

Godless Greece: atheism in Greek society

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Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction: Belief and Unbelief in Greek religion.....	2-36
Chapter One. Education: how the Greeks learned to believe.....	37-75
Chapter Two. The imagined and real moral consequences of atheism.....	76-109
Chapter Three. The limits of religious freedom.....	110-145
Chapter Four. Rethinking scepticism: the interrelationship of scepticism and belief....	146-176
Chapter Five. Unknowability: the central place of agnosticism in Greek religion.....	177-202
Chapter Six. The Other: oppositional self-definition of religious identity.....	203-233
Conclusion: belief in unbelief, a reassessment.....	234-240
Bibliography.....	241-285

Abstract

Godless Greece: atheism in Greek society

Was atheism in the ancient world really ‘scarcely imaginable’?¹ This thesis confronts the notion that religion was embedded in the environment and mentality of the ancient Greeks to the extent that atheism became cognitively impossible. Instead this thesis proposes that if atheism, rather than atheists, is made the focus then it is possible to examine atheism in the ancient world through a set of different thematic lenses. Atheism in ancient Greece was a highly contextual, varied, and flourishing set of phenomena. Understanding the form and evolution of atheistic ideas and atheism in Greek society is invaluable in helping us more fully understand Greek religion, not least because it was in response to and through opposition to atheism that Greek religious beliefs evolved and Greeks developed their own sense of collective and individual religious identity.

¹ Harrison 2000: 22.

Introduction: belief and unbelief in Greek religion

The central aim of this thesis is to ask, and begin to answer: what is the role and what are the consequences of atheism in Greek society? This thesis aims to redress two different trends in scholarship: the idea that periods of more visible scepticism or doubt are a sign of difficulty or decline for Greek religion, and the common belief that atheism did not exist in any substantive or significant way in Greek society (or before the enlightenment period, in fact). This thesis will argue that while religion was undoubtedly ‘embedded’ in Greek thought and practice, atheism was not only ‘thinkable’ but flourished in the ancient world. Greek religion was engaged in a constant state of exchange with scepticism, and the vast corpus of ‘religious’ texts that survive offer an insight into the largely healthy dialogue between religious and sceptical ideas. It is therefore a social study as well as a philosophical one, and split into themes that examine the role and consequences of atheism in different aspects of Greek society: religious socialisation, the relationship between atheism and morality, punishments for and deterrents against atheism, theology and theodicy, and religious identity generation through opposition. Before moving on to these studies, it is first necessary to do two things, as dictated by the current state of scholarship. First, to directly confront the key obstacles to studying atheism in the ancient world, and demonstrate that unbelief could and did exist in ancient Greece. And secondly, to explore and establish exactly what is meant by ‘atheism’, and how our understanding is deployed in comparison with existing scholarship.

The *problème de l'incroyance* in ancient Greece

The study of atheism in the ancient world had, until recently, received very little attention since the work of Danish philologist A. B. Drachmann nearly a century ago, on *Atheisme i det antike hedenskab* (*Atheism in pagan Antiquity*, 1919). This is due, in part, to the French historian Lucien Febvre, whose 1942 *Problème de l'incroyance au 16e siècle* (*The Problem of Unbelief in the 16th century*), the translation of which into English appeared in the early 1980s, has been extremely influential on studies of ancient religion in English scholarship. This polemical work was intended as a response to the historian Abel Lefranc’s *Pantagruel* (1905), in which it had been argued that Rabelais, the French Renaissance polymath, was an atheist. Febvre argued that religion was embedded in the physical, cultural, political, linguistic, and conceptual environment of Rabelais’s sixteenth century France:

Today we make a choice to be a Christian or not. There was no choice in the sixteenth century. One was a Christian in fact. One’s thoughts could wander far from Christ,

but these were plays of fancy, without the living support of reality. One could not even abstain from observance. Whether one wanted or not, one found oneself immersed from birth in a bath of Christianity from which one did not emerge even at death.¹

Over the following decades, Febvre's thesis was transposed on to the ancient world, with proponents arguing that religion was similarly inextricable from thought and action in ancient Greece, and as a result that unbelief was 'scarcely imaginable'.² Jan Bremmer and others have claimed a similar environment in the ancient world, and argued that atheism was likewise impossible:

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.³

Although versions of Febvre's 'unthinkable atheism' thesis remain predominant in Classics and Ancient History, there have been a number of substantial critiques in other historical fields, particularly in studies of medieval Europe.⁴ Over three decades ago Michael Hunter laid out the fullness of the atheistic tradition in Early Modern England: how atheism was recognised and caricatured through Christian writings, even if little direct evidence remains from the atheistic perspective.⁵ In support of the idea that atheism was 'thinkable', Susan Reynolds argued that 'mankind had the same basic mental equipment' and that the potential mentalities of different societies only substantially differ in the limits of their technological abilities, none of which were required for atheism.⁶ Atheism could exist in 'even the most

¹ Febvre 1982: 336. Wootton also argued that Febvre was arguing for an 'epistemological break', and did posit unbelief: see Wootton 1988: 703.

² Harrison 2000: esp. 22-3; Harrison cites Beard, North and Price 1998: 42-3 who argue Roman 'religion and its associated rituals were embedded in all institutions and activities', but not cognitively rooted to the extent they make unbelief impossible. Bremmer 1982, 2007, arguing Greek religion was cognitively embedded, and atheism impossible.

³ Bremmer 2007: 11 and 1982: 51-2. See also Harrison 2000: 22. Rubel 2014: 32 describes it as 'unthinkable' before the fifth century.

⁴ Whitmarsh 2016 has offered the main challenge in Classics.

⁵ Hunter 1985.

⁶ Reynolds 1991: 22.

untouched and traditional societies’, including medieval Europe, though its form would be determined by the terms of each society.⁷

David Wootton, who has been the most significant critic of Febvre’s ideas and the *histoire des mentalités*, has stressed that it is crucial to separate the ‘emergence of a secular, irreligious literary culture’ from the concept of atheism and atheistic thought, emphasising the importance of (and problems with) identifying ‘precursors’ whose efforts lie behind the more overt atheistic works.⁸ He has also focused on the tremendous power that the Church exerted over its laity in medieval Europe, the pressure this created to compliance, and the powerful deterrents it offered from any form of divergence (that will be explored in Greece in Chapters Three and Four).⁹ Most recently, John Arnold has further explored the power-relationship that was at the centre of Medieval Christian religion; a coercive and aggressive force in which the sense of community was generated by exclusion rather than inclusion.¹⁰ But even more forcefully than Wootton or the others, Arnold clearly lays out the evidence that atheism was thinkable and believable, and it frequently occurred in the medieval world.

In spite of its flaws, the influence of Febvre’s thesis on classical scholarship has endured, and this has helped suppress a broader dialogue about atheism and unbelief in ancient Greece. Yet a fresh interest in atheistic culture, perhaps provoked by the so-called ‘New Atheists’, has resulted in a flurry of smaller-scale studies of atheism in the ancient Greek world, and one very recent popular book in English: Tim Whitmarsh’s *Battling the Gods* (2016).¹¹ Whitmarsh has demonstrated that even beyond the theoretical issues with the adapted Febvre thesis, the evidence is quite clear that atheism did exist, and indeed thrived, in the ancient world. Still, no academic thesis has yet been produced which decisively confronts and answers the ‘problème de l’incroyance’. Whitmarsh’s contribution, while valuable, focuses too much on atheists, it is too polemical and modernising, and it does not

⁷ Reynolds 1991: 24, 35-6.

⁸ Wootton 1985, 1988, 1992. On precursors: 1988: 723-30.

⁹ On the power of the church: Wootton 1985.

¹⁰ Arnold 2005.

