatic assertion that the gods do not exist is not the kind of atheism one should expect when it is taken into account how the Greeks usually criticised their gods. This foreclosure of the possibilities of Greek religious criticism stems from a wider tendency to present unknowability as more than just a common facet of Greek polytheism that can admit important exceptions in Greek thought. On the contrary, it is presented as a 'fundamental category in Greek religion', or even more strongly, '*a*, perhaps even *the* central, foundation to traditional polytheism'.[16] A parallel, though far less extreme approach is evidenced in scholarship on the intellectual culture of the late fifth century, where Joshua Billings has characterised the fifth-century Enlightenment as in part a self-conscious 'recognition of the limits (as well as the extent) of human reason', which does not quite capture the boldness and dogmatism in some areas of fifth-century theological discourse which could coexist alongside seemingly (and even deceptively) modest pronouncements about human knowledge of the divine.[17]

The scholarship is now in a situation where the scales have tipped too far in one direction. Certainly, not all atheological discourse in fifth-century Greece should be casually assimilated with dogmatism, and it is easy to imagine cases where a Greek could have said 'the gods do not exist!' rhetorically in a moment of despair, before appealing to the mystery of the divine will. This reads like a natural way to adapt the tirade in Euripides' *Bellerophon* in a daily religious context, for example. Still, it is unsatisfactory to imagine that all strong criticisms of Greek religion were softened by the discourse of divine unknowability, and the real reason why Greek philosophers

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[15] This is the argument of Ford 2024: 98–120.

[16] Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: 299; Harrison 2006: 139.

[17] Billings 2023: 146–54.

could defend different conceptions of the gods was due not to a monolithic discourse of divine unknowability but the absence of an institutional framework for enforcing orthodoxy, which allowed philosophers to present dogmatic assertions of their own views. The anthropological argument of the Sisyphus fragment, noted by Harrison, is a case in point, given that later authors who entertained a similar idea to Sisyphus did not relativise their point of view as fallible human conjecture. In his watered-down echo of the fragment Aristotle wrote in his *Metaphysics* that the old traditions of the poets and prose authors got two things right about the gods, namely, that the heavenly bodies were gods and the natural world was divine. But only after conceding this, Aristotle turned rigidly critical: everything else the ancients claimed, τὰ λοιπά, were said μυθικῶς, in the manner of mere fable, and as an expedient for the masses to conform to the laws and uphold the status quo.[18] Acting less like the polite observer Herodotus, Aristotle was positivistically assertive about what the ancients got right and what was fanciful, and while his qualified acceptance of these articles of theology as valuable relics from the past ultimately set Aristotle apart from atheism, his presentation of the issue was not delimited by, and indeed serves as a foil to, the problem of divine unknowability.

This points to a wider *desideratum* that the scholarship on Greek religion acknowledges the more dogmatic knowledge claims about the gods that can surface in the Greek intellectual tradition. That there were differences in attitude was first, to my knowledge, identified by Jaap Mansfeld in 1981, who suggested that Greek philosophers often convey an 'epistemological optimism' in unearthing facts that went beyond sensory experience, but traditional claims of divine unknowability in the style

[18] Arist. *Metaph.* 1074b1–14; cf. above, ch. 3.3.2.

of Xenophanes were emblematic of 'epistemological pessimism'.[19] This distinction is a useful one that can be updated to take into account the scholarship on divine unknowability that has matured since Mansfeld developed this neglected polarity. Although it was a commonplace in Greek philosophy to stress the unobservability and obscurity of the gods to mortals in contrast to the complete knowledge possessed by the divine, these statements coexisted with claims that the divine could be glimpsed with the aid of reason or inference through the phenomena, and some philosophers presented their theological views with a confidence that was surprisingly at variance with the discourse of divine unknowability. To be more precise, the principle of unknowability did not merely fail to extend to the fact that there *was* a divine principle that was active in the cosmos, but also failed to prevent various philosophers from dogmatically attributing characteristics to the divine that were not always purely negative descriptions. In the context of Greek philosophy, at least, it is better to speak of a spectrum between divine unknowability and accessibility rather than 'divine unknowability' as one dominant principle.

Something of this optimism about the world of the unseen can be registered in the thought of Parmenides, which was already set in verse by the early fifth century. In his hexameter poetry Parmenides confidently presented his audience with a Way of Truth, a means of recognising ultimate reality that could be accessed beyond our sensory experience. In the poem, an unnamed goddess addressed a young man who can be plausibly taken as the youthful persona of Parmenides, who then wrote in his mature years to share his revelation with others. The goddess contrasted the 'truth' (ἀλήθεια) with the 'opinions of mortals' (δόξαι βρότειαι), envisioning the former in maximalist epistemic terms as claims that were true beyond dispute, while the latter

[19] Mansfeld 1981: 39 defined 'epistemological optimism' as the perspective that the unseen 'can be *known* beyond doubt, even if this knowledge has to be sought and is not immediately or even ultimately available to the common run of mankind'.

were, at best, specious and misleading opinions held by most people.[20] According to Parmenides, the goddess went further and reasoned that there must be an object of thought for us which necessarily exists, on the basis that our thought could hardly concern an object of cognition which necessarily did not exist. This necessary existence was subsequently identified with ultimate reality, and the argument of the goddess that ultimate reality could never admit any unreality was presented as an indisputable truth: as is necessary (ὥσπερ ἀνάγκη), there must be an object of thought out there which is pure Being.[21] This invested Parmenides with the power to enumerate the attributes of pure Being, which was, for him, ungenerated and indestructible, self-complete and homogenous, atemporal and motionless.[22] The fact that these attributes of Being were indefinite and largely consisted in negating what the senses perceived did little to detract from his certainty, however; for Parmenides, the Way of Truth was a process of reasoning and revelation, and he was the inspired individual who was chosen to lead the others to it. Parmenides was a 'master of truth', with a similar enlightened position of authority to traditional poets, seers and kings, but in the service of a novel philosophical outlook.[23]

Parmenides relegated the phenomenal world of experience to the realm of opinion, but most natural philosophers were given to recasting the divide between appearances and reality through the lens of our ordinary empirical observation, so that the unseen included not merely the fundamental basis of reality (as for Parmenides)

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[20] DK 28 B8.50–1.

[21] DK 28 B8.16.

[22] DK 28 B8.3–33.

[23] The label was coined by Detienne 1996: 129–34, to be read with Williams 2002: 272; here I use the term more broadly to describe the distinctively assertive self-presentation of Greek philosophers who marketed their theories as more correct than others, following Lloyd and Sivin 2002: 139, 146, 156.

but also the causes behind sensible phenomena such as the motion of the skies, or the nature of unobservables like the gods or the soul. Because the realm of the unseen could not be perceived directly, of course, a sensible thinker had to acquiesce in their limitations and could only rely on educated inferences taken from the appearances themselves. On its face, this could be interpreted as a pessimistic point of view that stressed the cognitive limitations of mortals. A near-contemporary of Parmenides, Alcmaeon of Croton, asserted that the gods have clarity (σαφήνεια) about human affairs, but humans have only been endowed with the power to learn about the unseen (τὰ ἀφανῆ) through relying on indirect signs (τεκμαίρεσθαι).[24] That this inferential mode of reasoning was applied to theology is suggested in the thought of Anaxagoras, who made a similar methodological claim to Alcmaeon that 'appearances are a vision into the unseen' (ὄψις … τῶν ἀδήλων τὰ φαινόμενα).[25] But there are grounds for suspecting that this limitation was not a decisive barrier to knowledge about the divine when it eventually came to Anaxagoras' attention.

If Anaxagoras opened his manual of natural philosophy by defining the nature and activity of Mind without developing an argument for its existence, at least in our surviving fragments, it is unlikely that he never appealed to the phenomena to reason his way back to the existence of Mind when Mind was invoked precisely to explain the order of the natural world. All the more so, since Anaxagoras had a methodological

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[24] Diog. Laert. 8.83 (= DK 24 B1): περὶ τῶν ἀφανέων· περὶ τῶν θνητῶν σαφήνειαν μὲν θεοὶ ἔχοντι, ὡς δὲ ἀνθρώποις τεκμαίρεσθαι (sc. δέδοται, per LSJ).

[25] Sext. Emp. *Math.* 7.140 (= DK 59 B21a, Democr. fr. 72 Luria); a perhaps overly pessimistic but evocative gloss on this passage was given by Cleve 1973: 103: '[*t*]*he nous confined of an individual living being is in touch with the walls of its prison only.* Therefore, it only knows but little. It has to experience and infer from the reports transmitted by the body's senses, from the percepts, now for it the only way to get knowledge of the things that have become unknown'.

principle with the same aim in view; if indeed he claimed that he would discover truths about the unseen from the observation of visible phenomena, Anaxagoras' description of Mind as a telekinetic rotator would have to imply that he inferred the nature and activity of Mind from the regular motions of the skies.[26] And this move, once done, helped Anaxagoras to achieve quite a great deal; it allowed him to reduce Mind to this explanatory role and limit its sphere of activity in the cosmos, to stipulate that Mind worked outside the cosmos through uniform rotatory motions, and to rule out the common Greek belief that gods could arbitrarily send down natural omens to mortals in the guise of malformed sacrificial victims or solar eclipses.[27] On the other hand, it might be said that there are passages which suggest Anaxagoras had some reserve in discoursing about the divine; when, for example, he described the composition of Mind as superlatively light and pure (ἔστι γὰρ λεπτότατόν τε πάντων χρημάτων καὶ καθαρώτατον), it might be replied that Anaxagoras was trying to say that Mind was *not* material or *not* blemished by matter, as though he could only establish what god was like by negating our ordinary observations.[28] But this pessimism was foreign to the thought of Anaxagoras, and not merely in view of the fact that fine and pure materials can be observed by the senses. With Anaxagoras' Mind, what you see is what you get; the course of the skies was a sign for Mind's main domain of activity in the cosmos, and

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[26] Cf. Reesor 1983: 95, who also compared Sext. Emp. *Math.* 7.140 (= DK 59 B21a, Democr. fr. 72 Luria).

[27] Anaxagoras' rejection of divination included the rejection of (1) inspecting animals for signs and (2) interpreting eclipses as messages from the gods: for (1) see Plut. *Vit. Per.* 6.2–4 (= DK 59 A16); for (2) see Pericles at Plut. *Vit. Per.* 35.1–2 (<Heraclid. Pont. fr. 47 Wehrli), to be read alongside Hippol. *Ref.* 1.8.9 (<DK 59 A42).

[28] Simpl. *in Phys.* p. 156.19–20 Diels (<DK 59 B12).

when Anaxagoras first defined the nature and activity of Mind in his treatise, it was laid down as a basic reality without any argumentation or hedging, cautionary language.[29]

This surprising confidence about uncovering the world of the unseen was even more explicitly outlined in the natural philosophy of Diogenes of Apollonia, who opened his treatise with the promise that he would build upon a foundation that everyone could agree upon (the 'indisputable', ἀναμφισβήτητον).[30] Diogenes would take it as beyond dispute that air was the grounding material (ἀρχή) of the natural world, which gave further definition to his commitment to substance monism, that is, the view that the cosmos was composed of variations of the same basic material. Diogenes reasoned that this basic material was intelligent and the primary source of life, and he concluded that the only element which possessed both of these attributes was air (ἀήρ). For Diogenes, furthermore, the intelligence (νόησις) of this material could be shown by appealing to the regular change of the seasons and night and day, which was routinely determined by changes in atmospheric air. The orderliness of these changes led Diogenes to embrace a Panglossian optimism about the natural world: 'thus everything was laid out in the finest way possible' (οὕτω διακείμενα ὡς ἀνυστὸν κάλλιστα).[31] Satisfied that air was intelligent, Diogenes quickly moved on to show that air was the source of life, furnishing 'great indicators' (μεγάλα σημεῖα) that all creatures relied on respiration to survive.[32] This led him to conclude that air was the supreme substance which inhered in all creatures to varying degrees and controlled (κυβερνᾶσθαι) the cosmic order as an omnipresent, supreme and intelligent power. When he advertised this discovery to his audience, finally, Diogenes' reference to himself (μοι δοκεῖ) should not be mistaken as epistemic humility, as though his theory

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[29] On this dogmatic component of Anaxagoras' thought see Schofield 1980: 22–33.

[30] Diog. Laert. 9.57 (= DK 64 B1, fr. 1 Laks); cf. Hippoc. *Reg.* 1; Lloyd 1996: 67.

[31] Simpl. *in Phys.* p. 152.11–16 Diels (= DK 64 B3, fr. 6 Laks).

[32] Simpl. *in Phys.* p. 152.18–21 Diels (= DK 64 B4, fr. 8 Laks).

was a personal and tentative finding. On the contrary, Diogenes was a 'master of truth' like Parmenides before him, and he displayed his knowledge in contrast with the errant speculation of others:

> καί μοι δοκεῖ τὸ τὴν νόησιν ἔχον εἶναι ὁ ἀὴρ καλούμενος ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καὶ ὑπὸ τούτου πάντας καὶ κυβερνᾶσθαι καὶ πάντων κρατεῖν· αὐτὸ γάρ μοι τοῦτο θεὸς δοκεῖ εἶναι καὶ ἐπὶ πᾶν ἀφῖχθαι καὶ πάντα διατιθέναι καὶ ἐν παντὶ ἐνεῖναι.[33]
>
> And it seems to me that what people call air is a possessor of intelligence, and that everything is steered by this element and it rules over everything; for this seems to be the same thing as god and it enters into everything, arranges everything and inheres in everything.

Diogenes also accounted for sense perception and thought as faculties that emerged from 'internal air' in living creatures, which was in his view a 'small portion of the divine' (μικρὸν ὢν μόριον τοῦ θεοῦ).[34] This meant that there was an element of self-recognition in his discovery that the gods were composed of rational, vital air, and through this process of self-realisation Diogenes believed that he had indisputably unearthed the nature and the sphere of activity of the divine. Although it seems likely that Diogenes made much of the fact that air was invisible, preserving some of the mystery of the divine,[35] his conviction that he had uncovered the fundamental truth of natural philosophy resulted in a remarkably dogmatic natural theology, and the

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[33] Simpl. *in Phys.* p. 152.22–5 Diels (<DK 64 B5, fr. 9 Laks).

[34] Theophr. *Sens.* 42 (<DK 64 A19, test. 8 Laks).

[35] Cf. Xen. *Mem.* 4.3.13–4, where Socrates similarly sermonised about the mystery of the visible and invisible gods who were active in the natural world.

evidence that he relied upon to get to that point was accessible to all: every Greek knew that the skies turned around, everyone knew that living creatures breathed to survive.

It is not a silly question to ask how any intellectual in antiquity could have claimed to have known what the fundamental element of the universe was, or how they knew that this element was a vital, intelligent god, or still less to have gone further and presented their findings as 'indisputable'. Yet while this might seem incredible to us, this optimism about uncovering the true nature about the unseen, and the foolhardy promise that the nature of the divine could be established on an indisputable foundation, are less surprising when it is considered how Greek intellectuals promoted their views in competition with others, and not merely between the philosophers who wrote to correct their predecessors. As G. E. R. Lloyd pointed out, there is evidence in the fifth and fourth centuries of lectures and agonistic public debates that explored fundamental questions about the unseen world, including the elemental constitution of the human body. One Hippocratic author complained that in these public debates, each advocate confidently claimed to speak correctly (φάντα ὀρθῶς), but each one advocated a different element as the main ingredient of the body: one speaker would plead their case for air, another for fire, or water, or earth, and the audience would vote for the most convincing argument.[36] As Lloyd noted, in a highly competitive intellectual culture of this kind it is unsurprising to meet cases where philosophers exuded a self-promotional confidence veering on dogmatism.[37] However, without taking into account this distinctively argumentative and dogmatic strand of the intellectual culture of the Greeks, an investigation into their speculative theologies can only be a partial one, and could be taken to imply that Greek philosophers were uniformly modest devotees within a broad church of negative theology. In reality, the philosophers could advance confident claims about the gods; their bold self-assertion makes it less

[36] Hippoc. *Nat. hom.* 1; cf. Lloyd 1979: 92–4.

[37] Lloyd 1979: 97–8, 139–46, 267; cf. Lloyd 1987: 96, 112–3.

troubling to imagine how fifth-century atheism could have surfaced as a dogmatic challenge against the consensus of the Ionian tradition, and a similar relationship between argumentativeness and dogmatism is evidenced in the portrait of the atheists and the other heretics in Plato's *Laws*. As their own 'masters of truth', the impious youths simultaneously scorned their theistic opponents and demanded convincing proofs (τεκμήρια ἱκανά) for the existence of the gods:

> With a mocking attitude (ἐρεσχηλοῦντες) they would quickly say the following words: Athenian Visitor, Lacedaemonian and Knossian, you speak the truth! For there are those of us who hold there are absolutely no gods at all (τὸ παράπαν θεοὺς οὐδαμῶς) and the [others] are as you describe them. In fact, we expect that before you threaten us harshly, you should first attempt (as you thought was fitting for your laws) to persuade and instruct us that the gods exist, arguing with adequate proofs (τεκμήρια λέγοντες ἱκανά).[38]

Throughout his discussion on atheism and impiety Plato portrayed the atheists as scornful and prone to contemptuous laughter, often describing their attitude with the verb καταφρονεῖν, 'to look down upon',[39] a term Plato used in the *Gorgias* to capture the kind of groundless intellectual arrogance that Socrates sought to extirpate from

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[38] Pl. *Leg.* 10.885c5–d3.

[39] Καταφρονεῖν: Pl. *Leg.* 10.885c2–3, 886a7–8, 887e7; καταγελᾶν: 10.908c8; προσπαίζειν: 10.885c3, ἐρεσχηλεῖν: 10.885c5; cf. Annas 2017: 123: 'atheism [in *Laws*] is a kind of youthful intellectual bravado; [Plato] pictures the young atheist openly deriding sacrifices and oaths and trying to persuade others'; on the comparable 'self-assurance' and 'swagger' of the argumentative stock atheist in theological polemics from early modern Britain, see Hunter 2023: 14–21.

humanity.[40] Clearly, his agenda was to present the atheists as all talk, as young men whose confidence in argument had outpaced their ability to recognise the obvious fact that the gods exist. But through the smokescreen of this negative portrayal there is a real vitality to the argumentative dogmatism of Plato's atheists, which resists a comparison to the polite affirmations of unknowability that one finds in Herodotus. Among this group of scorners we are faced with another mode of discourse, aggressive argumentation, but also a different personality type and disposition towards comprehending the world of the unseen. In his *Sophist* Plato pointed out that the sophists honed the critical debating skills of their pupils by, among other things, teaching them how to argue about the divine, which was an inscrutable topic for most people (περὶ τῶν θείων, ὅσ' ἀφανῆ τοῖς πολλοῖς).[41] On this understanding, the gods were ἀφανῆ as they could never be observed in the phenomenal world, while only a series of well-informed inferential leaps could get one closer to the truth of the matter (if indeed there was a truth to find; the sophists were more narrowly concerned with the application of reasoning). Natural philosophers like Anaxagoras and Diogenes of Apollonia never arrogated to themselves a complete knowledge the nature of the divine, but they *did* believe they could attain some understanding, and in confident terms; these facts were accessible to human reason. Looking to these thinkers, it is plausible that some readers of natural philosophy imbibed some of their optimism and advocated against the existence of the gods with a confident posture. Atheism was a culturally extreme relative of divine accessibility, and this confidence had a past.

This confident argumentative pose was equally reflected in the ontological tradition of the Greeks, as was just seen in Parmenides, the first Greek philosopher to address ontology after the goddess fatefully introduced him to the Way of Truth.[42] It

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[40] The term was tellingly used to describe the attitude of Callicles: Pl. *Grg.* 527a5–7.

[41] Pl. *Soph.* 232c1.

[42] On Parmenides' novelty in this regard, cf., e.g., Palmer 2009: 331.

would be no exaggeration that these questions added a second-order layer of speculation to the cosmological thought of the earlier Presocratics that did not previously exist. Is there something out there which exists necessarily, or is there something that necessarily does not? And if there *has* to be a necessary existent of some kind, how are we to describe it? Although it has been fairly concluded that Parmenides was probably misunderstood by Plato to mean that *only one thing existed*, which was never stated in the surviving fragments,[43] the descendants of Parmenides were, at least, faithful in exploring fundamental questions on similar lines, and soon enough the ontological thought from the Eleatic revolution would seep into other areas. Moreover, even if it was never an immediate factor in the history of atheism — one could scarcely imagine that the Way of Truth instantly brought about coteries of atheists in Elea — the ontological tradition of the Greeks did quietly form the background for an existential discussion like 'do the gods exist or not' to be explored in the first place.[44] It can be concluded that the Greeks were in a position to argue about ultimate realities and gods with confidence, and fundamental ontological questions were ready to hand.

4.2 Δύο Λόγοι: Rhetoric and Antithetical Argumentation

However, the argumentative character of atheism reflects another aspect of Greek thought that remains to be explored, and something should be said about the method of reasoning that was not merely associated with atheism but arguably played some role in shaping the idea. This was the uniquely exaggerated propensity among the Greeks to

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[43] Mourelatos 1970: 130–3; Curd 1998: 64–97.

[44] This is shown by the fact that ancient cultures which lacked an ontological tradition that could enter into theological disputes, such as ancient China, never yielded an existential worldview like atheism; cf. Li 2021: 787–8.

argue from two mutually exclusive positions in a competitive, agonistic setting, which could encourage a different way of tackling a philosophical conundrum when compared to surveying a range of options or advocating a position from an advisory, non-adversarial perspective.[45] The practice of arguing between opposing points of view was partly anticipated by the contests of words in early Greek culture in civic settings and military assemblies, as early Greek epic clearly shows. In the *Iliad*, the shield of Achilles famously depicted a public dispute (νεῖκος, 18.497) between two men over the aborted payment of a blood-price, which was arbitrated by judges and observed by a crowd in a civic meeting area (εἰν ἀγορῇ, 497) who favoured one side or the other (ἀμφὶς ἀρωγοί, 502).[46] Over a long timescale the spectacle of opposing arguments could certainly draw a crowd among the Greeks, as Hesiod and Thucydides attest. In *Works and Days*, Hesiod scolded his brother Perses for idling away the day watching public debates and quarrels in the town square.[47] Much later, during the Mytilenean Debate (427 BCE) in Thucydides, the statesman Cleon bitterly complained of the 'competitions' (ἀγῶνες) in the assembly between clever orators and rebuked his audience as complicit 'spectators of arguments' (θεαταὶ τῶν λόγων).[48]

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[45] This distinctive binary, legalistic quality to much Greek thought has been noted by generations of comparativists of the intellectual cultures of ancient Greece and ancient China: see Gernet and Vernant 1964: 324–5 (translated into English in Vernant 1980: 90); Lloyd and Sivin 2002: 128. More recently, Napoli 2025 has singled out this argumentative method (debating opposing perspectives before an audience) as fundamental to democratic politics and not merely sophistic thought.

[46] Hom. *Il.* 18.497–505; for contests of words in Homer see Barker 2009: 31–134.

[47] Hes. *Op.* 27–32.

[48] Thuc. 3.38.3–4; Munn 2023: 84–5 singled out Cleon's anti-intellectual distaste for the 'fascination with debate for its own sake' among the Athenians.

The rancour of Cleon was not directed against the Greek appreciation for spectacle in general, however, so much as the tendency for sophistic, intellectualised public discussion to devolve into a competition over who was the most skilled speaker in the assembly. Of course, Cleon was no less a beneficiary of rhetoric than the political rivals he criticised, and the art of public speaking in the fifth century was not a simple distraction from the affairs of the *polis* so much as it was a technical innovation to keep up with the increasing rationalisation and popularity of Greek political and legal institutions. But it can be further pointed out that rhetoric is of exemplary value for understanding the intellectual culture of the Greeks. With different points of emphasis Jean-Pierre Vernant and G. E. R. Lloyd developed the generally accepted thesis that it was the 'political experience' of the Greeks that proved decisive in the rise of Greek philosophy, contending that the regime changes of the sixth and fifth centuries and the broadened access to the law courts and assemblies (particularly at Athens) encouraged public debates on a variety of subjects which could take place on an increasingly higher level of abstraction.[49] Although it was largely intended to explain the rise of Greek cosmological speculation and fields like medicine, the Vernant-Lloyd thesis is well-supported by the rise of Greek rhetoric as a science, when the decline of tyrannies in Sicily and the rise of direct democracy in Athens increased the demand for experts to train citizens to plead their case in law courts and assemblies, and led to the appearance of rhetorical manuals with template speeches as a practical guide for how to argue from opposing perspectives.[50] Although the scholarship on antilogic has generally studied

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[49] The political analogies in Presocratic thought were underscored in Vernant 1957 (translated into English in Vernant 1983: 343–74); Vernant 1982; but as a rule the adversariality and radical revisability of Greek thought were more consistently emphasised in Lloyd 1979: 226–67; Lloyd 1987: 78–83; Lloyd 1991: 121–40.

[50] Aristotle noted that rhetorical handbooks were first written by Corax and Tisias in Syracuse after a spate of trials in the law courts after the expulsion of their tyrants: Cic. *Brut.* 46 (>DK 80 B6 [1], <Arist. fr. 137 Rose); on the fifth-century Athenian

antilogic as a sophistic mode of reasoning, Davide Napoli has pointed out that Greek civic institutions already encouraged an antilogic mode of discourse for resolving daily disputes. Besides the transparently adversarial approach of the law courts, a similar binary mode of thinking was encouraged in the popular assembly who would have to eventually vote for or against a motion, which encouraged a polarising contest between two contradictory claims.[51] Should the male citizens of Mytilene be executed, or spared? Should the stepmother be prosecuted for poisoning in the homicide court, or acquitted? Should the Athenians send out a convoy of ships to invade Sicily, or wait out of prudence? The necessary training for these types of policy or legal disputes was formalised by the sophists as the science of debate, ἀντιλογία, and as freelance experts in rhetoric they were paid to instruct the youth of the political elite on how to argue for and against a proposition.[52]

There were no disciplinary limits to what a sophist could argue about in the format of *pro* or *contra* arguments, and for Protagoras this was what made his curriculum so effective. He boasted that there were 'two opposing arguments' (δύο λόγοι ἀντικείμενοι ἀλλήλοις) 'for every subject' (περὶ παντὸς πράγματος),[53] and

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democracy and its increasing demand for training in rhetoric, see Kerferd 1981: 15–23; de Romilly 1992: 18–26; Munn 2023.

[51] Napoli 2025: 343–55, 363–4.

[52] On the science of debate (antilogic) and the sophists see Solmsen 1975: 10–46; Kerferd 1981: 59–67; Balla 2021; Lee 2023: 284–91; Napoli 2024; McKirahan 2025: 105–14.

[53] Diog. Laert. 9.51 (= DK 80 B6a; cf. Eur. fr. 189 K): πρῶτος ἔφη δύο λόγους εἶναι περὶ παντὸς πράγματος ἀντικειμένους ἀλλήλοις. Protagoras promoted this method as part of his general political education, which he taught for forty years (*c.* 460–420 BCE): Pl. *Men.* 91e6–7 (<DK 80 A8); cf. *Prt.* 317c1–2 (<DK 80 A5); in this vein Lee 2023: 299–301 describes rhetoric as a 'subject-neutral skill'.

according to Plato the sophists taught their students to debate for and against arguments in topics as diverse as theology, astronomy, metaphysics and moral and political affairs (see below, Figure 4.1).[54] Navigating these subjects was accomplished by a mixture of reading and spoken discussion with the sophist and their pupil. Plato had it that some topics were restricted to private meetings between the sophists and their students,[55] and equally he noted that there were handbooks which offered pointers on how to structure and embellish speeches as well as 'Protagorean' books about how to argue from opposing perspectives.[56] This brings to mind the debating societies in high schools and universities today, where aspiring politicians and lawyers can hone their critical skills in an improvisatory public setting that anticipates the parliament chamber or the courtroom. In Classical antiquity, however, the pupils of the sophists were restricted to a wealthy male minority, reflecting the limits of political participation at that time.[57]

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[54] Pl. *Soph.* 232b11–232e1 (>DK 80 B8) outlines a topic syllabus in this order for the sophists to create a ἀντιλογικός, a 'disputer' (i.e. in opposing arguments).

[55] Pl. *Soph.* 232c8 suggested that controversies about ontology (generation and being) were discussed in private gatherings (ταῖς ἰδίαις συνουσίαις); on the other hand, Gorgias' display speech *On Not-Being* was certainly available for a public reading.

[56] For the former, see Pl. *Phdr.* 266d5–267d8 (>DK 80 A16); for the latter, Pl. *Soph.* 232b11–232e1 (>DK 80 B8); it is not entirely clear how distinct these books were as a literary genre. Aristotle complained about Protagorean template speeches at *Soph. el.* 183b37–184a8 (>DK 82 B14 [1]) that the sophists simply gave their students written speeches to absorb through passive, rote learning, to 'learn by heart' (ἐκμανθάνειν, LSJ s.v. III).

[57] On the steep price of a sophistic education, see Munn 2023: 79–85; on the sophistic education curriculum in general, see Marrou 1965: 90–106 and de Romilly 1992: 30–56.

THEOLOGY	NATURAL PHILOSOPHY	STUDIES ON BEING	LAW AND POLITICS	THE ARTS
Disputation about divine matters (τὰ θεῖα): 232c1–3.	Disputation about visible phenomena in the earth and sky: 232c4–6.	Disputation on generation and being (γένεσις, οὐσία): 232c7–11.	Disputation about laws and state affairs (νόμοι, τὰ πολιτικά): 232d1–4.	Disputation about the arts (τέχναι) against their experts: 232d5–e1.

Figure 4.1. The syllabus in Plato, *Sophist* for common sophistic debating subjects.

The public interest in atheism in Athens was in part stimulated by growing popular suspicion about the perils of sophistic rhetoric, which can be interpreted on parallel lines as a reactionary discourse that consisted in a mix of exaggeration with reality. There was, in general, a concern that Athenian politicians who were too skilled in rhetoric could be cunning and manipulative, to the point of misleading their audiences about basic facts of objective reality. One prominent political opponent of Pericles, Thucydides son of Melesias, reportedly quipped that Pericles could have lost a wrestling contest but still managed to convince everyone present that he had won.[58] The more specific rhetorical practice of antilogic was also subjected to harsh public

[58] Plut. *Vit. Per.* 8.3–4 (≠ DK; probably from Stesimbrotus); for the Protagorean wrestling reference of Pericles' opponent see Bonazzi 2020: 139–40 and Corradi 2023: 101–2; cf. Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.46–7 on Pericles as a sophistic dialectician in his youth; a fifth-century source in Plut. *Vit. Per.* 36.2–3 (>DK 80 A10, Stesimbrotus *FGrH* 107 fr. 11) puts Pericles in the company of Protagoras, alleging that they talked about rhetorical puzzles for hours.

scrutiny. Protagoras did himself no favours when he promised that he could help his students win the unpopular side of the debate, 'to make the weaker argument the stronger' (ποιεῖν τὸ τὸν ἥττω δὲ λόγον κρείττω),[59] as this sounded unsavoury to critics of the sophists who believed that teachers like Protagoras were teaching their young students to upturn traditional values to clear the path for an undisciplined, impious lifestyle. Already in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, the 'weaker' argument (τὸν ἥττονα, 1337) could be suspiciously understood to mean 'contradicting what is just' (τοῖσιν δικαίοις ἀντιλέγειν, 1339),[60] and after he was captivated by the spell of antilogic, the youth Pheidippides would argue to his father Strepsiades that it is acceptable, and indeed positively helpful, behaviour for sons to beat their own fathers.[61] These misgivings about the destructive consequences involved with youths learning antilogic persisted seamlessly into the fourth century when the educational practice continued in Athenian elite circles. In *Republic* Socrates said that when young men (οἱ μειρακίσκοι) learned antilogic for the first time, they ripped up the claims of their opponents like puppies,[62] and in his *Topics* Aristotle set firm moral boundaries on the remit of dialectic. Some topics in dialectic could not be seriously entertained, and those who were genuinely puzzled about whether the gods should be honoured and the like should be punished rather than argued with.[63]

As Aristophanes and Aristotle suggest, the reckless deployment of dialectic could be used to entertain different sorts of impious propositions. Should the gods be honoured, *or not*? Does Zeus exist *or not*? In *Clouds* the second question did not

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[59] Arist. *Rhet.* 1402a23–7 (>DK 80 B6b).

[60] On these rival fifth-century interpretations of Protagoras' creed, see Corradi 2013.

[61] Ar. *Nub.* 1399–1451.

[62] Pl. *Resp.* 7.539b1–6.

[63] Arist. *Top.* 11.105a3–9, esp.: οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἀποροῦντες πότερον δεῖ τοὺς θεοὺς τιμᾶν καὶ τοὺς γονέας ἀγαπᾶν ἢ οὔ κολάσεως δέονται.

necessarily exclude the existence of other divinities but positively promoted it, allowing Socrates to trample down the traditional Olympian gods with his Cloud goddesses. But there are cases where characters in Greek drama entertain the question 'do the gods exist *or not*', which was posed as a stark binary between polytheism and atheism. One of the slave politicians in Aristophanes' *Knights* asked the other what evidence he had (ποίῳ χρώμενος τεκμηρίῳ, 33) for the existence of the gods, while the other quipped that he could acknowledge that the gods exist because he was hated by them (34). Like the natural philosopher or the sophist, the less impious slave of the two adduced an inferential proof, τεκμήριον, to glimpse into the world of the unseen, parodying a real argument from the fifth century that one can recognise the gods due to their goodwill towards mortals.[64] But the same extreme polarisation between 'gods or no gods' was already mapped out in Euripides' *Bellerophon*, when, as was noted (ch. 1.1), the tortured protagonist of the drama said that the gods do not exist because tyrants flourish and pious people suffer. As was seen at the start of this study, there is a charged religious subtext behind Bellerophon's tirade, and a closer reading suggests that his 'argument' was a rhetorical outburst from an eccentric moralist who believed, and was actively disappointed, in the gods. Yet fifth-century audiences could have nonetheless recognised that Bellerophon was presenting a τεκμήριον for the non-existence of the gods; it could be read literally as a stimulus for further discussion, as it was precisely the atheistic and rhetorical form of Bellerophon's outburst that made something new out of the traditional protests directed against the Olympian gods in earlier Greek

[64] Similar is the theological argument of Pericles recorded in Stesimbrotus (*c.* 420s BCE), which included the premiss that 'we do not see [the gods], yet through the honours which they receive, and through the goods which they dispense (καὶ τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς ἃ παρέχουσιν), we infer on the basis of signs that the immortals exist' (ἀθανάτους εἶναι τεκμαιρόμεθα): Plut. *Vit. Per.* 8.6 (= Stesimbrotus *FGrH* 107 fr. 9).

poetry.[65] This upturning of the old and the new was a textbook approach in rhetoric, which, as Socrates pointed out in the *Phaedrus*, so often involved presenting 'new claims in an old-fashioned way and the opposite claims in a novel way' (καινά τε ἀρχαίως τά τ' ἐναντία καινῶς).[66] Rhetoric was dangerous as it could make the gods non-existent in speech, but this prospect could not help but attract a certain fascination, and if it were otherwise, Euripides would have never been as popular as he was.

The close relationship between sophistic rhetoric and atheism is all but confirmed by Plato in his *Republic* and *Laws*. Besides presenting the upper-class Athenians who were prone to atheism or the other types of impiety as beneficiaries of the sophists, paid 'teachers of persuasion' (πειθοῦς διδάσκαλοι),[67] Adeimantus included atheism as a dialectical option in *Republic* under a form of reasoning that recalled Gorgias' distinctive method in *Encomium for Helen* and *On Not-Being* of outlining a set of possibilities and arguing that each item in the list inexorably led to the same conclusion.[68] Clearly for Gorgias, this mode of argument could be used to promote the unpopular side of a familiar debate, boldly defending the view that Nothing exists; a tongue-in-cheek ἀντίλογος to the Parmenidean λόγος that Being necessarily exists. In the imagined conversation between Cleinias and the atheists in

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[65] Those who question the rhetorical novelty of Bellerophon's tirade might counter that he merely inverts Odysseus' 'hallelujah' at Hom. *Od.* 24.351–2 (quoted at the opening of this chapter); already Burkert 2011: 469 suggested 'dass man an der Existenz der Götter zweifeln kann, ist im Grunde schon in dem frommen Ausruf der Odyssee enthalten'; cf. Kullmann 1986: 41–2. However, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, the existence of the gods for Odysseus was hardly envisioned to imply a negative, which would need another age of exploration.

[66] Pl. *Phdr.* 267b1 (<DK 80 A16).

[67] Pl. *Resp.* 2.365c7–d6.

[68] Pl. *Resp.* 2.365d7–366a1; see earlier, ch. 2.2.1.

Laws, however, atheism was pitted against polytheism in the form of Protagorean opposing arguments and no longer referenced in passing as a subsidiary dialectical option. It has already been noted that Cleinias' argument for the existence of the gods consisted in two related τεκμήρια, that is, the order of the natural world and the universal recognition of the gods, but the Athenian Visitor replied that the atheists would scoffingly respond with the counter-assertion that the natural world was comprised of lifeless matter.[69] This goes to show that the influence of rhetoric on atheism was not merely a rhetorical or linguistic experiment, however much the sophists like Gorgias composed their speeches with these aims in mind; in the process of teaching their subjects in the form of two opposing arguments, it became increasingly easy in the late fifth century to think about the existence of the gods as a stark, all-or-nothing antithesis which was favourable to a maximalist contrast between a full pantheon of gods or a world that was empty of them. In the terminology of the German intellectual historian Hans Leisigang, this was a method of argumentation that had a distinctive 'thought form' (*Denkform*) or pictorial structure that split every topic into two extreme positions; every topic could be beaten, in a Procrustean manner, into the shape of a binary.[70] Marek Winiarczyk identified four intellectual currents as contributions to the formation of fifth-century atheism, namely early criticisms of divine anthropomorphism, rationalisation of myths, materialism and the view that religion is a human invention, but the foregoing discussion suggests that there were other ingredients in the mix: the ontological thinking of the Eleatics, read through the antilogic of the sophists. Via these two branches of influence, the 'political experience' of the Greeks had an indirect but profound role to play in the formation of fifth-century atheism, and the intellectual resources were present in this period for staging a devastatingly clear debate between these opposing positions.

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[69] Pl. *Leg.* 10.886a2–5; *Leg.* 10.886d3–e1; see earlier, ch. 3.1.

[70] Leisegang 1928: 9.

4.3 'Credal' Non-Religion? Protagorean Agnosticism

But it is one thing to argue between two views, and another to wholeheartedly subscribe to the unpopular side of the debate. A sceptic might counter that atheism was a dialectical experiment that some callow students of the sophists in Classical Athens indulged in, but it was never entertained for any serious period of time; and when Plato suggested otherwise he was guilty of melodrama. But to discredit Plato's testimony convincingly, the burden of proof rests on the sceptic to show why, from an intellectual and social perspective, an 'impious' Athenian could not have cleaved to the concept of atheism as a worldview as Plato says he does. In his polemic about unbelief in the sixteenth century, Febvre's position was that anti-Christian ideas were available to the Renaissance scholars of this period from a wide sampling of Classical authors, but the humanists read their own Christian preconceptions into these past authorities and did not firmly commit to the original doctrines presented: the philosophies of the sixteenth century could be characterised by a pre-logical mentality, and a pre-logical mentality could only produce 'a chaos of contradictory and wavering opinions'.[71] On this view, the denial of providence in Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (say) was available for readers to contradict the fundamental tenets of Christianity, but in a Christian intellectual climate it was impossible for the idea to stick in anyone's mind.

The question of the availability and, for want of a better term, the mental *tenacity* of Greek atheism has been recently discussed in scholarship which has looked to the connection between Protagoras and philosophical atheism. When Protagoras admitted in his notorious opener that he could not establish whether there are gods or

[71] Febvre 1982: 379.

not, his presentation of the possibilities could be taken as a barometer for a growing polarisation between polytheism and atheism among his fellow Greeks:

> περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι οὔθ' ὡς εἰσίν, οὔθ' ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν οὔθ' ὁποῖοί τινες ἰδέαν· πολλὰ γὰρ τὰ κωλύοντα εἰδέναι, ἥ τε ἀδηλότης καὶ βραχὺς ὢν ὁ βίος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.[72]
>
> ἔχω εἰδέναι Diog. Laert. δύναμαι λέγειν Sext. Emp. οἶδα Euseb. | οὔθ' ὁποῖοί τινες ἰδέαν Euseb. solus | τὰ κωλύοντά με Di Benedetto ex Sext. Emp. et Euseb., με deest in Diog. Laert. | ἥ τε ἀδηλότης […] τοῦ ἀνθρώπου Diog. Laert. solus
>
> On the gods I am unable to know whether they exist or not, or what they are like in regard to form; for many things get in the way of knowing — both the obscurity of this matter and the shortness of human life.

True to the Protagorean creed that any topic could be split into two, this looks like a dialectical division between opposing arguments: there are *gods*, or there are *no gods*.

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[72] Diog. Laert. 9.51 and Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 14.3.7 (<DK 80 B4); in the app. crit. see Sext. Emp. *Math.* 9.56 (<DK 80 A12); for quotations of the fragment in chronological order see Barnes 2015: 199–200, but he leaves out the ancient paraphrases, which are also valuable; add Pl. *Tht.* 162d5–e2 (= DK 80 A23 [1]) and Phld., *Piet.*, *P.Herc.* 1428 col. XV.1–4 Henrichs (= DK 80 A23 [3]). As noted in the apparatus, the inclusion of με has been defended in Di Benedetto 2007; Corradi 2018: 80 points to the limitations of this reading (the syntactic dispensability of με, and the possible generalising force of the fragment) but suggests it could be printed as one possible version of the *incipit*. I believe this is a simplifying addition that unintentionally lessens the generalising force of Protagoras' claim; mortality did not affect him in particular, and the imperceptibility of the gods was for Protagoras a universal problem (cf. ch. 4.1).

In this vein, David Sedley takes this admission as an indirect testimony for fifth-century atheism, pointing out that if Protagoras saw the existence and non-existence of gods as equally uncertain possibilities, this 'implies a context in which a case for the non-existence of the gods had already been propounded'.[73] By contrast, Thomas Harrison has replied that Protagoras' statement need not signal an ongoing debate between two logically articulated positions. As he puts it, 'if our concern is a cultural history rather than philosophical exposition', 'there are perhaps dangers inherent in this very precision. Can we establish the origins of atheism in such a clear-cut analytical fashion?'[74] Fusing together the theories of Febvre and Henk S. Versnel, Harrison reasons that the thought pattern of the ancient Greeks could not allow a view like atheism to take root in their minds, and when they made sceptical (or even atheistic-sounding) statements about the gods, these claims do not really imply a fixed commitment to a non-religious creed. After all, as Versnel put it, the Greeks usually adopted 'a multiperspective view' about the gods which allowed them 'to cope with the ambiguity by shifting from one point of view to the other, depending on what the context, focus, discourse or frame of mind required'.[75] Harrison refashions this paradigm for thinking about Greek religion as evidence against the existence of atheism: '[w]hy do we credit atheistic expressions with a distinctive – might we say doctrinal or credal? – clarity, or suppose that ancient writers had a neat, unitary perspective on traditional religion?'[76] In reply to this eloquent challenge, then, it needs to be shown how an ancient Greek could hold a non-religious view that was not merely a context-dependent, fleeting rhetorical statement. In the absence of clear and

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[73] Sedley 2013: 347.

[74] Harrison 2025: 104.

[75] Versnel 2011: 143; this verdict is the culmination of the earlier studies Versnel 1990 and Versnel 1994, which contend that Greek and Roman religion are characterised by the co-existence of contradictory beliefs.

[76] Harrison 2025: 104.

independently reliable accusations directed against atheists outside of Plato, the agnosticism of Protagoras is a good *comparandum*. However, it will be necessary to develop an interpretation of his thought on its own terms, too, since Protagoras' thought is a close blood relative of philosophical atheism in its theological outlook, when it domesticated the existence of the gods as merely an object of thought.

The ancient biographical tradition holds that Protagoras' admission of agnosticism opened a book that was later titled *On the Gods* (ch. 2.1.2), but it is unknown whether this book existed in antiquity or even belonged as a section to a larger work. It does not appear in the book catalogue of Protagoras' works in Diogenes Laertius,[77] and it is not out of the question that the book was speculatively invented by later authors on the basis of a notorious aphorism. Somewhat differently, Jonathan Barnes has argued that Protagoras' book was followed by a completely different topic, noting that the μέν-particle in περὶ μὲν θεῶν could anticipate a contrast made after the surviving fragment: 'on the gods, *on the one hand* I do not know whether they exist or not … but on the other hand …'. Sceptical that an agnostic like Protagoras could have discoursed about a fundamentally unknowable subject like the gods, Barnes appealed to the humanistic outlook of the sophist and proposed that Protagoras said, 'of the gods I know nothing; about men I speak thus'.[78] There is also an ancient testimony, the earliest surviving paraphrase of Protagoras' confession of agnosticism in Plato's *Theaetetus*, which might tell against Protagoras interrogating the existence of the gods in a book. In a conversation about Protagoras' concept on truth, Socrates spoke for Protagoras and told the young man Theaetetus not to mention the gods in their conversation, referencing the diffidence of Protagoras about theology:

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[77] Diog. Laert. 9.55 (<DK 80 A1).

[78] Barnes 1982: 137–8; cf. Barnes 2015: 199: '*On Gods* was not an essay in theology'.

> For you are young, dear lad; and so you enthusiastically buy into the popular nonsense that you hear. For on this matter Protagoras (or someone else on his behalf) would say: 'Good fellows young and old! You talk nonsense in the assembly as you sit down together, bringing the gods into the open (θεούς τε εἰς τὸ μέσον ἄγοντες), whom I omit from speeches or writings as to whether they exist or not (οὓς ἐγὼ ἔκ τε τοῦ λέγειν καὶ τοῦ γράφειν περὶ αὐτῶν ὡς εἰσὶν ἢ ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν, ἐξαιρῶ).[79]

The phrase 'keep out from' (ἐξαιρεῖν ἐκ) points to a thoroughgoing reserve on Protagoras' part, omitting any mention of whether the gods exist both in public speaking (τὸ λέγειν) and his writing (τὸ γράφειν). This is interesting as it recalls the myth of Protagoras in Plato's eponymous dialogue, in which Protagoras could be read as non-committal about whether the universal belief in the gods was a product of human ingenuity or, true to the mythic presentation of his message, an insight into their existence. This passage equally confirms that throughout the Protagorean corpus of writings, he was always an agnostic, which allays any misgivings that he was merely trying to shock his audience in one book or display speech. In a somewhat undeveloped article from a few years ago, however, I suggested a stronger reading for the *Theaetetus* passage that Protagoras did not write about the gods at all, but Plato's Socrates did not necessarily imply that much. More narrowly, as Rachel Barney has pointed out, this testimony seems to exclude Protagoras mentioning the gods in any connection with his epistemology, which could allow for the possibility that Protagoras wrote about the gods in a less systematic way. Further, this reading could be squared with the existing scholarly view that *On the Gods* was a section in a longer work that featured opposing arguments on a number of topics.[80] After all, there is a network of book titles from

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[79] Pl. *Tht.* 162d3–e2 (>DK 80 A23 [1]).

[80] My thanks for Rachel Barney on this point, as a response to Henry 2022: 218–25; see Barney (unpublished manuscript).

antiquity which show that Protagoras surveyed topics in the form of opposing arguments, with book titles ranging from *Knockdown* [*Arguments*] and *Antilogies.*[81] Taking a cue from these titles, this school of thought holds that Protagoras was an agnostic, but he discussed the existence and nature of the gods as a dialectical exercise for educational or polemical purposes, as though to say, 'on the gods, I cannot say whether they exist or not, … but there are opposing arguments on this subject for the student to master'.[82] This possibility can scarcely be ruled out, although as an argument intended as a hypothetical reconstruction of Protagoras' body of written work, more evidence is needed than sifting through the book titles about Protagoras, which makes it necessary to appeal to indirect (and arguably indecisive) testimonies in other places.[83] In lieu of a positive *or* negative answer on what followed from Protagoras' admission

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[81] Bernays 1850 influentially argued that several different Protagorean book titles (Ἀλήθεια, Καταβάλλοντες, Ἀντιλογίαι) referred to a single dialectical work on various topics, esp. Sext. Emp. *Math.* 7.60 (= DK 80 B1 [1]).

[82] Untersteiner 1971: 390 saw the 'rassegna' of subjects in Pl. *Soph.* 232b11–232e1 (>DK 80 B8) as a summary for the contents of Protagoras' *Antilogies*, noting the repetition of similar book titles from Diog. Laert. 9.55 (<DK 80 A1): Ἀντιλογιῶν α' β'and Diog. Laert. 3.37 (= DK 80 B5; >Aristox. fr. 67 Wehrli, Favorinus fr. 55 Barigazzi); cf. Lee 2005: 21–8; Lee 2023: 299–300; Barney (unpublished manuscript). *Truth* and *On the Gods* are missing from the catalogue in Diogenes Laertius, but according to this view, these items were different sections in the *Antilogies*.

[83] In particular, the syllabus of Plato is not unimpeachable evidence that Protagoras' book included a section on theology. Although the writings of Protagoras are certainly mentioned at the close of Plato's subject catalogue (*Soph.* 232b11–232e1), the reference to theology (περὶ τῶν θείων) as a topic of debate is not described as a written medium, and Plato included other topics that were addressed in spoken private meetings (ταῖς ἰδίαις συνουσίαις, 232c8).

about the gods, I have adopted the methodological principle that we read Protagoras' fragment closely and try ascertain its meaning in light of his epistemological views and his position on other topics, without committing to a stance on what his *On the Gods* (if it existed) contained. The epistemology of Protagoras is chiefly recoverable from Plato's *Theaetetus* and a fragment from his book *Truth*.

In the *incipit* to *Truth*, Protagoras declared to his listeners that judgements about reality were restricted to the human individual — the 'man measure' or *homo mensura* thesis — which Plato would later interpret this as a relativist claim that each perception is automatically true to the perceiver who judges it to be true, which included evaluative judgments as well. Sextus Empiricus quoted the opener fully:

> πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν.
>
> A human being is the measure of all things: both of the things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not.[84]

In an illuminating lexicographical study on Homeric to Classical usages for the term μέτρον, T. A. van Berkel suggests that Protagoras was the first Greek to popularise the usage of the term as a 'standard' of judgment, rather than a form of measurement (its more concrete meaning). But the enigmatic opening of *Truth*, according to van Berkel, might have been an innocuous acknowledgement of the fact that all knowledge comes from a situated, human perspective: 'we cannot but see things from a first-person perspective. As humans we are bound to see the world in terms of a human

[84] Sext. Emp. *Math.* 7.60 (<DK 80 B1 [1]), which was Protagoras' *incipit* for *Truth* (ἀρχόμενος τῆς Ἀληθείας) according to Pl. *Tht.* 161c2–6 (<DK 80 B1 [2]).

measure'.[85] Famously, however, Plato's *Theaetetus* attributed a far more radical relativism to Protagoras — namely, the idea that what *seems* true to an individual or community, *is* true for them — but for van Berkel, this could be little more than a sustained misreading of Plato's own devising.[86] This difficulty of interpretation will be revisited further on, but for now it can be taken for granted that Protagoras relied on an anthropocentric understanding of knowledge: what is knowable can only be circumscribed in a human frame of reference, the individual who judges and their community. This principle is necessary for appreciating the scope of Protagorean agnosticism and its emphasis on the limits of human understanding.

Agnosticism can be divided into two broad categories, and each comprises a separate, second-order knowledge claim about the gods' existence or non-existence: 'weak agnosticism' and 'strong agnosticism'. According to this division, a weak agnostic could be *optimistic* or *undecided* whether the existence, or non-existence, of the gods, could be discovered by human knowledge. A weak agnostic would only remain committed to this stance, however, on the grounds that he or she has yet to be persuaded either way, or perhaps sees the problem as a collective mystery which humanity has yet to solve — but, importantly, it *could* be solved. By contrast, a strong agnostic would be *pessimistic* about the subject entirely, and takes the question of the gods' existence as irresolvable as a matter of principle, both for the individual and for humanity as a whole.[87] In Protagorean terms, a weak agnostic would view τὰ

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[85] Van Berkel 2013: 61.

[86] Van Berkel 2013: 62: 'Protagorean relativism as we know it may be an invention of Plato's. It was Plato who investigated the implications of [*homo mensura*], by turning an aphorism on the human condition ("being caught in a human perspective"), both into perceptual relativism and into a position favouring majority opinion'.

[87] See, e.g., Ferrari and Incurvati 2022: 375: 'while optimistic and hesitant agnosticism leave the enquiry into whether *p* open, pessimistic agnosticism effectively closes the

κωλύοντα εἰδέναι as a tall fortification which is difficult to breach, but it could be accomplished; with more self-assurance, a strong agnostic takes the fortress as indestructible, and we should be content in the knowledge that no one can scale to the other side. In the modern scholarly parlance on ancient scepticism, the difference is one between a radical sceptic who renounces all knowledge about the gods, even their obscurity to mortals as a topic, and a negative dogmatist who asserts that theology as a subject is objectively unavailable to human knowledge.[88]

Some previous scholarship has pondered the possibility of a weak agnosticism for Protagoras, although this weakness can be conceived at different levels of potency. Werner Jaeger characterised Protagorean agnosticism as merely 'an expression of individual opinion', and suspects that the sophist must have eventually warmed towards theism if he could write 'an entire treatise' about the gods.[89] Less presumptuously, Adam Drozdek suggested that Protagoras' appeal to the shortness of human life could imply a collective weak agnosticism — perhaps, given enough time, humans could eventually learn more about the existence of the gods, but Protagoras' own lifespan would be too short to see this objective to its completion.[90] Perhaps here Protagoras could have been drawn to a cultural-historical optimism on the basis of earlier human innovations, and taken a hint from Xenophanes' fragment that humans can gradually come to learn about things better 'in time', χρόνῳ.[91] A stronger dose of

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enquiry'. 'Hesitant agnosticism', according to their view, is a second-order uncertainty on whether the existence of the gods could be discoverable.

[88] For this distinction among the Pyrrhonian sceptics, see Sext. Emp. *Pyr.* 1.1–4.

[89] Jaeger 1947: 189.

[90] Drozdek 2005: 42: 'would it be possible to acquire at least partial knowledge about the gods through generations of theological investigations? Presumably, problems like this are addressed by Protagoras later in his book'.

[91] Stob. *Flor.* 1.8.2; 3.29.41 (= DK 21 B18).

Protagorean agnosticism — if still on the 'weaker' side of the question — was proposed by Jaap Mansfeld in an influential article on Protagorean theology. According to Mansfeld, Protagoras meant to stress his individual incapacity to ascertain the gods' existence, but his statement somewhat simultaneously implied a universal claim of mortal ignorance.[92] So far, this could well suggest 'strong agnosticism'. On the other hand, Mansfeld continues that Protagoras did not necessarily propose that the gods were unknowable in principle; indeed, the sophist would seem to imply that the conditions for establishing their existence were practically *unlikely*. Interpreting Protagoras as a radical empiricist, Mansfeld influentially — and controversially — suggested that he demanded a 'clear and distinct *personal experience*' to verify the existence of the gods.[93] This is substantiated from a passage in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, in which Mansfeld detected the lurking shadow of Protagoras. In a hagiographic passage in this work that once again underscored Socratic piety, Socrates urged his friend Euthydemus not to 'wait for' (ἀναμένειν) a personal religious experience to confirm the gods' existence, since we do not need to look upon the 'forms of the gods' (τὰς μορφὰς τῶν θεῶν) to comprehend them. Mansfeld interpreted this as a subtle dig at Protagoras, who must have seen the gods as verifiable according to 'personal experience' solely; an experience which was not forthcoming.[94]

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[92] Mansfeld 1981: 52–3 clarifies this at his conclusion.

[93] Mansfeld 1981: 42, italics in the original; in a more 'weak agnostic' reading, Woodruff 1985: 496 suggested that Protagoras only spoke for those 'not blessed with perceptions' of the gods. Woodruff further argued that Protagoras was too thoroughgoing a relativist on truth (cf. Pl. *Tht.*) to propose agnosticism as a meaningful position of his own (494 n. 20), although it surely counts for something that Protagoras dared to state his uncertainty in the first place.

[94] Xen. *Mem.* 4.3.13 (≠ DK); cf. Mansfeld 1981: 42: 'Socrates agrees that life is too short for this, but he refuses to follow Protagoras/Euthydemus all the way'.

The more direct evidence at our disposal, however, can be taken to show that Protagoras made his verdict on the gods' existence on independent grounds to immediate sense data as well. In his *Metaphysics* Aristotle reported that Protagoras refuted (ἐλέγχειν) the geometers by denying that a non-sensible, perfect circle exists, countering that there are only imperfect circles, which is to say their concrete instantiations.[95] If this claim was more than an improvisatory rebuttal, Protagoras seems to suggest here that our personal experiences undermine the reality of hypothetical, abstract objects, positing that only circles within our frame of observation are genuine ones, ruling out the existence of insensible abstract objects in geometry. We can grant that not even the geometers would be waiting to have a perfect circle talk to them in a dream, but a Mansfeldian Protagoras would surely prefer to see these kinds of entities as either beyond sense verification, rather than false, or otherwise he could presume against the gods' existence until he has encountered them directly.

It seems more likely that the grounds for Protagoras' doubt cannot be reduced to a single formula, and this would remain so if he endorsed a worldly perspective that favoured personal experiences as a fundamental source of knowledge.[96] Instead, his conflicting answers for each problem would make more sense if we read Protagoras' opener with a stronger negative force: the mortality of Protagoras, and the inherent obscurity of theology, would underscore the intrinsic distance between mortals and the gods, which must have struck Protagoras as absurdly inapt for human comprehension: neither the mortal thinker, nor the abstruse subject matter, could hope to meet somewhere in the middle. Xenophanes said that mortals have not, and never will, attain 'clarity' (τὸ σαφές) on the nature of the gods, and in a more sceptical era Protagoras

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[95] Arist. *Metaph.* 997b32–998a4 (= DK 80 B7).

[96] *Pace* Woodruff 1985: 496: 'surely what Protagoras means [in his *incipit* for *On the Gods*] is that generally the gods do not manifest themselves to mortals'; for another critique of this view, see Gagarin 2002a: 116.

must have taken this negative theological thinking up a notch: 'if the gods are unknowable, this would equally apply to their existence or non-existence'. But it is dissatisfying to reduce Protagoras' stance to an exaggeration of the pronouncements of Xenophanes in view of the fifth-century controversies about the existence of the gods. In the fifth-century, the Greeks reasoned their way to the unseen through 'signs' or 'inferential clues' (σημεῖα, τεκμήρια), which largely consisted in inferences from the natural world and the realm of human experience: the practice of worshipping the gods and receiving things from them, the universal belief in the gods, the enforcement of cosmic justice, and the order of the natural world.[97] Although generally empirical in content, this evidence was not restricted to 'personal experiences', and since this information was available to Protagoras it would be quite incredible to imagine that he failed to reflect upon it. Although his views were polemically shaped to an extent by engagements with philosophers like Xenophanes, it is strongly probable that Protagoras surveyed all the τεκμήρια for polytheism and atheism and came up empty, which reinforced his view that theology was inherently obscure; everything he knew supported this claim.[98] In sympathy with the atheists, then, Protagoras had a highly abstracted disposition towards the existence of the gods, treating the subject as a *demonstrandum* between opposing arguments. His was not a simple relational perspective, as though he felt *abandoned* by the gods in his aporetic quest to discover whether they existed or not; Protagoras was non-religious.

This supports a negative dogmatist reading for the agnosticism of Protagoras, according to which he held that the obscurity of the divine was common to all mortals

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[97] In this vein, Billings 2023: 153 notes a marked 'empirical tendency' in theological reasoning from the late fifth century.

[98] Cf. Carbonara Naddei 1969: 98, who concluded that Protagoras emphasised from a synoptic perspective the total unfoundedness ('infondatezza') in reasoning for either theism or atheism.

and that the κωλύοντα invoked in *On the Gods* were not going to disappear. If this is correct, Protagoras' allusion to the shortness of human life could be taken as the more radical claim that οὔτις ἀνὴρ γένετ' οὐδέ τις ἔσται with such knowledge about the gods (if it is permitted to twist the words of Xenophanes in this direction). But it still remains to explore how this pronouncement of agnosticism relates to Protagoras' dictum that 'man is the measure of all things', which could lead to curious consequences if the latter was a thoroughgoing endorsement of relativism. The phrase on its own terms is cryptic and can be read in a number of ways, which has not allayed modern suspicions that Plato misrepresented Protagoras as an out-and-out relativist about truth. This suspicion is perceptive and partly well-founded, but there are good reasons to believe that Protagoras literally promoted relativism in *Truth*.[99] The examples Plato used to illustrate the *homo mensura* doctrine come under two types, which are plausible enough in and of themselves: Protagoras was seen to endorse a relativism for perceptual qualities and a relativism for moral and normative qualities. The first example that Plato cited to describe Protagorean perceptual relativism in the *Theaetetus* is a sensible one that could have easily come from the original *Truth* (as Diels recognised): if a wind blows and it is hot for Person A, it is true *for them* that the wind is hot; if it is cold for Person B, it is true *for them* that the wind is cold.[100] Meanwhile, while Socrates

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[99] I have somewhat modified my position on the role that relativism played in Protagoras' thought since Henry 2022: 227–9, where I agreed that Protagoras was a relativist (so Guthrie 1971: 266); this likely obtained only for the literal presentation of his argument. For fifth-century expressions of relativism besides Protagoras that suggest a 'wider reception' of his thought see Kingsley 2024: 211–6.

[100] The relative and demonstrative pronoun sequence used here (οἷα … τοιαῦτα) has the ring of a recurring catchphrase which Protagoras could have used to expand upon his enigmatic proem: see Pl. *Tht.* 151e8–152c3 (<DK 80 B1 [2]): οἷα μὲν ἕκαστα ἐμοὶ φαίνεται τοιαῦτα μὲν ἔστιν ἐμοί, οἷα δὲ σοί, τοιαῦτα δὲ αὖ σοί […] οἷα γὰρ

continued to contend with the phantom of Protagoras, his moral relativist stance on nobility, justice, and piety would turn into a qualified relativism: although Protagoras admitted that some laws could help or harm a constitution, from a pragmatic point of view what seemed noble, just or pious for a city was true for them.[101] These admittedly restricted cases of relativism seem to have been used to support a universal thesis in Protagoras, as his generic individual is shown as the measure of 'all things', and the book that included the *incipit* was already called *Truth* before the mid-fourth century.[102] These examples were not mild in their implications, really; relativism was the literal doctrine promoted by Protagoras' argument.

Naturally, this could raise disastrous consequences for the agnosticism of Protagoras. If a city state were to accept a pantheon of their own, it would be a true pantheon of gods for them; or if someone like Socrates recognised a καινὸν δαιμόνιον for himself, it would be true for him. This might suggest that Protagoras did not endorse, but his views would entail, a kind of theological solipsism in which the gods had a relative existence in some human frames of reference and not others. We would come surprisingly close to the relativist theology of the Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion D. Z. Phillips (1934–2006), who sidestepped the question of whether the divine is objectively real or not by describing every belief system as valid only within its own linguistic framework. When one religious viewpoint contradicts another, Phillips denied there was a neutral vantage point for determining the correct one:

αἰσθάνεται ἕκαστος, τοιαῦτα ἑκάστῳ καὶ κινδυνεύει εἶναι. Cf. Pl. *Cra.* 385e6–386a3 (= DK 80 A13).

[101] Pl. *Tht.* 172a1–5 (≠ DK).

[102] In line with Diels, Lee 2005: 8–28 argues that these examples were originally present in Protagoras' *Truth* (and in the service of a relativist thesis about truth).

> As soon as one has language one has logic which determines what can and what cannot be said in that language without being prior to it. As soon as one has religious discourse one has a theology which determines what it will be sensible to say and what it will be nonsensical to say within that religious discourse without being prior to it […] But this need not be true of modern developments in theology: opposing theologians will stick to their respective positions and declare the others to be wrong […] But because of the nature of theology one may only say that a religious statement is refuted by *a* theology.[103]

Surely it would have been repugnant for Protagoras to imagine that this was a serious entailment of his *homo mensura* doctrine: 'In my *Truth*, I only defended the relativity of truth in terms of the properties of a sensible object or idea. I did not mean to say that a fact like the wind blows was a matter of relative truth, or to imply that the existence of individuals or cities was somehow a subjective topic of debate. Therefore, it would be quite wrong to apply this thinking to the gods, who obviously go beyond the scope of what we can observe'.[104] On the other hand, judgments about properties can certainly imply the existence of types of entities, which reintroduces the charge of solipsism. A useful example can be repurposed directly from Plato's *Theaetetus* itself, about the objective error of madmen who suppose that they are gods (οἱ μὲν θεοὶ αὐτῶν οἴωνται εἶναι).[105] If such a madman *seems* to himself to be a god, then a god must exist for him since the property of being a god has been predicated to an existent

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[103] Phillips 1963: 347–8; italics in the original.

[104] That Protagoras could have said this (even as a relativist) would be generally representative of ancient thought; the sceptical schools of later Greek philosophy strongly challenged the assumption that one can accurately perceive any properties from external reality, but they did not venture to question the reality of the external world itself; cf. Reinhardt 2023: clxxxv.

[105] Pl. *Tht.* 158a8–b4.

being. By the same token, a traditional believer in Helios could point to the sun and claim that 'the sun is a god *for me*'. On its face, then, Protagoras' relativism and agnosticism would be an uneasy pairing, and to assert the problem of 'epistemological obstacles' or the unreality of abstract objects would require a robust and shared concept of truth. But the fact that Protagoras accepted claims at variance with relativism suggests that the *homo mensura* thesis was in its subtext a statement about the limitations of human experience, and it was to this extent a real Protagorean thesis, but the literal force of his argument was deliberately absurd and paradoxical, recalling the radical disjunct between the preposterous zero-ontology of Gorgias' *On Not-Being* and its deeper commentary on reality and language which served as its subtext.[106]

The fact that Protagoras had a stable and unwavering commitment to agnosticism throughout his writings and speeches (as Plato's *Theaetetus* effectively confirmed) is instructive, and the fact that he was willing to dismiss theology as an incomprehensible topic serves as a natural counterpoint to the concern expressed by Harrison that the Greeks did not maintain consistent and 'credal' beliefs about religion.[107] We should be on our guard to avoid subsuming different philosophers under uniform modes of thinking, which could risk introducing a different form of reductivism to the one that Henk Versnel had originally worked against. Although he was polemically engaged for decades with scholars who (in his opinion) tried to impose too much 'coherence' on

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[106] For a recent linguistic/epistemological reading of *On Not-Being*, see Di Iulio 2024. I envision this reading as somewhere in between the conclusions of Lee 2005: 8–28, who argues that Protagoras' *Truth* was an unsystematically reasoned display speech rather than a philosophical treatise, and van Berkel 2013: 61, for whom 'Protagoras' position was rather one of perspectivism than of relativism'.

[107] Diller 2023: 174–5 defines the confident belief that the existence or non-existence of God cannot be known or proven either way as 'stable agnosticism', implicitly presenting a wavering, more hesitant stance as 'unstable'.

theological discourse among the Greeks, and claimed that the existence of the gods 'obvious' to the Greeks and belonged to their 'social knowledge', Versnel also allowed for some diversity in practice, acknowledging that there were individual atheists in antiquity.[108] By contrast, Harrison seems to argue that even lone individuals were not immune to the fluid religious mentality of the Greeks; this view would entail that the closest thing to a Greek atheist would be a character in Euripides who makes a rhetorical statement that *sounds* atheistic, but affirms that the gods exist in other contexts. At least in this strong formulation, however, the point cannot stand. What would happen if the same sort of thinking was applied to the religious views of Protagoras? If we tried to make the sophist adopt the 'multiperspective view' of someone like Herodotus, his verdict on the gods' existence would dissolve into a rhetorical statement, and we would expect to find other fragments where he presented their existence as uncontroversial. Moreover, when he explained his uncertainty by appealing to 'the shortness of human life', a strong reading of Versnel would hold that Protagoras was being frivolous and failed to say anything definite about the human condition and the insurmountable barrier between gods and humans. But this distortion of Protagoras' views would result from universalising Versnel's thesis and arguing away the recalcitrant evidence where the Greeks do not seem to think fluidly about the gods. Marek Winiarczyk has cautioned against the temptation to 'absolutize certain aspects of Greek thought' in discussions about ancient atheism, and the same caution should apply in how we read Greek religious mentalities.[109]

4.4 Θεοὺς Νομίζειν: Language and Mentality

[108] Versnel 2011: 553–4.

[109] Winiarczyk 2016: 68.

These argumentative and dogmatic elements in Classical thought suggest that atheism had a place in the reception of Greek philosophy, but there is also the disputed connection between language and pre-modern atheism to consider, and what this tells us about the sort of mentality that is amenable to unbelief. In the modern historiography on atheism, this connection was first problematised by Lucien Febvre, who argued that the introduction of a novel technical and scientific vocabulary and the increasing popularity of clear, concise syntax were necessary for the disenchanted modern mentality that came to reject the mystery of Christianity. In the sixteenth century, by contrast, the absence of these higher-order 'mental tools' meant that a tolerance for religious ambiguities prevailed, and a forcefully clear position like atheism could have never taken root.[110] Language, in other words, was for Febvre a window into the wider mentality of a culture and the ideas that it could entertain, which was surely one of the most misguided tenets in the *Problem of Unbelief*; for if it can already be shown that non-religious ideas were available in a given historical context like Classical antiquity, and some people indeed accepted them, it is misconceived to focus on the particulars of language, which can always be changed to accommodate what people wish to say. On the other hand, delimiting where Febvre went wrong with his assumptions on thought and language is a helpful exercise for clarifying how the Greeks talked about atheism and the associated vocabulary that went along with it, and from a cross-cultural perspective it suggests that a highly technical and scientific vocabulary is not necessary for pre-modern atheism to have some currency.

Pointing in this direction, the argumentative terminology from the late fifth century that was adequate for critically problematising the existence of the gods was not complicated or unusually specialised. To discuss the existence of the gods in a propositional and argumentative register, that is, to treat it as a claim that could be argued about like any other proposition that requires evidence, only required an

[110] Febvre 1982: 355–8, 358–63; 388–93.

elementary vocabulary for arguments and evidence, such as the meaning of λόγος as 'statement of a theory', 'argument' (LSJ III.2), τεκμήριον as 'proof' (LSJ II; cf. LSJ s.vv. σημεῖον II.2, ἀπόδειξις I.3), and ἀντιλέγειν as 'contradict' (LSJ 1; cf. LSJ s.v. ἀντιλογία 1). Furthermore, although the arguments for atheism themselves can be analysed in a second-order way, such as the rhetorical syllogism in *Bellerophon*, or the identity claims of the atheists in *Laws* who denied the existence of Helios and the other visible gods, there were no second-order logical statements to describe these claims in Greek philosophy before Aristotle.[111] Before then there was no clear distinction between a deductive argument and an inductive argument, nor a premiss and a conclusion, nor a necessary proof as opposed to a merely plausible one. Nor did their terms for 'evidence' necessarily constrain what was intended about their soundness or indecisiveness, as these terms were marked as inferential signs which could be demonstrative or merely speculative depending on the context. This is clear from a sophistic text that survives from the fourth century called the *Dissoi Logoi*, a text which was linked to the curriculum of the sophists which surveys a series of opposing arguments in a superficial and rhetorical manner that seems indebted to the antilogic teachings of Protagoras.[112] When the author considered the opposing arguments about whether wisdom and excellence (σοφία, ἀρετή) can be taught, it is clear that the terminology for proof and argument was not distinguished between in any technical sense. The mentality of the author did not so much consist in the sophistication of their terminology, but rather in the fact that the language of proof and argument could be reductively applied to any proposition in the context of a controversy between two sides:

[111] *Bellerophon*: ch. 1.1; *Laws*: ch. 3.1.

[112] E.g., Robinson 1979: 54–9 recognises the Protagorean structure of the piece.