¹¹ New Atheists: evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins 2006, late journalist Christopher Hitchens 2007a, 2007b, philosopher Daniel Dennett 2006, and neuroscientist Sam Harris 2004, 2006. See Harrison 2015b: 170 on the revival of studies on Greek belief. Recent works on atheism: see also Whitmarsh 2014. Bremmer 2007, Giordano-Zecharya 2005, O’Sullivan 2012.

satisfactorily confront the conceptual issues posed with atheism in historical societies by Febvre. It is necessary, therefore, to defend the idea that atheism was, in fact, ‘thinkable’ in the ancient world, without whitewashing the merits of the Febvre thesis, as tempered by modern research.¹² But the problème de l’incroyance is only the beginning of the problems for the student of the history of Greek atheism.

The embeddedness of Greek religion: polis religion and marginalisation

It has been argued that because the Greeks had no doctrine, dogma, or priesthood to enforce these, as a result Greek scepticism and atheisms were largely independent, and not in response to current or popular religious ideas.¹³ Greeks may not have had clear religious dogmas or doctrines, but there was evidently a body or collection of beliefs that were generally recognised as appropriate and sensible.¹⁴ Greek sceptical and atheistic ideas, as will be observed in Chapter Four, were in constant dialogue with contemporary and, by that time, historical religion. As a result, it is not possible to fix a clear period limitation for this thesis, since there is no obvious break in religious practice. However, the focus is the atheism that corresponds with classical Greek religion, and not Hellenistic religion: the circumstances of religion in this later period change too radically, especially in the granting of divine honours for men. So certain later texts can be useful but the focus is on evidence from earlier periods.

Greek religion was highly complex, and the nature of religion and beliefs in the ancient world is now equally contentious: scholars disagree over everything from the characteristics of the gods to the origin and meaning of ritual sacrifice.¹⁵ One of the most influential ways of understanding Greek religion has been through the now beleaguered model of Polis Religion.¹⁶ In its traditional form, as conceived by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, the model has been susceptible to criticisms that it is exclusionary, particularly in its

¹² The naturalness of religion: Boyer 1994, McCauley 2011, or Wolpert 1992.

¹³ E.g. Price 1999: 126.

¹⁴ See Harrison 2007b: lack of dogma does not mean the absence of a generally accepted set of beliefs. On doctrine see pg.96 n.109.

¹⁵ On the nature of the gods: Parker 2003: 182, ‘Is there such a thing as Zeus, or are there just a huge host of Zeuses?’ See Chapter Five. See Burkert, Girard, and Smith in Hamerton-Kelly 1987, in which Burkert argues sacrifice originated in prehistoric hunt-violence, Girard in generative scapegoating, and Smith in animal domestication.

¹⁶ PR was outlined in Sourvinou-Inwood 1990, 2000.

dismissal of individual belief, and its marginalisation of ‘unofficial’ cultic or ‘mystery’ practices, like the Eleusinian Mysteries, which were an exceptionally important part of Greek religious life.¹⁷ Though the Polis Religion model has come under increasing scrutiny, the theory that Greek religion was embedded in the ancient city is well-grounded. It has been necessary to alter and modify the model, and with the fruitful adjustments of scholars like Julia Kindt in reducing the strict Durkheimian and structuralist nature of Polis Religion, the model has endured and proven useful, though it continues to be problematic in emphasising and valuing certain areas over others (as discussed in Chapter Six).¹⁸ For our purposes, to say that Greek religion was embedded in the ancient city is simply to say that the political, social, and cultural environments were infused with religion, and that religion defined itself partly through these structures. This is not to say that Greek religion could not draw itself out beyond these boundaries, or to deny the long intellectual and critical tradition in Greek religion that reached far beyond the scope of the ancient city. Scholarship has moved on since Sourvinou-Inwood’s initial formulation of Polis Religion: religion was grounded in the *polis*, not restricted to it.¹⁹ Important aspects of atheism must have manifested along the lines of the *polis*, just as Greek religion does: the lines of acceptable discourse and the legitimization of views, for instance, are played out in the courts (as observed in Chapters Two and Three).

But if Greek religion was embedded in the minds, behaviour, and creations of the ancients (and therefore our source material) how is it possible to understand the Greek perspective without seeing things through a filter of Greek religion? The nature of the evidence on atheism in the ancient world means that it is not possible to look at an atheism of atheists, in much the same way that a history of women from their own perspective largely does not exist. Gordon et al. explain why women are not present in our history books:

Historians’ neglect of women has been a function of their ideas about historical significance. Their categories and periodization have been masculine by definition,

¹⁷ Woolf 1997 criticised PR’s marginalisation of belief; Bendlin 2006 and Kindt 2012 its marginalisation of decentralised religious practice.

¹⁸ Kindt 2012: 12-35, Versnel 1990, 2011; Gould, J. 1985; and Veyne 1998 have stressed the flexibility of religion beyond the *polis*.

¹⁹ Burkert 1995: 203: ‘Polis religion is a characteristic and representative part of Greek religion, but only part of it. There is religion without the polis, even if there is no polis without religion.’

for they have defined significance primarily by power, influence, and visible activity in the world of political and economic affairs...²⁰

History-writing is as much of an exclusionary process as archaeology is: both involve choosing what to focus on and what not, and in both our choices are restricted by a variety of factors outside our control, from survival of the evidence to our own biases.²¹ In a similar way, there are obvious reasons why atheistic treatises and ideas would not have entered our historical record. They were rarely written down in the first place: creating a permanent record of something which was potentially prosecutable and even punishable by death seems remarkably unwise. The Athenian philosophical culture was at least significantly oral anyway (as observed in Chapter One), and the more acceptable contexts for atheistic discourse, for instance in *aischrology* (unacceptable speech from the rude to the inappropriate) were not in written treatises. Even if atheistic arguments or ideas were written down, which some clearly were, they might have been subject to destruction by authorities or individuals.²²

Assuming that they were written, and avoided destruction, these works were subject to standard survival pressures: only normative works tend to survive through copying and keeping, because of which atheism should not be expected in these texts.²³ Lucretius' famous discourse, *De Rerum Natura*, provides a salutary lesson on this process of survival. Stephen Greenblatt has brought to light how this radical text was nearly lost, and only just survived the Middle Ages thanks to the rediscovery of a lone manuscript in the 15th century.²⁴ So those fragments and forms of atheism that do remain in the texts that survive have been through various normative filters, which will have warped the presentation of atheism, and may have excluded examples that do not explicitly discredit it. The sort of atheist who takes little notice of the gods, or is perceived as unlucky, is the more acceptable form to write about because he does not advocate radical views but is usually subject to punishment: he is a kind of fall guy.²⁵

²⁰ Gordon et al. 1976: 75.

²¹ Burton 1992: 26 observes that 'feminists recognize that history is not simply what happened in the past but, more pointedly, the kinds of knowledge about the past that we are made aware of'.

²² On book-burning see Chapter Three.

²³ Whitmarsh 2016: 7.

²⁴ Greenblatt 2011.

²⁵ Kearns 2010: 141 observed that punishable 'godless' types are more commonly portrayed.

So an attempt to reconstruct a history of Greek atheism from the perspective of atheists is probably futile. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, yet this cannot be a sound foundation for any argument. There are, nonetheless, ways to access evidence for atheism in Greek society. This thesis aims to reconstruct the attitudes of the society and the religious to atheism, and trace atheism in the ways that it is reflected through religion. One of the most interesting aspects of using religion as a platform for examining atheism is that there are two conflicting tendencies when the religious present an image of the irreligious. The first is normative, and involves presenting a healthy religious community not marred by significant dissent, as in the argument of Meletus against Socrates in Plato's *Apology*, where it is argued that Socrates is the only one of the entire city who corrupts the youth.²⁶ The second conflicting tendency in presenting an image of the non-religious is to demonise, and to present an 'Other', a scapegoat and a caricature for collective opposition (this is explored in Chapter Six). This tendency involves familiar claims such as that religion is in decline, or atheists are infecting the community, and it is especially exhibited in Book Ten of Plato's *Laws*, in which his Stranger and Clinias discuss how to deal with the vast underclass of young atheists (*atheoi*) in Athens at the time.²⁷ Even for authors and topics where atheism is not directly the concern, these caricatures are present: this is an unavoidable problem, so any study of atheism must embrace the fact that it is really a study of attitudes towards atheism.