> And some present an argument (λόγος) which is neither accurate nor original; namely that wisdom and excellence cannot be taught or learnt. Indeed, those who argue this make use of the following proofs (ταῦτα λέγοντες ταῖσδε ἀποδείξεσι χρῶνται): that it would be impossible for someone to still retain something, if he were to give it to someone else — this is the first claim. Moreover, even if it *could* be taught, there would need to be teachers with followers on a subject, such as music. And thirdly, that there would really need to be wise men at large in Greece who taught their art to people near and dear to them […] But I believe that this claim (λόγον) in particular is extremely silly: since I own that there *are* teachers who teach how to write, and someone can simultaneously know these things in the doing, as well as cithara-players to play the cithara. But as for the second proof (πρὸς δὲ τὰν δευτέραν ἀπόδειξιν) that there are no teachers with their own followers, what do the sophists really teach save for wisdom and excellence? What were the Anaxagoreans and the Pythagoreans? And thirdly, Polycleitus taught his son how to craft statues. And if someone did not teach him this, it could not be proof (οὐ σαμῆιον); but if someone did teach this, this would be evidence (τεκμάριον) that it is possible to teach.[113]

In his closing disclaimer the *Dissoi Logoi* author concluded in a lawyerly fashion that he was not saying that virtue *could* be taught but that the opposite cannot be proven (καὶ οὐ λέγω, ὡς διδακτόν ἐστιν, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἀποχρῶντί μοι τῆναι αἱ ἀποδείξεις).[114] His 'evidence' was therefore only *support* for a claim, without any specialised meaning, and the fact that atheism could appear in intellectual circles before the advent of Aristotelian logic tells against the argument of Febvre that technical, second-order language is an important historical precondition for a mentality that is compatible with atheism. This likely communicates a bias on Febvre's behalf, who was not religious and

[113] DK 90 6.1–4, 7–9.

[114] DK 90 6.24–5.

overestimated the sophistication of atheism in his polemic. It should be questioned whether atheists are really any more clear-minded than their religious counterparts, the quality of their arguments for atheism notwithstanding, in view of the fact that many modern self-identified atheists around the world still hold residual supernatural beliefs. In China, for example, a large portion of atheists and agnostics continue to believe in astrology, and in the United States many atheists continue to believe that there are 'underlying forces of good or evil' in the universe.[115] Certainly this does not mean that theists and atheists think the same way about religion, but it is not so much the rigour of their views that are distinctive but rather their thought process about the object of religious belief. An atheistic or agnostic mentality is generally 'hyper-propositional' in how they ponder theological problems, considering the existence of god (or gods) as a topic for argument or an empirical datum only, but this thinking will exert less influence on religious people who construe the existence of their god(s) within a cluster of other beliefs that presuppose that very point, and who would only apply propositional thinking to theology in specific contexts.[116] This is a natural consequence of believing in a god seriously, since in a similar vein if someone thinks about a real person whom they have only heard about from others, he or she will not typically think about the existence of this distant personality as a testable proposition but rather assume this fact as tacit knowledge which forms the background to his or her views on what this individual is like or how they interact with others. This is to say that the existence of a higher power will not be a *demonstrandum* in everyday religious

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[115] These findings come from the survey of Lanman and Bullivant et al. 2019: 13.

[116] The notion of a pre-logical mentality is effectively criticised by Lloyd 1990, although Lloyd does not decisively challenge the notion that there are *unconscious* patterns of thought that can be accurately called a 'mentality', rather than (say) a network of beliefs. Atheists and agnostics are often unaware of how their thought-pattern towards religion differs from theists, which points to a mentality.

experience as it is for speculative atheists and agnostics.[117] For this reason atheism can only be described as more 'coherent' in one sense, in that unbelief can remove troubling religious ambiguities; but the cognitive dissonances of an atheist can be redirected into other areas, such as residual beliefs in the supernatural, contradictory thinking used in the service of their atheism or indeed other beliefs distinct from religion. This suggests that Febvre mischaracterised the mentality that was required for atheistic thinking, and this misled him in his arguments about the linguistic preconditions for unbelief.[118]

The expressions for atheism from Classical antiquity can also be briefly noted. It has been pointed out (ch. 2.1.1) that ἄθεος or ἀθεότης were seldom used as philosophical terminology in the Classical period, and it is only on a rare occasion that these words have a negative philosophical colouring that can describe naturalistic atheism (as once in Plato) or intellectual impiety in a vague sense (as in Aeschines the Socratic). Rather than singular identity-labels like 'atheist' or 'atheism', then, atheism in the fifth and fourth centuries was predominantly described through long-form expressions to talk about claiming, thinking or believing that no gods exist. On the other hand, this too has been problematised. Harrison has argued that the Greeks lacked fixed linguistic expressions for the concept of atheism, which in his view suggests

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[117] Eagleton 2009: 110–2 has described the atheistic and agnostic viewpoint of belief in a god as the 'Yeti view of belief in God', in that non-religious people view God as an object of cognition and a hypothetical entity in the universe, while Christians view their belief in God as faith in a mysterious personal being. This points to a meaningful difference in outlook, but Eagleton's negative framing is unnecessary and reads as a convenient attempt to shield Christian theology from criticism.

[118] This uncompromising view on language and thought led Febvre to deny that the Latin available to the humanists could have been used as a vehicle for atheism (Febvre 1982: 364–7), which has been undermined by the fact that a Latin author did precisely that in the seventeenth century; see Paganini 2020: 52–8.

that their religious mentality was too fluid to capture it. He rightly points out that the phrase the Greeks used for believing in the gods' existence, θεοὺς νομίζειν, could, when negated, refer to different kinds of impiety to atheism, and this could generate 'slippages' in meaning.[119] This is true in specific cases where θεοὺς νομίζειν in the fifth century could often mean 'acknowledging' the gods in the sense of 'esteeming' them. This 'axiological' force in θεοὺς νομίζειν is seen in Aeschylus' *Persians* (472 BCE) when the herald reported to the court that even the most irreligious Persian soldier who had earlier 'esteemed the gods at nought' (θεοὺς νομίζων οὐδαμοῦ) desperately prayed to the gods when he was faced with the existential danger of crossing the River Strymon. When he related this, the herald did not allude to philosophical atheism but rather the commonplace view that some types only care about religion when they are faced with life-threatening circumstances.[120] This 'axiological' usage was still common fare around trial of Socrates, which is clearly expressed in Lysias' prosecution speech *Against Eratosthenes* (403 BCE). In this speech Lysias insulted one of the Thirty Tyrants who

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[119] Harrison 2025: 100: '[t]he phrase *nomizein tous theous*' 'makes no distinction between positive atheism and a mere lack of belief — or, in our terms, between agnosticism and atheism'. I would put this somewhat differently; the expression can be unclear about whether someone who does not 'acknowledge' the gods (1) disrespects the gods, (2) denies their existence, or (3) holds impious views in some vague sense, but there are no, to my knowledge, passages of Greek from Plato's time (or earlier) where agnosticism is implied (the mere absence of theistic belief).

[120] Aesch. *Pers.* 497–9: θεοὺς δέ τις | τὸ πρὶν νομίζων οὐδαμοῦ, τότ' ηὔχετο | λιτῆσι, Γαῖαν Οὐρανόν τε προσκυνῶν. Unsurprisingly, given the sharp axiological contrast of this passage, the adverb οὐδαμοῦ does not have existential force: cf. Garvie 2009 ad loc. and the similar pairing of οὐδαμοῦ with λέγειν at Soph. *Ant.* 182–3. Although I do not share her conclusions on belief in Greek religion, I have taken this 'axiological' terminology for νομίζειν from Giordano-Zecharya 2005: 333–7.

was associated with the accused, saying he 'neither regards gods nor people' (οὔτε θεοὺς οὔτ' ἀνθρώπους νομίζει), and the existential meaning of the phrase can be safely ruled out: the Tyrant could not deny the existence of humans so much as he thought little of them, and did not act rightly by them.[121] On the other hand, this issue was already settled by a number of twentieth century scholars who pointed out there are enough unambiguous cases where the phrase only has an existential meaning, above all in our disputed text, Plato's tenth book of *Laws*.[122] To this, however, a further linguistic distinction can be drawn between Classical *assertions* of atheism and *belief-ascriptions* of atheism, as both are attested in our sources. The first kind of statement consisted in saying 'there are no gods', or 'I say there are no gods', but the second statement imputed this unbelief to others: 'you believe in absolutely no gods', 'they claim that chance exists, but not gods'. The words for expressing this view include terms for believing and thinking (νομίζειν, ἡγεῖσθαι) and words for speaking (φάναι, κατειπεῖν), while only the context can show whether the non-existence of the gods was literally meant by a speaker or merely presented as a rhetorical statement. In Attic drama, atheistic statements and belief-ascriptions generally appear without any adverbs,[123] but the situation is better for Plato in the *Apology* and *Laws*, who made pains

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[121] Lys. 12.9.

[122] On θεοὺς νομίζειν as signifying not merely 'respecting the gods according to custom' but sometimes (and often simultaneously) 'believing that the gods exist' in fifth- and fourth-century Greek, see Derenne 1930: 217–23; Tate 1936; Fahr 1969: 160–2, 166; cf. Guthrie 1971: 237 n. 2; Ostwald 1986: 197; Versnel 1990: 125; Pecorella Longo 2011: 52. The now unpopular view that θεοὺς νομίζειν denoted practical worship of the gods almost exclusively was canonically defended by Burnet 1924 on Pl. *Ap.* 24c1, which was challenged by Derenne 1930: 217–23 and Tate 1936a.

[123] Eur. fr. 912b.1 (= *TrGF* adesp. fr. 624.1) S/K: ὅσοι νομίζετ' οὐκ εἶναι θεόν, Eur. *Beller.* fr. 286.2 K: οὐκ εἰσὶν [sc. ἐν οὐρανῷ θεοί], οὐκ εἴσ', Eur. *Phrixos* B fr. 820b.2

to describe the uncompromising denial of all gods with the articular adverb τὸ παράπαν (no gods 'at all'), while in his *Laws* Plato once added οὐδαμῶς to underscore this further (believing in 'absolutely no gods at all').[124] This suggests that, within the constraints of Classical Greek, atheism could be endorsed by speakers or spoken about by others without too much difficulty, but only the context would clarify whether the intellectual denial of the existence of the gods was intended or a different, more popular use of θεοὺς νομίζειν.[125] However, given that the Classical sources used different expressions for atheism, it is misleading to point to the ambiguities of a single phrase, since this would overlook the fact that the Greeks could entertain atheism conceptually and made an effort to describe it in different ways to get the point across. They were not passively beholden to ambiguities in their popular lexicon, and nor should we expect any culture to have been when the meaning of individual terms is only one aspect of language. Conversely it could also be pointed out that the terminology for atheism in Plato is so thoroughgoing in its clarity that it is a better tool for describing naturalistic atheism than vague modern labels like 'atheist' and 'atheism'.

K: οἵ φασιν εἶναι τὴν τύχην ἀλ[λ' οὐ] θεούς, Eur. *El.* 583: χρὴ μηκέθ' ἡγεῖσθαι θεούς, *TrGF* adesp. fr. 465.1 S/K, τολμῶ κατειπεῖν, μήποτ' οὐκ εἰσὶν θεοί.

[124] Pl. *Ap.* 26c1–6: ἢ παντάπασί με φῂς οὔτε αὐτὸν νομίζειν θεοὺς τούς τε ἄλλους ταῦτα διδάσκειν, *Resp.* 2.365d8: εἰ μὲν μὴ [sc. θεοὶ] εἰσιν, *Leg.* 10.885c7: ἡμῶν γὰρ οἱ μὲν τὸ παράπαν θεοὺς οὐδαμῶς νομίζομεν ('absolutely no gods at all'), 10.900b6–7: πρὸς τὸν τὸ παράπαν οὐχ ἡγούμενον θεούς, 10.908b5: μὴ νομίζοντι θεοὺς εἶναι τὸ παράπαν, 12.948c2–3: ἀνθρώπων τὸ παράπαν οὐχ ἡγοῦνται θεούς.

[125] Kearns 2010: 141 agrees with Harrison 2025: 100 that θεοὺς νομίζειν contained this kind of slippage in meaning in popular discourse, but she suggests that Plato could still adopt the phrase to refer to atheism in the modern sense.

4.5 Conclusion

If the previous chapter looked at the core ideas that Plato presented as fundamental to atheism (Ionian naturalism, antinomian thought paired with anthropological explanations of religion), this chapter turned to the broader cultural question of how the Classical Greeks were capable of 'thinking with atheism'. Several elements of the Greek intellectual and political experience were singled out to show that some Greeks entertained and subscribed to atheism as a stable argumentative position. It was noted that alongside their commonplaces that the divine was unknowable, Greek philosophers also said that it was possible to indirectly perceive the contours of the unseen world, which enabled them to make confident and even dogmatic statements about the existence and nature of the gods. These statements could be informed by ontological thinking, which reflected a similar tendency among the Greeks to confront bold questions through ultimately indirect modes of reasoning. It was also pointed out that the legal, political and sophistic practice of formulating different problems as opposing arguments was an important 'thought form' for Classical Greek atheism and indeed shaped the way in which it appears in our sources. Among its more rebellious practitioners, antilogic could be used to present the existence of the gods as a testable proposition which could be critically discussed from opposing points of view, and this type of thought pattern could easily discourage intermediate positions that rejected the existence of some gods and not others. After this, the question of whether a Greek could have seriously cleaved to an unpopular non-religious position like atheism was considered, which was resolved by considering the negative dogmatism of Protagoras on the existence and nature of the gods. Because Protagoras always showed reserve about the existence of the gods throughout his writings and speeches, and outright admitted that the obscurity of theology and the shortness of human life ruled out the possibility of ascertaining the truth, there is certainly no reason to believe that Classical atheism could not be maintained with a similar mental tenacity. Finally, we considered

the question of how Classical atheism could be framed in language and how 'technical' such a language (and the broader thought process) would have to be to facilitate a serious discussion about denying the existence of the gods. It was concluded that there were no singular identity labels for atheists and atheism in Classical Greek, and some phrases could be ambiguous in some contexts (such as θεοὺς νομίζειν), but it was possible to discuss atheism in long-form statements that mentioned the idea or imputed the idea to others ('there are no gods (at all)', 'they recognise no gods (at all)'), and in the hands of an author like Plato the concept could be discussed with impressive clarity. Meanwhile, the Febvrian thesis that a technical vocabulary is a necessary precondition for historical atheism was challenged on the grounds that this gives too much credit to unbelief as somehow more 'sophisticated' than theology, while the difference between atheism and believing in a higher power is more fundamentally influenced by the propositional or personal attitude that a person takes towards theology in general. Taking stock of these considerations, the intellectual culture of the Greeks was sufficiently varied, argumentative and capable of entertaining unusual propositions that atheism could, in some limited cases, be a topic for discussion and (less often) believed. The argument to the contrary, which forecloses the possibility of atheism in Classical antiquity, simply must change too much about the political and intellectual culture of this period to make a compelling negative case.

5. Classical Greek Atheism as a Situational Philosophy

The foregoing chapters have shown that a number of familiar ideas in fifth-century Greece — ranging from criticism of myth, materialism, anthropological thought and antithetical argumentation — were familiar to the Greek intelligentsia of the time and would have 'anchored' atheism through a process of gradual assimilation. Without these familiar notions in place, there would have been no basis for atheism to have developed and gained traction.[1]

If, however, atheism was a worldview that was not merely entertained but accepted, as Plato asserted in *Laws*, it is not enough to speak of intellectual availability, as though the question of whether to believe or disbelieve in the gods was settled by what books were for sale in the Athenian *agora* and what they might convey to an impressionable readership. In no uncertain terms, the Athenian Visitor in *Laws* pointed out that *every* Greek child started out as religious: their conditioning for belief began in early childhood, and through the recursive process of hearing myths, attending prayers and sacrifices, and observing the sun and moon, all the Greeks were impressed with the conviction that the gods absolutely (μάλιστα) existed.[2] In a bid to explain how the atheist failed to internalise all of this, as was seen, Plato blamed the popularity of novel ideas, but he was too intellectualist in how he accounted for the origins of impious speech and behaviour (see above, ch. 2.2.2). For this reason, to

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[1] For the concept of 'anchoring' see Sluiter 2017: 23, who observes that '[i]nnovations may become acceptable, understandable, and desirable when relevant social groups can effectively integrate and accommodate them in their conceptual categories, values, beliefs and ambitions'.

[2] Pl. *Leg.* 10.887c5–888a2.

account for their remarkable estrangement from the emotional consolation of Greek civic religion — which would have needed more than abstract ideas to undermine the religiosity of their childhood, or to bypass the widespread hostility toward heterodoxies like atheism — we should be kinder to the Greek atheist than Plato's Athenian Visitor. Their loss of belief formed in childhood cannot be simplified into a 'death by philosophy narrative'.[3]

In addition to considering the 'anchoring' of atheism in a number of ideas that were potentially favourable to it, then, the rise and recurrence of Classical Greek atheism should be integrated into a social crisis narrative for the fifth century, followed by a plateau narrative for the fourth. *Contra* the intellectualist Platonic explanation for Greek atheism, the onset of fifth-century atheism cannot be uncoupled from the emotional turmoil and the upheavals of tradition during the Peloponnesian War, in a period when the intellectual ingredients for atheism were already in place but only transmuted into lived atheism in the crucible of war.[4] On the other hand, because it remained a marginal worldview throughout its appearance in Classical Athens, atheism fell considerably short of becoming a perennial philosophy in Greek theology as did (say) the rejection of divine anthropomorphism or the denial of divine immorality.[5] It would be more accurate, then, to speak of Greek atheism as a *situational philosophy*,

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[3] To quote Ryrie 2019: 3, who makes the case for an emotional history of doubt and atheism; Erdozain 2016: 5 similarly critiqued the intellectual historical approach of Taylor 2007 for exemplifying the 'intellectualist fallacy', which he defined as 'a tendency to privilege the clean logic of ideas above the raw fuel of human experience among the forces of historical change'; cf. Hunter 2023: 18–21.

[4] Decharme 1904: 129–30, in light of Campbell 1898: 295–6; for more recent arguments to this effect, see Bremmer 2020: 67; Pinel Martínez 2022: 82–152.

[5] On this near-universal assumption among ancient Greek thinkers, Epicureans excepted, see Wifstrand Schiebe 2020.

which can be defined as an idea or theory which flourished in a fleeting cultural moment that guaranteed its impermanent or ephemeral status: one thinks of the elemental theologies of the late fifth century parodied in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, the disproportionate focus on moral problems in the early Socratic movement, the sceptical turn of the later Academy, or the anti-civic attitudes of the early Epicureans.[6] All of these ideas relied on earlier intellectual conditions to 'anchor' them, but also, to varying degrees, a more specific set of social circumstances to undergird them compared to 'perennial' Greek philosophies.

Plato was faced with a compelling problem when he puzzled over how a young Greek could have shed the theistic beliefs acquired during their childhood, but it is only by taking into account the 'hard surfaces' of Greek life, to borrow a phrase from the study of Greek religion, that the rise of atheism in Athens can truly become intelligible.[7] In recent scholarship on the subject this continues to be a *desideratum*, as these factors are generally overlooked in studies that focus on religious mentalities and deny that atheism was a phenomenon in Classical antiquity.[8] After these wider factors are considered, the remainder of this chapter will explore how atheistic ideas were diffused and discussed among the Athenian elite (ch. 5.2) and how these views could be believed in secret (ch. 5.3). Pursuing a similar approach to the earlier chapter on Greek atheism as a form of reception (at ch. 3.1), this concluding discussion will modify in some places the 'atheist underground' thesis of David Sedley.[9]

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[6] Contrast 'situated knowledge', coined by Haraway 1988, that is, the notion that all knowledge is always dependent on a point of view, which does not rule out the possibility of rationality or objectivity.

[7] Kindt 2012: 2, 57, 79, 80–1; cf. Morris 1993: 32.

[8] Harrison 2025: 95, for instance, critiqued Sedley 2013: 347 for neglecting the social conditions required for atheism, but his own argument is intellectualist.

[9] Sedley 2013.

5.1 Cultural Breaks and Civic Disruption in Classical Athens

Although there might have been atheists before the final third of the fifth century — and here it would be enormously helpful, if quite impossible, to know whether Protagoras' admission of agnosticism was made before then — the earliest known current of atheism came in Athens during the crisis of the Peloponnesian War, affording the latest possible period for the acceptance of Greek atheism.[10] Starting from this point, the aim of this section will not be to explain how atheism persisted in Classical Athens, despite the observation of Plato's Athenian that it did,[11] but rather to account for its earliest known origins in the late fifth century in light of various challenges put to traditional beliefs and values in this period: perceptions of injustice from warfare and disease, elite dissatisfaction with the traditional Athenian democracy, the irreligious actions among the Athenian upper classes unearthed in 415 BCE, and the

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[10] Winiarczyk 2016: 70 ('by around 400 BC there already existed absolute atheists, i.e. ones who rejected the existence of gods and any supernatural forces'); cf. earlier, Winiarczyk 1990: 12; Sedley 2013: 346–8 set the origins of atheism modestly earlier (whose *terminus ante quem* for Greek atheism is the death of Protagoras at *c.* 420 BCE); in his fourth Appendix on belief in Greek religion, Versnel 2011: 559 surmised from Aristophanes' *Knights*, *inter alia*, that 'the options to believe or not to believe in gods simply were alive at least from 424 BC onwards'; Bremmer 2020: 67 notes a 'cluster' of references to atheism at 430–415 BCE, considering the 'de-traditionalization' of this period as an important factor. By contrast, Ford 2024: 46 has questioned the assumption that atheism originated in the fifth century, but verbally, as he means by the term something different and more general.

[11] Pl. *Leg.* 10.888b6–c3, to be read with *Resp.* 2.365d7–366b3; cf. Sedley 2013: 347 and ch. 2.2.2, above.

existence of a number of social clubs from that same pool of elites who mocked Athenian civic religion at varying levels of sophistication. Atheism, in other words, was but one challenge to civic tradition among several in this period. This choice to focus on the late fifth century follows from the assumption that atheism in history does not require an ongoing crisis to continue to find acceptance, but some tensions in traditional religious life would be expected to account for its first appearance. From a historian's perspective, more historical explanation would be necessary to account for how an atheist could lose their faith in the Bible Belt areas of the United States during the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, compared to an atheist two decades later, as the second phenomenon was largely coasting on the first.

This is not to say, however, that the fourth-century context cannot be meaningfully studied, and one could point to three factors that would have contributed to the persistence of atheism in this period. Firstly, the political elite in Athens continued to be trained by sophistic methods, as Plato and Aristotle show (ch. 4.2), and this ensured that the intellectual tools for atheism — scientific, anthropological, dialectical — were still on the radar. Secondly, although Athens never faced the same level of internal discord as it did during their *fin de siècle*, there remained tensions during its steady economic recovery as a restored democracy, ranging from lingering hostilities toward the cavalrymen class in Athens for their complicity in overturning the democracy (in 411 and 404/3 BCE), a growing perception of income inequality in the 380s BCE, evidenced in Aristophanes and Plato, and discontent among the Athenian elite about the increased burden of taxation after Athens could no longer rely upon exacting tribute for revenue.[12] These forms of antagonism in Athens between mass and

[12] On the economic difficulties and the social tensions that brewed in postwar Athens up to Corinthian War (395–387 BCE), see Strauss 1986; on the post-war Athenian hostility directed at the cavalrymen class (the wealthiest sector of the Athenian male youth) and their attempts to reconcile with democratic ideology, see Low 2002.

elite certainly could have facilitated further rifts in religious attitudes, which was at any rate true for the late fifth century. Thirdly, and relatedly, there was some talk of rebellious behaviour among the elite in Demosthenes' time, particularly the youth, who continued to rally together in social clubs that were notorious for their rowdy and impious practices. This dovetails with complaints (see ch. 5.1.3, below) about the *anomie* of the Athenian youth during the aftermath of the Social War (357–355 BCE) from Isocrates, which lends weight to the complaints of Plato's Athenian in *Laws*, which would have been roughly contemporary.

5.1.1 Plague, War, Ideological Subversion and Revolution

If the chronology of the late fifth century is considered as a first point of departure, we can gain a better insight into the wartime experience of the Athenians. The main point to emphasise is that the 'Peloponnesian War' was not recognised by contemporaries as one drawn-out conflict between Athens and Sparta from 431–404 BCE, despite the memorable and polemically self-aware chronology of Thucydides, who battled against an entrenched opinion in his 'Second Preface' when he included the Peace of Nicias as an episode in a continuous 27-year period of war. Anyone who distinguished the Peace from the war, wrote Thucydides, οὐκ ὀρθῶς δικαιώσει (5.26.2), but normally the Athenians did divide this period into two or three wars, recognising an independent Archidamian War (431–421 BCE), a campaign against Sicily (415–413 BCE) and a renewed war against Sparta (413–404 BCE), sometimes combining the Sicilian expedition with the Decelean War.[13] Without an overarching narrative of a 'Great War' the Athenians were confronted with a pervasive uncertainty, making it easier to see

[13] Ar. *Lys.* 507–14; Andoc. 3.8–9, 31; Pl. *Menex.* 239d1–46a3; this divergent popular narrative from Thucydides was influentially shown by Strauss 1997.

how Athenian religion is described in the sources on this period; without the benefit of hindsight that Thucydides possessed, it is no wonder that many flocked to oracle-collectors and mantic experts to comprehend their situation, or how criticisms against these traditional modes of explanation could reflect the same situation. Thucydides noted that popular interest in oracles exploded at the onset of the Archidamian War, the siege of Athens and the build-up to the Sicilian expedition, but this spike in curiosity towards the world of the unseen could equally supply evidence for the harsh psychologising criticism, aired in his *History*, that oracles and prophecies were merely the last resort of the desperate and disadvantaged.[14] It is hard to avoid the impression that Thucydides' caustic distrust towards oracles was shaped by these years, and his dismissive confidence was a signal that he had sympathisers.[15]

The first incident which tested religious sensibilities was the Plague of Athens (430–426 BCE), which visited the city in two waves (the first wave lasting for two years,

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[14] On the popular interest in oracles in these periods, see Thuc. 2.8.2, 2.21.3, 8.1.1; cf. Plut. *Vit. Nic.* 13.1; the psychologising critique of μαντική and oracles in Thuc. 5.103.2 (paraphrased above) is stated by a character (the Athenian envoy in the Melian dialogue), but his critique is not odds with Thucydides' narrative, which correlated moments of crisis with credulous readings of oracles (cf. 2.21.3). At some stage Pericles had also argued, as reported by Demosthenes in Plut. *Vit. Dem.* 20.1, that cowardly statesmen conveniently cited unfavourable oracles to avoid hard situations, and only rational calculation could be relied upon to decide how to act.

[15] As shown by his dismissal of oracles in the 'Second Preface' at Thuc. 5.26.3–4; cf. Appendix A. Conversely, the dichotomy of Harrison 2000: 246 seems too rigid given that ideas from one generation can take on a renewed vitality in another: '[t]he difference between [Herotodus and Thucydides on divination] need not then reflect any shift of opinion in the course of the twenty years, say, between the times at which they wrote, but rather the difference of outlook of intellectual contemporaries'.

and the second lasting just short of a year) and devastated the local urban population of Athens and refugees from the Attic countryside.[16] Thucydides, who had suffered from the plague himself, reported that the number of civilian deaths was beyond reckoning (ἀνεξεύρετος, 3.87.3) and that the fighting population in Athens only replenished by the onset of the Sicilian expedition in 415 BCE.[17] In the immediate circumstances of the plague, the Athenians resorted to pragmatic measures that disregarded normal religious standards. Forced to retreat behind the city walls due to the Spartan enemy ravaging the surrounding countryside, Attic refugees camped in sanctuaries which eventually filled with bodies during the onslaught of the plague.[18] During the worst phase of the outbreak the Athenians were forced to dig mass graves, which informed the testimony of Thucydides that the Athenians were disempowered by the plague and disregarded 'the sacred and profane alike' (καὶ ἱερῶν καὶ ὁσίων ὁμοίως).[19] This report was vindicated by series of excavations in the 1990s which unearthed a mass grave in Athens dating from the plague years which was 'completed

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[16] The chronology is given by Thuc. 3.87.1–2.

[17] On the last point see Thuc. 6.12.1, 26.2; modern mortality estimates from the plague vary from 'about one-third of the population' (Adcock 1953: 201, from Thuc. 3.87.3) to a quarter at most (Leven 1991: 146, from Thuc. 2.58.3); cf. Akrigg 2007: 31–2; these estimates are based on the deaths of soldiers, ignoring more potentially vulnerable groups like children (so Gomme, *HCT* 2.388); but Thuc. 6.26.2 can be read to imply that not so many children and adolescents had died if Athens could confidently embark on another campaign by 415 BCE. Another ongoing controversy concerns the retrospective diagnosis of the plague; Papagrigorakis et al. 2006 concluded that the 430–426 BCE plague was typhus, which was challenged by Shapiro et al. 2006 and Littman 2009; for sceptical verdicts see Holladay and Poole 1979 and Leven 1991: 144.

[18] Cf. Parker 1983: 33 n. 5: 'purity requirements [against the natural pollutions of death] applied to all sacred precincts, not just those of specific gods'.

[19] Thuc. 2.52.3–4.

in a hasty and improper manner'.[20] It has been plausibly argued that the experience of seeing the newly improved city of Periclean Athens transform into a graveyard would have compounded the disorientation and low morale of the Athenians.[21]

The plague is of special interest for the religious responses to the crisis chronicled in Thucydides, who was impressed by the impact of the disease on religious observance. Although he did not go so far as to say that the Athenians hardened into firm deniers of the existence of the gods or divine providence, Thucydides pointed out that traditional rituals and piety were observed to have made no difference in surviving the plague, for good or for ill. The Athenians began to notice that supplications in temples and queries for oracles 'were of no help at all' (πάντα ἀνωφελῆ ἦν),[22] and according to Thucydides, there were some lawless Athenians who chose to live the rest of their days in the pursuit of pleasure:

> And no fear of the gods nor laws of men checked them (θεῶν δὲ φόβος ἢ ἀνθρώπων νόμος οὐδεὶς ἀπεῖργε), since in the first case some realised that being pious or impious were on equal footing, from seeing that everyone died in equal numbers (ἐν ὁμοίῳ καὶ σέβειν καὶ μὴ ἐκ τοῦ πάντας ὁρᾶν ἐν ἴσῳ ἀπολλυμένους), and in the other, none of the wrongdoers expected to live long enough to face trial and pay the penalty for their crimes, but a still greater sentence was hanging over their heads; and before it struck them down, it seemed reasonable to live pleasurably for a little while.[23]

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[20] As Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002: 192 concluded in her archaeological survey; the presentation of the findings in Rubel 2014: 56 ('basic funeral rites were respected') does not reflect her conclusions.

[21] Harris Cline 2022.

[22] Thuc. 2.47.4.

[23] Thuc. 2.53.3–4.

In general, however, the arbitrary survival rate of the plague did not fundamentally threaten popular religious belief. In his speech in Thucydides, Pericles spoke along conventional lines when he presented the plague as an unavoidable divine mishap that one had to endure (φέρειν δὲ χρὴ τά τε δαιμόνια ἀναγκαίως, 2.64.2), and the Spartan and Athenian sides of the conflict were equally invested in how this calamity tallied with earlier oracles, including the oracles from Delphi and the ancient oracles kept under the lock and key of collectors.[24] Indeed, years after the event, a similar religious concern is suggested by the establishment of the Asclepius cult at Athens in 420 BCE, which was most likely (if not exclusively) a measure against future plagues: a reflection of the adaptable logic of polytheism which can still be observed today.[25] During the

[24] Thuc. 2.17.1, 2.54; cf. 1.118.2–3; on the spike in interest towards oracles in this period, see Parker 1983: 141; Giuliani 2001: 111–37; Rubel 2014: 48–55.

[25] On the introduction of Asclepius cult into Athens and its likely rationale, see Garland 1992: 131–2; Parker 1996: 146–8, 200; Rubel 2014: 103–5. On the purification of Delos in 426 BCE as another Athenian response to the plague see Diod. Sic. 12.58.6–7; earlier, Thuc. 3.104.1 claimed the purification was requested by 'an oracle' without elaborating. Generally, scholarship has sided with Diodorus: Parker 1983: 276–7, Hornblower 1992: 194–6 and Rubel 2014: 61–2; but Jordan 1986: 137–9 argues the Athenians merely aimed to control the Ionian cultic centre in 426 BCE, noting that they went further and depopulated the Delian locals in 423 BCE for the same official reason, yet were told to restore them by the oracle at Delphi during the Peace of Nicias (Thuc. 5.1; 5.23.1). These readings are not incompatible, however, as the official reason for the purification could have been to appease Delian Apollo to protect against another plague outbreak, while the Thucydidean 'true cause' of the depopulation of the island was the latter, and the Pythian oracle intervened so the official pretext could not stand. On Athenian religious responses to the plague

worst phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021, for example, the Hindu priests in Tamil Nadu did not turn to atheism, but introduced a goddess for the virus named Corona Devi.[26] This notwithstanding, there was a variety of individual experiences of the Athenians confronted with the plague, and we should be cautious about presenting religious responses to the plague as a monolith when the literary and material evidence is patchy and obscures the lived-in complexities of the time.[27] It is not unlikely that in the majority of cases, the criticisms that the plague-stricken Athenians put to their gods occupied a broadly religious frame of reference, and if, *per impossibile*, we had a qualitative study for Athenian religious attitudes for this period, perhaps most of the critical feedback would have primarily been complaints and protests of the Theognidean type. Moreover, even the Athenians could have recognised intelligible reasons for their suffering, as it was often conjectured that the plague was caused by the wrath of Apollo at Delphi, who had promised to side with the Spartans in the event of a war.[28] On the other hand, the variety of religious responses to the plague is richly suggested by Thucydides' self-positioning, who avoided conceding anything to the *communis opinio* in Athens that it was caused by the arbitrary wrath of a god, to the

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generally see Mikalson 1984; Longrigg 2000: 61–3; Atkinson 2001: 39–45; Eidinow 2007: 61–6 (the last discussion critiqued in Faraone 2012: 115–7; Lamont 2023).

[26] Sundaram 2024.

[27] Cf. the discussion at ch. 1.4, above; arguably too uniform is the picture presented in Rubel 2014: 46–63, which downplays the neglect of ritual observance noted in Thucydides and the florescence of critical attitudes found in this period; although dated, a feeling for the varied attitudes in this period was captured by Campbell 1898: 295–6; cf. Furley 2006: 432 ('an uneasy mix of attitudes'); Ford 2024: 146–7 plausibly compares the variety of religious attitudes during the First World War, which reads well alongside the remarks of Powell 1979: 30–1 on divination and the Sicilian expedition.

[28] Thuc. 2.54.4–5.

extent that even his refusal to speculate on the causes of the pestilence was coloured by a Hippocratic predilection for natural explanations. Rather than credit the origins of the plague to the allegiance of Delphic Apollo with the Spartans or the breach of the Delphic prohibition against occupying sacred land in Athens, or still less suggest that diviners and oracle-mongers had anything meaningful to contribute to the discussion, Thucydides left the problem for the physician or non-specialist (καὶ ἰατρὸς καὶ ἰδιώτης) to consider, as though to say that his first thought was for intellectuals who thought in the language of natural explanations, and the second was for everyone else, who could say whatever they liked. The very idea that a god could send down a plague upon the Athenians was dismissed out of hand.[29] Similarly, the Athenians in Thucydides who noticed that piety, supplications and prayer made no difference in surviving the plague would have expressed their criticisms in different forms, and there would have been sharp-edged philosophical problems to consider for the educated circles in Athens who were versed in developments in natural philosophy, rhetoric and medicine. Was this the watershed moment, as has often been speculated, when some

[29] Thuc. 2.48.3. When Thucydides abandoned this controversy for others, he did not necessarily signal open-mindedness towards popular speculation either; on the question of whether Cyclopes and giants first inhabited Sicily, Thuc. 6.2.1 adds ἕκαστός πῃ γιγνώσκει περὶ αὐτῶν, which reads as dismissive and not earnestly agnostic about these fabulous creatures; contrast the methodological ban on such embellishments in Thuc. 1.21.1. The argument that Thucydides accepted a Herodotean providential interpretation of the plague, if in a more implicit tone of delivery (e.g. Marinatos 1981: 18, 24) forces Thucydides into a separate mould, as does the view that Thucydides' refusal to speculate about natural causes was a 'dare' for his readers to supply a theological explanation of their own, *pace* Kallet 2013: 359; cf. Appendix A.

Athenians immersed in these new ideas rejected the existence of the gods for good?[30] If it was not enough for some students of the sophists on the brink of atheism, there was yet more to come.