The Great Man Theory: abandoning the search for atheists

One of the most significant issues for the scholar of ancient Greek atheism is that this topic has been traditionally approached through individuals. The Great Man Theory is nowhere else more visible than in studies on atheism in Classics, with its catalogues of atheists and focus on 'exceptional individuals' as drivers of atheistic and sceptical innovations.²⁸ Scholars have attempted to diagnose whether or not a particular individual was 'really' an atheist, focussing either on excusing individuals 'falsely accused' of atheism, or on the other side of

²⁶ Pl. *Ap.* 24d-25a.

²⁷ Religion is declining: e.g. See Reynolds 1991: 30.

²⁸ 'Exceptional individuals': Bremmer 2007: 1. Shorter articles are often just lists of atheists or discussions of individual unbelief: Bremmer 2007; O'Sullivan 1997, 2012; Wallace 1994; Van der Horst 2006: 242-9; Cooper 1995; Osborne, C. 1997; Sutton 1981; Lefkowitz 1987, 1989; and many works on Socrates like Connor 1991. Whitmarsh 2016 discusses groups and individuals called atheists.

the spectrum, tracing heroic rationalists standing out against the tide of religious naivety.²⁹ For centuries the Great Man approach was a central part of historical study, embraced particularly by polymaths, but the theory has received considerable criticism over the centuries from a variety of angles, and has appropriately been largely abandoned in the Humanities, and mostly too in the Classics (studies on atheism being one of the exceptions).³⁰ But to trace a history of ideas or philosophy through this sort of method inevitably skews the evidence, and this sort of investigation of personal beliefs cannot conceive of broader social, political, and philosophical trends. Just as religious thought is not limited to individual philosophers, atheistic ideas – as opposed to the people who articulate them – can be seen as free-floating. Focussing on phenomena rather than individuals offers a better chance to grasp the broader philosophical and social contours of atheism as a phenomenon.

Focussing on individuals, scholars have usually argued that atheism simply did not exist in the ancient world, as with Jan Bremmer:³¹

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.³²

But there are plenty of others who follow this sort of view. Glenn Most, after a defence of ‘belief’ in the ancient world, rules out atheism:

...just as monotheism was not a viable cultural option in antiquity, so too, symmetrically, atheism was virtually unknown: ancient lists of those philosophers who denied altogether the very existence of the gods never manage to come up with more than a handful of names.³³

²⁹ Sedley 2013 traces heroic rationalists.

³⁰ GMT: justified by Carlyle 1840. Polymaths: Hegel 1914: 30, Kierkegaard 1941, and Nietzsche 1997: 111: ‘the goal of humanity cannot lie in its end but only in its highest exemplars’. Criticism: Spencer 1896: 34. See also William James’ 1880 lecture ‘Great Men and their Environment’.

³¹ Bullivant 2013: 13, Lee, L. 2015: 22.

³² Bremmer 2007: 1.

³³ Most 2003: 304.

Paul Woodruff:

True atheism is elusive in this period, and we do not know for certain of any thinker who denied the existence of the gods. Denying that the gods take action falls short of atheism in the full sense.³⁴

Or Thomas Harrison:

The real difference arguably is not between Christianity and ancient religion, but between an age today (in Britain) where unbelief is envisioned as a normal, if not indeed as the normal position... and earlier ages, Christian as well, in which complete unbelief was scarcely imaginable.³⁵

This is the trend that was alluded to in the opening to this chapter: almost all scholars who have studied ancient atheism have argued that it did not exist. Some scholars have avoided the Christianising tendency to excuse the ancient philosophers of their atheism, perhaps in an attempt to salvage their wisdom from ‘primitive’ beliefs (see Chapter Six), and identified atheism in Protagoras, Prodicus, Diagoras, or others, but this is not much more useful.³⁶ In fact, depending on how one defines terms and examines the evidence, it is possible to argue either way: that there were no atheists, or that every critic, sceptic, or intellectual was one, or anything in-between. This should reveal not only that our methodology is faulty, but more generally, as Furley observed in his article on Thucydides’ atheism, that approaches that try to divine the ‘true’ beliefs of individuals are ‘doomed to failure ultimately as there is simply no way of knowing’.³⁷ Claims about individual unbelief are unfalsifiable just as claims about belief are; investigations that hinge on claims about the specific (un)beliefs of an individual should be avoided.

The focus on individuals partly just reflects the focus of our sources – Herodotus and Thucydides, as well as the later historians Diodorus, Plutarch, and so on – who all focused on great men.³⁸ Additionally, the primary evidence used for histories of atheism, which is mostly

³⁴ Woodruff 2011: 92.

³⁵ Harrison 2000: 22.

³⁶ Some avoid the tendency, like Whitmarsh 2016. See also Winiarczyk 1984 and 1992 gives an index of those viewed by the ancients as atheists. Henrichs 1976, who accepts Prodicus was an atheist.

³⁷ Furley 2006: 415-6.

³⁸ Sarah Brown Ferrario 2014.

focused on the trials for impiety in the fifth and fourth centuries, is riddled with caricature, *topoi*, and personal attacks, and often from later centuries. As is often the case in social history, the individuals whose names have entered into the historical record are, by and large, only those who have been prosecuted, and images of them are presented through others in a way that was acceptable enough to contemporary and later society to ensure survival of those particular historical documents.³⁹ The record is thus irredeemably distorted. As a result, there are times in this thesis where we will confront individual (un)beliefs, but only where appropriate and necessary: this is not the central concern of the argument. Scholars who focus entirely on individual beliefs are attacking phantoms; creations of historical polemic. Yet locating, and in part creating, a general history of atheism is crucial, in order to fill a significant gap in our collective cultural history and the history of modern atheist groups. But instead of a history of individual atheists focused on diagnosing or excusing atheism, this needs to be a history of the form, function and consequences of unbelief, as a phenomenon, in society, just as with Greek belief.⁴⁰

The problem of belief

One of the things that confounds any attempt to locate belief or unbelief in the ancient world is the ‘belief in belief’. This is the idea that belief is a good thing in itself, a kind of second-order belief, so called (by the American philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett) ‘belief in belief’.⁴¹ Believers in belief are people who believe that believing in *P* is good, valuable or noble, though they may not believe in *P* themselves. Take Gibbon’s remark on Roman religion:

The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord.⁴²

³⁹ Wootton 1988: 714.

⁴⁰ Wootton 1988: 724: ‘The search for precursors is, I believe, of particular importance in the history of unbelief, but it needs, as Febvre recognized, to be conducted not just as a search for unbelievers but also as a search for ways of thinking on which unbelief will later depend.’

⁴¹ Dennett 2006: 9-12, 200-240. See also Helm 2000: 158-78 for a religious perspective.

⁴² Gibbon 1776 [1995 ed.]: 1:22.

Gibbon grasped the pragmatic foundation of religion: mutual concord in society relied at least on collective participation, and belief in the usefulness of that participation, regardless of other beliefs.

The ‘belief in belief’ can help elucidate the social stigma on atheism and the tendency to support belief and religion even when one does not personally believe in its truth. People are typically less concerned with the philosophical question, of whether there is sufficient evidence to justify their belief (or unbelief), than with the practical question, of whether there is sufficient evidence to others that they do believe.⁴³ It is just this sort of thing that is the concern of Xenophon’s Socrates in his *Apology*: when pushed to prove his conformity during his trial, Socrates observed that everyone had seen him sacrificing at the public altars around the city and attending the various festivals of the gods.⁴⁴ No matter the variety of individual beliefs people held, they were expected to share only the broadest belief in the usefulness of religion: to believe in belief. Indeed, it has been argued that the Sisyphus fragment – the most notorious atheistic document from ancient Greece, from a play probably written by the Athenian oligarch Critias in the fifth century BC – is dangerous not because the character advocates unbelief in specific gods or in general, but because it undermines the legitimacy of belief itself:⁴⁵

some wise and clever man invented for mortals fear of the gods, that there might be some means of frightening the wicked, even if they do, say, or think anything in secret. Hence he introduced the Divine... Thus, I think, for the first time did someone persuade mortals to believe in a race of deities...⁴⁶

Since Fontenelle in his *Histoire critique des oracles* (1687), it has been argued that earnest ritual participation can be motivated by many culture-driven alternatives to genuine belief, and can also coincide comfortably with the ridicule of those beliefs. That is to say, ritual participation does not mean that the participant believes in the existence of any god or accepts any related supernatural propositions at all, and they may even have really believed

⁴³ Helm 2000: 159.

⁴⁴ Xen. *Ap.* 11.

⁴⁵ Undermines legitimacy of belief: Bremmer 1996: 15-17, Kearns 2010: 149. Fragment as ‘dangerous’: Burkert 1985: 314-5. Parker 1996: 212 said that the ‘radical criticisms’ of the fragment had ‘ugly atheistic implications’. Whitmarsh 2014 is the best modern scholarly discussion.

⁴⁶ Critias (*TGrF* F1), ad. Sext. Emp. *Adv. Math.* 9.54, trans. Whitmarsh 2014.

that it was false: they shared the collective belief in the usefulness of religion to society or themselves.⁴⁷ This is especially the case for atheists, for whom ritual participation was strongly incentivised (as will be explored in chapters Three and Four).⁴⁸

The primacy of ritual in our sources has led some scholars to argue that belief is an inappropriate and anachronistic category when used for studying the ancient world. There are no terms in Greek that unproblematically mean either ‘belief’ or ‘religion’, and it is debatable whether on a conceptual level the Greeks would have found the idea of religion as a distinct concept at all intelligible.⁴⁹ In the tradition of the great ritualists of the late nineteenth century, pioneers of a new ritual school argued that Greek religion was entirely ritualistic and had nothing to do with belief.⁵⁰ For these scholars, Greek religion can be defined through a ‘negative catechism’: unlike most modern religion it had no dogma, doctrine, or creed; no holy books, no priesthood, and no sense of personal faith.⁵¹ In part the hesitation to posit belief in the ancient world comes from the desire to avoid a Christianising tendency, and it is appropriate to be cautious in this case given the emphasis on personal faith in Christianity.⁵² But in doing so scholars have partly fallen into their own trap, as it is equally Christianising to prize belief as a uniquely Christian concept.⁵³ If the ritual interpretation remained the

⁴⁷ Breilsford 2005: 176: ‘actions or behaviors do not derive from and are not readily governed by beliefs’. See also Rossano 2012: 81-3 on ‘Ritually faking belief’.

⁴⁸ E.g. Putnam et al. 2010, ch.10: nearly half of orthodox Jews doubt the existence of God, but are still active religious participants.

⁴⁹ *nomizein* as ‘to believe’ is highly controversial: see Giordano-Zacharya 2005, and reply in Versnel 2011: 539-59; *pisteuein* can be used, but means closer to ‘trust’, e.g. Hdt 1.24, or Aesch. *Pers.* 800: ‘trust in the divine oracles’, and is not consistently used to refer to any distinct concept of belief. The intelligibility of religion: Gould, J. 1985: 1-2, Kearns 1995: 512.

⁵⁰ Ritualists: Jane Harrison, Francis Cornford, and Arthur Cook. On these see Burnet 1924: 5, Dover 1972: 33, Finley 1969: 64, and Needham 1972 e.g. 191. For the modern movement: Price 1984: 10-11, 1998: 3, and Beard, North, and Price 1998: 43; Burkert 1985: 8, Gould, J. 1985: 7, Sourvinou-Inwood 2000: 44, and Bruit-Zaidman and Schmitt-Pantel 1992: 27. Versnel 2011: 545-59 lists and critiques these perspectives.

⁵¹ ‘Negative catechism’: Garland 1994: ix. See Harrison 2015b on the evolution of the negative catechism. Kindt 2012: 30-2 responds to/nuances the negatives. See pg.96 no.109 on doctrine.

⁵² Price 1984: 10: “‘Belief’ as a religious term is profoundly Christian in its implications”.

⁵³ Versnel 1993: 124-31, 2011: esp. 547: ‘the kernel of the problem emerges when most sceptics do claim to know the precise meaning of belief/believe, namely by identifying it with – and restricting it to – its uses in Christian theological discourse’. Harrison 2000: 19-23, esp. 20: ‘to avoid the term “belief” on the grounds of its association with Christianity is surely to privilege Christianity’ also now Harrison 2015a: 24; King, C. 2003,

academic consensus then studying atheism would be very difficult, because unbelief is relatively meaningless without comparative belief.

Thankfully, the ritual interpretation is no longer fashionable, and the campaign to inject belief back into studies of Greek religion has been quite successful: there have since been a variety of studies that look at this aspect of the Greek religious experience.⁵⁴ Ritual has remained central, but it is understood appropriately as part of a package that included beliefs of different forms in many contexts.⁵⁵ In the case of belief, the lack of a term for a set of ideas that is mapped and bundled in the same way as in our era, language, culture, and historical tradition does not indicate that the Greeks did not have any related concepts.⁵⁶ The Greeks did perceive a collection of ideas that can be loosely understood as ‘religion’ or ‘belief’.⁵⁷ It is generally understandable to ‘reasonably suppose’, as Harrison does, ‘that the performance of ritual was accompanied by attitudes’; as already observed, beliefs frequently coincided with or drove ritual performance.⁵⁸ But there is a difference between society and the individual that Harrison and other proponents of belief have glossed over or ignored.⁵⁹ These ‘attitudes’, or motivations for ritual participation, need not be related to any supernatural beliefs in any given individual. Ritual practice can be general evidence for belief

esp. 276: ‘the assumption that Christianity represents a radical break with other (or earlier) religious concepts could itself be the product of a Christianizing bias in favor of Christian uniqueness’.

⁵⁴ Versnel 1993: 124-31, 2011: 539-59, and Harrison 2000: 1-30, 2007: 383-4, 2015a: 24-7: beliefs are not only subservient to ritual; Naiden 2012, on the critical role of belief in ritual; and Feeney 1998: 12-46, Most 2003: 303-4, Yunis 1988: 39. Parker 2011: 15-16 summarises: ‘surely even a ritual is performed in the belief that there is some purpose in doing so’, influenced by Frazer, e.g. 1957: 65-6. Similarly Jim 2014: 59: ‘ritual performance – or indeed the whole fabric of ancient Greek religion – presupposes the beliefs that the Greek gods existed’

⁵⁵ Ritual implies belief: see Naiden 2012.

⁵⁶ Cf. Raaflaub 2004: 44, who is ‘reluctant to assume a high level of consciousness of a given value in a society that does not have a corresponding word to express it.’ See Skinner 2002: 159-60, arguing that word and concept are not equivalent, and Kindt 2012: 30: ‘the very fact that Greek culture had no word to say *credo* (“I believe”)... does not mean that the category of belief itself – in the sense of certain shared assumptions about the nature of the divine – was absent from ancient Greek religion.’

⁵⁷ See esp. Veyne 1988, and Versnel 2011.

⁵⁸ Harrison 2007b: 133.

⁵⁹ Rüpke 2013: 3-40 argues for the difference between individual and *polis*-based religiosity, as does Rubel 2011, 2013; and Woolf 2013: 136-63, on the importance of choice and difference to polytheism. See also Kindt 2012: 36-54 on personal religion and modes of thinking versus Polis Religion.

in Greek society, but it is not valid to use ritual participation as evidence for the belief of an individual in the absence of other evidence.