There were other ways that the wartime experience of the Athenians led them to come to terms with the absence of divine causation in human affairs, and we find that ancient authors from this period reacted against two forms of injustice. Thucydides' observers of the plague realised that the distribution of good and bad fortune was the same for pious and impious people, but the cruelties of war led the Greeks to remark upon another, non-random but rather inverted pattern of unfairness where the unjust were rewarded and the just were disadvantaged. According to this perception of events, lawless and impious actors, such as tyrants or unjust city states in warfare, benefited from exploiting others without any regard for higher human or divine authority, while their pious victims suffered without any recourse to a moral higher power. It was this second form of inverted justice that informed the argument exposited by Euripides' troubled hero Bellerophon, who appealed to the exploitation of tyrants over their subjects and the brutality of interstate warfare, pointing out that tyrannical regimes violated oaths to ransack cities (ὅρκους τε παραβαίνοντας ἐκπορθεῖν πόλεις) and small pious states were subjugated by bigger impious states (πόλεις τε μικρὰς … αἳ μειζόνων).[31] If the likely performance date of *Bellerophon* (*c.* 430–426 BCE) is taken into account, it can be surmised that this scenario was probably not just a *topos* for Euripides' audience, and a number of commentators of *Bellerophon* have pointed out that Plataea, an ally of Athens, faced similar treatment during the early Archidamian War. A small Boeotian

[30] On the plague of Athens as a plausible factor in the onset of fifth-century atheism, see Mikalson 1984: 224–5; Parker 1996: 200; Winiarczyk 1990: 14 (cf. Winiarczyk 2016: 74); Bremmer 2020: 67; Pinel Martínez 2022: 118–22.

[31] Eur. *Beller.* fr. 286.7, 10–1 K.

town near Attica, Plataea was besieged by the Spartans and Thebes in a flagrant violation of an old oath that the Spartans would respect their autonomy, and soon enough the Lacedaemonian side blockaded the town in the summer of 429 BCE until they brutally razed it to the ground in 427 BCE.[32] In the less likely event that Euripides did not refer to this unfolding crisis, Bellerophon's observation of the persistence of worldly injustice would have resonated with the Athenians during their wars with Sparta and Sicily, and the problem could be rhetorically invoked in the service of atheism or the denial of providence. In a fragmentary passage from one of his speeches, the sophist Thrasymachus (fl. 427 BCE) appealed to human injustice when he said that the gods did not supervise human affairs,[33] and Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* attest that there were Athenians in the fourth century who believed that the prosperity of the

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[32] On an allusion to Plataea in Eur. *Beller.* fr. 286.5–9 K, see Curnis 2003: 145–8; cf. Milo 2006: 307–8; a negative reference to Thebes and Sparta would also agree with the political *Tendenz* of Euripidean tragedy. On the perjury of the Spartans alleged by Plataea, see the inset speech of the Plataeans addressed to the Spartans (set in 429 BCE) at Thuc. 2.71.2–4, and their appeal for mercy at Thuc. 3.53–9 (set in 427 BCE, and a stronger religious argument than the Theban counter-claim); cf. Hornblower 2007 and Kozak 2012. The dating of *Bellerophon* has its *ante quem* reference in Ar. *Ach.* 426–7 (426 BCE), while the metrical resolutions of the surviving *c.* 100 trimeters suggest a drama composed after *c.* 430 BCE: Cropp and Fick 1985: 88–9.

[33] Herm. *in Phaedr.* 267c (= DK 85 B8); this could be a rhetorical aside rather than a doctrine Thrasymachus believed. On the other side of the coin, the idea resonates with the Platonic position of Thrasymachus that justice was socially determined by the community; cf. Guthrie 1971: 97; to this argument add Adeimantus' theological elaboration of Thrasymachus' case at Pl. *Resp.* 2.365d7–366a1. Thrasymachus' *floruit* comes from a reference to him in Aristophanes' *Banqueters* (427 BCE): fr. 205 KA (= DK 85 A4).

unjust was evidence that the gods existed but were completely insensible to the plight of ordinary mortals.[34] On the other hand, most Athenians who saw the Spartans as brazen perjurers against city states like Athens or Plataea would have believed that their crimes were seen and condemned by the gods, and would have selectively interpreted subsequent Athenian victories through this lens. This was not restricted to their side of the war, either; Thucydides noted that the Spartans stepping into the Decelean War (in 413 BCE) were aware of their perjury at Plataea and saw their subsequent campaign failures as divine punishment, particularly their defeat at Pylos (in 425 BCE), which shocked the Greek world and blemished Sparta's reputation in warfare for years.[35]

Moreover, the wartime experience of the Athenians also inflamed elitist and iconoclastic attitudes among the upper classes, when the Athenian democratic establishment was emboldened to carry out pragmatic and sometimes cruel policies in the service of their maritime empire. It is perhaps unsurprising that this led to a moral calcification at different levels of social interaction in the Greek world, ranging from behaviour between city states, factions and private individuals.[36] When he described the moral linguistic changes caused by wartime revolutions in his famous Corcyra episode, Thucydides wrote that traditional norms like prudence, moderation, and good counsel were insidiously redefined throughout the Greek world to accommodate

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[34] Pl. *Leg.* 10.899d4–905d3; cf. Mayhew 2008: 155–84; this inductive reasoning should be logically distinguished from another contemporary belief that the self-sufficiency of the gods logically ruled out any divine interest in human affairs (Xen. *Mem.* 1.4.10), but Plato showed in *Laws* that these ideas were naturally combined.

[35] Thuc. 7.18.2; cf. 4.40.1, 4.55, 5.75.3. A similar theodicy surfaces *in propria persona* in Xen. *Hell.* 5.4.1, who assumed that the Spartan defeat in their war against Thebes (378–362 BCE) was divine punishment for illegally invading Thebes.

[36] Cf. Lévy 1976: 144: 'ainsi cette idéologie s'est «durcie», aussi bien au niveau du citoyen qu'au niveau de la cité'.

opportunistically amoral and rash behaviour.[37] Although he was speaking of factional rivalries in city states during the Peloponnesian War, this extended equally to the politicians and diplomats in Thucydides who negotiated with other city states in harsh ideological terms, discarding any talk of τιμή and justice in favour of candid meditations on fear, advantage and power.[38] Such an ideology of *Realpolitik* was exploited by the Athenians to justify brutal measures against city states who resisted their demands for allegiance or tribute, which included killing their men and enslaving their women and children as a form of deterrence.[39] This mentality was chillingly displayed in the Melian dialogue of Thucydides, which dramatised the fatal moment that the Melian envoys refused to ally with the Athenians in their private negotiations. According to the creative, idealised version of Thucydides, which should be read as a dramatic commentary on the spirit of the times rather than a literal transcript for the meeting at Melos of 416 BCE, the Melians appealed to the justice of the gods to oppose the aggression of the Athenians, while the Athenians replied with icy sophistic logic that they had power on their side, drawing a naturalising analogy between themselves and the might of the gods.[40] At home these harsh wartime attitudes were also

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[37] Thuc. 3.82.4.

[38] On the wartime 'l'idéologie de la puissance' typical of the late fifth-century Athens, see Lévy 1976: 111–45.

[39] In the Mytilenean Debate (set in 427 BCE) the Athenians retracted this punishment for a lighter one (Thuc. 3.37–48), but Scione (in 420 BCE) and Melos (in 416 BCE) were not so fortunate: Thuc. 5.32.1; 5.116; for a pro-Athenian apologia on Scione and Melos, contrast the arguments in Isoc. *Paneg.* 100–2. These cruelties came to haunt the Athenians in 405/4 BCE when they feared a similar fate at the hands of the Spartans, as Xen. *Hell.* 2.2.3 gloatingly pointed out.

[40] Thuc. 5.105.1–2; promoting immorality by appealing to analogies in animal and divine behaviour was evidently a *topos* that developed in response to the rhetorical education of the sophists, e.g. Ar. *Nub.* 904–5, 1421–31, Pl. *Grg.* 484e1–485b1; for the

internalised by the elite Athenian youth, bolstered in part by intellectual fads from the time but also exaggerated by older Athenians who looked on the sophists with distrust. By the 420s BCE it was feared that a muscular ethos of power and self-interest was gaining currency among the Athenian youth via the teachings of the sophists, the antinomian doctrines of Antiphon's *Truth* among them (see above, ch. 3.3.1), and a cluster of references to young, sophist-educated iconoclasts in this period indicate a widening 'generation gap' between Athenian emerging politicians of the 420s and 410s BCE and their elders who were wedded to traditional values like self-discipline, simplicity and equality — which were hardly the virtues embodied by an emerging politician like Alcibiades.[41] In Aristophanes' *Clouds* (423/*c.* 418 BCE) the courses in rhetoric taught by the sophists were depicted as a convenient tool for the youth to pursue a hedonistic and undisciplined lifestyle and disdain traditional social norms,[42]

Melian dialogue as a sophistic-influenced literary work more generally, see Beloch, *Röm. Gesch.*[2] II 251; Hudson-Williams 1950; MacLeod 1974: 388–90; Ostwald 1986: 305–12; Bonazzi 2020: 123; Anderson 2024: 57.

[41] Forrest 1975 first applied the 'generation gap' label to Alcibiades' generation in relation to the earlier ones; cf. Ostwald 1986: 229–50; Strauss 1993: 136–78; Rubel 2014: 72; by contrast, Shipton 2018: 6–7 is more reluctant to apply the 'intergenerational conflict' label to late fifth-century Athens. Generally, Alcibiades is seen as typical of this disenchanted generation, who relied on demagogic tactics reminiscent of Cleon during his tenure as an Athenian politician (Plut. *Vit. Alc.* 10.3, 14.4; cf. Connor 1971: 140–1) but embraced a lifestyle of aristocratic excess, and radically changed his political strategy according to his immediate advantage.

[42] See the Unjust Argument's vision of an intemperate lifestyle at Ar. *Nub.* 1075–85; on Aristophanes' homage to Prodicus' 'Choice of Heracles' in this contest of competing lifestyles, see Papageorgiou 2004; cf. Sidwell 2009: 173–5; on the central focus on σωφροσύνη in this contest see Moore 2023: 11–4. Pheidippides' gleeful boast that he could overturn traditional norms only came after he had mastered the

while in Euripides' *Phoenician Women* (411 BCE) the aspiring young tyrant Eteocles relied on a strikingly anachronistic line of sophistic reasoning to dismiss the taboo against perjury as an irrelevant human invention.[43] For the ambitious young men who were stepping into public life in the democracy, no doubt, their disenchantment with old values could drive a rift between their populist, pro-democracy rhetoric in the law-courts and the assembly and their elitist, libertine lifestyle habits and ideas. The Janus-faced lifestyle of the new Athenian politician was captured with Plato's unforgettable character portrait of Callicles in the *Gorgias*, a young statesman during the Peloponnesian War who selectively celebrated aristocratic social norms and assumed a democratic persona to appease the Athenian assembly, on one level, but subscribed, on another, to an anti-social ethic that saw exploiting others as the 'correct' and 'natural' way of life. Socrates was quick to praise the candour (παρρησία) of Callicles for openly embracing what was the equivalent to social Darwinism in his time, but it is revealing that even Callicles hesitated to reveal everything he believed from the outset, and it can be safely assumed that he would have shrank from explaining his personal anti-egalitarian philosophy to a popular jury or assembly.[44]

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art of defending the weaker argument: Ar. *Nub.* 1399–400: ὡς ἡδὺ καινοῖς πράγμασιν καὶ δεξιοῖς ὁμιλεῖν, | καὶ τῶν καθεστώτων νόμων ὑπερφρονεῖν δύνασθαι.

[43] Eur. *Phoen.* 499–502; for the sophistic elements of Eteocles' speech see Mastronarde 1994 on Eur. *Phoen.* 499–502, 501–2; cf. Ostwald 1986: 413–4; Lloyd 1992: 89–90; Mastronarde 2011: 218–9.

[44] Callicles only admitted to his creed after being pressed by Socrates at Pl. *Grg.* 491e7–492a7: 'to be blunt now (νῦν παρρησιαζόμενος), I'm telling you that the man who lives correctly must (δεῖ τὸν ὀρθῶς βιωσόμενον) allow his desires to grow huge and not inhibit them […] But I think this is not possible for the masses (τοῖς πολλοῖς οὐ δυνατόν) […] they go so far as to claim that a lack of inhibition (τὴν ἀκολασίαν)

This quiet dissatisfaction among elite circles equally extended to the democracy at a time when theoretical debates about the merits of democracy, oligarchy and tyranny were becoming increasingly common. The anonymous Athenian author of pseudo-Xenophon's *Constitution of Athens*, the Old Oligarch, took the view that the Athenian democracy was resilient and praiseworthy for what it was, but out of principle he condemned the people as morally and intellectually inferior to the elite and favourably described the oligarchies found elsewhere in Greece as 'good governance' (εὐνομία).[45] While this pamphlet was probably circulated while the Athenian democracy was in full swing in the 420s BCE, the shameless contempt of the author towards the Athenian non-elite must have spoken for a sizeable portion of the politically active upper classes of Athens at the time. Another case of this elitism in a wartime context came from the oligarchically inclined orator Andocides, who in one of his privately circulated speeches bitterly reminded his fellows of the time when the workers from the Attic countryside crowded the streets of Athens during the

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is disgraceful—the same quality I said was present among those men—enslaving the men who are naturally superior to them (δουλούμενοι τοὺς βελτίους τὴν φύσιν ἀνθρώπους)'. Contrast, e.g., Callicles' egoistic 'obsession' with manliness and heroic lion imagery at Pl. *Grg.* 484e1–485b1 (cf. Hobbs 2000: 137–51) with his inner drive to possess a good reputation (καλὸν κἀγαθὸν καὶ εὐδόκιμον ἔσεσθαι ἄνδρα) and his pragmatic pandering towards the Athenian popular assembly noted at *Grg.* 484d1–2, 481c5–482c3, 491a7–b4; the contradictory nature of Callicles' ethos was summed up by Woolf 2000: 2: 'one side of Callicles […]—Callicles 1—wants to shatter and override law and convention. The other side—Callicles 2— recommends working within law and convention as the framework for a happy life'.

[45] [Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 1, 5, 8–9; on the conjectural date for this text, which is generally fixed in the final third of the fifth century, see Frisch 1942: 47–62 and Marr and Rhodes 2008: 3–6, 31–2; for εὐνομία as a euphemism for ὀλιγαρχία (an unpopular term often avoided in Athens) see Simonton 2017: 59–61.

Archidamian War.[46] Comparable classist and oligarchic-adjacent sentiments were strong among the wealthy equestrian class of youths in Aristophanes' *Knights* (424 BCE) who were portrayed as adversaries of men of the people like Cleon, and Laconophiles who sought to imitate the warlike appearance of the Spartans.[47] After the disastrous defeat at Sicily in 413 BCE and the resumption of hostilities with Sparta in that same year, however, the dissatisfaction with democratic rule among elite circles was no longer a kind of cultural posture or an austere style of dress. A number of prominent Athenian politicians and the class of cavalrymen grew displeased at the prospects of funding another costly war, and they considered bolder solutions for ending the war with Sparta that accorded with their own class interests. Through a combination of clever policy manoeuvres in the Athenian assembly and conspiracy and intimidation tactics, the Athenian democracy was overturned in 411 BCE for a limited council of Four Hundred who ruled the city for four months, and it is telling that the first steps towards the new regime were accomplished in the deme of Colonus at the temple of Poseidon Hippios, an equine symbol for the Athenian aristocracy.[48] Although the blueprint for

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[46] Andoc. fr. 4 Blass (= Σ Ar. *Ach.* 477); the probable work for this passage was an anti-democratic propagandist text, *To His Companions* (Πρὸς τοὺς ἑταίρους), mentioned in Andoc. fr. 3 Blass (= Plut. *Vit. Them.* 32.2); see MacDowell 1962: 190–2; Ostwald 1986: 327–8; Simonton 2017: 170–1. However, Andocides' age noted at [Lys.] 6.46 suggests that he was very young at the beginning of the Archidamian War; it is possible he alluded to the Spartan infantry raids of the Decelean War.

[47] The Knights are called νεανίσκοι at Ar. *Eq.* 730–1; their long hair in the Laconian style is noted at *Eq.* 580, and after 404 BCE this look became negatively associated with agitators against the Athenian democracy: Lys. 16.18–9; on Laconophilia among the rebellious Athenian young men in this period, which did not always signify oligarchic sympathies, see Ostwald 1986: 235–6; Strauss 1993: 138–9.

[48] Thuc. 8.67.2; on the cultic and economic significance of this meeting, which confirms that the cavalrymen were behind the wheel of the 411 BCE revolution, see

the new oligarchy was subsequently advertised in the Athenian assembly as a respectful elaboration of the 'ancestral laws' (πάτριοι νόμοι) of Cleisthenes, Thucydides correctly pointed out that the council of Four Hundred who governed the city represented a radical and impressive reversal of the democracy.[49] Indeed, the oligarchic coup of 404 BCE that followed the Spartan victory over Athens was achieved through similar methods, in that the elite social clubs of Athens (called ἑταιρεῖαι, or strictly in their subversive form 'conspiracies', συνωμοσίαι) played an instrumental role in overthrowing the Athenian democracy by offering an enclave for reactionaries among the upper-classes to plot against rivals and devise stratagems for easing Athens into an oligarchy through gradual policy changes and official communications.[50] These anti-democratic regimes, although short-lived, are a testament to the radical revisability of

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Siewert 1979; cf. Ostwald 1986: 373–4; the installation of the Four Hundred (and the body of 5000 citizens who succeeded this regime) was presented as a violent cloak-and-dagger operation in Thuc. 8.45.1–97.2, but contrast Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 29.1–32.2, which painted the oligarchs in a positive light and stressed the role of public deliberation in undoing the democracy; on the significance of the 411 BCE coup more generally, see Ostwald 1986: 367–87; Shear 2011: 19–69.

[49] Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 29.3; contrast Thuc. 8.64.8; Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.2 attests that the short-lived, milder form of the oligarchic constitution in 404 BCE was also sold to the Athenian public as a return to the πάτριοι νόμοι; cf. Ostwald 1986: 477–9.

[50] On the role of these clubs in the revolution of 411 BCE, see Thuc. 8.53.1–4.4; cf. 8.65.1–8.1; for their ideological support in the revolution of 404 BCE, see Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 34.3; Lys. 12.43–4; on the regime of the Thirty Tyrants, as they were later pejoratively known, see Ostwald 1986: 460–96; Shear 2011: 166–87; Canfora 2013. On private clubs and associations in Athens in general, which were typically non-ideological and used for networking purposes among the elite, see Calhoun 1913; Sartori 1957; Connor 1971: 25–9; Gomme, Andrewes and Dover, *HCT* 5.184–93; on the difference between ἑταιρεῖαι and συνωμοσίαι see especially Aurenche 1974: 38.

Athenian politics in this window of time, and forcefully illustrate the secretive and subversive culture that took hold among the Athenian upper classes.

5.1.2 'Hermsgate' and the Diagoras Affair

These challenges to traditional values and the democracy equally outspread to religion, which was not recognised by the Greeks as a separate domain from the political affairs of the city or the private life of the individual.[51] By the preparations for the Sicilian expedition of 415 BCE, the young men among the Athenian elite continued to spurn traditional values as they had done the decade before, and one of their forms of rebellion consisted in secretly mocking the most sacrosanct cult in Athens, the Eleusinian Mysteries, or, among another group, devising a plot to inspire religious terror in the city. The public backlash against these clandestine displays of rebellion, however, came to a head in 415 BCE when it was found that the statues of Hermes in urban Athens were defaced overnight before the Athenian departure to Sicily, prompting a public inquiry which led to dozens of accusations against the Athenian elite from a number of lists provided by informants, and then a series of executions, exiles, and confiscations of property. This incredible scandal, which I have anachronistically (but unapologetically) dubbed 'Hermsgate' due to its remarkable parallels with modern revelations such as the Watergate scandal or the 'Epstein files', represented a critical juncture in Athenian cultural history when many of the urban elite were exposed to the public for their ἀσέβεια and their disregard for the laws of the people, prompting a wave of religious fear and persecution which can be partly taken as a coping mechanism for the trauma of the plague and the uncertainty of stepping

[51] On the integration of religion in every sphere of Greek life, see Bremmer 2021: 2–5; cf. Kindt 2012: 16–9.

into another war.[52] To get a sense of how the Athenian elite mocked their religious institutions in this period, however, it will be necessary to survey the controversy chronologically from the discovery of the herms to the public inquiry which revealed that the Athenian elite were parodying the Eleusinian Mysteries in their homes. This will be followed by a discussion on the dithyrambic poet Diagoras of Melos, who was accused of revealing and travestying the Mysteries in roughly the same period.

The precipitating events before 'Hermsgate' were the preparations for the Athenian expedition to Sicily, a highly anticipated and almost universally popular campaign in Athens promoted and organised by Alcibiades.[53] Less than a month before the departure, however, the Athenians who lived in the city woke up one morning to find that almost all the herms in the streets had been vandalised.[54] Overnight the unknown culprits (who were soon christened the 'herm-cutters', Ἑρμοκοπίδαι) had violently struck the faces of the herms and their phalluses, and one archaeological finding indicates that some were decapitated.[55] Although some Athenians denied that

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[52] On the latter explanation, cf. Furley 1996: 71–92; Graf 2000: 126; Rubel 2014: 74–98.

[53] Thuc. 6.24.3.

[54] The time between the mutilation of the herms and the Sicilian departure cannot be determined exactly: MacDowell 1962: 189; Gomme, Andrewes and Dover, *HCT* 4.271.

[55] Thuc. 6.27.1: μιᾷ νυκτὶ οἱ πλεῖστοι περιεκόπησαν τὰ πρόσωπα, cf. [Lys.] 6.15; Ar. *Lys.* 1094–5 implies that the phalluses of the herms were also destroyed, which seems likely as a reckless way of vitiating their power; cf. Pausanias Atticus Ἀττικῶν ὀνομάτων συναγωγή s.v. Ἑρμοκοπίδαι (τῶν Ἑρμῶν τοὺς τραχήλους καὶ τὰ αἰδοῖα); *pace* Furley 1996: 28, who questions this reading. For the decapitated head of the herm (dated to 415 BCE) which was found buried in an Athenian sanctuary in the agora, see Agora Museum S 2452, with analysis of the findings in Shear Jnr. 1973:

the crime was a bad portent (σημεῖον δεινόν) for the expedition and even dismissed the crime as drunken delinquency, the main response in Athens was one of considerable alarm and suspicion.[56] The religious import of the crime and the scale of the damage led some to suspect an oligarchic plot, and in a bid to find the culprits a board of investigators (ζητηταί) was entrusted to handle the matter, and immunity was granted to anyone who had information about the vandals of the herms or perpetrators behind any other impious deeds.[57] This yielded a number of findings, exposing to public scrutiny a string of impious actions that were committed mostly among the younger cohort of the Athenian urban elite. A few metic and slave informants reported earlier incidents in Athens when young men had destroyed other religious statues during their drunken carouses, but more unsettling was the revelation that there had been earlier mock performances of the Eleusinian Mysteries, τὰ μυστήρια, held in a number of private houses.[58] During an assembly meeting which took place immediately before the departure for Sicily, Alcibiades was impeached for

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164–5; cf. Furley 1996: 16; Kousser 2015: 80. For the label Ἑρμοκοπίδαι (Lat. Hermocopidae), see already Ar. *Lys.* 1094; cf. Plut. *Vit. Alc.* 20.8, 21.7.

[56] Plut. *Vit. Alc.* 18.4.

[57] Thuc. 6.27.2–3, 28.2. On the Athenian fear that the mutilated herms boded poorly for the expedition to Sicily, see Powell 1979: 21–4; that the mutilators of the herms were also suspected as oligarchic enemies of the democracy is corroborated by Andoc. 1.36; more extravagantly Philoch. *FGrH* 328 fr. 133 (= Σ Ar. *Lys.* 1094) identified the Corinthians (the original colonists of Syracuse) as the real saboteurs behind the Sicilian expedition, who hoped (it was alleged) that the bad omen would disrupt the expedition (cf. Plut. *Vit. Alc.* 18.3); on the investigators into the herms (which only later concerned the Mysteries) see Andoc. 1.14 (with MacDowell 1962 ad loc.), 40; on the immunity (ἄδεια) granted to informants see Thuc. 6.27.2; Andoc. 1.11, 20.

[58] Thuc. 6.28.1 (note the plural): καὶ τὰ μυστήρια ἅμα ὡς ποιεῖται ἐν οἰκίαις ἐφ᾽ ὕβρει.

superintending one of these scandalous parties, and after the departure he was further suspected of participating with the Hermocopidae with designs for a tyranny in Athens backed by Sparta.[59] Although the second charge was unlikely due to Alcibiades' interest in the Sicilian expedition running smoothly, his opponents tried to implicate him in the mutilation of the herms by citing the 'elitist dissoluteness in respect to his lifestyle' (ἐς τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα οὐ δημοτικὴν παρανομίαν).[60] In the absence of clear proof these prying and indecisive arguments only added to the atmosphere of suspicion and uncertainty, and unsurprisingly the Athenian sources on the incident were either partisan or pessimistic about unearthing the truth. We have a defence speech from Andocides in 399 BCE that retrospectively denied his involvement in both affairs as well as an incomplete prosecution speech against him from the same proceedings, and the informants who supplied lists of the men involved in the mutilation of the herms were not always reliable; the boldest informant, Diocleides, supplied 42 names and a fanciful testimony but was later forced to recant.[61] Although he had more material at his disposal than this, Thucydides shrugged and concluded that there was no one at the time or subsequently who could say anything reliable about who committed the deed (τὸ δὲ σαφὲς οὐδεὶς οὔτε τότε οὔτε ὕστερον ἔχει εἰπεῖν περὶ τῶν δρασάντων τὸ ἔργον).[62] But it has been rightly pointed out that the other informants who implicated upper-class Athenians in this affair were not necessarily as deceitful as Diocleides,[63] and

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[59] Andoc. 1.11–3; Thuc. 6.28.2, 6.53, 6.61; correcting the record at Athens (in 407 BCE), Alcibiades argued he had been falsely accused: Xen. *Hell.* 1.4.13.

[60] Thuc. 6.28.2; cf. Lys. 14.41–2 for a retrospective assessment on the 'paranomian' elitism and irreligion of Alcibiades and his family (in 395 BCE).

[61] Andoc. 1.37–43, 47, 65–6; cf. Thuc. 6.60.2.

[62] Thuc. 6.60.2, 4–5; cf. Plut. *Vit. Alc.* 20.5.

[63] See the prosopography table for the accused (and comments) of Gomme, Andrewes and Dover, *HCT* 4.276–80, 282–3.

the defence speech of Andocides is sufficiently detailed, and even awkwardly concessive at times, to admit a partial understanding of what happened.

Although Andocides was involved in the plot behind the mutilation of the herms, it is unclear how many were involved or what their precise intentions were. Diocleides claimed to have seen some 300 conspirators gathered in the Theatre of Dionysus, while Andocides tried to sell to the jury that only a handful of partygoers in a house were involved; the fact that almost all the herms in the city were vandalised in a single night, however, suggests that the operation was conducted at some scale.[64] Their target, the herms, were not simply sacred protectors of the streets of Athens but also icons of local and sentimental importance, as it was commonly believed that the Athenians were the first Greeks to adopt these phallic pedestal statues of Hermes.[65] Given their religious and local significance it is not hard to picture the dread that the vandalism of the herms would have caused, and George Grote pointed out that a comparable response could be imagined if villagers in a modern Spanish or Italian town discovered that their images of the Virgin Mary had been vandalised overnight.[66]

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[64] Andoc. 1.37–8 (*c.* 300 men), contrast Andoc. 1.61–4 (a household); for the common interpretation that Andocides played down the scale of the event, which certainly served his purposes, see Rubel 2014: 171, with references. Andocides was not harmed by the fact that earlier, a Megarian informant in Athens named Teucros (Andoc. 1.34–5) had accused only 18 men of mutilating the herms.

[65] Hdt. 2.51 (Herodotus, however, characteristically speculated that the herms were a borrowing from the pre-Greek, Pelasgian population); cf. Thuc. 6.27.1; Paus. 1.24.3; on the herms see Wrede 1986; Furley 1996: 13–28; Rückert 1998; Kuhle 2020.

[66] Grote 1851: 230–1: '[i]f we could imagine the excitement of a Spanish or Italian town, on finding that all the images of the Virgin had been defaced during the same night, we should have a parallel, though a very inadequate parallel, to what was now felt at Athens'.

Andocides never confessed to parodying the Mysteries, but after he was pressured to inform against the Hermocopidae to save two of his family members accused by Diocleides, he admitted to his involvement in the mutilation of the herms but denied breaking them. As he asserted during his 399 BCE trial, the vandalism of the herms was not a spontaneous incident but was planned during a drinking party, and he alleged that the man who proposed the idea was one of his companions named Euphiletus.[67] Andocides urged the jury that not only did he not wish to harm the herms, but he was detained at home on the night of the vandalism, insisting that he had immediately opposed Euphiletus' idea and was later bedridden from an injury after he was thrown from his horse. This double-barrelled excuse surely overdoes it, and it seems likely Andocides agreed to participate but faked (or exaggerated) an injury to avoid vandalising the herm in his neighbourhood.[68] Andocides was more credible, however, when he described the crime as a 'pledge of allegiance' (πίστις), which plausibly suggests that Euphiletus wanted his compatriots to commit a serious crime together to ensure their group loyalty.[69] This does not supply an explanation for the motives of the Hermocopidae so much as it postpones it, however, as the pledge of allegiance was presumably made with some end in mind; one need only consider the other

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[67] Andoc. 1.61.

[68] Andoc. 1.61–3; this makes good sense of the facts, since the herm near Andocides' house was one of the few left undamaged in Athens (cf. Plut. Vit. *Alc.* 21.1–2) and Andocides was threatened by Euphiletus not to snitch the following day (Andoc. 1.63); cf. Furley 1996: 64: '[p]robably [Andocides] […] backed out at the last minute'; on Andocides' involvement with the Hermocopidae see MacDowell 1962: 173–6.

[69] Andoc. 1.67: πίστιν τῶν ἐν ἀνθρώποις ἀπιστοτάτην, in the translation of Jebb 1880 ad loc., 'the most traitorous of all possible compacts'; on this practice among conspirators in this period see Thuc. 2.82.6, 8.73.3; for discussion see Weil 1893; Decharme 1904: 153–4; MacDowell 1962: 192–3; Murray 1990: 153, 157–8; Furley 1996: 29–30; Graf 2000: 120–1.

conspirators in Thucydides who pledged to commit a crime that furthered their ambitions, such as killing a political opponent.[70] In view of the timing of the action, it is possible that the conspiracy was orchestrated by some Athenians who opposed the Sicilian expedition, and it is intriguing to hear Thucydides mention a minority of dissidents against Alcibiades' plan who kept silent for fear of appearing unpatriotic.[71] But the obscurity surrounding the plot even in hindsight could potentially reflect the nature of the conspiracy itself, which may have been organised among a smaller number of men (such as Euphiletus) and then advertised among other drinking groups as little more than a dare. In this sense, perhaps some of the Hermocopidae were 'useful idiots' for sabotaging the Sicilian expedition, and it was enough for them that they were encouraged by group peer-pressure and drunkenness.[72]

The revelatory power of 'Hermsgate' was such that another act of impiety was reported to the assembly and the board of authorities: the profanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Revealing them in a series of private rituals was potentially a more serious affair than the mutilation of the herms, given that the secrets of Eleusis were jealously guarded by the Athenians and the families who formed its ancestral priesthood, the Eumolpids and the Kerykes, and any Greek with the patience and the means to pass through every stage of initiation could participate, regardless of their background or

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[70] Thuc. 3.82.6, 8.73.3; cf. MacDowell 1962: 192.

[71] Thuc. 6.24.4, Plut. *Vit. Nic.* 12.2; later cases of 'silent opposition' in the Athenian assembly are discussed by Strauss 1986: 113. This possible motive for the herms affair is proposed by MacDowell 1962: 192–3 and Furley 1996: 30; contrast, however, Ostwald 1986: 324–5.

[72] Cf. the admission of Andoc. 2.7 that either 'foolish youth' or 'forceful peer-pressure' (εἴτε χρὴ εἰπεῖν νεότητί τε καὶ ἀνοίᾳ τῇ ἐμαυτοῦ, εἴτε καὶ δυνάμει τῶν πεισάντων) led him to get involved in the desecration of the herms.

social status.[73] Such was the prestige of the cult that Eleusis was an asset for the Athenian empire by the late fifth century, as shown by the so-called Athenian 'First Fruits Decree' (*c.* 430s BCE) which stipulated that their allies provide an annual tribute of first-fruit offerings for the Eleusinian cult goddesses Demeter and Kore.[74] In addition to being concrete personalities in myth and cult, these goddesses symbolised death and renewal as well as the bounties of the new harvest, and in Athenian popular ideology it was believed that Demeter gifted the Athenians with the discovery of grain agriculture, and the Athenian hero Triptolemus taught this technology to the rest of the world.[75] Demeter further granted the heroes at Eleusis the secret rites for attaining a blissful afterlife, liberating them from the ordinary gloominess of death, and according to Eleusinian tradition these heroes became her high priests, or 'hierophants', whose descendants with this hereditary office could reveal the secrets of her cult to initiates during the Greater Mysteries festival which took place every summer.[76] However, these secret words and their accompanying actions (τὰ ἀπόρρητα, 'the things that should not be spoken') could never be disclosed by anyone besides the hierophant during the reveal during the Greater Mysteries, which apparently involved the hierophant producing an ear of wheat to the initiands and declaring the birth of a goddess' son,

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[73] Hdt. 8.65.4: τὴν δὲ ὁρτὴν ταύτην ἄγουσι Ἀθηναῖοι ἀνὰ πάντα ἔτεα τῇ Μητρὶ καὶ τῇ Κούρῃ, καὶ αὐτῶν τε ὁ βουλόμενος καὶ τῶν ἄλλων Ἑλλήνων μυεῖται. For surveys on the Eleusinian Mysteries see Mylonas 1961: 224–86; Parker 2005: 327–68; Burkert 2011: 425–31; Bremmer 2014: 1–20, Bremmer 2021: 97–100.

[74] *IG* I^3 78a.14–24; on this decree as an assertion of Athens as a Panhellenic imperial power, see Smarczyk 1990: 224–52; Parker 1996: 143–4; Suk Fong Jim 2014: 207–19; Constantakopoulou 2025: 158–9; but Hornblower 1992: 186–7 has cautioned that grain tithes may have been demanded by Athens before the decree.

[75] Isoc. *Paneg.* 28–31; cf. Xen. *Hell.* 6.3.6; Pl. *Menex.* 237e7–238a6.

[76] *Hymn Hom. Cer.* 473–9, 480–9; cf. Burkert 2011: 430–1; on the Greater Mysteries in the Attic calendar and the agricultural year, see Brumfield 1981: 192–216.

Brimo (who represented the abundance of the harvest and the promise of a bountiful afterlife).[77] On the other hand, revealing the Mysteries outside of this cultic context was a grave offence against the two goddesses, and even participating in the act was considered just as impious. Although many of the perpetrators who were accused of profaning the Mysteries in 415 BCE were not executed, so that Alcibiades had the temerity to lead a procession to Eleusis during the Decelian War years later, scores of the Athenian elite faced tangible consequences for their actions, including exile and property confiscation.[78] Although Athenian religion was not grounded in a creed, the Eleusinian Mysteries were zealously safeguarded in local law and custom.

Despite all the various intricacies involved in becoming an initiate in the Eleusinian Mysteries, the motives behind the parodying the Mysteries pose fewer difficulties of interpretation than the mutilation of the herms. Plutarch, who provided the fullest account of the charges against Alcibiades, wrote that Alcibiades was accused of participating in an alcohol-fuelled party in which he dressed up as a hierophant while his compatriots assumed the ancestral offices and roles required for the initiation to proceed, namely, the torchbearer, the herald, and the initiands.[79] In 399 BCE Andocides

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[77] Hippol. *Haer.* 5.8.39–41, to be read alongside [Lys.] 6.51; on this Gnostic testimony as an insight into the climactic reveal of the Mysteries (and Brimo, who is generally suspected today to be Persephone's son, Ploutos), see Parker 2005: 357–8; Burkert 2011: 426, 429–30; Bremmer 2014: 11–6. That the forbidden words of the hierophant (τὰ ἀπόρρητα) were religious formulae accompanied by ritual action (showing the sacred objects, τὰ ἱερά) was clarified effectively by Foucart 1914: 415–20.

[78] On Alcibiades' short-lived return to Athens in 407 BCE, see Xen. *Hell.* 1.4; on the latter penalty see the 'Attic Stelai', which records the sales of confiscated property from the profaners of the Mysteries (and the Hermocopidae): *IG* I^3 421–430; cf. Philoch. *FGrH* 328 fr. 134 (= Σ Ar. *Av.* 766) and discussion in Pritchett 1953.

[79] Plut. *Vit. Alc.* 19.1–2.

was also accused of wearing the red vestments of the hierophant and revealing the forbidden secrets (τὰ ἀπόρρητα) of the Mysteries, but it is probable that he was only implicated from his involvement in the vandalism of the herms, and he certainly never confessed to this crime when he informed against the Hermocopidae in 415 BCE.[80] There is, at any rate, no indication in the charges against Alcibiades or Andocides that the parodies of the Mysteries which did take place were significant distortions of the original rites, and it seems more likely that the celebrants tried to recreate the secret episode of the Greater Mysteries festival, which was precisely what initiates of the cult were forbidden to do.[81] This suggests that the profanation of the Mysteries was not a step in an oligarchic conspiracy against the democracy (and still less of any relevance to the success of the Sicilian expedition) but rather a blunt assertion among the noble-born celebrants that they were not beholden to the rules of the ordinary *demos*, as though to say, *even the Mysteries*, for them, could be scorned.[82] The class character of these celebrations was not left unnoticed by politicians in Athens during the

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[80] [Lys.] 6.51; cf. Andoc. 1.19: ἔλεξαν γὰρ ὡς ἐγὼ μηνύσαιμι περὶ τῶν μυστηρίων.

[81] As argued by Murray 1990: 155–6; cf. Graf 2000: 124. Murray 1990: 156 did not mean to say that the Mysteries were performed respectfully, however, as it was in his words an 'intentional and deliberate sacrilege'; *pace* Bremmer 1995: 77 and Rubel 2014: 94.

[82] Cf. Aurenche 1974: 172, who noted in his prosopographical survey that some of the Athenians who apparently participated in the profanation of the Mysteries also belonged to the aristocratic families who maintained it: '[c]elui qui y pénétrait pouvait se croire libéré des obligations de tout le monde, et autorisé à outrepasser des règles dont son sense moral ne voyait pls la nécessité […] [p]areille attitude, dont les cérémonies sacrileges ne représentaient qu'un aspect, ne pouvait qu'aggraver les soupçons d'un vertueux démocrate'. *Pace* Furley 1996: 31–40, it is unlikely a pro-war motive lurked behind the profanations of the Mysteries, which were never intended to be made public.

impeachment made against Alcibiades in 415 BCE, who (as was noted above) cited his 'elitist immorality in respect to his lifestyle' as evidence for Alcibiades' involvement, and Aeschines the Socratic was likely reflecting upon these scandals when he had Socrates remark that the young Alcibiades was so astoundingly arrogant that he could have easily scorned the twelve Olympian gods.[83]

Although this material is integral for understanding how atheism appeared during the cultural crisis of the late fifth century, it is worth considering whether 'Hermsgate' can be read as a σημεῖον that there were atheists in Athens. Was this scandal not merely a historical *accompaniment* to atheism but a revealing *testimony*? For Plato, as we have seen, it was; he thought these outrages (ὕβρεις) implied an absence of god-fearing piety which could only be attributed to three errant views: atheism, the denial of providence, and the view that the gods could be bribed.[84] This idea found acceptance among an older generation of modern scholars who believed that the parodying of the Mysteries and the Hermocopidae was motivated by an 'essentially intellectual' denial of providence, or (more weakly) was a typical behaviour of the young men in Athens who were fuelled by alcohol and not particularly religious to begin with.[85] An alternative, more popular view was suggested by Oswyn Murray,

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[83] Thuc. 6.28.2; Arist. Ael. *Or.* 46, p. 285.24–7 Jebb (= Aeschin. Socr. *Alc.* fr. 5 Dittmar, *SSR* VI-A 46); cf. Gribble 1999: 218 n. 12: 'here, typically for Alcibiades, self-confidence overflows into sacrilege'.

[84] Pl. *Leg.* 10.884a6–885a1, 885b4–9; that Plato reflected upon the defacement of the herms in this passage has been convincingly argued, in my view, by Furley 1996: 10, 91; Plato was too young to have known about it in 415 BCE, but the 399 BCE acquittal of Andocides brought everything back into public consciousness.

[85] Meijer 1981: 217, e.g., saw 'an essentially intellectual objective [behind the scandals of 415 BCE], an aggressively experimental attitude or a desire to show up the gods' incapacity of repression, if not simply to deprive them of their existence'. A similar, if

however, who proposed on anti-Platonic lines that a sacrilegious action like mimicking the Mysteries or vandalising the herms had a charged significance in a society which was predominantly religious, implying some degree of belief in the gods and their power: to break a herm or to parody the Mysteries was 'a defiant gesture directed towards God as much as man, daring Him to punish and half expecting Him to do so'.[86] Conversely, this survey has shown that these crimes were committed by dozens of Athenians encouraged by additional political motives and a classist self-assertion, and for this reason it seems unlikely that every youth involved corresponded to an ideal type of the scoffing intellectual or the daring believer. Although one suspects that some Greeks among the Hermocopidae and the mockers of the Mysteries could have fit the bill for Plato's schema of impiety, there is little sense in imagining a uniformity of belief at work here; really what united these men, on top of the considerable peer-pressure they faced, was a momentary *attitude* of disrespect towards the gods; a vanguard of unbelief was not necessary for the crisis of 415 BCE to happen. Erring on the side of caution, it is more reasonable to correlate these events with atheism.

It was another sign of the times that the Athenians who were accused of profaning the Mysteries in private houses were not the only targets in this period. Roughly around this time a lyric and dithyrambic poet who lived in the city, Diagoras of Melos, was said to have mocked the Eleusinian Mysteries and revealed its secrets to

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broader, Platonic stance on the matter is found in Dover 1982: 139: 'the one thing that can be said for sure is that they themselves did not fear the god's anger'; cf. Gomme, Andrewes and Dover, *HCT* 4.284–5; earlier, however, Dover wrote that the attitudes among Alcidiades' circle were not necessarily the product of 'earnest intellectual inquiry': Dover 1976: 26.

[86] Murray 1990: 158; cf. Furley 1996: 95; Flower 2009: 11.

discourage non-initiates from participating in the rites.[87] However, the nature of Diagoras' revelation, and his connection with the events of 415 BCE, have been controversial in modern scholarship, and to varying degrees the question of Diagoras' theological views has been a contentious issue since the fourth century BCE. It is a useful starting point to observe, at least, that unlike Alcibiades or Andocides, or in fact the dozens of Athenians who were implicated in parodying the Mysteries, Diagoras was unique in acquiring a reputation for philosophical atheism which was fixed by the late fourth century BCE.[88] He was listed in the catalogue of atheists in the source used by Epicurus, who condemned Diagoras as a mentally disturbed atheist in his *On Nature*, and from that point on, the fate of Diagoras was sealed. He would become the most popular spokesperson in antiquity for atheism, which was usually presented as the claim that gods 'do not exist' (οὐκ εἶναι, μὴ εἶναι), and by the late first century BCE he was also called 'godless' (ἄθεος).[89] Evidently, such a chorus of accusations is not

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[87] Diagoras' career as a dithyrambic poet (διθυραμβοποιός) was reported in his later biographical tradition, and was highlighted in Sext. Emp. *Math.* 9.53, Σ Ar. *Nub.* 830c, Σ Ar. *Ran.* 320, Suda s.v. Σωκράτης (= Diag. testt. 57, 6A, 6B, 9 Winiarczyk).

[88] For the reported accusations of ἀσέβεια against Alcibiades and Andocides in ancient literary sources, see Winiarczyk 1984: 159, 160; one conceivable counter-example can be found with [Lys.] 6.19: ἐπεδείξατο δὲ καὶ τοῖς Ἕλλησιν ὅτι θεοὺς οὐ νομίζει, but this usage of νομίζειν may have axiological force (= 'Andocides does not respect gods'); cf. Lys. 12.9 and discussion in ch. 4.4, above.

[89] The doxographic testimonies which credited Diagoras with atheism are numerous, and the following selection are only the earliest extant ones: Phld. *Piet.*, *P.Herc.* 1077, cols. 18.30–19.15 Obbink (>Epicur. fr. 27 [2] Arrighetti, Diag. test. 39 Winiarczyk); Phld. *Piet.*, *P.Herc.* 1428, col. XI.5–7 Henrichs (= Diag. test. 69 Winiarczyk); Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.2, 63*, 117, 3.89* (= Diag. testt. 40, 41* 42, 36* Winiarczyk); Diog. Oen. fr. 16 Smith (= Diag. test. 62 Winiarczyk); Sext. Emp. *Pyr. hyp.* 3.218, *Math.* 9.50–3* (= Diag. testt. 56, 57* Winiarczyk). The testimonies marked with an asterisk refer to

irrelevant to the sort of questioning Socrates anticipated from the jury in Plato's *Apology*. What exactly was Diagoras doing differently to get his reputation?[90] What was strange about his actions (or literary activity) for him to be remembered as not merely an impious braggart and criminal like Alcibiades, but an opinionated atheist? The question gains more traction when it is remembered that Diagoras also became a magnet in the Hellenistic tradition for anecdotes where he featured as an atheist (or denier of providence) who committed impious deeds or disputed with believers over whether there were gods who supervised human affairs. In one story, for example, Diagoras was said to have chopped up a wooden statue of Heracles as firewood for a meal he was cooking in a cauldron. Before he hurled it into the flames, he told the wrecked image to complete the 'thirteenth labour' of Heracles.[91] In another tale Diagoras visited the island of Samothrace, and one of his pious friends showed him dedicatory tablets from sailors who offered their thanks to the local gods of seafaring. For Diagoras' acquaintance, at any rate, this was unimpeachable evidence that the gods supervised human affairs: they protected pious sailors on their journey. Diagoras drily pointed out, however, that he could not see the dedicatory tablets from the number of sailors who drowned at sea.[92] It is instructive that these stories were also attributed in antiquity to the Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, who did not deny the existence of the gods but often mocked popular religion,[93] which could be taken as another

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Diagoras by the sobriquet ἄθεος; see also Diod. Sic. 13.6.7* (= Diag. test. 17* Winiarczyk), which does not credit Diagoras with philosophical atheism but highlights only his impiety.

[90] Speaking for the jury, Socrates asks this about himself at Pl. *Ap.* 20c4–d1.

[91] Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.24.4 (= Diag. test. 63 Winiarczyk).

[92] Cic. *Nat. deor.* 3.89; Diog. Laert. 6.59 (Diag. testt. 36, 37 Winiarczyk).

[93] *Theos. Tub.* 70, Diog. Laert. 6.59 (Diag. testt. 29, 37 Winiarczyk); Winiarczyk 2016: 103–11 plausibly argued that both these philosophical anecdotes originate from the Hellenistic period and were linked with Diagoras before Diogenes.

indication that Diagoras had philosophical tastes which later piqued the interest of the Peripetatics and Epicurus in the fourth century.

In our record Diagoras is first mentioned in comic sources. It is possible, if uncertain, that Hermippus targeted Diagoras in 430 BCE in *The Fates* (Μοῖραι), which paired someone named Diagoras with a mocking patronymic: 'Diagoras, son of Pedant' (Διαγόρας τοῦ Τερθρέως). It is possible Hermippus had another Diagoras in mind, as he presented his imposing physical stature as very important, which might tell against a reference to a poet, but the scales tip in the Melian's favour in view of the fact that τερθρεία was used to describe pedantry and useless cleverness.[94] The next known comic reference to Diagoras, however, was more specific to its target by singling out his impious reputation in an oblique manner. Late in the second version of Aristophanes' *Clouds* (*c.* 418 BCE), Strepsiades would come to an imperfect understanding of the heterodox teachings of Socrates and told his son Pheidippides that Zeus had been forcibly displaced by Vortex, who was now in power (Δῖνος βασιλεύει, τὸν Δί' ἐξεληλακώς, 828). However, when asked who told him this, Strepsiades only half-remembered and replied that his teacher was 'Socrates the Melian' (Σωκράτης ὁ Μήλιος, 830). As the ancient scholiast noted on this passage, this is a reference to the impious reputation of Diagoras, who was 'slandered as a combatant against the gods' (διεβάλλετο ὡς θεομάχος).[95] Although this allusion is practically beyond doubt, important studies on Diagoras have been circumspect about whether any philosophical

[94] Hermippus fr. 43 KA (= Diag. test. 86 Winiarczyk); cf. Isoc. *Hel.* 4; LSJ s.v. τερθρεία. For comic patronymics in Old Comedy, see Alonso Déniz 2019: 148–53.

[95] Ar. *Nub.* 827–30 (= Diag. test. 38 Winiarczyk); cf. Σ Ar. *Nub.* 830 (= Diag. test. 6A Winiarczyk): ἐπειδὴ Διαγόρας Μήλιος ὢν διεβάλλετο ὡς θεομάχος, καὶ τὸν Σωκράτην δὲ ὡς ἄθεον διαβάλλει, διὰ τοῦτο αὐτὸν Μήλιον ἔφη.

material about him can be read from this passage.[96] Conversely, in view of the fact that it is unlikely Diagoras had already mocked the Mysteries by this stage, Strepsiades' dubious 'citation' is suggestive of a philosophical and literary side to Diagoras which has since been buried in our sources.[97] Because Strepsiades was confident to present Δῖνος as a post-Olympian god, the point was not necessarily that Diagoras was a complete atheist, but rather that he was too 'modern' for his own good when he composed songs about the gods. Perhaps he was drawn towards experimental conceptions of the gods like Euripides, although from the freer standpoint of a lyric and dithyrambic poet, which afforded him material for unserious depictions of the gods inspired by new developments in philosophy.[98] If any such work existed, however, it must have dropped out of transmission in antiquity early as a 'submerged' text.[99] No

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[96] Jacoby 1959: 8, for one, was sceptical about this passage as a philosophical testimony for Diagoras (but see Jacoby 1959: 25).

[97] Cf. Ostwald 1986: 276–7; aside from the fact Strepsiades demotes Zeus and not the Two Goddesses of Eleusis, it is impossible that Diagoras could have lived in Athens until *c.* 415 BCE if the Athenians already knew he had revealed the Mysteries by *Clouds* II (to the extent that the comic reference to him was easily understood); he would have been pursued by the assembly immediately, especially as a foreigner; *pace* Winiarczyk 2016: 8–11, 49, who saw a reference to the Mysteries in *Clouds*.

[98] *Contra* Henry 2023a: 938–9, it probably distorts the force of the passage to argue that Aristophanes here refers *either* to naturalistic atheism *or* the rejection of the traditional gods (although the second reading seems closer to the truth). In light of the potential etymologising at Ar. *Nub.* 828 (τὸν Δία → Δῖνος) and the complaints of Epicurus against Diagoras, Franklin 2017: 184–9 has suggested that Diagoras modified divine names and dabbled in novel philosophies as a dithyrambic poet.

[99] This concept was coined by Rossi 2000: 170, as translated by Ercolani 2014: 7: '[b]y *"submerged" literature* I mean [...] texts which were mistreated from the very beginning of their transmission, and even texts which were not transmitted at all.

doubt aware of his impious reputation, an older fourth-century contemporary of Epicurus, Aristoxenus, took it upon himself to pore over the surviving verses of Diagoras, and was puzzled to uncover only pious, conventional references to the gods.[100]

The situation escalated a couple of years later when the Melian who was notorious for trampling Zeus underfoot in the *Clouds* was referenced as a public enemy in Aristophanes' *Birds* (414 BCE). In their address to the audience, the bird chorus in Cloud Cuckoo Land dismissively mentioned decrees that the Athenian assembly had passed against their public enemies to make a point that in *their* society it would be humans who were cruel to birds who would be pursued by the state. They alluded to a proclamation made against Diagoras and another against the old tyrants, which can be taken as evidence that the Melian was seen as a public enemy of Athens *par excellence*, as though on equal terms with the Peisistratids who were expelled from Athens before the Persian Wars: 'if any one of you kills Diagoras of Melos, he will receive a talent' (ἢν

These texts benefited of neither *control* nor *protection*, either because *no community had any interest in their preservation*, or because it was in the interest of a community that they be concealed, and even suppressed'; cf. Appendix C, below.

[100] Phld. *Piet.*, *P.Herc.* 1428, cols. X.30–XII.12 Henrichs (= Aristox. fr. 45a Wehrli, Diag. test. 69 Winiarczyk); cf. Diag. frr. 1–2 *PMG*. The idea that Philodemus mentioned a *prose work* of Diagoras (which Aristoxenus athetised as spurious) was suggested by Jacoby 1959: 14, but this depends on a superseded text of Philodemus; better is the impartial suggestion advanced by Henrichs 1974: 28: '[d]ieses παίζειν kann durchaus ein mündlicher Akt der Asebie gewesen sein'; cf. Winiarczyk 2016: 25; *pace* Whitmarsh 2016: 183: 'Aristoxenus wondered whether the same person could have written pious verse and atheistic prose'.

ἀποκτείνῃ τις ὑμῶν Διαγόραν τὸν Μήλιον, | λαμβάνειν τάλαντον, 1073–4).[101] The reports of later authors only hinted at Diagoras' travestying of the Mysteries without, understandably, including details which were offensive and illegal. It seems most likely that the decree against Diagoras was passed roughly around the 'Hermsgate' affair, as the tradition used by Diodorus Siculus dated the proclamation against Diagoras after the Sicilian departure during the archonship of Charias (415/4 BCE).[102] The charges against Diagoras were still preserved on a bronze stele by the late fourth century BCE when it was consulted by the Atthidographer Melanthius, who quoted it in a book about the mystery cult of Eleusis called *On the Mysteries* (Περὶ τῶν Μυστηρίων).[103] According to a potted summary of Melanthius, Diagoras got into trouble because he 'cheapened the Mysteries to discourage many people from the initiation' (τὰ δὲ μυστήρια ηὐτέλιζεν, ὡς πολλοὺς ἐκτρέπειν τῆς τελετῆς).[104] The incident was also

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[101] Ar. *Av.* 1072–8 (= Diag. test. 15 Winiarczyk); on the structure of the second parabasis and the reference to Diagoras, see Dunbar 1995 on Ar. *Av.* 1058–1117, 1072–87, 1073.

[102] Diod. Sic. 13.6.7 (= Diag. test. 17 Winiarczyk); Jacoby 1959: 17–24 proposed an earlier possible date for the motion against Diagoras, but on rather arbitrary grounds; for the traditional decree date of 415 BCE see Woodbury 1965: 193–7; Winiarczyk 2016: 12–7.

[103] Melanthius *FGrH* 326 fr. 5 *ap.* Σ Ar. *Av.* 1073b (<Diag. test. 7A Winiarczyk; cf. Melanthius *FGrH* 326 frr. 2–4): Μελάνθιος δὲ ἐν τῷ Περὶ μυστηρίων προφέρεται τῆς χαλκῆς στήλης ἀντίγραφον, ἐν ᾗ ἐξεκήρυξαν καὶ αὐτὸν καὶ τοὺς <μὴ> ἐκδιδόντας Πελλανεῖς. ἐν ᾗ γέγραπται καὶ ταῦτα· ἐὰν δέ τις ἀποκτείνῃ Διαγόραν τὸν Μήλιον, λαμβάνειν ἀργυρίου τάλαντον· ἐὰν δέ τις ζῶντα ἀγάγῃ, λαμβάνειν δύο. Wilamowitz 1900: 81–2 was probably correct that Melanthius was the only ancient author who consulted this bronze stele directly, and the others who reported the decree (Craterus included) depended upon him.

[104] Melanthius *FGrH* 326 fr. 4 *ap.* Σ Ar. *Av.* 1073b (<Diag. test. 7A Winiarczyk).

elaborated by the Atthidographer Craterus in his *Collection of Decrees* from the Athenians (Συναγωγὴ τῶν ψηφισμάτων), who quoted the motion and explained in his commentary that Diagoras was charged 'because he disclosed the Mysteries to everyone, making them generally known and turning them into trivialities' (κοινοποιῶν αὐτὰ καὶ μικρὰ ποιῶν).[105] Unlike the domestic parodies of the Mysteries, however, it seems that Diagoras made the offensive reveal of the Mysteries *verbally*, so it can be safely assumed that he did not dress in the red robes of a hierophant and perform the ritual in a private or public setting. Reflecting on the affairs of 415 BCE at the turn of the century, the prosecutor of Andocides took it upon himself to contrast Andocides with Diagoras, arguing to the jury that Andocides was more irreligious as he sinned against his own city in his actions (ἔργῳ) unlike Diagoras, who was 'verbally impious towards rites and festivals which were foreign to his own' (λόγῳ περὶ τὰ ἀλλότρια ἱερὰ καὶ ἑορτὰς ἠσέβει).[106] To an extent, this comparison can be dismissed as mere desperation, since Andocides was acquitted by the court in 399 BCE and the motion against Diagoras and his subsequent reputation cast a much longer shadow. Nonetheless, the prosecutor's contrast between words and actions is fussy enough to be authentic and can be read as evidence that Diagoras composed a text that travestied and revealed the Mysteries, which came to the attention of the Athenians during the sensitive climate of 'Hermsgate'.

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[105] Craterus *FGrH* 342 fr. 16 *ap.* Σ Ar. *Av.* 1073b (<Diag. test. 7A Winiarczyk): ταῦτα ἐκ τοῦ ψηφίσματος εἴληφεν. οὕτω γὰρ ἐκήρυξαν· τῷ μὲν ἀποκτείναντι αὐτὸν τάλαντον λαμβάνειν, τῷ δὲ ἀγαγόντι δύο. ἐκηρύχθη δὲ τοῦτο διὰ τὸ ἀσεβὲς αὐτοῦ, ἐπεὶ τὰ μυστήρια πᾶσι διηγεῖτο κοινοποιῶν αὐτὰ καὶ μικρὰ ποιῶν καὶ τοὺς βουλομένους μυεῖσθαι ἀποτρέπων, καθάπερ Κρατερὸς ἱστορεῖ.

[106] [Lys.] 6.17 (= Diag. test. 16 Winiarczyk), esp.: τοσοῦτον δ' οὗτος Διαγόρου τοῦ Μηλίου ἀσεβέστερος γεγένηται· ἐκεῖνος μὲν γὰρ λόγῳ περὶ τὰ ἀλλότρια ἱερὰ καὶ ἑορτὰς ἠσέβει.

Melanthius wrote that after Diagoras escaped Athens he was protected in the Achaian city of Pellene, which must have been a sensible strategy for him given that it was the most pro-Peloponnesian city in that region.[107] Despite the incredible bounty against Diagoras, which would have guaranteed a lifetime of wealth for his assassin, there was no chance of getting him back, and it can be taken for granted that the Athenians never caught Diagoras or had him killed; the religious-minded chroniclers of Athens, the Atthidographers, would have savoured the poetic justice had he come to a sticky end, as Philochorus must have done when he accepted the tradition that Protagoras had died at sea.[108] More contentious in the scholarship, however, is the nature of Diagoras' revelation of the Mysteries, and his motives for doing so. It has been said that Diagoras authored a 'philosophical' prose book which simultaneously promoted atheism and revealed the Eleusinian Mysteries, although this theory (and others like it) has been comprehensively refuted by Marek Winiarczyk.[109] I have defended the view, by contrast, that Diagoras composed (and perhaps sang) an offensive poem modelled on a hymn normally performed during the procession to Eleusis at the start of the Greater Mysteries festival. In a verse from Aristophanes' *Frogs* (405 BCE) which has been misunderstood by various editors of Aristophanes since antiquity, Diagoras was mentioned by Dionysus' slave Xanthias when he heard a procession singing an ode for Iacchus, the torch-bearing god who conducted and symbolised the procession to Eleusis: 'why yes, they sing the same song for Iacchus that

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[107] Melanthius *FGrH* 326 fr. 5 *ap.* Σ Ar. *Av.* 1073b (<Diag. test. 7A Winiarczyk); the alliance between Pellene and Sparta is underscored in Thuc. 2.9.2.

[108] Diog. Laert. 9.55 (<DK 80 A1, Philoch. *FGrH* 328 fr. 217); on this tradition see ch. 2.1.2, above.

[109] That Diagoras authored such a work was defended by Jacoby 1959: 24–31, cf. Whitmarsh 2016; contrast the two-part study from Winiarczyk's dissertation, Winiarczyk 1979 and Winiarczyk 1980; cf. Winiarczyk 2016: 78–98.

Diagoras [sang]!' (ᾄδουσι γοῦν τὸν Ἴακχον ὅνπερ Διαγόρας [sc. ᾖσεν]).[110] Because this song for Iacchus was performed during the procession to Eleusis and was not part of the climactic reveal of the Greater Mysteries,[111] it is conceivable that Diagoras' version revealed the Mysteries at the beginning, which would have been both audacious and incredibly funny. However, even among the scholarship on Diagoras which recognises the value of this testimony, the motives behind the poem are not universally agreed upon. It has been suggested that while Diagoras did compose a hymn for Iacchus, he did not necessarily mean to upset the Athenians.[112] No doubt, it is good critical practice to explore this possibility, and one could point out that Diagoras' early flight from Athens was not necessarily proof of malicious intent: just a few years earlier, Chrysis, the priestess of Hera in Argos, also fled her city to avoid punishment after she accidentally burned down her temple during her sleep.[113] This notwithstanding, surely everything else that we know about Diagoras suggests that he mocked the Mysteries out of spite; by 415 BCE, he already had a reputation for sophistic irreligion, his homeland Melos was blockaded by the Athenians in 416 BCE, with the population killed or enslaved in the following winter, and the Eleusinian Mysteries was a vulnerable comic target as the most zealously protected religious institution of Athens and an instrument of their empire.[114] From the unique standpoint of a dissident, Diagoras' reveal of the

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[110] Ar. *Ran.* 320 (= Diag. test. 85 Winiarczyk); the arguments for this reading, which are primarily philological but not exclusively so, are presented in Henry 2023a.

[111] Ar. *Ran.* 340–50, Hdt. 8.65; LSJ s.v. Ἴακχος I.2.

[112] Hordern 2001: 37–8.

[113] Thuc. 4.133.2–3 (in 423 BCE).

[114] Auffarth 1995: 341: 'die Zerstörung seiner Heimat Melos scheint mir der auslösende Grund zu sein'; earlier Smarczyk 1990: 286–7 also identified a hostile political motive for Diagoras and suggested that he may have had occasion to protest against the imperial expansionist function of Eleusinian cult, which forced Athenian allies to provide grain tithes in the late fifth century; this could be right, even if

Mysteries was altogether in keeping with the sacrileges of 415 BCE, and whatever he did must have been extravagant, confirming his later inclusion in the catalogue of atheists.

5.1.3 Guilds of Impiety, Youth and Atheism

It can be concluded that the ἑταιρεῖαι of Athens could be enclaves for entertaining scandalous and unpopular ideas, securing group allegiance through dangerous and reckless actions and subverting normal morality through various forms of mocking behaviour. Moreover, their acts of impiety were seen in the public eye as anti-democratic and linked with the 'elitist debauchery' (οὐ δημοτικὴ παρανομία) of extravagant men of power and wealth such as Alcibiades, and orators like Lysias and Demosthenes were given to discrediting their opponents by drawing attention to their snobbish immorality.[115] The democratic bias of Athenian oratory can shine a light on further irreligious activity among the well-to-do Athenians in this period.

Smarcyzk's late dating for the 'First Fruits Decree' is not accepted. Contrast, however, Wilamowitz 1900: 83, who assumed that Diagoras was estranged from Melos, and avoided positing any hostile political motive; cf. Winiarczyk 2016: 54: 'it seems probable that Diagoras did not openly express his critical attitude towards the Eleusinian Mysteries during the siege of Melos'. Earlier, Jacoby 1959: 21 had largely dismissed this dissident interpretation of Diagoras as speculative 'romance'. However, unless Diagoras hated his native island (which cannot be assumed from his itinerant career, which was usual for a lyric poet), it seems reasonable to conclude that he was unhappy about the imperialist bullying of Athens in this instance.

[115] Thuc. 6.28.2; on this populist strategy in Athenian oratory, with useful comments on Dem. 54 in particular (discussed below), see Ober 1989: 256–9.

Unlike the somewhat improvisatory cases of impiety committed by the ἑταιρεῖαι in Athens, such as mutilating the herms, there were drinking groups in Athenian high society which were known to assemble with the intent of mocking traditional religious customs, which has often been likened to the Hellfire Clubs of eighteenth-century Britain and Ireland.[116] A central figure in this controversy was the Athenian poet Cinesias, a dithyrambist with modern tastes like Diagoras, and a somewhat rakish figure in Athens with elitist political leanings and a reputation for impiety.[117] If he was not an atheist or a denier of providence himself, he must have known Athenians who were. Lysias, who wrote against Cinesias on two occasions, accused Cinesias of two scandalous actions in an oration written for a defendant, Phanias, who was accused by Cinesias as proposing an unconstitutional measure in the Athenian assembly.[118] Relying on character assassination to undermine the credibility of his opponent, Lysias reasoned that a man who was as impious as Cinesias had no authority to style himself a protector of the laws of Athens against Phanias when he used to host a club which deliberately scorned (καταγελᾶν) the gods and the laws of

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[116] Calhoun 1913: 32–3 n. 5; Murray 1990: 159–60; Parker 1996: 335–6. This comparison respects the modest scale and secretive operations of these clubs and societies in antiquity; less convincing here is Fahr 1969: 110, who compared the κακοδαιμονισταί to a proselytising club of atheists linked with the Soviet Union.

[117] Cinesias' neologism-laden poetry was mocked at Ar. *Av.* 1373–409; cf. Pherecrates fr. 155 KA, *Nub.* 333–8; on Cinesias' poetic and musical style see Zimmermann 1992: 119–26. In his political *curriculum vitae* Cinesias proposed a motion to honour Dionysius I of Syracuse and his male family members: *IG* II^2 18 (394/3 BCE); Maas 1921: 480 plausibly detected an *aristokratische Tendenz* to Cinesias' politics, and Dionysius' patronage of court poets was probably not unrelated to Cinesias' spirited endorsement either; cf. Diod. Sic. 15.5–7.

[118] Apparently, Lysias attacked Cinesias in two speeches: Harp. s.v. Κινησίας (= Strattis fr. 19 KA, Lys. fr. 196 Carey): Λυσίου β′ λόγοι εἰσὶ πρὸς Κινησίαν.

the city. The club members were called the κακοδαιμονισταί, or 'Devotees of the Evil Spirit' (κακὸς δαίμων):

> I am astounded if you don't take it badly that Cinesias is a servant of our laws, who has been the most impious and lawless man of them all, which all of you know well. Hasn't this man committed crimes against the gods in ways which would be disgraceful (αἰσχρόν) to describe to others? But you hear about it from the comic poets every year! Wasn't it with him that Apollophanes and Mystalides and Lysitheus would feast together on one occasion, organising it for one of the inauspicious days, and rather than 'Celebrants of the New Moon' they gave themselves the name 'Celebrants of the Evil Spirit' (ἀντὶ δὲ νουμηνιαστῶν κακοδαιμονιστὰς σφίσιν αὐτοῖς τοὔνομα θέμενοι) — which would make sense, given their horrible fates? But obviously they didn't do it with that aim in mind [i.e., to provoke divine punishment], but to scorn the gods and your laws (ἀλλ' ὡς καταγελῶντες τῶν θεῶν καὶ τῶν νόμων τῶν ὑμετέρων). And so each of them has come to ruin, which is unsurprising for men like them. And this man, who is their most well-known member for most of you, has been so horribly treated by the gods that his enemies are happier for him to remain alive than to die, as an example to others that the gods do not defer punishment to their children for those who are highly disposed to insolence against religion, but rather bring them to ruin by afflicting them with greater and more grievous misfortunes and illnesses than what they do to other people. For death and common illnesses are universal to all of us, but to continue living in this way for so long, at death's door every day without the means to end one's own life, is only deserved by those who have sinned in the same way as this man has.[119]

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[119] Lys. fr. 195 Carey *ap.* Ath. 551e16–552b8; in agreement with Storey 2011a, however, πρέπον μὲν ταῖς αὑτῶν τύχαις is printed (and translated) here as a direct question.

This was something of an experiment among like-minded artists who were as provocative as they were pretentious: Cinesias was a dithyrambic poet who experimented with novel rhythms and neologisms, and Apollophanes can be identified with the Old Comic author.[120] Their society was meant to flout a number of religious conventions, and in accordance with the logic of Old Comedy, they adhered to the comic formula of upending as many expectations as possible, such as hosting a drinking party on a day that was forbidden in the Athenian festival calendar.[121] However, the sympotic dimension to this mockery should not be understated. The name κακοδαιμονισταί jokingly implies that Cinesias and his friends rejected temperance, since the Greek clubs and societies who called themselves 'Celebrants of the Good Spirit' (ἀγαθοδαιμονισταί) were known to have abstained from heavy drinking.[122] However, I take the view that κακοδαιμονισταί also had a specific ritual meaning that would not have escaped Phanias' audience of jurors, and it is likely that Cinesias and his clubmates travestied the popular sympotic ritual of pouring out a libation of unmixed wine and toasting the Good Spirit (ἀγαθὸς δαίμων) for their blessing.[123]

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[120] Cf. Storey 2011: 82–3 for this identification.

[121] On this point Decharme 1904: 136 compared the Parisian literary critic C. A. Sainte-Beueve, who (in 1868) held a meat dinner on Good Friday with his literary *cénacle*, causing an uproar; it would have pleased the Greeks to know that Sainte-Beueve died the following year.

[122] Arist. *Eth. Eud.* 1233b2–4; Hsch. s.v. α.250 Ἀγαθοδαιμονισταί· οἱ ὀλιγοποτοῦντες. That Cinesias' club parodied these groups, along with their ideals of moderation, was first pointed out by Calhoun 1913: 32; cf. Murray 1990: 157.

[123] Ar. *Eq.* 85–6, 111–2 (which similarly joked that the ἀγαθὸς δαίμων latent in the wine could be an 'evil genius', κακοδαίμων), *Vesp.* 525, *Pax.* 300; Theopomp. fr. 41 KA; cf. Diod. Sic. 4.3.4, Theophr. fr. 572 *FHS&G*; cf. Philoch. *FGrH* 328 fr. 5a; for discussion see Tolles 1943: 84–9; Burkert 2011: 114, 278; I have argued for the ritual significance of κακοδαιμονισταί in Henry (forthcoming a).

Familiar with this practice, an Athenian who heard the name would have been led to believe that Cinesias poured out neat wine κακοῦ δαίμονος, before indulging in its servings and wilfully inviting misfortune to enter into the minds and fates of his friends through the drink as the 'Toasters of the Evil Spirit'. Such sympotic irreligion is not unheard of in later times, and the practice of toasting the 'devil' was certainly linked with the Hellfire Clubs of the eighteenth century. Bishop Berkeley, for one, was horrified to find that a London painter who had joined a Hellfire Club in Ireland 'hath offered up Prayers' to the devil and 'publickly drank to the Devil's Health'.[124]

However, Lysias shows that the 'Hellfire Club' of Cinesias was not the only source of his impious reputation, and another deed too outrageous (αἰσχρόν) to mention in a courtroom (but not in Old Comedy) supposedly involved Cinesias soiling the shrines to Hecate (τὰ Ἑκαταῖα, LSJ II s.v.). Lysias' client told the jury that this was referenced by the comic poets every year, and the incident was indeed described in Aristophanes' *Frogs* when the chorus banned defecating on the shrines (or perhaps the shrine offerings) of Hecate while singing in accompaniment to a circular chorus (κατατιλᾷ τῶν Ἑκατείων κυκλίοισι χοροῖσιν ὑπᾴδων, 366).[125] Paul Maas compared this scandal to the Hermocopidae, and it cannot be ruled out that Cinesias' indiscretion was discovered during the inquiry of 415 BCE which uncovered similar instances where drunken Athenian men broke statues (Thuc. 6.28.1).[126] Since Lysias cited the incident as an example of Cinesias' παρανομία, at any rate, it seems likely that the act was deliberate and insolent, and perhaps involved defiling a Hecate statue on the street,

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[124] Berkeley 1738: 34; further examples in Henry (forthcoming a).

[125] Ar. *Ran.* 366, with schol. ad loc.; cf. *Eq.* 329–30; Harp. s.v. Κινησίας (= Strattis fr. 19 KA, Lys. fr. 196 Carey) reports that Strattis composed an entire comedy about Cinesias that τὴν ἀσέβειαν αὐτοῦ κωμῳδεῖ, which may have mentioned this.