Approaches focused on belief as a phenomenon should be distinguished from approaches that focus on what specific individuals believed (like the GMT above). The latter is impossible to determine accurately. The unfalsifiability of claims about the religious beliefs of individuals makes such claims scientifically unacceptable, as insisted A. J. Ayer, the philosopher and proponent of logical positivism.⁶⁰ The anthropologist Evans-Pritchard also recognised this in practice: ‘religious beliefs must always be treated with the greatest caution, for we are then dealing with what neither European nor native can directly observe.’⁶¹ Evans-Pritchard was able to live among his subjects and survey their responses: there are no surveys of ancient Greek beliefs, but even surveys would not help much. There are many reasons why people report the beliefs that they do, in the modern world and in ancient Greece, or why they might engage in ritual action, as their religious beliefs were always in competition with other aspects of their lives.⁶² When an individual attends church, for instance, they may have sufficient reasons outside of belief in a deity to do so, and as such it is not valid to argue that they believe in God (or in the efficacy of worship) on the basis of going to church or sacrificing at an altar. There are other things that influence ritual actions: social, political, financial, and so on.

But accepting the difficulty in obtaining evidence of belief is not the same as the argument that there was no belief in the Greek (or modern) world. Belief is indispensable to any study of religion.⁶³ It is possible to discuss beliefs in a generalised way based on several criteria, as long as it is recognised that, as P. J. Rhodes has argued that:

different kinds of investigation have their own procedures and their own degrees of certainty, and that for many purposes the fact that Ayer's total certainty cannot be achieved is a fact which we should remember but by which we need not be discouraged. Historians do the best that they can with the evidence that they have.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Ayer 1936 [1971 ed.]: 16-19, and 84-103. See Palmer and Steadman 2004 that ritual performance cannot be used as an indicator of belief. Cf. Boyer 2001: 1-2, Needham 1972: 1.

⁶¹ Evans-Pritchard 1965: 7.

⁶² Price 1984: 5. See also Kindt 2012: 36-7 on the impossibility of accessing personal beliefs.

⁶³ Just as Wiebe 1979 argued belief ought to be indispensable even before the second ritual turn.

⁶⁴ Rhodes, P. J. 1994: 168.

In this case, it is reasonable to adduce a generalised belief in the gods in Greek society from the commonality of practice, even if it is not safe to assume belief from individual practitioners of Greek religion.

Though belief is now appropriately valued in scholarship, corresponding attitudes towards Greek atheism have lagged behind. To some extent this is predictable since the exclusion of belief from studies on Greek religion involved the exclusion of atheism, but while studies on belief have resurged the study of atheism remains muted. Atheism, just like belief, comes with its own set of assumptions and connotations, and its own individual history of ideas, which undeniably has the potential to distort our approach to religion in the ancient world.⁶⁵ But this is more or less the case for every term and concept. Banning the use of ‘atheism’ for this sort of reason is entirely unhelpful, just as it is in the case of ‘belief’: it simply serves to mask the history of whichever replacement term is settled on, which will be inevitably equally loaded.⁶⁶ Historians, defending the significance and sanctity of belief, have traditionally been reluctant to attribute it to the Greeks with their human-like, arrogant, petty, and immoral gods.⁶⁷ The solution is often to attribute to certain individuals belief in a more philosophical and abstracted deity, and assume that the daily grind of ritual was nothing more than social conformity.⁶⁸ Locating belief in a substantial way, and dividing without divorcing it from ritual, is difficult and complex.

The problem of definition

By confronting and answering the main obstacles to the study of atheism in scholarship, this chapter has now laid the groundwork for understanding atheism in the ancient world, for which it is now necessary to establish a definition. However, there is something about religion and religious concepts that makes it problematic to fix a definition of them; there is,

⁶⁵ On history of ideas see Buckley 1987, Cliteur 2009: 1-23 and Hyman 2007: 28-46.

⁶⁶ Harrison 2015b: 169: ‘purifying our language of terms for which there is no tidy equivalent in the culture under study provides no magic shortcut; arguably indeed it has the effect of obscuring inadvertent associations.’

⁶⁷ Humphreys, S. 2004: 12-16: the reluctance of scholars to attribute belief to Greeks.

⁶⁸ E.g. on Socrates’ Divine Sign: Plato’s and Xenophon’s Socrates indicated belief in the gods of traditional religion, though modified, yet it is often argued that he was a rationalist; see McPherran 1991: 345, n.1. On the sign see Brickhouse and Smith 2005: 45-62, Partridge 2008: 285-309, Vlastos 1991: 157-78.

perhaps, nothing ‘essentially religious’, and consequently, nothing essentially irreligious.⁶⁹ Indeed, it has been argued that terminological issues are largely responsible for inhibiting the systematic study of atheism.⁷⁰ The meanings, definitions, and semantic ranges of even the broadest terms, of ‘atheism’, ‘belief’, and ‘agnosticism’, are highly problematic and controversial. Atheism is also often further subdivided: minor and major, positive and negative, strong and weak, militant and fundamentalist.⁷¹ These controversial and opaque terms are widespread in the Classics, where they are inconsistently and often unreflexively used.⁷² But lively discussions in the social sciences, particularly by Lois Lee and Stephen Bullivant, have demonstrated the problems with using existing terms without further thought and analysis, even with qualifications depending on context (e.g. ‘I am now talking about atheism in X sense’). In particular, these warn against insisting on terms that are ‘imprecise or overly narrow and which are confused and combined with one another without consistency’, as Lee observes.⁷³

In Classics, the picture described by Lee and Bullivant is certainly the case: the study of atheism has been stunted by a history of prejudice that manifests in methodological extremism, special pleading, and terminological and conceptual vagueness. This has allowed scholars to engage in what sometimes approaches apologetics. Phenomena that, using any reasonable or standard definition or methodology in history or philosophy, ought to come under the heading of ‘atheism’, have been excused as something else (typically ‘agnosticism’).⁷⁴ Scholars have also obscured atheism by appealing to the ritual-belief

⁶⁹ Asad 2003: 25-6: ‘there is nothing essentially religious, nor any universal essence that defines “sacred language” or “sacred experience.”’ Problematic to fix a definition: Lemert 2002: 247-8. See also Weber 1963: 1.

⁷⁰ Lee, L. 2012, 2015: 22, Campbell 1971: 17-45, Pasquale 2007: 760.

⁷¹ Minor and major: Smith, G. 1989: 7-8. Negative and positive: Flew 1976: 14, 1984; still used by Michael Martin 1990.

⁷² Controversial: e.g. Dawkins 2006: 50-1.

⁷³ Lee, L. 2015: 22 and Bullivant 2013: 13 on avoiding narrow definitions.

⁷⁴ E.g. Bremmer 2007: 1 on ‘soft atheism’ (below); Parker 1996: 211: Greeks stayed clear of ‘militant atheism’; Drachmann 1922: 146: ‘positive atheism’; Versnel 2011: 292: ‘isolated cases of ostentatious atheism’. O’Sullivan 2012: 174, also n.36 derides New Atheism and ‘its most zealous preachers’ as ‘populist, fundamentalist atheism’. This intellectual baggage leads O’Sullivan to minimise the importance and atheism of the fragment e.g. 2012: 184: ‘not atheistic but philosophically rich’. Bremmer 2007: 12-13: ‘Protagoras was an agnostic rather than an atheist’; see likewise O’Sullivan 2012: 172, Mansfeld 1993: 183. Versnel 2011: 558 sensibly discards the division between agnostic and atheistic.

division: that ritual participation is proof of belief. Thomas Harrison, for instance, unironically argues for ‘reclaiming belief’ from the ritualists, but in the next breath claims that ‘complete unbelief’ is ‘scarcely imaginable’, on the one hand campaigning against the suppression of the study of belief while himself contributing to the suppression of unbelief in a similar way to those he is criticising.⁷⁵ If the sort of approach taken to atheism in ancient Greece were applied to belief then the overwhelming majority, if not all, of our evidence on belief would evaporate.