[126] Maas 1921: 480: 'also ein dem Hermokopidenskandal verwandter Frevel'.

where the shrines (like the herms) were normally located.[127] However, already in the *Birds* (414 BCE) Cinesias was described as frail to the point of looking half-dead,[128] and his poor health in later years was cited by Lysias as evidence that he was hated by the gods for his crimes. Unlike Diagoras, or even Andocides, the miserable life of Cinesias was more vulnerable to a selective religious interpretation.

These practices of the ἑταιρεῖαι did not entirely come to an end after the trial of Socrates, and they seamlessly continued into the fourth century. In a prosecution speech from the mid-fourth century, a middle-aged Athenian from the elite named Ariston charged his adversary Conon with assault and accused him and his sons (presented as archetypically upper-class, 'the sons of noble gentlemen', κἀγαθῶν ἀνδρῶν υἱεῖς) of being denizens of a club called the Hard-Cocked Men (ἰθύφαλλοι), darkly hinting to the jury that they had a vulgar initiation ritual.[129] Although this name would seem to reference the conventional troupe of satyric dancers who performed during festivals to Dionysus (cf. LSJ s.v. ἰθύφαλλος III), there is reason to believe that Conon's sons travestied a number of rituals as a display of their rebellious and elitist attitudes, if to a lower degree of sophistication to that of Cinesias' *cenacle*. These practices seemed to have run in the family, moreover, as Ariston continued in the same invective that when Conon was a young man he belonged to another social club called the Triballi (named after a Thracian tribe) who would apparently feast on stolen offerings to Hecate and the testicles of the pigs sacrificed at the beginning of every

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[127] Murray 1990: 157 suggests the crime took place 'probably during the *komos*'; conversely Franklin 2017: 188–211, esp. 203 proposes that Cinesias choreographed and performed a tasteless dithyrambic performance set in the underworld. Tentatively, I suspect the former is more likely; cf. Henry (forthcoming a).

[128] Ar. *Av.* 1378; cf. Ar. fr. 156 KA, Σ *Ran.* 1437; Plato Com. fr. 200 KA.

[129] Dem. 54.14 (quoted), 17, 20; this practice recalls the πίστις ('group pledge') made among the mutilators of the herms (noted at ch. 5.1.2).

assembly meeting.[130] If there were manifestly undemocratic overtones to profaning the offerings for the Athenian *ecclesia*, their theft at the street shrines to Hecate was a still more blatant display of elitist παρανομία compared to the deeds of Alcibiades. At the end of every month charitable Athenians of high standing put food offerings at Hecate statues called Hecate's Meal (Ἑκάτης δεῖπνον, or simply Ἑκαταῖα), which was a means for distributing alms to the poor. Cheerfully depriving the Athenian poor of these victuals, consequently, was more than an affront to Hecate, and everyone would have sensed that this was meant as an elitist mockery towards the disadvantaged and the democratic institution of patronage itself.[131] It can be concluded that while many drinking groups in Athens would have been relatively harmless get-togethers, the anti-civic and closed character of the ἑταιρεῖαι remained a live issue in the fourth century, when they continued to be sites for rebellious, elitist and sacrilegious behaviour.

This landscape of elite sociability is illuminating for the profile of Plato's philosophical atheist, and the fact that the male, educated elite of Athens were overwhelmingly implicated in the 'Hermsgate' scandal and the 'Hellfire Clubs' of the fifth and fourth centuries is congruent with what Plato had to say about atheism in his *Republic* and *Laws*. The point at issue, for us, is not whether there were sworn atheists

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[130] Dem. 54.39; the name Triballi suggests that Conon and his ἑταῖροι saw themselves as 'barbarians' who participated in 'uncivilised' behaviours like drinking unmixed wine, relying on a negative, exoticised understanding of the Thracians; for early modern parallels, Sandys and Paley 1910: 242–4 compared the Mohocks in England and the *Polacken* in Germany, which were thuggish and alcohol-infused clubs that relied on similar exoticising assumptions; cf. Calhoun 1913: 31–2.

[131] Ar. *Plut.* 595–600, cf. Σ Ar. *Plut.* 594c, with useful elaboration in Berti 2023: 86; in this light Franklin 2017: 181 similarly concludes: 'the Triballoi's "sacrilege" consisted not only in undermining the apotropaic benefits of the δεῖπνα, but equally in the refusal of charity and *noblesse oblige*'.

in one ἑταιρεία or another, but rather that the correlation of rebellious behaviour, attitudes and ideas is too obvious to ignore; and it is no coincidence that in *Republic*, Plato's young adult brother Adeimantus was familiar with atheism as something that other people believed, or that when the Athenian Visitor in *Laws* addressed a hypothetical atheist, he said that atheism was a young man's philosophy:

> Well, child, you are young (ὦ παῖ, νέος εἶ), and as time passes it will make a great deal of what you think right now transform and fix into the opposite view. […] Neither you nor your friends are the first to originally hold this view about the gods, and there have always been people around with this disease in greater or smaller numbers (γίγνονται δὲ ἀεὶ πλείους ἢ ἐλάττους ταύτην τὴν νόσον ἔχοντες). Well then; given that I have come across many of these people, I should tell you this: no one who has adopted this view from their youth about the gods — that they do not exist — has ever passed into old age abiding in the same way of thinking.[132]

It is striking that Plato's avatar addressed the typical atheist as 'my boy' (ὦ παῖ), which was a phrase that Plato never used elsewhere for males older than their early twenties.[133] Perhaps on one level, this might sound like a convenient rhetorical tactic to discredit atheism as juvenile, which would have appealed to Plato by the time that he wrote *Laws*; a dialogue that often credited the judgment and authority that came with old age.[134]

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[132] Pl. *Leg.* 10.888a7–b1, 888b6–c3.

[133] Note the same address used for Theaetetus: e.g., Pl. *Tht.* 145d4; Phaedrus: *Phdr.* 237b7; Lysis: *Lys.* 210d1; Meno: *Men.* 82b9.

[134] This tactic is not infrequent in modern apologetics. In a 2012 Oxford Union debate on the existence of God, e.g., Peter Hitchens said the arguments of his atheistic opponents reminded him of 'the most irritating, infuriating, revolting person I ever knew — namely, my adolescent self': watch Hitchens 2012 at 0:35–48.

Moreover, as the testimony of Ariston shows, it was possible for a mature-aged Athenian to flout age-appropriate standards for what counted as youthful misbehaviour: Conon, who was over the age of fifty, was accused of cavorting with his sons in nightly drinking bouts.[135] These considerations suggest that there were some exceptions to the rule who could not attribute their atheism to the folly of youth, but there is nonetheless a lived-in plausibility to Plato's rendering of the atheist as a young, scoffing rebel, who delighted in overturning the religious socialisation of his childhood and advertising this to his peers. Highlighting this non-rational and insubordinate side to atheism, Jan Bremmer has observed that younger men from an elite social background in Athens would have had less incentive to conform to tradition when they had fewer responsibilities and a weaker attachment to the status quo, and one can further add that in modern countries (outside of former Soviet nations) atheism continues to be more common in younger age cohorts.[136] Provided that Plato's complaints are correctly interpreted as a response to his contemporary landscape rather than a self-generated discourse, it can be concluded that atheism in Classical Athens belonged to a spectrum of youthful rebellious behaviours in Athens, but commentators from the fourth century focused on different aspects of this phenomenon that immediately interested them. One need only note that during the same period that Plato wrote *Laws*, Isocrates had also complained (in 354 BCE) that young men were constantly wasting their time drinking, partying and gambling.[137] Although they were fiercely at odds with each other over their rivalling approaches to education, Plato and

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[135] Dem. 54.21–2.

[136] Bremmer 2020: 67; for a modern *comparandum*, note, e.g., the survey by Gervais 2018: 7–8 which concluded that US online respondents who agreed with the claim 'I do not believe in god' were more likely to be Millenials (21%) than Baby Boomers (14%).

[137] Isoc. *Antid.* 285–7; gambling and/or drinking youth: Isoc. *Areop.* 49; cf. Lys. 14.27, 16.11.

Isocrates were moralists who were dealing with two modes of the same thing when they critiqued the youth of their day: the cohort of deniers targeted in Plato were not 'esoteric scientists', as has been suggested, but young, educated Athenians who had the money and the leisure to explore bold and scandalous contemporary ideas: an ideal type closer to Callicles, Cinesias or Alcibiades rather than Anaxagoras or Prodicus.[138]

5.2 The Diffusion of Atheism and the Question of Clandestine Unbelief

Everything from the second chapter up to this point has sought to show that there was an intellectual and social milieu for Greek atheism, but two factors should be considered that very much tell against exaggerating its popularity. It should first be noted that in Athenian public life, anyone who spoke in a law court or the popular assembly had to appear religious before their audience, and this 'public speech', in Robert Parker's words, would have excluded endorsements of atheism.[139] None of the speeches in the canon of the ten Attic orators, in other words, endorsed atheism or the denial or providence for the simple reason that a speaker who wanted to persuade a jury or assembly would have hoped to appear as (to paraphrase the formula of Isocrates) god-fearing, pious to his parents, respectful towards his friends and law-abiding.[140] Take this moral persona away, and the predominantly religious audience would have turned against the speaker in an instant. There was no room for private conscience in Athenian state religion where the citizens had to pray to the gods and swear oaths, and in daily Athenian life curses were directed against subverters of the democracy at every assembly meeting and jurors in the popular courts were expected

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[138] *Pace* Yunis 1988a: 60.

[139] Parker 1997: 157; cf. Martin 2019: 296.

[140] Isoc. 1.16; quoted earlier at ch. 2.1.1.

to swear by Zeus, Poseidon and Demeter before every proceeding (the so-called 'dicastic oath').[141] This factor alone would have constrained a number of Athenians from discussing atheism openly, and the mere perception of atheism as a taboo topic would have only shrunk its potential following. Although the (likely historical) trial of Anaxagoras and the execution of Socrates imply that there were ill-defined limits to religious thought and practice in Athens, and Aristophanes' comedies presented ἀσέβεια law as something of a sword of Damocles above the heads of thinkers who entertained different beliefs about the gods,[142] determining the freedom of the Greek intellectual can be clinched from a broader perspective. Greek atheism was pot-bound: like a shrub in a small planter, it had only a limited amount of room to grow.

However, focusing too narrowly on the negative consequences involved in accepting atheism in Classical antiquity is misleading given that Greek *polis* religion already had a schema for thinking about the world that hardly needed to be replaced. Even during moments of crisis in the late fifth century, when the Athenians were confronted with the random and unreasonable deaths of family members or friends during the plague of 430–426 BCE, the cruelty and uncertainty of war, and the unsettling crimes against cherished icons from their cultic landscape like the herms or the Eleusinian Mysteries, Athenian religion showed remarkable 'resilience', ruling out the possibility that atheism could have emerged as a widespread phenomenon at the

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[141] For the curse against subverters of the democracy in the popular assembly see Ar. *Thesm.* 335–62 (which satirised this prayer); cf. Sommerstein 2013 and Martin 2019: 282–4; on the 'dicastic oath' see Dem. 24.149–51 and Aeschin. 2.1; on oaths in Athenian legal procedure see Sommerstein 2013a.

[142] For Aristophanic comedy as evidence that Athenian impiety law was more threatening to intellectual freedom in Athens than is often believed in post-Doverian scholarship, see Williams (forthcoming), especially on Ar. *Nub.* 1476–92.

time.[143] The polytheism of the Greeks was always adaptable, and a *polis* could always rely on different interpretations of diviners to address a social crisis, even introducing new gods into the city to remedy any gaps in religious observance. It was a source for social cohesion and hope, anchoring the community in a way that an obscure, anti-civic philosophical creed like atheism could not. These powerful countervailing forces meant that atheism was still stigmatised, inexpedient for political life, and could never have competed with a dominant religious mentality. Esther Eidinow is right, in this sense, to suggest that a simple opposition like 'belief vs. atheism' is not applicable to ancient Greece as a tool of analysis.[144]

These opposing conditions would suggest something like the following. In scenarios where atheism found acceptance in Athens it must have largely been behind closed doors, which squares with the fact that there are no Athenians from this period who can be reliably identified as atheists in spite of Plato's testimony. In view of these factors, David Sedley has made the original suggestion that there was an 'atheist underground' in fifth and fourth-century Athens which consisted of 'an established atheist movement' who organised in 'semi-private contexts' like social clubs and exchanged clandestine texts among themselves which were authored by anonymous 'authorities'.[145] In some respects this blueprint for the social diffusion of Greek atheism needs some finessing, and the case has been made (earlier in ch. 3.1) that Plato was not reacting against a clandestine literary culture so much as a public library which could

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[143] As argued in Flower 2009: 16–8.

[144] Eidinow 2022: 188–90; but I would differ with Eidinow's wording of the 'spectre of atheism' (190), which implies its general unreality in Greece.

[145] Sedley 2013: 333–4, 336, 348; there are only hints in earlier scholarship of Sedley's 'anonymous' reading of Classical Greek atheism, as when Kahn 1997: 262 noted about the subversive ideas presented in the Sisyphus fragment, '[w]e can only imagine what Athenians of this period would have said or thought in private'.

sow the seeds of atheism among certain young men. It is also arguable that Sedley exaggerated the popularity of Classical Greek atheism as a 'movement', which is not ordinarily how one encounters pre-modern expressions of atheism. On the other hand, positing atheism in less public settings in Athens is a plausible move, and the idea could have hardly been entertained in Athenian public discourse unless it was presented in a negative, or at most ambivalent, manner. It has been seen that Critias and Plato could relate the tenets of atheism in prose or verse, but they were critical of it on moral grounds and showed only a modicum of intellectual admiration for the daring παρρησία of the philosophical atheist. Surely a good many Greeks would have tolerated people who believed in no gods, but disliked the very idea; in his centuries-later compilation of the lives of the philosophers, Diogenes Laertius wrote that an atheist who stood firm in his unbelief was in the wrong, but his convictions had to be respected: κακῶς μέν, ἀλλ' ἔδοξε.[146] The situation must have been more complex in more confidential settings, however, lending a kernel of truth to the story where the philosopher Bion of Borsythenes (*c.* 335–*c.* 245 BCE) was asked if gods exist (εἰ θεοί εἰσιν), and out of circumspection, he quoted a line of epic poetry telling the crowd in the street to go away.[147] In this crucial respect Sedley is probably right, although one suspects that atheists in ancient Athens did not talk in homogenous groups as a 'movement' so much as there were settings where some of them could be listened to. This seems like a more realistic possibility which would only require sympathetic hearers of atheism rather than a party consensus, and there is a reasonably close parallel in Enlightenment France where the arch-atheist Baron D'Holbach freely discussed his unbelief during his dinner parties, but most of his company were not atheists.[148] For this reason we are probably dealing not with a coterie of atheists but a sliver of a climate of opinion among the educated upper classes of Athens, where the idea was more often

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[146] Diog. Laert. 4.55 (<Bion fr. Kindstrand test. 6A).

[147] Diog. Laert. 2.117 (= Bion fr. 25 Kindstrand).

[148] As shown by Kors 1976: 41–81.

talked about than believed.[149] But Adeimantus' trilemma shows that atheism belonged to a sea of options in the city, even if it was extremely unpopular.

Because he has responded to the 'atheist argument' thesis of Sedley, which has informed my argument in several respects, Thomas Harrison has already objected to this characterisation on two grounds, and this section will accordingly conclude with a response to the first. Harrison proposes that atheists who conceal their unbelief in public are not meaningfully atheists, suggesting, or raising the possibility, that 'beliefs are only meaningful if they provide a guide to action'.[150] While this relies on a controversial understanding of belief, it is an understanding that is worth testing against our evidence. Let us consider an example where a Greek could conceal his unbelief in a god, such as Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae*. In a conversation outside the palace, he tells two Theban elders that Dionysus is not a god, but one of them, Cadmus, tells him to quit his anti-social behaviour towards Dionysus and participate in the 'customs' (νόμοι) of the city: 'and even if he is not a god, as you claim, just say that he is' (κεἰ μὴ γὰρ ἔστιν ὁ θεὸς οὗτος, ὡς σὺ φήις, | παρὰ σοὶ λεγέσθω).[151] Suffice to say, Pentheus does *not* go down this simple path of dissimulation, as he should have done. But let us say he did, and went to the festivals for Dionysus without any complaints, only rejecting his existence in learned company. Even then, how could Pentheus *not* disbelieve, in this scenario? If there is a genuine contradiction between his actions and his views, there must be some sense that Pentheus does not accept Dionysus. Long ago, it is true, the British philosopher R. B. Braithwaite argued that belief was a disposition to act: 'I have a disposition to act as if *p* were true'.[152] But it seems false to disregard the

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[149] *Pace* Sedley 2013: 335; Saunders 1970: 409 was the first to apply the label 'climate of opinion' in association with Plato's polemical target.

[150] Harrison 2025: 96.

[151] Eur. *Bacch.* 331, 333–4.

[152] Braithwaite 1933: 129–46.

inner workings of our experience as though we only live hypothetically ('as if *x*') and never hold definitive views about the world in our minds ('I hold *p* to be true'). Surely beliefs include convictions in the indicative: 'Dionysus is not a god', and if not, our theory should change and not our convictions. Even then, it is not self-evident that a Braithwaite-inspired response would automatically disqualify Greek atheism as a 'mirage'. The unbelief of Pentheus towards Dionysus still has effects on the world, which shows he has a disposition to act as if the god is unreal, even if he is constrained by a number of social pressures: his confidants know he does not believe, and perhaps Pentheus shows less fear of the Mad God's powers during festivals. It seems, on the whole, too neat to assume that covert beliefs are not genuine or are ineffective. Some atheists in modern Islamic countries pretend to be religious but their actions are influenced by their atheism, often presenting as believers who are neglectful of ritual.[153]

5.3 Irrelevant, Unreal … Or Just Real?

On the other hand, characterising atheism as a curiosity in a predominantly religious society might seem like a risky move in the historiography of atheism for anyone who remains sympathetic with Lucian Febvre, who appealed to the ubiquity of religious life in a bid to nullify the study of pre-modern atheism in Europe. In *Problem of Unbelief* this sleight of hand was accomplished through a string of metaphors which conveyed that every aspect of life in sixteenth-century Europe was saturated in religion, when 'Christianity was the very air one breathed', 'the atmosphere in which a man lived out his entire life', and 'one found oneself immersed from birth in a bath of Christianity from which one did not emerge even at death'.[154] According to this styling of religion

[153] Al-Soukkary 2025.

[154] Febvre 1982: 336.

as pervasive natural elements — air and water — it would stand to reason that someone who was *not* a believer in the sixteenth century would simply wither away. As was noted in the introduction (at ch. 1.4), however, Febvre dismissively argued that any freethinking individuals who might have rejected Christianity in this period were historically unimportant and unworthy of serious scholarly study. From this 'axiological' point of view, pre-modern atheism was an individual phenomenon at best and it certainly did not have a history as a collective mentality.[155]

Some scholarship on Greek atheism has repurposed this axiological framing of Febvre to undermine the idea that there were atheists in antiquity. Since the 1980s, as we have seen, Jan Bremmer has argued that the 'main findings' of Febvre apply to ancient Greece, which Harrison has accepted (see ch. 1.4, above).[156] Since, for Bremmer, the Greek way of life was so anchored in attending festivals, praying and sacrificing at temples, and swearing oaths to the gods, 'atheism never developed into a popular ideology with a recognizable following'.[157] Although antiquity allowed for the rare 'exceptional individual who dared to voice his disbelief', these figures would have been speculative types who still participated in daily religious practice, and it is for this reason that Bremmer falls short of calling any ancient unbelievers 'atheists'.[158]

Although Febvre was right about the historical contingency of atheism, it is doubtful that his absolutist thinking about religious life and atheism is a useful legacy

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[155] Febvre 1982: 352.

[156] Harrison 2025: 92.

[157] Bremmer 2007: 11; cf. earlier Bremmer 1982: 51–2.

[158] Bremmer 2007: 11; the latter point is argued at Bremmer 2025: 45: '[a] modern atheist will not only reject the Christian ideas but also refuse to practise Christianity's rituals. This is the great difference with antiquity, where we never hear of people refusing to participate in the traditional rituals practised by their fellow citizens. That is why we can talk about atheistic ideas, but we should not use the term "atheist"'.

if it can so often produce so many lapses in coherence. If an 'exceptional individual' in antiquity, such as Plato's atheist, could disbelieve in the existence of gods, as Bremmer seems to allow, this would not justify describing atheism as a 'scholarly mirage', in Harrison's terms; a rare phenomenon is not a non-existent one. The Derveni papyrus is a unique document, but not a forgery; the critics who condemned slavery as unnatural in Aristotle were marginal voices in antiquity, but not characters in a historical novel.[159] Nor would it be intuitive to deny that there were ancient atheists if they attended festivals, and the like; in common usage, an atheist is someone, for the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'who denies or disbelieves the existence of a God'.[160] Provided that one pluralises that definition into 'one who denies or disbelieves the existence of any gods', Plato certainly described people who fit that description.

However, these are preliminary objections, and Febvre's well-known axiological thesis about atheism in a religious society reflects a still deeper confusion that ought to be challenged. Harrison's final objection to Sedley's thesis exemplifies the problem. For argument's sake, Harrison argues, let us grant that the intellectual conditions for complete unbelief were in place; let us concede the Sedleyan argument that these views could have been diffused in clandestine settings, and that the anonymous atheists who met in Athens worked together. Even then, Harrison concludes, it would rule out '[a] widely disseminated concept of truth' for atheism, and '"atheist" ideas' would remain 'exclusive to a narrow elite'.[161] Although he denies that Greek atheism existed on an individual level, to account for that possibility Harrison adds that 'one possible Febvre-inspired response would be to concede that atheism was in some sense thinkable but to deny that it had sufficiently wide currency to be

[159] Arist. *Pol.* 1253b14–22.

[160] *OED*^{2} s.v. atheist.

[161] Harrison 2025: 95–6.

significant'.[162] Yet it is this italicised term, inherited from Febvre, which needs to be singled out and examined. If we concede that atheism was 'thinkable', how could it have been 'insignificant' to Plato when he tried to refute it, in the sense of 'meaningless' or 'irrelevant' from a historical point of view? Was it 'insignificant' in the same way for any Greeks who accepted, or entertained it? Finally, in a modern setting, is it not worth investigating any ancient phenomenon that could be genuine, however rarely it was believed? For this reason, one objection to this Febvrian expression is that it is too polemically vague and suggests more than it can possibly mean. But there is a still more fundamental problem at stake with this wording. When Febvre says that atheism in the sixteenth century was 'insignificant', an intelligent scholar can easily read his words as an existential thesis: atheism in this period did not exist. This can be credited to the fact that language about value or meaning can easily be confused with existential statements, and this type of linguistic confusion is already apparent in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. There Socrates told his aspiring pupil Strepsiades that Zeus was not real, emphasising he was both non-existent and nonsensical to entertain: 'what "Zeus"? Don't talk nonsense, there is no Zeus' (ποῖος Ζεύς; οὐ μὴ ληρήσεις· οὐδ' ἔστι Ζεύς, 367). Nonetheless, Strepsiades took Socrates to mean 'Zeus means nothing', in the sense that he has been made worthless and redundant now that another god has taken his place:[163]

Strepsiades: But who drives [the clouds] to move, if not Zeus?

Socrates: Not him, unless you mean the whirl of the aether.

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[162] Harrison 2025: 89, 96 (quoted).

[163] Here I am inspired by the reading of Woodbury 1980: 108–12 and the terminological framing of Giordano-Zecharya 2005: 333–7.

Strepsiades: Whirl? I had never realised that *Zeus is nothing* (ὁ Ζεὺς οὐκ ὤν), and instead of him, now Whirl is in power (βασιλεύων).[164]

It stands to reason that another comic intellectual like Socrates who heard Strepsiades could read an existential claim back into Strepsiades' value statement, and in much the same way, a Febvrian statement of value like 'atheism is not significant' can easily blur into 'atheism is not real'. Surely, the tradition we have inherited from Febvre is too porous to allow these differences of opinion to seem the same. If, however, we retire this unhelpful and value-laden terminology, indebted to the polemical excesses of Febvre, we can rely on clearer wording for expressing the marginality of a viewpoint like Greek atheism, such as 'unpopular', 'inconceivable for a majority', 'rarely accepted'. Once this ambiguity is cleared, philosophical atheism in antiquity either existed, or it did not, and if the former is true, then the scholarly discussion dedicated to the topic ought to analyse it like any other belief which has left traces in our textual record from antiquity.

5.4 Conclusion

The two preceding chapters established that atheism in Classical antiquity was 'anchored' in ideas that were accessible to educated Athenians, but this claim was still open to the Febvrian objection that the social conditions of the time rendered these ideas irrelevant and unbelievable to all parties involved. This chapter, however, has articulated the social conditions for Classical Greek atheism and made the case that atheism was a real worldview which surfaced in a time of turbulent cultural and political

[164] Ar. *Nub.* 379–81.

re-evaluation, such that atheism was only one manifestation among several challenges to tradition in fifth- and fourth-century Athens. Updating the 'atheist underground' thesis of David Sedley, it was further reasoned that Greek atheists probably did not share their ideas in semi-private associations of like-minded unbelievers, but rather in heterogenous groups who were willing to explore the idea, which has a strong historical precedent in the case of early modern atheism. Lastly, it was argued that even if the idea of atheism was always unpopular by virtue of the pervasive, obligatory and adaptable character of Greek *polis* religion, the Febvrian rejoinder that an unpopular belief is 'insignificant' is not a meaningful objection and should be permanently retired from scholarly discourse of atheism for the unhelpful equivocations it has introduced and the untenable restriction that it imposes on studying rare and countercultural beliefs from the past. Considering the social landscape in the late fifth, and early fourth, centuries of Athens lends more credence to Plato's testimony that atheists lived in Athens, and the experiences of plague, war and revolution would have provided strong affective fuel for some of the Greeks to abandon their religious convictions. Once it arrived at the scene, the currency of atheism in elite circles would continue intermittently into the fourth century.

6. Conclusion: The Eclipse of Classical Greek Atheism

The philosophers of the fourth century were aware of the threat of atheism and devised a number of strategies to neutralise it and distance themselves from the charge of godlessness. Plato's Athenian in *Laws*, Book 10 argued that the materialism of the atheists relied on a mistaken view of causality and the universe could not have budged without a divine soul moving it. This response did not mean to show that there was a divine inventor of the universe, which was the task of *Timaeus*, but only to lay down the law that every motion — down to the smallest nudge of an element up to the rotations of the heavenly bodies — was directed by a supreme will or agency which was not moved by anything else.[1] To show that a soul substance animated the universe, Plato's avatar in *Laws* advanced two arguments for the necessity of primary self-motion, supplementing these with an argument to establish the vitality and rationality of this motion. He reasoned, first, that there had to be a self-moving power in every corner of the universe to prevent an infinite regress of dependent motions.[2] After this came the argument that the earliest state of the cosmos imagined by many natural philosophers would fail to move without some kind of self-impelled motion.[3] And so

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[1] On Plato's likely (εἰκός) account see *Ti.* 29b1–d3; on Plato's reasoning for the demiurge see McPherran 2006: 253–4.

[2] Pl. *Leg.* 10.894e4–895a4; for this 'first mover' argument cf. Mayhew 2008: 119–20; on Plato's understanding of the self-moving soul as invisible gods in the cosmic order, see Mason 1998 and Jirsa 2008.

[3] Pl. *Leg.* 10.895a5–b7; cf. Plato's assertion that the heavens could not be moved (κινεῖσθαι) without the motion of soul in *Phdr.* 245d7–e2; cf. Mayhew 2008: 120–4.

the atheists, according to this logic, were left frozen in time and space, caught in an infinite regress and a static universe.

These combined arguments did not, on the other hand, show why this this self-motion had to be a vital, rational force, but this was the next task for Plato's Athenian. Certainly, while he was aware that the materialist opposition described motion as a chance or necessary phenomenon, the Athenian countered this with an animist conception of motion, contending that any self-directed movement seen in the natural world should properly count as evidence of intelligent life at work in the regular motions of the cosmos. Anyone with sense, for the Athenian, who saw a visible element like fire, earth or water that moved on its own accord would have to conclude that it had a living soul.[4] If a fire sparked without anyone lighting it, say, this had to be a living force. On the other hand, the rationality of this vital force was shown by the fact that the universe is orderly, because order presupposes rationality: the heavens rotate in a rational circular motion, and for this reason one could ascribe psychological properties to it such as reason and volition (10.896c9–d3). This led the Athenian Visitor to conclude that materialists put the cart before the horse, and it was soul which was causally prior to and older than the material world.[5]

It is not clear, on the other hand, that a speculative atheist from Athens or Magnesia who had devoured all the books of the Ionian natural philosophers would have folded at the moment that they heard the Athenian's defensive theology. Even if they accepted a similar 'lithic model' to the one articulated by the Athenian, it would have been premature for them to concede that their universe would have been paralysed from the start. We have seen, for example, that Plato already conceded that a conglomerate of matter could exist if atheism were true, thereby avoiding the trite

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[4] Pl. *Leg.* 10.895c1–896a4.

[5] Pl. *Leg.* 10.896c1–3: ψυχὴν μὲν προτέραν γεγονέναι σώματος ἡμῖν, σῶμα δὲ δεύτερόν τε καὶ ὕστερον, ψυχῆς ἀρχούσης, ἀρχόμενον κατὰ φύσιν.

modern objection to atheism, 'why is there something rather than nothing?' Still, at that stage an Archelaus-inspired atheist could reply, 'I would say that there was an eternal conglomerate of matter before the universe was formed, but there is little reason to suppose that it did not move *at all* during this time. It seems reasonable that this matter had always moved to some extent, but it took aeons before the qualities in the mix were arranged in such a way that the universe formed out of a rotatory motion that was more powerful than any other motion that went before'. Consequently, while this response would introduce an infinite series of motions, it would need further argument to show that such an infinite series was *impossible*. Democritus, whom famously Plato ignored,[6] had already defended the eternity of the universe and the eternity of motion in a bid to bypass the problem of infinite regress.[7]

The lessons from the atomists could be applied equally to Plato's final identification of self-motion with soul to dismiss it as a category mistake. The atomists would have shared common ground with Plato that the soul was the principle of motion for living animals, but differently, they made a tacit distinction between the motive force of the soul in animals and the motion in the void.[8] On this view, some motions could be identified with soul, but there was no reason to conflate this with the motion of other material bodies, which could be accounted for as the default condition in the universe and need not have been a vital, rational substance. This does not mean that

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[6] As Aristoxenus pointed out: Diog. Laert. 9.40 (<DK 68 A1, Democr. test. lxxx Luria, Aristox. fr. 131 Wehrli).

[7] For the testimonies on Democritus' rejection of a beginning (ἀρχή) for the existence of the universe (which should not be confused with the Aristotelian idea that the earth and heavens were eternal), see Democr. frr. 13–21 Luria.

[8] The automatic primary motion of bodies in a void: Arist. *Ph.* 213a27–b22 (= DK 67 A19 [2], Democr. fr. 255 Luria); the primary motion of the (atom-based) soul within animal bodies: Arist. *De an.* 403b28–404a1 (<Democr. fr. 443a Luria, cf. DK 67 A28).

Plato saw his arguments for the priority of the soul as merely plausible τεκμήρια at best which served only an educative and moral purpose for a citizen of Magnesia,[9] but they were not necessarily an improvement over the materialist opposition, either. It is perhaps more instructive that the Greek philosophers who rejected atheism did not recreate the arguments of Plato in their works. Aristotle developed the connection between divinity and motion in his *Metaphysics*, quarantining the gods to the outer spheres of the cosmos, but there was little to no intellectual kinship between the over-saturated theology of Plato and his religious critics. The Epicureans chastised the animism of Plato for depriving the gods of a body, and doing so inconsistently, as he had also claimed that the heavenly bodies were gods and recognised the traditional Greek pantheon in his *Timaeus*.[10]

We have seen that the other strategy against atheism that philosophers employed was moral denunciation and pathologisation. Plato articulated a series of philosophical arguments as psychic medicine for atheism, but this did not prevent him from condemning atheism as an enabler of impious and hedonistic behaviours, and the catalogue of atheists compiled after Aristotle and revived by Epicurus was used to name and shame. On the basis of our limited knowledge, Epicurus looks to have fused emotional polemic with arguments (or counter-assertions) against atheism by foreclosing the anthropological strand of atheism that Plato left unexplored in Book 10 of his *Laws*.[11] If his letters are anything to go by, and his strident rhetoric in Philodemus,

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[9] As was compellingly argued by Teisserenc 2019: 59, 60.

[10] As shown in the Epicurean-tinted doxography of Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.30–1.

[11] Or, better, by proving the existence of the gods in the natural world, Plato did not need to sketch out another argument to show that humans knew about them. Epicurus, by contrast, was an atomist who rejected teleology, and accordingly his evidence for the existence of the gods had to be anchored in the early human reception of divine images and our innate proclivity to believe in gods.

the Epicurean case against atheism would have been more complex but perhaps no more argumentative than what was said by the non-philosopher Cleinias against the atheistic opposition in Plato: Epicurus wrote that the inquiry into the origins of divine names was banned for all time, while the origins of religious belief could only be imputed to our pre-programmed belief in the gods. Overwhelmed by the religious landscape of the *polis* and condemned and rebutted by the philosophers, atheism had only a limited καιρός in which to develop in antiquity.

But develop it did, as this study has set out to show. It was pointed out in the introduction (Chapter 1) that ancient sources in the Classical period could certainly cast atheism in a negative, highly rhetorical light, which has fuelled recent scholarly controversies over what the fuss was all about. So long as we draw a clear distinction between a 'philosophical' and 'discursive' study of this topic, however, it is valid to carefully evaluate the sources as a quarry for atheism, and there are veins of gold out there. The most prominent school of thought which has denied the currency (or relevance) of ancient atheism is indebted to the ideas of Lucien Febvre, who has been influential in Classical scholarship since the 1980s, although to address this challenge one must know what the best sources for philosophical atheism are and build up a case through inductive argument in the manner of Decharme or Winiarczyk. While there is much to be said for models and new terminology, more empiricism is needed in the present state of the scholarship rather than less, when a number of recent scholarly efforts continue to overlook the best evidence for atheism in this period. Future scholarship should consider what our evidence base consists in without setting too much on terminology, and work on Greek religion in particular should not be too quick to smooth over edge cases in our evidence. Given the secularised position of Classical scholarship nowadays, what should be guarded against in this controversy is not residual religious bias, but the undeniable fact that, to adapt the perspectivist observation of Thucydides (2.54.3), scholars shape their conclusions on difficult topics according to what they normally investigate and find interesting. If one scholar studies

a religious author, of course atheism will seem impossible, while a traditionally inclined scholar of philosophy might be more open to pre-modern atheism in the Greek world without recognising the socio-cultural complexities of this problem. This is to say that the spectrum of possibilities depends on where one starts and where one is willing to go, and for a topic like Greek atheism some flexibility is needed.

If atheism is a historical contingency, there are standards of proof that are needed to establish its currency in pre-modern periods where it has been transmitted through our sources imperfectly. It was argued (in Chapter 2) that many of the charges of atheism in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE were polemical distortions, but not all of them, suggesting that the blunt instrument generalisations of Febvre are less apt here than the qualified remarks of Michael Hunter on early modern atheism in Britain. The fears around atheism in ancient Athens were a variegated mixture of fact and exaggeration, and the portrait of philosophical atheism in Plato seems too weathered by external reality to be a polemical fiction. This is clear from the tortured logic of Plato's Athenian, who vocally loathed atheists and condemned them for their immorality, but remarkably conceded at the end of his discussion on the preamble of the ἀσέβεια law code that there were instinctively just atheists, resonating in many respects with the historical verisimilitude of Callicles in the *Gorgias*. Then it was argued (in Chapter 3) that atheism in late fifth-century and fourth-century Athens was not promoted by individual philosophers but was an artefact of ancient reception, which is suggested by Plato's pulpit talk on the issue but also the unstable materialism of the natural philosophers, which could pave the road to atheism depending on one's frame of reference. Once it distilled for a while atheism resolved into a coherent worldview, according to which the natural world was all there was and there were 'no gods at all', and the formation of the universe unfolded over time as a lifeless process to form the heavens, the earth, and eventually the creatures who occupied it, while the gods were a human invention devised by lawgivers at an early stage of cultural history. In addition, the argumentative culture of the late fifth century was another salient element in the

gestation of fifth-century atheism, and the agnosticism of Protagoras is a useful case study in mentalities which shows that not all the Greeks were beholden to an internally religious frame of reference (as was argued in Chapter 4).