In applying vague but overly narrow and anachronistic terms (like ‘positive’ atheism, or ‘complete unbelief’) to the Classical world, the historical, geographical, and social contextuality of atheism has rarely been grasped, and scholars have often ended up looking for the wrong thing. To expect ‘militant’ or ‘fundamentalist’ atheists, ‘radical atheism’, or ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ forms of atheism in Greece, as many classical scholars do, is thinking about things from a treacherously modern perspective. The New Atheist in the modern West is a self-identified atheist or anti-theist, naturalist, scientific pupil, ritual non-participant; (s)he is also a product of a very specific time and place. New Atheists are also only a minuscule (and much derided) part of one aspect of ‘intellectual’ types of atheism in the modern world.⁷⁶ There are many other reasons to be an atheist other than a rational summing up of the available evidence.⁷⁷ An individual may become disillusioned by religion as a whole due to scandal, for instance, or disillusioned with gods because of the death of a close family member.⁷⁸ Or they might simply be raised in a home or environment that is atheistic, like China, the Soviet Union, or even the UK, where estimates show the religious ‘nones’ seem to have stabilised at 48.6%.⁷⁹ Some of these may correspond in some ways to forms of atheism in the ancient world, but other types of atheism in ancient Greece are unique in form and

⁷⁵ Harrison 2000: 22.

⁷⁶ Intellectual atheism: Silver et al. 2014.

⁷⁷ Distinction between concept of and motivation for atheism: Cliteur 2009: 10-11.

⁷⁸ Reed 2002 left the Catholic priesthood for emotional reasons. Barker 1992 insists his ‘deconversion’ to atheism was due to an addiction to reason, but also describes how the corruption of his fellow preachers turned him away from the church. ‘Non-intellectual’ reasons are rarely offered by ‘deconverts’ as the reason they lost their faith – rationality, reason, and intellectual integrity provide a more easily defensible platform – but non-intellectual reasons almost always play a part.

⁷⁹ On the latest estimates of religious nones in Britain see NatCen BSA: 2017.

dependent on the nature of Greek religion. It has not been generally recognised, within and without Classics, that the forms of atheism vary as much as corresponding beliefs in societies.

Terms like ‘atheism’ have the potential to be etic, described from the perspective of the observer, and emic, described from the perspective of the subject. So for ‘atheism’ it is possible to embrace a broad definition intended to be applicable to all societies across space and time, or to use a specific definition, the meaning of which is unique to the society under scrutiny. Emic and etic definitions are not incompatible, and both are equally important. It is vital to give an accurate treatment of the evidence, which allows the ancients to define the importance and direction of study, and to avoid enforcing our own concerns over those of the ancients. But it is also crucial that any study of the ancient world recognises the broader academic and public interest of this subject, both historically and presently, as proven by the popularity of works from Christopher Hitchens’ *Portable Atheist* (a collection of historical atheistic extracts) to Whitmarsh’s *Battling the Gods*.⁸⁰ Therefore, atheism must be defined in a way that allows scholars to ask questions that answer broader interests: about the rational arguments for god; the naturalness of atheism or religion, and the importance of religious education; the morality of atheists; the persecution and marginalisation of atheists; the importance and nature of doubt and uncertainty; and the nature of atheism as a target of prejudice. To some extent this study is constrained to use the same evidence as before (of trials and accusations), but this thesis seeks to take a broader approach, with a focus on a number of other topics like education or morality (rather than, for instance, ‘accusations of atheism’), that allow us to trace atheism as a phenomenon, and through less directly polemic or loaded contexts. This thesis seeks to advance an understanding of atheism broad enough that it avoids ‘Christianising’ assumptions (i.e. projecting Christian assumptions onto ancient religion) and can allow for cross-comparison of atheistic phenomena examined here with other cultures, while not confusing or excluding the specific types of atheism unique to the ancient Greek world.

a. belief, agnosticism, and disbelief

Even if an exhaustive and precise definition is not possible (or desirable), it is crucial to provide at least a conceptual base for our understanding of the nature and range of what is

⁸⁰ Hitchens 2007a, Whitmarsh 2016.

meant by ‘atheism’.⁸¹ Regarding the categories of belief and unbelief, there are, broadly speaking, two schools of thought. The first, which is popular in philosophy, theology, and casually in the Classics, proposes a threefold structure, with three categories for understanding, interpreting, and classifying different types of beliefs across the spectrum. The main categories are: belief, or acceptance of the existence of a ‘Culturally Postulated Superhuman Agent’ (CPSA); agnosticism, the middle ground of uncertainty in which the existence (and nature, form, etc) of a deity is uncertain, and so neither accepted nor rejected; and atheism, or positive disbelief.⁸² We will call this ‘BAD’ (belief, agnosticism, and disbelief). The view that there are three main categories of belief and unbelief is illustrated by J. J. C. Smart, the late Australian philosopher, in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Smart recognises the problems with dividing potential positions towards belief in a deity into three: principally, that there are significant overlaps between the categories of agnosticism and atheism, and agnosticism and theism. His solution is to dilute the boundaries between these categories:

let us consider the appropriateness or otherwise of someone (call him ‘Philo’) describing himself as a theist, atheist or agnostic. I would suggest that if Philo estimates the various plausibilities to be such that on the evidence before him the probability of theism comes out near to one he should describe himself as a theist and if it comes out near zero he should call himself an atheist, and if it comes out somewhere in the middle he should call himself an agnostic. There are no strict rules about this classification because the borderlines are vague. If need be, like a middle-aged man who is not sure whether to call himself bald or not bald, he should explain himself more fully.⁸³

But this muddying of the waters, with the expansion of definition without a clear understanding of the core meaning of the terms, only serves to undermine the legitimacy of the three categories. BAD involves defining atheism as its most extreme form, in the classic

⁸¹ Campbell 1971: 17 argues ‘Irreligion itself must be identified, delineated and defined and its various forms described... Since irreligion is defined primarily by reference to religion, the notable lack of success in defining the latter term is hardly a good omen for success in defining the former’. Until very recently Campbell’s plea for a new sociology of irreligion had been ignored e.g. Bullivant and Lee 2012: 19.

⁸² CPSA is the standard definition of a deity in the cognitive sciences: see Lawson and McCauley 1990: 5.

⁸³ Smart 2013.

terms of John Hick, ‘the belief that there is no god of any kind’ (i.e. positive disbelief); everything short of belief and shy of positive disbelief is excused as something other than atheism.⁸⁴ But this mid-ground, the position of ‘neither believing nor disbelieving’ in the gods, which is the definition of agnosticism under BAD, falls under *tertium non datur*, the Law of the Excluded Middle. That is, it is not a coherent position. ‘Do you believe God/gods/Zeus/etc exists?’ can be answered either yes or no; ‘I don’t know’ (agnosticism according to BAD) is the inability to answer, and not an answer in its own right.⁸⁵ ‘Excluding the middle’, then, leaves the answers of either belief or unbelief.

b. belief and unbelief

The alternative view to BAD is that there are two main categories of belief: atheism and theism. This view is that atheism and theism should be understood as the two positions regarding the existence of god(s), with no middle ground, but instead coterminous. Atheism, therefore, might contain within it several distinct but sometimes overlapping positions: irreligion (irreverence to ritual/religion) and non-religion (lack of participation or subscription to ritual/religion), unbelief (lack of belief in gods), and disbelief (‘belief’ in the nonexistence of gods).⁸⁶ Under the binary view, agnosticism answers a different question: it concerns the possibility of evidence of god (rather than whether gods exist or not), and this understanding allows for theistic and atheistic agnostics. Though it is often argued agnostics are predominantly atheists, Greek religion contained many core agnostic elements (as explored in Chapter Five), as did many other religions.⁸⁷ It will be argued that the binary position is less problematic than the BAD position and best fits the ancient evidence and atheism in the modern world. This conception is certainly *prima facie* more logically coherent than BAD. However, the binary position has come under criticism.

It has been argued that the binary understanding is inferior to BAD because the latter is more commonly used today. But there is no consensus among the general public about the

⁸⁴ Hick 1963: 4.

⁸⁵ Law of the excluded middle: atheist philosopher Smith, G. 1989: 8; agreed by Evangelical theologian Ron Rhodes, R. 2006: 12.

⁸⁶ Lee, L. 2012: ‘non-religion’ is a binary against religion. ‘Non-religion’ implies atheism is ritual non-participation, and implies that one could exist outside of religion, neither of which are true for the Greeks. See also Eller 2010: 1-18.

⁸⁷ On agnostic atheism: Martin, D. 2007: 2.

definitions of atheism, agnosticism and theism. The binary distinction was until less than one and a half centuries ago the main definition, and even now it is still a very popular reported definition, and has also lately increasingly gained support in the social sciences and in philosophy.⁸⁸ The self-reporting definitions of atheists are important too. Atheists are part of a sub-group in society that has been subject to significant persecution over the centuries (an ‘outgroup’), and the term ‘atheist’ has been, and continues to be, used as a weapon to demonise and exclude individuals. So in looking for a definition that works for the ancient and modern world, it is important to avoid those that atheists believe are prejudicial. In fact, atheists have justifiably argued that the threefold division (BAD) is used to caricature atheism and to show its unreasonableness. Take the observations of the *American Atheists*:

Atheism is usually defined incorrectly as a belief system. Atheism is not a disbelief in gods or a denial of gods; it is a lack of belief in gods. Older dictionaries define atheism as "a belief that there is no God." Some dictionaries even go so far as to define Atheism as "wickedness," "sinfulness," and other derogatory adjectives. Clearly, theistic influence taints dictionaries. People cannot trust these dictionaries to define atheism.⁸⁹

In other words, in artificially presenting atheism as an ‘extreme’ position, BAD has been used to caricature atheism as an ‘other’, in contrast to ‘good belief’ (as explored in more detail in Chapter Six). Imagining atheism as part of a binary allowed atheism to be presented in a negative way as well: it was, for instance, employed to describe failure to espouse properly the new Protestantism from the sixteenth century.⁹⁰ The binary may be used to present

⁸⁸ Bullivant 2008: a study of 728 students found 28.1% students defined atheism as positive disbelief, and 13.6% as unbelief. Unbelief is the major definition in most general and some philosophical dictionaries, e.g. the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, ‘either the lack of belief that there exists a god, or the belief that there exists none’. *Oxford Dictionaries* have it as ‘Disbelief or lack of belief in the existence of God or gods’; *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘Disbelief in, or denial of, the existence of a God. Also, Disregard of duty to God, godlessness (practical atheism).’ Support in the social sciences: Lee, L. 2012, 2015; Eller 2010: 1; Philosophers: Smith, G. 1989: 7; atheism as unbelief (including disbelief) is the definition in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*; definition in Bullivant 2013: 11-21, and *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*; definition in Martin, D. 2007: 1-10. Cf. also Cliteur 2009: 1-2.

⁸⁹ *American Atheists* 2016.

⁹⁰ Atheism as failure to espouse Protestantism: Hunter 1985: 139.

atheism negatively, but it does not involve painting it falsely as ‘extreme’, excluding a variety of phenomena in the process.

For historians, ancient definitions matter at least as much as modern ones, so it is crucial to deploy the most suitable definitions for our own subject.⁹¹ Especially when discussing belief and other heavily contextual attitudes of the ancients, it is key ‘to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world’.⁹² Certainly, the notion of agnostic and atheist as distinct positions regarding belief in god is not clear in ancient Greek thought.⁹³ Atheism has a long history of being viewed as opposed to theism in a binary. The idea of a threefold division is a modern one: the idea of a middle ground between atheism and theism arose from the invention of the term ‘agnostic’ by Thomas Henry Huxley in the late nineteenth century.⁹⁴ Allowing agnosticism to be a free-floating concept, and therefore allowing for the idea of ‘agnostic atheists’ and ‘agnostic theists’, is very useful. For instance, it is beginning to be recognised that the term ‘agnostic’ can be a form of social identification often used in theistic communities to avoid conflict, rather than a philosophical position.⁹⁵

The binary conception is also much more useful in application to the Greek world, while BAD has caused problems. For instance, the controversial phrase used in the accusation against Socrates, *ou nomizein theous* (variously translated as does not believe in, does not accept, does not worship, etc. the gods), has caused so much controversy in translation partly because it does not distinguish between agnostic and atheistic positions as

⁹¹ Bullivant 2013: 12-13 argues it is legitimate for different disciplines to deploy different definitions suited to them.

⁹² Malinowski 1922: 25.

⁹³ Kearns 2010: 141-2.

⁹⁴ Huxley first used agnosticism in 1869. Agnosticism was never distinct from atheism, e.g. Huxley 1884: ‘It simply means that a man shall not say he knows or believes that which he has no scientific grounds for professing to know or believe.’

⁹⁵ Social identification was at the core of Huxley’s redefinition: see Pleins 2013: 93. Huxley 1889: 750 records that Rev. Dr. Wace, Principal of King’s College, remarked of him: ‘He may prefer to call himself an agnostic; but his real name is an older one – he is an infidel’. The differing social acceptance of atheism and agnosticism is discussed in Putnam and Campbell 2010: 16, and again at 104.

they have been traditionally envisioned using BAD.⁹⁶ Plato's and Xenophon's Socrates (and Xenophon himself) respond to each form of atheism, with the exception of disbelief: irreligion (irreverence to ritual/religion) and non-religion (lack of participation in ritual), unbelief (lack of belief in gods).⁹⁷ Under the binary view, then, this accusation makes sense, as an accusation of atheism. Likewise, the confusion about the agnosticism or atheism of ancient figures like Protagoras disappears if BAD is abandoned in favour of the binary view: the fragments of Protagoras' works reveal agnostic atheism.⁹⁸ From an emic perspective, therefore, the binary concept of atheism and theism maps quite well on to both the philosophical and general understanding of belief and unbelief in ancient Greece. The binary division is simply more functional, comprehensive, flexible, and representative of people's real beliefs and practices. This is the definition and meaning that is broadly used in this thesis, but it has to be tailored specifically to the atheism in the ancient evidence.

Varieties of atheism in the ancient world

Unlike 'belief' or 'religion', the ancients did have a term that could mean atheist: *atheos*, the root of the modern word. However, this term did not mean precisely the same thing as atheist, but had different conceptual and semantic boundaries. *Atheos* has a different semantic range to atheist. Sometimes it does not mean atheism as it might be commonly understood today; equally, atheism is sometimes present without the term *atheos*. Judging by its earliest uses in Pindar, Sophocles, and Aeschylus – though the term has echoes as early as Homer – this word means 'godless', or 'god-forsaken'.⁹⁹ By the time of Plato, it is clear that the term

⁹⁶ Accusations against Socrates: Pl. *Ap.* 24b-c. On the ritualist position see Giordano-Zecharya 2005; cf. Versnel's 2011 fourth appendix: 539-59. See also Harrison 2015a: 23, and Parker 2011: 36.

⁹⁷ Irreligion and non-religion: Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.2-5, 1.1.5; unbelief: Pl. *Ap.* 27a-28a.

⁹⁸ E.g. Bremmer 2007: 13 calls Protagoras an 'agnostic rather than an atheist'; likewise O'Sullivan 2012: 172, and Meijer 1981: 220, who mentions his 'agnostic theories'. Whitmarsh grapples with similar problems, e.g. 'this cannot be a simple statement of agnosticism', 2016: 88, and calls Protagoras an atheist; and Flower 2009: 11 says 'it was perhaps not so much the atheism of Prodicus as the agnosticism of Protagoras' that drove the mystery parodies and mutilations of the *Herms*.