It can be concluded, in sum, that atheism and agnosticism are interesting edge cases from fifth-century Greek thought that do not fit into our analytic categories of '*polis* religion' or 'personal religion', although this does not so much invalidate these categories as it does show that Greek theological discourse could be varied enough to transcend them on occasion. This was followed by the argument (in Chapter 5) that atheism in Classical Athens can be studied as what I have termed a 'situational philosophy' that arose from a specific series of crises that impacted Athenian political, cultural and religious tradition. Just as certain intellectual currents and fads can be connected with their social conditions in more recent history, so too can Greek atheism be read as a fad that came in waves, and there is much to be gained from considering the rebellious and libertine character of the educated elite in this period. Studying Classical Greek atheism in these terms helps to avoid miscasting it as an arid intellectual experiment or an object of exclusively moral concern, while lending more plausibility to Plato's variegated portrait of atheism. This was something that some ancients lived and explored, and by taking into account the seismic cultural shifts of the late fifth century one can see why. Still, there is a converse tendency in some Classical scholarship to focus on the literary presentation of characters and events in ancient authors, committing to the methodological solipsism that all we have are texts that engaged with other texts, with no material substrate behind them. This is the 'we can only know what it meant to the Greeks' school of thought, which reduces authorial views to a disembodied persona, and the characters in literary works as phantasmic

literary creations.[12] Such a method might describe a lyric poet playing a part, but what a difference it would make to the polemical urgency of *Gorgias* if Callicles in Plato was *not* taken as a realistic politician during a cultural crisis in Athens, and the outpouring of emotion from Plato was a strange, interiorised anxiety. The problem of atheism for Plato raises similar objections for a representation-centric approach that neglects the 'hard surfaces' of his time. As Classics scholars we are trained to approach ideas largely through texts, but there had to be something beyond them.

[12] On the related issue of the historicity of Aspasia of Miletus, Emily Hulme *per litteras* has termed a similar approach as 'the move where all history of philosophy questions turn into rhetoric of philosophy questions'.

Appendix A: Not Insistent on Oracles: Thucydides and the Gods

Although Thucydides was scolded in antiquity for writing an immoral and guileful speech about justice and the gods for the Athenian envoys in the Melian dialogue (Dion. Hal. *Thuc.* 40–1), he was rarely accused of impiety personally. The exception to the rule comes from a post-Classical author who seems to have inferred that Thucydides was suspected of impiety in light of two aspects of his *History*: (1) the reticent approach of Thucydides when he writes about the gods, and (2) his occasional penchant for natural scientific explanations. Unlike Herodotus, who signed and declared his religious belief in the existence and power of the gods throughout his *Histories*, Thucydides held back, and this silence attracted some comment among ancient scholars and encouraged them to situate Thucydides' views in a doxographic chain. According to Antyllus, an ancient Thucydides biographer and commentator (whose *floruit* is unknown) with an interest in Thucydides' sophistic intellectual pedigree, Thucydides was a student of Anaxagoras and was 'thought to be subtly godless (ἄθεος ἠρέμα), drawing from the wellspring of his speculative thought'.[1] In the early modern period this accusation was countered by Thomas Hobbes, who protested

[1] Antyllus *ap.* Marcell. *Vit. Thuc.* 22; 35 credits Prodicus and Gorgias as Thucydides' main stylistic influences. The singular passage on Thucydidean 'atheism' is 22: ἤκουσε δὲ διδασκάλων Ἀναξαγόρου (≠ DK) μὲν ἐν φιλοσόφοις, ὅθεν, φησὶν ὁ Ἄντυλλος, καὶ ἄθεος ἠρέμα ἐνομίσθη, τῆς ἐκεῖθεν θεωρίας ἐμφορηθείς. Since the force of ἤρεμος is 'quiet', 'gentle', I translate Marcellinus' paraphrase of Antyllus as expressing that Thucydides was not 'somewhat' of an atheist but was rather 'unassumingly' sceptical, i.e., his reserve and his intellectual connections betrayed his real, 'godless' views.

that atheism was a cheap label: 'in his writings our author appeareth to be, on the one side not superstitious, on the other side not an atheist'.[2] Scholars writing in the nineteenth century reasoned that Thucydides' reticence about theology came from a place of profound piety, especially the Thucydides editor Johannes Classen, but this consensus was challenged near the turn of the century by Heinrich Meuss, who argued in 1892 that Thucydides was probably a Protagorean agnostic about the gods who rejected oracles and omens as human fictions.[3] Then Thucydides entered the modern scholarship of atheism and religious criticism in the work of Paul Decharme, who echoed Hobbes' and Classen's judgement that Thucydides was religious but not superstitious, but this characterisation was already challenged in the next book on the subject when A. B. Drachmann, who normally distrusted testimonies of ancient atheism, defended an even bolder interpretation than Meuss, making the remark that Thucydides 'had altogether emancipated himself from the religious views of his time'.[4] In much later twentieth-century scholarship on fifth-century atheism and into the present, the controversy over the religious views of Thucydides has often been left unexplored,[5] which has coexisted with an ongoing critical revaluation in Thucydides scholarship spearheaded by Nanno Marinatos, who argued in 1981 that Thucydides was a conservative author who believed in the traditional gods of Greek religion and accepted a watered down version of Herodotean providential history, omens, and oracles, giving rise to a diverse school of thought which has been criticised from a series

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[2] Quoted from the edition of Hobbes 1843: xv.

[3] Classen and Steup 1897 (4th edn.); Meuss 1892; Marinatos 1981: 1–16 surveyed these trends in nineteenth-century scholarship.

[4] Decharme 1904: 83–9; Drachmann 1922: 28–9, 155; unhappily, Drachmann cited not a single passage of Thucydides to substantiate his case in the notes.

[5] A cursory Meuss-influenced view was embraced by Fahr 1969: 47–8; contrarily, the controversy was avoided in Guthrie 1971: 226–49; e.g., Winiarczyk 1990; Winiarczyk 2016; Bremmer 1982; Bremmer 2007; Bremmer 2025; Sedley 2013.

of alternate viewpoints in Thucydidean scholarship.[6] But the problem of the theological position of the *History* was reignited in a provocative chapter on Greek historiography in Tim Whitmarsh's *Battling the Gods* (2015), which argued that Thucydides' *History* is 'the earliest surviving atheist narrative of human history', presenting a narrative which is 'entirely free from divine intervention' and negative about traditional religion, which has been (briefly) critiqued for smoothing over the complexities of Thucydides' presentation of the issue.[7] The question remains, then, where to place Thucydides in the history of ancient atheism and criticisms of traditional Greek religion.

Since Thucydides as a literary persona did not give us general views about the gods like Herodotus, the question has to be divided into further problems of interpretation. Some problems seem to admit a fairly definitive answer, while others are more complex, dependent on the subjective cumulative impression one gets from reading the *History* from start to finish. In the first category belongs Thucydides' presentation of everyday piety, such as respecting the family, or honouring oaths and correct ritual practice. Thucydides was not anti-religious on this point, and in his narratives on the plague and the civil strife at Corcyra he presented the breakdown of religious norms as an index of social breakdown and moral anarchy (ἀνομία: Thuc. 2.53.1; cf. 3.81–2). In addition, when he praised the stability of the Peisistratid regime before the Harmodius and Aristogeiton incident, Thucydides noted that the tyrants in Athens maintained traditional sacrifices in the sanctuaries and dedicated new altars to the gods (6.54.5–7).[8] But this does not indicate belief or unbelief so much as a

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[6] Marinatos 1981 (but see Dover 1988 on oracles); Jordan 1986; Kallet 2013 (but see Munson 2015: 54). Differently, Furley 2006 avoids labelling Thucydides' *History* as atheistic or agnostic, though he doubts that this school of interpretation has unearthed any core theological assumptions in Thucydides' narrative.

[7] Whitmarsh 2015: 81–6, quoted at 86, 82; contrast Harrison 2025: 105.

[8] Marinatos 1981: 31–46; Jordan 1986: 130–7.

conservativism in religious matters, as Thucydides can be compared to the appearances of Protagoras in Plato, who suspended his judgement about the gods but saw piety and impiety (ὅσια καὶ μή) as culturally variable but persistent norms in Greek city states and condemned impiety (ἀσέβεια) as a deviation from the social order which needed to be conditioned out of citizens (even though piety was not, according to the myth of Protagoras, the source of morality itself).[9] Another non-problem, arguably, is the absence of a Herodotean providential history in Thucydides, which is to say, no individuals or communities are aided or punished by the traditional Greek gods in his historical analysis. This squares with Thucydides' commitment in his methodology in the *History* to aim for accuracy (ἀκρίβεια) over romantic fable (τὸ μυθῶδες, 1.22.2, 4), and consistently with this aim Thucydides avoids speculation about the intentions of the gods in the world of the invisible. But this is not, as has sometimes been suggested, due to the recency of the events of the Peloponnesian War,[10] as Thucydides' analysis of the Trojan War zeroed in on the psychological motivations of its actors and considerations of the power and the resources at their disposal, ignoring the Homeric theological rationale for the prolonging of the war with the argument that the Greek forces were short on resources (1.3, 9). Notwithstanding this, some scholarship has tried to impose a Herodotean or Xenophontean providential narrative onto Thucydides. A recent argument holds that Thucydides developed a subtle dynamic argument over his narrative that Delphic Apollo sided with the Spartans during the Archidamian War, and the historian endorsed an oracle that the Spartans would be helped by Apollo if they waged war, which Thucydides suggests was conjectured (εἰκάζειν) to fit with the events of the plague (2.54.4–5).[11] However, this is not likely. Thucydides presented this reading of the oracle as not just the view of others but

[9] Pl. *Prt.* 323e3–324a1 (≠ DK); Pl. *Tht.* 172a2–6 (≠ DK); see above, ch. 3.3.2.

[10] E.g., Decharme 1904: 84.

[11] Kallet 2013; earlier, Marinatos 1981: 42–4 suggested that Thucydides saw the outcome of the Sicilian Expedition as divine punishment for the Athenians.

consigned it to the past with a narrative imperfect, ἤκαζον, as he was attentive to the social and psychological effects of war and how the Greeks in the thick of the conflict interpreted their changing situation. It would be equally hazardous to argue, for example, that Thucydides shared the later Spartan concern that they were hated by the gods when they lost their men at Sphacteria (7.18.2). But it can also be noted that the absence of providence in Thucydides was not solely a methodological feature of his *History* but a working theological assumption, which is indicated when Thucydides editorialises about oracles *in propria persona*. In the one case when Thucydides intervenes with a positive interpretation of an oracle about the plague, it is telling that he does not endorse the popular view that the Athenians were punished by Apollo for occupying sacred land, which had been prohibited by the Delphic oracle, who warned, 'better the Pelargikon was left alone' (τὸ Πελαργικὸν ἀργὸν ἄμεινον, 2.17.1). Against this view Thucydides asserts that the oracle merely 'had the foreknowledge' (προῄδει) that the occupation of the Pelargikon was a sign of hard times, that is, the war (2.17.2). This is a passage where Thucydides as a narrator appears to reject the straightforward Homeric or Herodotean view that the gods punish mortals who transgress their rules, and he says explicitly that the main efficient cause for Athenian misfortune was the war.[12] The chain of causation implied in the contrarian reading of this oracle betrays an entirely different understanding of historiography compared to someone like Herodotus:

(1) War → siege → occupation of Pelargikon → wrath of Apollo → plague, suffering
(2) War → siege → occupation of Pelargikon (an index of bad times), plague, suffering

Thucydides' rejection of Herodotean providence seems sincere enough, but it is possible this reliance on an oracle to support his argument is also a shade sarcastic —

[12] Cf. Dover 1988: 69; Munson 2015: 55.

the prediction that the occupation of sacred land was an indicator of misfortune could have been made by anyone in Athens, especially given that the civilian and military occupation of sacred spaces like sanctuaries was a recurring wartime practice in the Greek world. This leads to the question of Thucydides' presentation of natural omens and oracles, which is a more complex issue of interpretation.

In the proem to his *History* Thucydides asserted that the Peloponnesian War was the greatest 'disturbance' (κίνησις) in the Greek world and many other lands (1.1.2), concluding that this period was unprecedented in military terms but also 'in other respects' (ἐς τὰ ἄλλα, 1.1.4). The argument is developed when Thucydides adds that this time faced the greatest number of calamities (παθήματα) in warfare and natural events, among the latter ruinous earthquakes, overly frequent solar eclipses, droughts and consequent famines, and above all the plague of Athens (1.23.1, 3). To build his case Thucydides dutifully recorded any freak occurrences in the natural world that came to his attention, presumably noting them after he gathered material at the outbreak of the war (1.1.1), and on occasion he fails to establish the relevance of these natural calamities, such as the first eruption of Mount Aetna in fifty years (3.116.1–2) or the solar eclipse and earthquakes of 424 BCE (4.52.1). This has led some scholars to argue that Thucydides dramatised a supernatural, sympathetic connection between human misfortunes and nature, taking the presentation of the war of Thucydides in literal terms as the 'Twenty-Seven Years that Shook the World'.[13] In my opinion this is a reading which has initial plausibility with the 'First Preface' of Thucydides, which resounds for a while, but as the narrative of the *History* presses on, the prospect runs dry. This is not simply due to the fact that Thucydides applied the parsimony of Anaxagoras to his practical knowledge when he saw consistent natural causes behind phenomena such as solar eclipses (which only happen at the beginning of a lunar month, 2.28) tidal waves (which are always caused by earthquakes, 3.89), and thunder

[13] Marinatos 1981: 17–30; this argument is refined in Munson 2015.

and rainfall during the Sicilian expedition (which was normal for certain times of year, 6.70.1; 7.79.3).

It might be said that Thucydides could retain a belief in the fearful potency of nature alongside these simple explanations. Democritus, for example, believed that his atomist theory of images could accommodate the Mediterranean belief in the 'evil eye'.[14] But even if he did not think omens were sent by individual gods, Thucydides, according to this reading, ought to have retained the view that the natural world demonstrated communicative powers in anticipating devastating wars or at least accompanying them. But this sits at odds with Thucydides' marginal comments about the natural world, and as the *History* progresses it seems more likely that Thucydides was advertising the war as destructive in human terms and did not assign any supernatural importance to natural upheavals.[15] As a former general he was aware how thunderstorms could terrify soldiers, earthquakes could prevent wars, and eclipses could decide the fate of military campaigns, and the inclusion of natural events as παθήματα during the war probably came from the frank recognition that besides their material impact, unusual natural events affected the human psyche and changed the world as a consequence. In Books 6 and 7, we can see how Thucydides chronicled the greatest and most terrible episode of the entire war, in his view: the Sicilian expedition (7.87.5–6). This is a prime test case for the historian's understanding of nature, and if indeed Thucydides believed in a sympathetic connection between nature and human events, as the proem could imply, he had a funny way of showing it for the most monumental period of the conflict. Thucydides insisted that years of military experience prove that thunderstorms are normal seasonal events, and fearing them was a marker of callow inexperience (6.70.1; 7.79.3). The sickness of the Athenian soldiers

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[14] Plut. *Quaest. conviv.* 682f6–683a7 (<DK 68 A77, Democr. fr. 579 Luria); cf. Trépanier 2010: 314.

[15] For this latter school of interpretation, see Meuss 1892: 226; Furley 2006: 423.

and their allies at Sicily was caused by the seasonal and regional conditions (7.47.1–2). Thucydides was also embarrassed by Nicias' decision after a lunar eclipse to wait for the advice of his seers, adding *in propria persona* that Nicias was 'a bit too attached to divination and that sort of thing' (τι καὶ ἄγαν θειασμῷ τε καὶ τῷ τοιούτῳ προσκείμενος, 7.50.4). These scientific interpolations and editorial views on superstition are consistent in tone, and we are justified to read Thucydides' criticism of the credulity of the soldiers fighting for Athens in light of their reception of the lunar eclipse, especially since he had already described solar eclipses in naturalistic terms at 2.28. The cumulative impression from the *History* is that seeking omens in the natural world stems from a deficiency of understanding, either out of inexperience or personal idiosyncrasy, and as it stands Thucydides' tally of natural incidents was more about the considerable human suffering and anxiety it caused than anything non-material; an eclipse could kill just as much as an earthquake, as far as the error of Nicias was concerned.[16] In the hands of Herodotus or Xenophon the natural mishaps of the Sicilian expedition would have been interpreted as σημεῖα, rendering Thucydides' refusal to read nature like a text distinctive.

The final difficulty for any study of theology in Thucydides is his stance on oracles, which may have ranged anywhere from a limited acceptance of oracles to a totalising rejection of them.[17] It was not fatal for oracles or prophesies that some of them were wrong, which could be blamed on experts with flawed or suspect credentials: some oracles could be falsely interpolated (Hdt. 7.6), and some predictions of seers could be gravely wrong (e.g., *Euthyphr.* 3e4–6). More threatening was the perspectival

[16] On the key role of religion in the fate of the Sicilian expedition, see Powell 1979.

[17] These possibilities were already articulated between Meuss 1892: 227, 231, who read Thucydides as implying that all oracles were 'Menschenwerk', versus Classen and Steup 1897: xlv–vi, who suggested that Thucydides accepted the validity of some oracles, but he did not believe it was prudent to put too much trust in them.

thought of the sophists, which encouraged sceptical attitudes among the fifth-century intelligentsia in the Greek world. If humans perceived everything through their own, private frame of reference, why should oracles tell us anything about the invisible world of the divine? Why should oracles relate to us anything more than our private experiences, or the experiences felt by a community? Herodotus was steeped in this controversy when he asserted that oracles could clearly predict the future, and he asserted his stance in the phraseology of his Protagorean opposition, who overthrew traditional norms through logical nitpicking: unlike them, he was not going to speak against (ἀντιλέγειν) oracles or overthrow them (καταβάλλειν) when they were plainly right.[18] Thucydides, by contrast, continued the Protagorean challenge into a new epoch. After the plague of Athens, he wrote, an old oracle was recalled that foretold that 'a Dorian War would come, and with it a pestilence' (ἥξει Δωριακὸς πόλεμος καὶ λοιμὸς ἅμ᾽ αὐτῷ, 2.54.2), but there was some trouble over whether the oracle originally said famine (λιμός) or plague (λοιμός). Thucydides drily pointed out that the circumstances of the plague led to the acceptance of λοιμός, but were there a famine during a similar war in the future, they would have picked λιμός, 'for people make what they have experienced correspond to what they remember' (οἱ γὰρ ἄνθρωποι πρὸς ἃ ἔπασχον τὴν μνήμην ἐποιοῦντο, 2.54.3). These wartime controversies in Athens must have been sobering for any sympathisers of Protagoras, and in this sense Thucydides' distrust of oracles was a powerful blend of practical experience and his philosophical training (see ch. 5.1.1, above).

In the two cases in the *History* when Thucydides intervened with his own interpretation of an oracle, he was either critical of popular opinion and expressing a contrarian theological point of view, as when he interpreted the Delphic oracle on the

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[18] Hdt. 8.77.1: χρησμοῖσι δὲ οὐκ ἔχω ἀντιλέγειν ὡς οὐκ εἰσὶ ἀληθέες, οὐ βουλόμενος ἐναργέως λέγοντας πειρᾶσθαι καταβάλλειν. For the Protagorean resonances of this passage see Nestle 1908: 16; Thomas 2000: 264–5; cf. ch. 4.2, above.

Pelargikon, or he accepted an oracle in a rather backhanded way, contrasting the trustworthiness of one oracle against the dubiousness of all the others. We get the latter in the 'Second Preface', when Thucydides justifies his 27-year tally of the war against rival chroniclers and the layperson, adding that an old oracle had predicted a war which would last nine years multiplied by three (5.26.4). But Thucydides cites the oracle in a manner that casts doubt on their overall reliability, telling the supporters of oracles that this was the only one which had any claim to trustworthiness: 'and for those who make some insistence on the basis of oracles, *this was genuinely the only* one which turned out to be reliable' (καὶ τοῖς ἀπὸ χρησμῶν τι ἰσχυρισαμένοις μόνον δὴ τοῦτο ἐχυρῶς ξυμβάν, 5.26.3). Although μόνον δὴ τοῦτο could be an exaggeration and Thucydides saw reliable oracles in other rare cases, this is a remarkable passage for getting at Thucydides' general attitude on the topic. The verb ἰσχυρίζεσθαι appears in seven instances in the *History*, and often in argumentative contexts (clustering with ἀντιλέγειν at 4.23.1; 7.49.4). The verb is used when someone in an argument stands firmly by a position opposed by others, sometimes wilfully, and other times for good reason: Thucydides uses the verb for himself at 6.55.1, for Cleon's argument for repressing the Mytileneans at 3.44.3, and for Nicias' disastrous resolve to stay put in Sicily at 7.49.1, 4. Read alongside Herodotus' reaction to the Protagorean challenge to oracles, Thucydides presents a contrasting attitude of distrust which could not be more remote from Herodotus' polite attitude of deference, and the differences in lived perspective tell against the absolutising scholarly tendency since Marinatos to present Herodotus and Thucydides as basically the same in their position on oracles.[19]

[19] *Pace* Marinatos 1981: 47, who argued that Thucydides 'accepted oracles like his contemporaries Herodotus, Sophocles or even Plato', in that he endorsed oracles and only rejected the superstition of oracle-mongers (64); Herodotus only demonstrated more 'religious awe' (57); Dillon 2017 also tends to elide the differences between Herodotus and Thucydides, as for him they shared a religious and 'intellectual' interest in oracles; Thucydides 'demonstrates a profound belief in oracular

Although he is illuminating for his witty and mild-mannered adaptations of traditional Greek religious beliefs, the Halicarnassian is not the arbitrator for all the options in fifth-century religious discourse, nor how these options were used.[20] Thucydides took a different stance when he told his audience that οὐκ ἰσχυρίζομαι τι ἀπὸ χρησμῶν,[21] and his citation of the 'thrice-nine' oracle can be seen as a sarcastic response to literary rivals who relied on oracles to tally their chronologies. Perhaps this could have come from a Greek who accepted the predictions of oracles in rare cases, but the impression of Thucydides' treatment on the subject is not a positive one and his *History* is coloured by a deeply distrustful attitude towards oracles. For this reason, although the work is too particularistic in its critiques to be called atheistic, the *History* furnishes important intellectual background for the history of fifth-century atheism and shows that the Athenian experience of war could provoke a new wave of criticisms towards religion which were shaped by a distinctive intellectual culture.

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pronouncements and their prescience (particularly ones from Delphi)' (35); '[Herodotus], like Thucydides after him, had an intellectual approach to oracles' (33).

[20] *Pace* Harrison 2025: 105–6.

[21] *Pace* Marinatos 1981: 51–2, there is little reason to believe Thucydides only had oracle-collectors as his opponents in this passage (οἱ ἀπὸ χρησμῶν τι ἰσχυρισάμενοι); more convincing on this point is Dover 1988: 71–2.

Appendix B: Was Anaxagoras Scapegoated during the Plague?

The plague that erupted in the summer of 430 BCE brought about a climate of religious hysteria in Athens, and in a bid to address what they perceived as divine punishment, the Athenian populace looked for a scapegoat. Agitated by the religious zealot Diopeithes, a seer, the Athenians not only passed his decree to outlaw astronomy but brought Anaxagoras to trial. With his expulsion or his death, they believed, the wrath of Apollo would be assuaged, and they could resume their conflict with Sparta as normal. Without the traumatic conditions of the plague, the Athenians would have been unlikely to declare war on science in this thoroughgoing way.

This chronological narrative cannot be footnoted with Plutarch, or indeed any another ancient author; it is a reconstruction of a highly contentious series of events. The circumstances of the plague for the trial of Anaxagoras are not mentioned by Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch or any surviving fragments from earlier historians (Ephorus, Philochorus, Demetrius, Satyrus) and none claim that the trial took place in 430 BCE. Most modern scholarship does not accept it, either; instead it is preferred to adopt (1) the relative chronology of Ephorus, who presents the trial of Anaxagoras as taking place after the embezzlement trial of Pheidias, alongside the absolute (emended) chronology of Philochorus on the latter event, which fixes the trial of Anaxagoras at *c.* 437 BCE; or less often, (2) the relative and absolute chronology of Ephorus wholesale, which present the various trials against Pericles' associates as taking place before the outbreak of the Archidamian War at *c.* 432 BCE.[1] But these factors do not automatically tell against dating Anaxagoras' trial to 430, which could be a reasonable, if neglected,

[1] Mansfeld 1980: 80 proposes 437 BCE as the date for the trial; cf. Curd 2007: 131. By contrast, Busolt, *Gr. Gesch.* III(1) 9 n. 1 opted for *c.* 432 BCE; cf. Derenne 1930: 30–8.

scholarly synthesis of the ancient evidence. That the plague was behind the circumstances of the trial of Anaxagoras has been argued in a learned article by Richard Janko for the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, and this appendix will attempt to respond to the main arguments.[2] In the length of a short appendix, not all the details of Janko's arguments can be reported and critiqued in full, although it is hoped that the core premisses of his thesis have been addressed sufficiently.

Janko, for a start, follows the relative chronology of Ephorus, which was used by Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch. According to this version of events, as indicated, the embezzlement trial of Pheidias took place before the impiety trial of Anaxagoras.[3] However, Janko wishes to put the trial of Anaxagoras *after* the outbreak of the Archidamian War, in a mild correction of Ephorus. To get there he presents several items of evidence, arguing that Anaxagoras' thirty years in Athens are best fixed at 460–430 BCE; that the trial of Pheidias took place in the late 430s BCE, and may have dragged into 430 BCE; that an Athenian edict against astronomy could not have preceded 432 BCE; and that there are hints of anecdotal evidence which are suggestive that Anaxagoras and his sons suffered from the plague, with differing results.

Anaxagoras lived in Athens for 30 years, and besides his evidence for the plague date marking his departure, Janko suggests that 460 BCE is a coherent date for Anaxagoras' entry in Athens, as it coincides with the death of the Athenian exile Themistocles; Janko holds that Anaxagoras was associated with the former statesman

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[2] Janko 2020; earlier, see Gomme, *HCT* 2.186–8; Rubel 2014: 37–41.

[3] Ephorus saw this sequence of events as among the causes (αἰτίαι) of the Peloponnesian War: Diod. Sic. 12.41.1 (<Ephorus *FGrH* 70 fr. 196); cf. Plut. *Vit. Per.* 31–2.

in Asia Minor, and after he died it was natural for Anaxagoras to move to Athens.[4] This could be answered with *non liquet*, but Janko advances more direct evidence as he proceeds. Janko reasons that the trial of Pheidias should be pushed forward to 432/1 BCE, which he presents as the original date that Philochorus gave for the event.[5] However, this relies on rejecting a solid and generally accepted emendation for a scholion that quotes Philochorus. These are the relevant unamended scholia (Σ Ar. *Pax* 605*a*, 605*b* Holwerda = Philoch. *FGrH* 328 fr. 121):[6]

> Φιλόχορος ἐπὶ Πυθοδώρου (MSS | Θεοδώρου Lepaulmier) ἄρχοντος ταῦτά φησι· "καὶ τὸ ἄγαλμα τὸ χρυσοῦν τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς ἐστάθη εἰς τὸν νεὼν τὸν μέγαν ἔχον χρυσίου σταθμὸν ταλάντων μδ' Περικλέους ἐπιστατοῦντος, Φειδίου δὲ ποιήσαντος. καὶ Φειδίας ὁ ποιήσας δόξας παραλογίζεσθαι τὸν ἐλέφαντα τὸν εἰς τὰς φολίδας ἐκρίθη. καὶ φυγὼν εἰς Ἦλιν ἐργολαβῆσαι τὸ ἄγαλμα τοῦ Διὸς τὸ ἐν Ὀλυμπίᾳ λέγεται, τοῦτο δὲ ἐξεργασάμενος ἀποθανεῖν ὑπὸ Ἠλείων" ἐπὶ Σκυθοδώρου (MSS | Πυθοδώρου Lepaulmier).
>
> Philochorus claims the following took place during the archonship of Pythodorus (432 BCE): 'the gold statue of Athena, with a weight in gold of 44 talents, was set up in the great temple under the charge of Pericles, and she was crafted by Pheidias. And the craftsman Pheidias was brought to trial after he was suspected of having miscalculated the ivory for the snake scales. And he fled to Elis and was said to have been hired to work on the statue of Zeus in Olympia, and after he completed it he died at the hands of the Eleians'. During the [archonship] of *Scythodorus … [a

[4] Janko 2020: 220–1; Anaxagoras' 30-year sojourn in Athens: Diog. Laert. 2.7 (<DK 59 A1, Apollodorus *FGrH* 244 fr. 31, Demetrius fr. 150 Wehrli); Anaxagoras as a teacher of Themistocles: Plut. *Vit. Them.* 2.5 (= Stesimbrotus *FGrH* 107 fr. 1).

[5] Janko 2020: 225–6.

[6] The formatting of the textual variants here follows Bakola 2010: 305–6.

shorter quote from Philochorus on the negative response (once emended, in 432 BCE) directed against the Megarian decree proceeds]

ὁ Φειδίας, ὡς Φιλόχορός φησιν, ἐπὶ Πυθοδώρου ἄρχοντος τὸ ἄγαλμα τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς κατασκευάσας ὑφείλετο τὸ χρυσίον ἐκ τῶν δρακόντων τῆς χρυσελεφαντίνης Ἀθηνᾶς· ἐφ᾽ ᾧ καταγνωσθεὶς ἐζημιώθη φυγῇ. Γενόμενος δὲ εἰς Ἦλιν καὶ ἐργολαβήσας παρὰ τῶν Ἠλείων τὸ ἄγαλμα τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ Ὀλυμπίου καὶ καταγνωσθεὶς ὑπ᾽ αὐτῶν ὡς νοσφισάμενος ἀνῃρέθη.

Pheidias, as Philochorus says, while building the statue of Athena during the archonship of Pythodorus (432 BCE) had stolen gold from the snakes for the gold and ivory Athena; on this account he was sentenced with the punishment of exile. And once he moved to Elis he was contracted by the Eleians to work on the statue of Zeus at Olympus, and they sentenced him to death for robbery.

Lepaulmier emended all three archon names in these two scholia, changing the installation of the statue of Athena to 438 BCE (with the paleographically plausible archon date of *Theodorus*) and replacing the unattested name 'Scythodorus' to 'Pythodorus' for the latter date given in the first scholiast, which means an archon date of 432 BCE. Lapaulmier also corrected the second, shorter version of this scholion in light of the first, fixing the events of the completion of the statue and the trial at 438 BCE.[7] Lepaulmier did not give any historical rationale for this change in his notes because the problem is already evident on formal grounds; there is obvious corruption with the archon dates, and there is no sense in citing the same year twice in such a short space. Subsequent archaeological findings have vindicated this emendation, too: Pheidias worked outside of Athens in Olympia during the 430s, and the installation of the statue of Athena must have taken place in 438 BCE when the Parthenos temple was

[7] Lepaulmier 1668: 746–7.

largely completed.[8] Even if one does not accept the relative chronology of Ephorus, it must be said that a trial date fixed around 438 BCE is a strong prospect for Pheidias. This emendation has been challenged, but in my view unconvincingly. It has been suggested by Emmanuela Bakola that the second scholion could derive from a different source which accurately adduces a 432 BCE date, fixing the trial of Pheidias later. Bakola notes that the details between these scholia differ in two respects: the latter references the embezzlement of gold rather than ivory, and Pheidias' crime at Eleia is specified as robbery.[9] It could be replied that the first detail is simpler, and the other a basic elaboration, and the fact that the same author is credited (Philochorus) suggests that the second version of the scholion is a more derivative paraphrase of Philochorus that reproduces chronological errors from the first scholion.[10] Moreover, if both the scholia claim to only report Philochorus, this raises two questions for the argument against emending the first summary. Why does a different source need to stand behind the second one, and why should this be preferred when the first scholion appears to provide a quote (with a coherent opening for an emendation) rather than a terse and unconvincing paraphrase (which does not)? It seems unlikely that these objections will shift the consensus that Pheidias was probably tried for embezzlement in the early 430s, which has particularly strong textual and archaeological support.

Janko adduces further evidence for a 430 BCE trial, which can be addressed briefly. He accepts Plutarch's testimony that the Athenian seer Diopeithes passed a motion before the Archidamian War which promised to impeach 'those who did not believe in divinities or who taught doctrines about meteorological phenomena' (τοὺς τὰ θεῖα μὴ νομίζοντας ἢ λόγους περὶ τῶν μεταρσίων διδάσκοντας), but again, he

[8] Donnay 1968 and Mansfeld 1980: 45–6, 64.

[9] Bakola 2010: 305–12; cf. Janko 2020: 225 n. 134.

[10] Cf. Mansfeld 1980: 40 n. 164.

must push these events ahead to correspond with the plague.[11] After all, says Janko, there is evidence of astronomers working in a public setting in Athens at 432 BCE, which suggests that the edict was not yet in effect.[12] On the other hand, the brass tacks of Athenian legal procedure are often unreliable in these traditions, attracting *ben trovato* points of detail; the names of the accusers of Anaxagoras also change according to author, as was mentioned at ch. 2.1.2. It is arguably more probable that evidence in Athens of meteorological activity in 432 BCE tells against the historicity of this edict *in toto*, and only a trial of Anaxagoras ever took place.[13] Less persuasive is Janko's argument that anecdotal evidence points to Anaxagoras' imprisonment in Athens during the plague. As a first point, neither Ephorus nor Plutarch give any anecdotal support for this suggestion, which Janko speculatively draws out of secondary biographical traditions. Plutarch (*Vit. Per.* 35.4–5) associated the 430 BCE impeachment of Pericles with the popular resentment in Athens caused by the plague but presents the other trials in a different light, which took place earlier in the narrative of Ephorus (the earliest known historian who mentioned the trial of Anaxagoras). To be sure, Hieronymus of Rhodes (*c.* 290–230 BCE) described Anaxagoras as gaunt due to sickness (διερρυηκότα καὶ λεπτὸν ὑπὸ νόσου), but this can be explained from a sojourn in prison in the context of his narrative.[14] More is made of the fact that Satyrus claimed Anaxagoras was told in prison that his sons had died, and he quipped that they were born to die, although this was a wandering anecdote attached to other Greek

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[11] Plut. *Vit. Per.* 32.1–3, 5–6 (= DK 59 A17 [1]).

[12] Janko 2020: 228.

[13] Not implausibly, Dover 1975: 39–41 rejected the edict of Diopeithes as a forgery, noting that Plutarch quoted it using a post-Classical word-form (the Ionic μεταρσίων, not μετεώρων); cf. Filonik 2013: 32–3. But this problem is distinct from the reality of the trial of Anaxagoras, which could have happened independently of legislation.

[14] Diog. Laert. 2.14 (= Hieronymus fr. 41 Wehrli).

philosophers who were chronologically removed from the plague of Athens in both directions: Diogenes Laertius says the quip was also linked with Solon and Xenophon.[15] Janko adds that 'Demetrius of Phalerum points to the same conclusion by recording that in his old age he buried his sons with his own hands',[16] but this anecdote was linked with Xenophanes by Demetrius as well.[17] There is nothing to be gained from such wandering anecdotes.

None of these shortcomings in the ancient material prove beyond doubt that Anaxagoras was not put on trial in 430 BCE, but the ancient chronological and anecdotal evidence does not count in its favour. In my opinion, this negative finding suggests two points. First, future scholarship should remain open to the idea that the persecution of intellectuals like Anaxagoras could have preceded the Archidamian War, regardless of the historicity of the decree of Diopeithes. An ἀσέβεια trial may well have taken place in the early 430s, and it is not necessarily surprising that this could have happened without the pressing circumstances of a disastrous plague.[18] Second, it is hazardous to look for a detailed picture of the Anaxagoras affair, which is often done as an over-correction against the excessive scepticism of scholars like Dover. There is so much contradictory evidence about the controversy in antiquity since the work of Ephorus that it has attracted the philologically inclined scholar to make all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle fit, however speculative the results may be; like the quest to find the

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[15] Diog. Laert. 2.12–3 (<DK 59 A1; cf. Sotion fr. 3 Wehrli; Satyrus fr. 16 Schorn; Demetrius fr. 150 Wehrli; Hermippus fr. 30 Wehrli).

[16] Janko 2020: 232.

[17] Diog. Laert. 9.20 (<DK 7 A1, Demetrius fr. 83 Wehrli).

[18] Contrast Janko 2020: 232, who argues that '[o]nly the disastrous effect of the plague on the city's morale and a concomitant outbreak of religious hysteria' could have brought the decree of Diopeithes into law (presumably Janko's view applies to the better-attested trial as well, but he focuses on the edict in particular).

original author of the Derveni papyrus, there is a temptation to build an elaborate philological castle. Jaap Mansfeld, for example, ingeniously tried to resolve the chronological difficulties around the Anaxagoras affair, setting down the exact year that Anaxagoras arrived at Athens, and accepting some small-grained details as historical like the fact that Anaxagoras was escorted out of Athens with a guard,[19] while Janko subscribes to a similar chronological optimism and adds that the different accusers given for Anaxagoras in later authors can be combined into a coalition to 'save the phenomena'.[20] There is arguably a third way which accepts a broad picture without pressing the evidence too far, and if the scholarship can inch towards a thinner conception of what happened during the Anaxagoras affair, it would be easier to discuss the subject without the necessity of building up or dismantling these elaborate castles of argument.

[19] Mansfeld 1979; Mansfeld 1980: 81.

[20] Janko 2020: 230.

Appendix C: The Submerged Theology of Hippon of Samos

The theological views of Archelaus and Diogenes certainly registered on the radar of Euripides and Aristophanes, but the ideas of Hippon of Samos had the dubious honour of being part of the first mocking allusion to natural philosophy in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, and was even pilloried before Aristophanes in Cratinus' comedy *All-Seeing Men*.[1] When Strepsiades described the teachings of Socrates' school of mischief, the Thinking Chamber, he singled out two core subjects. The first topic he mentioned is meteorology, and he cited a maliciously curated example which was taken out of context from (so we are told by the scholiast) Hippon:

> This is the Thinking Chamber (τοῦτ' ἐστὶ φροντιστήριον) for wise minds. The men who live inside induce (ἀναπείθουσιν) us with arguments that the sky is an oven lid (ὡς ἔστιν πνιγεύς) which is all around us, and we are hot charcoal flakes (ἡμεῖς δ' ἄνθρακες). If you give them money, these fellows can teach you how to win an argument (λέγοντα νικᾶν), be it just or unjust (καὶ δίκαια κἄδικα).[2]

This suggests that Hippon was associated with meteorology and impiety in Athens, and his loose characterisation of the vault of heaven and its fiery skies as an oven lid was particularly mocked in Attic comedy for its strange domesticity. But Hippon would also get a reputation for atheism in later tradition, which was no doubt

[1] Cratin. Πανόπται fr. 167 KA *ap.* Σ Ar. *Nub.* 96d (<DK 38 A2).

[2] Ar. *Nub.* 94–9.

fuelled by the allusions in Attic comedy and his unfavourable reception in Aristotle.[3] Like Diogenes of Apollonia, Hippon was sympathetic to substance monism, but differently he rehabilitated the old doctrine of Thales that the originating substance of the cosmos was water (ὕδωρ) or, as one testimony for Hippon puts it, moisture (τὸ ὑγρὸν).[4] But when Aristotle later surveyed the authorities who presented water as a first principle in the *Metaphysics*, he cited Thales but added unnecessarily that Hippon was not worth mentioning in the same sentence due to the 'poverty of his intellect' (εὐτέλειαν αὐτοῦ τῆς διανοίας).[5] It is not entirely clear why Aristotle held such a scathing opinion, but later commentators of the *Metaphysics* were quick to speculate, with the Peripatetic scholar Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. 200 CE) and the six-century CE Neoplatonist Asclepius of Tralles taking the view that Aristotle dismissed Hippon because he did not believe in any gods.[6] This conjecture must have been informed by Hippon's inclusion in the catalogue of atheists, which cannot be shown to have long predated Clement of Alexandria (*c.* 150–*c.* 215 CE),[7] but Alexander of Aphrodisias further explained that Hippon was a materialist who did not believe in a demiurgic god (θεὸν γὰρ οὐ προεστήσατο τῶν ὄντων δημιουργόν).[8] Still more curious is the tradition that Hippon requested an epigram on his tomb which can be read as an

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[3] Cratin. Πανόπται fr. 167 KA *ap.* Σ Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.24.2 (<DK 38 A2) equally suggests that Cratinus associated Hippon with impiety: τοῦ δὲ Ἵππωνος καὶ αὐτοῦ ὡς ἀσεβοῦς γενομένου μέμνηται ὁ Κρατῖνος.

[4] Alex. Aphr. *in Metaph.* p. 26.21–2 (= DK 38 A6 [1]).

[5] Arist. *Metaph.* 984a3–5 (= DK 38 A7): Ἵππωνα γὰρ οὐκ ἄν τις ἀξιώσειε θεῖναι μετὰ τούτων διὰ τὴν εὐτέλειαν αὐτοῦ τῆς διανοίας.

[6] Asclep. *in Metaph.* p. 25.16–18 (≠ DK, but see LM R6c).

[7] Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.24 (= DK 38 A8); cf. Ael. *VH* 3.31 (≠ DK).

[8] Alex. Aphr. *in Metaph.* p. 26 (≠ DK, but see LM R6b).

endorsement of atheism, which Alexander of Aphrodisias also cited as a potential explanation for Aristotle's scathing evaluation of Hippon:

> Ἵππωνος τόδε σῆμα, τὸν ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσιν
>
> ἶσον ἐποίησεν μοῖρα καταφθίμενον.
>
> This is Hippon's tomb, whose fate at his death
>
> Made him equal to the immortal gods.[9]

Clement of Alexandria read this epigram as an arrogant boast: Hippon had achieved heroic immortality, for all to see. On the other hand, anyone who knew about Hippon's inclusion in the *index atheorum* could have taken Hippon to suggest that the gods were just as non-existent as a dead man.[10] Contemporary scholarship on atheism can be too quick to assume that the charges of atheism against Hippon are true,[11] but a late commentator like Alexander must have been right about one thing. There is no sense that Hippon could have believed in a 'demiurgic' god like Anaxagoras, which would have been singled out by doxographers as an anomaly. This makes sense, but there is a clue in Hippon's system which could tell against reading atheism into his natural philosophy. Hippon saw water as not just the *source* of other elements like fire, but he also identified the soul with water (ὕδωρ) on the grounds that (Aristotle seems somewhat uncertain) the seed of all living creatures was moisture, namely the semen

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[9] Epigr. 30 Cougny *ap.* Alex. Aphr. *in Metaph.* p. 27.1–4, Clem. Al. *Protr.* 4.103 (= DK 38 B2).

[10] Modern scholarship can favour this reading too, e.g., Decharme 1904: 137; Whitmarsh 2015: 63–4.

[11] Shapiro 1999: 119–21; Whitmarsh 2015: 63–4.

(ὑγρά).[12] Is it unlikely that Hippon regarded water as the divine source of life, as well as the fundamental material principle of the cosmos? This is the basic position of Thales, and Aristotle's dislike of Hippon in the *Metaphysics* and *On the Soul* may have stemmed from a perceived lack of originality on Hippon's behalf and the simplicity with which he defended his views on the first principle and the soul. If this is right, Hippon had a theology which was 'submerged' at any early stage in the textual tradition, and in its original form it was like the pantheism of Diogenes of Apollonia and Archelaus, but his god and first principle was an all-encompassing water.

[12] Hippol. *Ref.* 1.16 (= DK 38 A3); cf. Arist. *De an.* 405b1–5 (= DK 38 A4).

Appendix D: Prodicus: One or Two Stages?

There have been two scholarly controversies on Philodemus' doxographic summary of Prodicus and Persaeus, which takes place in the context of an Epicurean literature review and criticism of Stoic theology in *On Piety*. The first concerns how to reconstruct the text, and the second concerns whether the text says that (a) Prodicus claimed that there was one primitive stage of commodity worship in Greek religion, and Persaeus agreed but added another stage of hero cult worship, or that (b) Prodicus hypothesised both of these historical stages of religion and Persaeus agreed with him fully in this. For the most part I will print the text from Henrichs 1974:

> Περσα[ῖος δὲ δ]ῆ|λός ἐστιν [ἀναιρῶν] | ὄντ̣ῳ̣[ς κ]α[ὶ ἐξορί]|ζωι̣ τὸ δ̣αιμόνι[ον]| ἢ μηθὲ̣ν ὑ̣π̣ὲρ αὐ|τοῦ γινώσκων, ὅταν | ἐν τῶι Περὶ θεῶν μὴ || [ἀπ]ί̣θανα̣ λέ̣γ̣[η]ι̣ | φαίνεσθαι τὰ περὶ <τοῦ> | τὰ τρέφοντα καὶ ὠ|φελοῦν[τα θεοὺ]ς νε|νομίσθ̣[αι καὶ τε]τει|μῆ̣σ̣θ̣[αι πρῶτ]ο̣ν̣ ὑ|πὸ̣ [Προ]δ̣[ίκου γ]ε̣γραμ̣|μέ̣[ν]α, μ[ετὰ δὲ] ταῦ|τα τοὺ[ς εὑρό]ντας | ἢ τρ̣ο̣φὰς ἢ [σκ]έπας | ἢ τὰς ἄλλας τέ[χ]ν̣ας | ὡ̣ς̣ Δ̣ήμητρα κ̣[αὶ] Δι|[όνυσον] κα[ὶ] τ̣ο̣[[1]
>
> *P.Herc.* 1428, col. II Henrichs (= col. 348 Vassallo) **29–30** e.g. [ἀναιρῶν] | ὄντ̣ῳ̣[ς] Henrichs | [ἢ μάται]|ον Bücheler dubit. | [ἕνα τὸν θ]ε|όν Vassallo dubit. | [τιμητ]έ|ον Kouloumentas dubit. **30–1** [κ]α[ὶ ἐξορί]|ζωι̣ Henry ex e.g. [κ]α[ὶ ἀφανί]|ζωι̣ Henrichs | τε̣ κ̣ἄγ̣[νωστον δικά]|ζωι̣ Vassallo dubit. | [καὶ κενὸν νομί]|ζωι̣ Bücheler dubit.

[1] Phld. *Piet.*, *P.Herc.* 1428, col. II.28–34 and col. III.1–13 Henrichs, but (1) the *exempli gratia* supplements of Henrichs are printed in the text and (2) a different supplement is used at col. II.31–2.

> But it is evident that Persaeus [actually abolishes and rules out] the divine, or he is unable to understand anything about it, when he says in *On the Gods* that it does not seem unpersuasive concerning the fact that nourishing and helpful things were regarded as gods and worshipped, first written by Prodicus, but after this [he says] that the pioneers of food or shelter or the other arts, such as Demeter, Dionysus and also the [Dioscuri … were also recognised as gods].

The text of Henrichs has been the standard for this *testimonium*, but Vassallo 2018a has proposed reading a less hostile claim where Prodicus claims that 'god is one and unknowable'. However, this reading cannot be right for a few palaeographic and philological reasons. From a palaeographic point of view, as Thomas Coward has pointed out to me (14.05.2024), the letters which Vassallo reads at τε̣ κ̣ἄχ̣[νωστον δικά]|ζων̣ (col. II.30 Henrichs) are too far apart from each other. As can be seen in Figure D.1, below, the *tau* is too far apart from the *alpha* to read a τε καί phrase (with crasis or otherwise).[2] This palaeographic mistake also rules out the conjectures of Henry 2023b (which are also *spatio longius*); the Henrichs text, by contrast, is palaeographically reliable.[3] But for the second gap (col. II.30–1 Henrichs) it is possible that Philodemus could have used ἐξορίζειν, 'exclude', 'rule out', which Phld. uses elsewhere in a polemical context for showing up opponents who are thought to reject a given idea without meaning to do so.[4] Henrichs' verb [ἀφανί]|ζων̣ is not as attested for

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[2] Figure D.1 is reprinted here courtesy of Ancient Textual Imaging, Brigham Young University and the Italian Ministero per i Beni Culturali.

[3] For other objections to Vassallo's reconstruction see Henry 2023b: 165–6, which remain valid but less relevant since the palaeographic problems with the reconstruction are more fundamental.

[4] LSJ s.v. I.3; in Philodemus see *On Rhetoric* I, *P.Herc.* 1427 fr. 1 (Longo, 3): here Phld. says that if his opponents put too much stress on defining τέχναι narrowly on the

the same polemical notion, although it must be said that it fits the line lengths more nicely.

The second controversy is more protracted, because besides the state of the preservation of the papyri Philodemus is not a clear commentator on this issue. Without getting overwhelmed by the bibliography, the best argument for reading (a) comes from Henrichs 1975: 116 n. 84, and the best argument for (b) comes from Wifstrand Schiebe 2021: 241–4, whose article should be read more often. The question is how to read the phrase [πρῶτ]ο̣ν̣ … μ[ετὰ δὲ] ταῦ|τα: should we read πρῶτον as modifying the infinitives 'recognised and worshipped [as gods]' or 'the writings of Prodicus'? Reading (a) takes 'first … and after this' as simply narrating a historical change: *first*, Prodicus says, humans worshipped commodities, *and then after this*, Prodicus says, humans worshipped heroes. Wifstrand Schiebe 2021, however, endorses reading (b), where the writings of Prodicus were the *first* to claim that humans worshipped commodities, *but after this* [Persaeus says that] humans were deified by mortals. Here reading (b) is closer to the mark; the first term πρῶτον appears before ὑ|πὸ̣ [Προ]δ̣[ίκου γ]ε̣γραμ̣|μέ̣[ν]α, and it would have been better for Philodemus to have written καὶ πρῶτον τετειμῆσθαι if he only wanted to emphasise a shift from one historical stage to another. But as it stands πρῶτον sits *in between* the infinitival and prepositional phrases we have been disputing over, suggesting that Philodemus equivocated in practice between 'for the first time' and 'first [and then]' as a mild zeugma: i.e., both readings are true to an extent, but the indirect speech after μ[ετὰ δὲ] ταῦ|τα *only* reports Persaeus (reading [b]). This zeugma is clear if the original Greek

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basis of a specific quality, they would risk getting the details of a given τέχνη wrong, thereby removing ([ἐξ]ορίζουσιν) the quality from the τέχναι. See similarly Phld., *On Rhetoric* I, *P.Herc.* 1427 fr. 3 (Longo, 7); for a literary critic 'abolishing' ideas expressed in a poem see Phld., *Poet.* II, *P.Herc.* 994 fr. 140.5–7 Janko: μ[ὲ]ν [γὰ]ρ̣ ἐξορίζει τὰ̣ ν[ο|ούμ[εν]<α>.

word order is translated: [Persaeus] 'says in *On the Gods* that it does not seem unpersuasive concerning the fact that nourishing and helpful things were regarded as gods and worshipped **first** written by Prodicus but after this [he says] that the pioneers of food or shelter or the other arts [… were worshipped as gods]'.

A good ancient arbitrator on this issue can be found with Cicero. When he wrote *De natura deorum* in 45 BCE, Cicero had ample time to read all the doxographic excerpts on the theological views of Prodicus and Persaeus and ultimately reported the views of Prodicus and Persaeus consistently with reading (b).[5] The Philodemus passage is difficult in its current form, but Cicero would have absorbed the complete text and a wealth of other Epicurean, Stoic and Academic surveys on theology, including philosophical works that were no doubt earlier than the summary in Philodemus. It seems unlikely that Cicero would have made this simple mistake when he had all the facts available to him. Accordingly, Cicero's report on the difference between Prodicus and Persaeus should be taken as a reliable composite of earlier doxographies, as without the textual difficulties that *we* face (a dubiously written scrap of Philodemus which was likely clarified by the later missing part), the difference between their views is simple and easy to remember.

[5] See Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.38–9 (= Persae. *SVF* I 448), where the Epicurean Velleius blames Persaeus for claiming that (1) commodities were worshipped as gods but also (2) heroes after death; here contrast Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.118 (<DK 84 B5, Prodic. test. 73 Mayhew), where the Academic Sceptic Cotta exclusively ascribes (1) to Prodicus. Sextus Empiricus was also consistent on this issue.

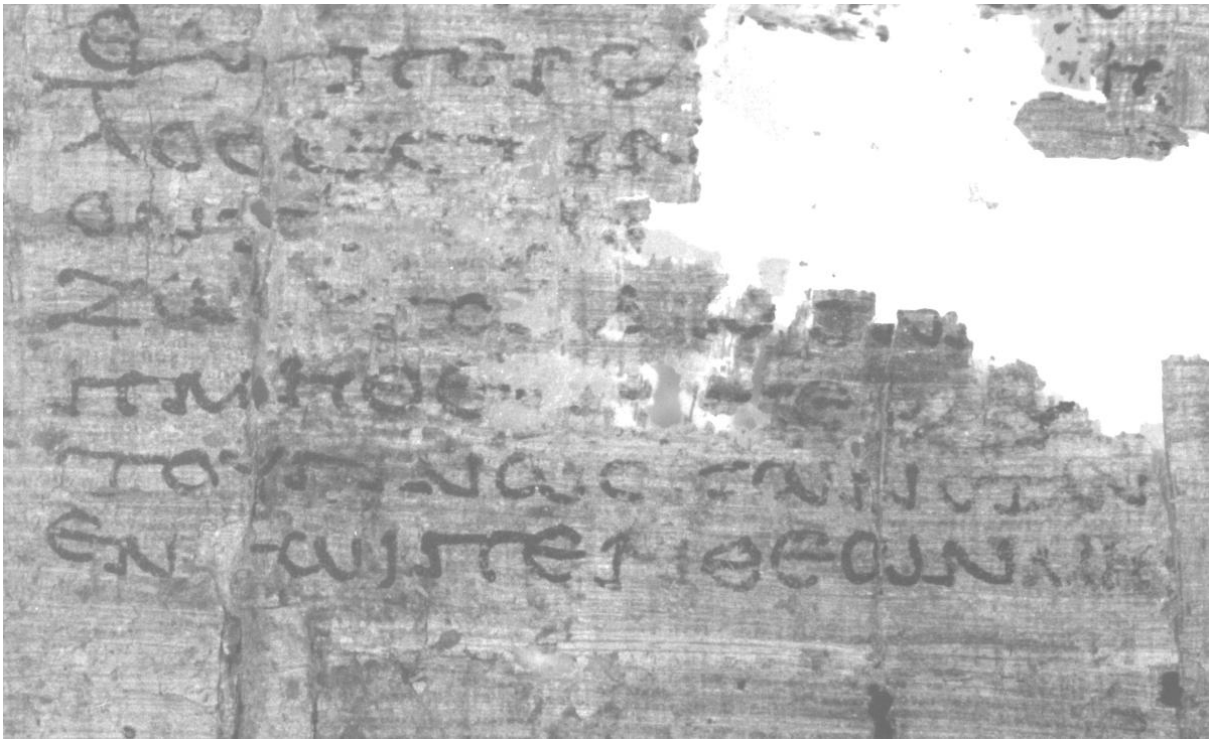


Figure App. D.1. Philodemus' mention of Persaeus in *De Pietate*, *P.Herc.* 1428.

Appendix E: Text and Authorship of the Sisyphus Fragment

<**ΣΙΣ.**> ἦν χρόνος ὅτ᾽ ἦν ἄτακτος ἀνθρώπων βίος
καὶ θηριώδης ἰσχύος θ᾽ ὑπηρέτης,
ὅτ᾽ οὐδὲν ἆθλον οὔτε τοῖς ἐσθλοῖσιν ἦν
οὔτ᾽ αὖ κόλασμα τοῖς κακοῖς ἐγίγνετο.
κἄπειτά μοι δοκοῦσιν ἄνθρωποι νόμους
θέσθαι κολαστάς, ἵνα Δίκη τύραννος ᾖ
<X – ∪ – X> τήν θ᾽ ὕβριν δούλην ἔχῃ·
ἐζημιοῦτο δ᾽ εἴ τις ἐξαμαρτάνοι.
ἔπειτ᾽ ἐπειδὴ τἀμφανῆ μὲν οἱ νόμοι
ἀπεῖργον αὐτοὺς ἔργα μὴ πράσσειν βίᾳ,
λάθρᾳ δ᾽ ἔπρασσον, τηνικαῦτά μοι δοκεῖ
<πρῶτον> πυκνός τις καὶ σοφὸς γνώμην ἀνήρ
<θεῶν> δέος θνητοῖσιν ἐξευρεῖν, ὅπως
εἴη τι δεῖμα τοῖς κακοῖσι, κἂν λάθρᾳ
πράσσωσιν ἢ λέγωσιν ἢ φρονῶσί <τι>.
ἐντεῦθεν οὖν τὸ θεῖον εἰσηγήσατο,
ὡς ἔστι δαίμων ἀφθίτῳ θάλλων βίῳ
νόῳ τ᾽ ἀκούων καὶ βλέπων, φρονῶν τε καί
προσέχων τὰ πάντα καὶ φύσιν θείαν φορῶν,
ὃς πᾶν τὸ λεχθὲν ἐν βροτοῖς ἀκού<σ>εται
<τὸ> δρώμενον δὲ πᾶν ἰδεῖν δυνήσεται.
ἐὰν δὲ σὺν σιγῇ τι βουλεύῃς κακόν,
τοῦτ᾽ οὐχὶ λήσει τοὺς θεούς· τὸ γὰρ φρονοῦν
ἔνεστι<ν αὐτοῖς>. τούσδε τοὺς λόγους λέγων
διδαγμάτων ἥδιστον εἰσηγήσατο
ψευδεῖ καλύψας τὴν ἀλήθειαν λόγῳ.
<ν>αίει<ν> δ᾽ ἔφασκε τοὺς θεοὺς ἐνταῦθ᾽ ἵνα
μάλιστ᾽ ἂ<ν> ἐκπλήξειεν ἀνθρώπους <λέγων>,

ὅθεν περ ἔγνω τοὺς φόβους ὄντας βροτοῖς
καὶ τὰς ὀνήσεις τῷ ταλαιπώρῳ βίῳ,
ἐκ τῆς ὕπερθε περιφορᾶς, ἵν' ἀστραπάς
κατεῖδεν οὔσας, δεινὰ δὲ κτυπήματα
βροντῆς τό τ' ἀστερωπὸν οὐρανοῦ δέμας,
Χρόνου καλὸν ποίκιλμα, τέκτονος σοφοῦ,
ὅθεν τε λαμπρὸς ἀστέρος στείχει μύδρος
ὅ θ' ὑγρὸς εἰς γῆν ὄμβρος ἐκπορεύεται.
τοίους πέριξ ἔστησεν ἀνθρώποις φόβους,
δι' οὓς καλῶς τε τῷ λόγῳ κατῴκισεν
τὸν δαίμον' οὕτος ἐν πρέποντι χωρίῳ,
τὴν ἀνομίαν τε τοῖς νόμοις κατέσβεσεν

< >

οὕτω δὲ πρῶτον οἶομαι πεῖσαί τινα
θνητοὺς νομίζειν δαιμόνων εἶναι γένος.[1]

[1] Text from Critias *TrGF* fr. 19 S (= DK 88 B25) *ap.* Sext. Emp. *Math.* 9.54 with alterations (vv. 6, 7, 12, 20, 24, 28, 32); Aët. *plac.* 1.6–7 preserves the character attribution of Sisyphus but is a considerably inferior text; see this Appendix, below. There are two new suggestions for this text: (1), for consistent editorial practice with other Greek tragedies, Justice is capitalised at v. 6 as a personification: for Δίκη as a secular matter see Eur. *Melanippe* fr. 506.7–8 K; cf. Χρόνου at v. 34; (2), at v. 7 <βίαν τε νικᾷ> is suggested in the apparatus *exempli gratia*, i.e. 'so that Justice could prevail over force and keep aggression as her slave'. See the tragic opposition between νόμος and βία at Moschion *TrGF* fr. 6.15–6 K; on the Moschion fragment see Cropp 2021: 258–65.

<**ΣΙΣ**.> intellegendum ex Aët. **7** e.g. <βίαν τε νικᾷ> Henry | <ὅμως ἁπάντων> Diels **12** <πρῶτον> Enger **13** <θεῶν> Wecklein **15** <τι> Grotius **18–9** del. Blaydes **18** τε καί Sext. φρονεῖ τ' ἄγαν Aët. **24** ἔνεστι<ν αὐτοῖς> Heath | <αὐτοῖς> ἔνεστι Mutschmann **25** ἥδιστον Sext. | κύδιστον Diggle **26** καλύψας Sext. | τυφλώσας Aët. **29** ἐκπλήξειεν Grotius | ἐξέπληξεν Sext. **30** ὀνήσεις Musgrave | πονήσεις Sext. **32** κατεῖδεν Sext. | κατεῖδον Snell **33** δέμας Sext. | σέλας Aët.[2]

> There once was a time when human life was disordered and inhuman, and a servant to force: a time where there were no incentives for good people, nor indeed punishments for the bad. And then, I suspect people established punitive laws, so that Justice could be a tyrant, (and prevail over force [?]) and keep violent crime as her slave: so if any one were to commit any wrongdoing, they would be punished. And then, when there were laws, they prevented people from openly committing crimes with brute force, but they would still commit crimes in secret. And then, I suspect that a shrewd and exceedingly clever man was the first to discover the fear of the gods for mortals, so that there would be some great object of fear for evil men, even if they went about their actions in secret, or spoke or thought about it. From here, then, he introduced divinity, claiming that 'there is a divine power who flourishes in eternal life, who hears and sees with their mind, meditating and intent upon all things and bearing the nature of divinity; who hears every utterance of mortals, and has the power to see their every move. And if you even *think* of doing the wrong thing in secret, this will not escape the gods, since the power of the mind is within them'. Saying these words, he introduced the most irresistible teaching of all, concealing the truth with a false story. He said that the gods lived in a place where he could terrify people the most, telling this story: from here he recognised what was frightening to mortals, from here were the benefits for their miserable lives, which came from the revolutions high above, where he caught sight of flashes of lightning, terrifying crashes of thunder, and the starry-faced frame of heaven, a fine piece of embroidery from the master craftsman Time. From here proceeds the radiant molten stone of a star, from here the torrents of rainfall pour down to earth. Such were the fears he circled around humanity, through

[2] The apparatus printed here offers only a selection; see further Snell 1986: 180–2, Davies 1989: 17–8 and Diggle 1998: 177–9; cf. Pechstein 1998: 320.

> which he settled the divine in an appropriate place with his well-told story, and quelled lawlessness with laws […] So it was, I suspect, that someone first persuaded mortals to believe there is a race of gods.

From quotations and oblique references, the Sisyphus fragment travelled widely through ancient authors: besides Sextus and Aëtius, parts of the text seem to have been known to Hecataeus of Abdera,[3] Epicurus, the Stoics, and Cicero (who avoided attributing it to an author). But even in antiquity the authorship of the fragment was up for dispute, as the Roman-period doxographer Aëtius credited the fragment to Euripides and Sextus Empiricus attributed it to Critias, and in later sources the Aëtian attribution was often followed. Since the nineteenth century the pendulum has gone back and forth between these two poets, and after Wilamowitz argued that Critias composed a tetralogy which included the Sisyphus fragment as a satyric drama (on not altogether secure grounds) Critias was a popular scholarly attribution,[4] but the Euripides-Critias consensus split cleanly into two after Albrecht Dihle advocated for Euripidean authorship in 1977.[5] This has led some to the pessimistic view that the authorship

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[3] *FGrH* 264 fr. 25 *ap.* Diod. Sic. 1.8.1: τοὺς δὲ ἐξ ἀρχῆς γεννηθέντας τῶν ἀνθρώπων φασὶν ἐν ἀτάκτῳ καὶ θηριώδει βίῳ.

[4] Wilamowitz 1875: 161–72; for later endorsements see Centanni 1997: 152–9 and Perris 2022: 215. The flaw of this 'Critian tetralogy' theory is that only *Pirithous* and the Sisyphus fragment were attributed by *some* ancient traditions to Critias, so there are no secure grounds to imagine that the entire tetralogy is one cohesive Critian work: Cropp 2020: 239.

[5] Dihle 1977; preference for Euripides: Scodel 1980: 122–37; Yunis 1988; Kahn 1997: 249; Pechstein 1998: 289–307, Sassi 2018: 176–7; preference for Critias: Sutton 1981; Winiarczyk 1987, cf. Winiarczyk 2016: 68–9 n. 34; Santoro 1994; Whitmarsh 2014: 112–3; Cropp 2020.

question is beyond resolution pending major discoveries,[6] although the transmission of the fragment arguably supports Critias as the original author rather than Euripides. In 1987 Marek Winiarczyk set out four arguments for Critias as the author of the Sisyphus fragment, and this appendix takes the same route:[7]

(1) Cropp 2020 has drawn attention to the Alexandrian transmission of Euripides, highlighting that there was a trilogy of plays in the Euripidean canon which were marked as dubious by some Hellenistic scholars in the Euripidean canon, but among these there was only one which was marked as potentially Critian (see Ath. 11.93.9); the doubted satyric drama that followed the trilogy was not named. It would not be out of the question that ancient scholars sought out more obscure tragedians as plausible candidates for the authorship of a doubted play like *Pirithous*, but it is unlikely that a fragment would have been attributed to Critias from a famous Euripidean 415 BCE tetralogy that featured *The Trojan Women* alongside Euripides' satyric *Sisyphus* — this would be equally implausible for any other Euripidean play that could have included Sisyphus as a character, such as the *Autolycus*.[8] So it seems less likely that a Euripidean passage from either of these texts would wander into the corpus of another author, especially since the Euripidean literary corpus survived more intact than many others. Moreover, Cropp plausibly argues that by Sextus' time the fragment only existed as an excerpt rather than a drama, which is a conjecture that is worth pursuing.[9] If it was not kept preserved and subject to the strictures of Alexandrian textual criticism, the 'Sisyphus' excerpt would have been a fragment in the wilderness: more easily prone to

[6] Wright 2016: 51: 'until more evidence should emerge, it is simply impossible' to recover the authorship of the Sisyphus fragment; cf. Cipolla 2003: 250, Egli 2003: 149 (a 'Glaubensfrage') and O'Sullivan 2012: 168 ('neither the question of authorship […] will be my focus here').

[7] Winiarczyk 1987.

[8] Cf. Cropp 2020: 239.

[9] Cropp 2020: 249; cf. Santoro 1994: 427.

confusion from endless quotations and re-quotations in Euripidean anthologists and doxographers, which accounts for the high degree of textual corruption.[10] An Alexandrian scholar might have had the competence to hypothesise that a dubious Euripidean fragment was Critian due to its formal and topical similarities (such as the *Pirithous*), but outside of this setting we should expect the normal rules of misattribution to apply. Who else could have written this tragic fragment, but an author who routinely put dangerous modern ideas into the mouths of his characters, and wrote in a prosier register than Aeschylus? When Philip Chetwinde compiled the second impression of his Third Folio of Shakespeare, he noted that the history play Thomas Lord Cromwell was registered by an actor's company under a certain 'W.S.' in 1602. Taken by its similarities to Shakespeare and the initials, he wrongly included it in his edition in 1664. In this misattribution that occurred after the play by decades Chetwinde did not give equal consideration to the fact that a more obscure author may have written it, which would have also made the play of less interest to him. Moreover, from a commercial perspective there is more to be gained from selling a new folio of Shakespeare with 'new' plays in it; this incentive would have been scarcely different in antiquity for booksellers who could vend Euripidean anthologies that falsely included the Sisyphus fragment. This suggests that a false attribution will usually swerve towards a well-known author.[11]

(2) It has been pointed out (ch. 2.1.1) that in the twelfth book of *On Nature*, Epicurus accused Prodicus, Diagoras and Critias of abolishing the existence of the gods, and in that same book he treated the origins of religious belief. Epicurus wrote Book 12 around *c.* 300 BCE,[12] which predates the Aëtian tradition by centuries. But to be more specific, in the first century CE Aëtius did not faithfully report an earlier source than Epicurus,

[10] E.g., once vv. 33–4 reached [Gal.] *Hist. Phil.* 34.6, we get the garbled paraphrase ὅθεν Εὐριπίδης εἶπεν· ἀστέρες δ' ἐν οὐρανῷ ποίκιλμα τέκτονος σοφοῦ.

[11] Cf. Whitmarsh 2014: 112.

[12] Sedley 1998: 128–32.

such as a Peripatetic account. Drawing from a melange of traditions, he accuses the Hellenistic philosophers Theodorus and Euhemerus of atheism — who are evidently later additions to the list — and his Euripidean attribution for the Sisyphus fragment also contradicts the Epicurean *index* that is presumably derivative itself.[13]

(3) It has been said that the metre of the Sisyphus fragment is inconclusive for indicating the authorship of the text.[14] On other hand, the Sisyphus fragment does show instances of un-Euripidean enjambment where a sense pause appears before the final iamb with a sense which leads into the next verse.[15] This is most marked with the enjambment at vv. 13–4, which does not show any signs of corruption (ὅπως | εἴη τι δεῖμα), and a milder instance of this pause also occurs at 27–8 (ἐνταῦθ' ἵνα | μάλιστ') where a relative clause is opened up at the very end of the line leading into the next ('where | especially …'). A less secure proof can be found at vv. 18–9, since the un-Euripidean enjambment (φρονῶν τε καί | προσέχων) could be a later supplement in view of the inferior Aëtius variant φρονεῖ τ' ἄγαν (there are a couple of lacunae in Sextus Empiricus already).[16] But this could be a genuine Critian contribution, given that Sophocles employs this enjambment on a couple of occasions.[17]

(4) Aëtius seems to have had access to the same length of the Sisyphus excerpt as Sextus, if more selectively quoted and paraphrased.[18] But the text presents three clear textual variants that are quite inferior to the text of Sextus: φρονεῖ τ' ἄγαν at v. 18, τυφλώσας at v. 26, and σέλας at v. 33. Some editors of the fragment have differed on the final example, but there are strong grounds to view σέλας as a spurious correction of δέμας,

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[13] On the multiple traditions in the doxography of atheism in Aëtius see Runia 1996, esp. 574.

[14] E.g., Pechstein 1998: 293–5 and Whitmarsh 2014: 112.

[15] Davies 1989: 27, Collard and Cropp 2008: 634; cf. Bond 1981 on Eur. *HF* 280.

[16] Cf. Diggle 1981: 106 (who recognises that the enjambment is un-Euripidean).

[17] Soph. *OT* 267, 123; *Ant.* 171; *Phil.* 312.

[18] On this point see Runia 1996: 555.

which makes sense as the *lectio difficilior*.[19] The only independent merit for Aëtius is that the character attribution is included (Sisyphus), but this need not indicate that the character attribution was lacking in Sextus Empiricus, who in fact leaves out more of the text that was available to him after quoting vv. 1–40 (καὶ ὀλίγα προσδιελθὼν ἐπιφέρει). Therefore, Sextus had access to a superior, earlier textual tradition, and the authorial attribution that he reports is more likely to be right.

It is possible that neither of these authors wrote the fragment, and David Sedley has suggested that the Critias attribution could have stemmed 'from a feeling that the author of such a seditious passage must be a playwright of appropriate date who was also a person of suitable moral badness'.[20] It is remarkable that a similar type of attribution was tendentiously applied to a creative adaptation of the Sisyphus fragment in sixteenth century England, when the offending speech in the anonymously published tragedy *Selimus* was excerpted and falsely credited to the knavish public figure Sir Walter Raleigh before his scandalous trial in 1603.[21] An ancient parallel to this practice can hardly be ruled out, but it has to be said that Critias has more than enough ideological overlap with Plato to have attracted him to discuss atheism as a critic of the decadent intellectual culture of Athens. The least likely possibility is that it was authored by an anonymous atheist,[22] as the

[19] Above all, δέμας can be justified (*pace* e.g. Davies 1989: 23) as the 'frame' of heaven fashioned by the craftsman, a coherent extended metaphor which is ironically attested with Euripides himself at *Alc.* 348–9: σοφῇι δὲ χειρὶ τεκτόνων δέμας τὸ σὸν | εἰκασθὲν ἐν λέκτροισιν ἐκταθήσεται. Moreover, as Pechstein 1998: 336 observes, δέμας can appear in a tragic periphrasis modified by a genitive: cf. LSJ s.v. I.2; cf. Soph. fr. 255.4 R οἰνάνθης δέμας.

[20] Sedley 2013: 337.

[21] Jacquot 1953: 1–2; cf. Henry 2024: 36.

[22] *Pace* Sedley 2013: 331, 335–7.

philosophical depth of the fragment is compatible with its authorship by a hostile but philosophically perceptive commentator of fifth-century atheism like Plato.

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