⁹⁹ Hom. *Od.* 18.353: 'not without the gods (*athei*) did the great Odysseus come to the palace'. Pindar *Pyth.* 4.159-62: 'For Phrixos commands us to go to the halls of Aietes, to return him to life and retrieve the thick-fleeced hide of the ram through which he was saved from the sea and from the **godless** weapons (*atheōn beleōn*) of his stepmother'; Aesch. *Eum.* 538-9: 'do not, looking to profit, tramp it [the altar of Justice] with **godless** boots (*atheō podi*)'; Soph. *Trach.* 1035-6: 'Heal the pain caused by your **cursed** mother (*matēr atheos*)'

atheos and its parallel term *asebēs*, impious, had a much broader range that included lack of belief or disbelief in the gods.¹⁰⁰ The range of *atheos*, and terms with which it is contextually and semantically associated, like *apistos* (faithless), *anomos* (customless/lawless), and *adikos* (unjust), suggests atheism implies a broad set of ideas that do not just incorporate philosophy, but include ritual practice, social behaviour, and particularly the (im)morality of the atheist (as explored in Chapter Two).¹⁰¹

The fact that the etymology of the term ‘atheist’ can be traced from Greece has overwhelmingly been a source of problems. It is not safe to appeal to the Greek origins of the term to try to locate the origin of atheism, as similar concepts, traditions, and ideas could have existed (and certainly did so) elsewhere or earlier, and there is every reason to believe that atheism is a basic human condition, just as theism is. To appeal to the original word for the ‘essential’ meaning is a basic etymological or genetic fallacy. The term clearly had some meaning to the Greeks, but it does not capture the entire set of phenomena that fall under different categories of unbelief. To some extent, the attempt to limit the meaning of *atheos*, and the insistence of avoiding the term ‘atheist’ or ‘atheism’ in favour of softer terms like sceptic or unbeliever, is an attempt to limit the discourse itself, which must be resisted.¹⁰² So our investigation of atheism is not limited to the term *atheos*, or derivatives.

It is, by now, clear that atheism is a cross-cultural and cross-historical phenomenon, but the form that atheism takes in different societies varies as much as the corresponding varieties of theism.¹⁰³ Atheism is a ‘semantically parasitic category’ that is only meaningful in relation to its corresponding theism.¹⁰⁴ This is also the case for the other relational terms:

(particularly interesting as the *atheos* mother is Hera); *Oed. Tyr.* 661: ‘**godless** (*atheos*), friendless may I meet my end, if I take this purpose’; Whitmarsh 2016: 116-7 gives a good brief overview. God-forsaken: Woodbury 1965: 208.

¹⁰⁰ Pl. *Laws* 10.

¹⁰¹ *Atheos* and other a- words: Gorg. *Pal.* 36, Eur. *Bacch.* 995, repeated at 1015, *Androm.* 491, *Helen* 1148.

¹⁰² On limiting the discourse by avoiding ‘extreme’ terms, from the perspective of women’s history, see Scott, J. 1986.

¹⁰³ Whitmarsh 2016: 4 observed the universal nature of atheism.

¹⁰⁴ Fitzgerald 2007: 54.

‘religion’ arguably has little meaning without the term ‘secular’, and theism without atheism.¹⁰⁵ As Hyman observes:

atheism defines itself in terms of that which it is denying. From this it follows that if definitions and understandings of God change and vary, so too our definitions and understandings of atheism will change and vary. This further means that there will be as many varieties of atheism as there are varieties of theism. For atheism will always be a rejection, negation, or denial of a particular form of theism.¹⁰⁶

Recognising the importance of a clear etic definition of atheism, and the fundamentally contextual nature of atheism, in combination with the religious variety of the Greek *poleis*, is a key step towards recognising the radically different and varied nature of Greek atheism. Different varieties of unbelief in ancient Greece can be identified and examined, just as there have been discussions of the different varieties of belief. Atheism comes in many forms: from non-participation in various ordinary rituals to intellectual rejection of the gods, with many varieties in-between. But it should not be expected that unbelief will manifest itself in precisely the same ways that it does in the modern world. This work does not give a catalogue of atheisms or a new catalogue of atheists, but it is useful to demonstrate the variety of irreligious experience in ancient Greece by showcasing some key categories of atheism that manifest themselves in the ancient world. Considering a plurality of atheisms and atheistic thought helps make sense of the religious mentality of the ancient Greeks as grounded in the essentially contextual nature of atheism in the Greek world. Some varieties of atheism in the ancient world might seem more or less ‘desperately alien’ to us:

a. Rejection of ritual and rejection of belief

There are some familiar types of atheism: of action, and of word (or belief). The first is of rejection of appropriate rituals towards the gods. It is this form of atheism that Thucydides describes when he details the plague incident: dead bodies were left unburied, people stopped making offerings at sanctuaries; and men had stopped caring about the fear of gods or law,

¹⁰⁵ On the co-dependence of theism and atheism see Asad 2003: 25-6, Fitzgerald 2007: 54, Lee, L. 2015: 25. and McCutcheon 2007: 173-99. See also Bullivant 2013: 13, Le Poidevin 1996: xvii: ‘Any discussion of atheism, then, is necessarily a discussion of theism.’

¹⁰⁶ Hyman 2007: 28-9.

behaving as if they did not exist.¹⁰⁷ This type of atheism, rejecting the ritual foundations of Greek religion, was probably the most feared (as revealed by Thucydides' account of the Athenians' darkest hour) but it was also, predictably, extremely rare. A second type is explicit pronouncements of atheism or disbelief, but these were sometimes paired with stories of some action against religion, or of education of others, as in the case of Diagoras.¹⁰⁸ Anaxagoras, meanwhile, was not accused of mocking religion, but of incorrect beliefs: Anaxagoras was brought to trial simply for declaring that rather than a god the sun was a flaming ball of metal, and the planets rocks which rotated around one another.¹⁰⁹ Likewise, as has been observed, it is clear that Socrates was a ritual participant: it was for his beliefs that he was indicted. Greeks could be prosecuted for believing the wrong things, as well as for ritual offences, and some Greeks, at least, saw the difference between atheism of action and atheism of belief (see Chapter Three).

b. Usurpation and atheism: behaving as if the gods no longer exist

Another variety of atheism in Greece is the way usurpation of new gods seems tied to atheism. For instance, in the *Clouds* of Aristophanes:

STREPSIADES: By Gaia, what a voice! How divine, revered, and wonderful!

SOCRATES: They are the only true goddesses; the others are nonsense.

STREPSIADES: By Zeus, and by the earth, you don't think the Olympian Zeus is a god?

SOCRATES: What Zeus? (*poios Zeus*) Don't talk nonsense. (*ou mē lērēseis*) Zeus doesn't exist (*oud' esti Zeus*).

[...] [*Socrates explains how storms, lightning, and thunder, traditionally attributed to Zeus, are really caused by the Clouds and Whirlwind*] [...]

STREPSIADES: Whirlwind? The news hadn't reached me that it wasn't Zeus any longer but Whirlwind who was the King.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Thuc. 2.47.3-53.3.

¹⁰⁸ Ar. *Birds* 1073-5: the accusation and reward for killing Diagoras. Lys. 6.17 on word vs deed. Athenagoras, *Plea* 4: he chopped up a statue of Heracles for firewood; Melanthios FGrHist 326 F3, Krateros FGrHist 342 F16: divulged the mysteries.

¹⁰⁹ DL 2.3.8-12.

¹¹⁰ Ar. *Cl.* 363-83.

A particular interpretation of atheism is encoded in the *Clouds*, and played on for comic effect, but how it is read from the perspective of belief is open to discussion.

Critics might, and with some justification, claim that disbelief in traditional gods alongside belief in new ones is not really atheism, but it is arguable that the foundation of these depictions of ‘new gods’ is in comic exaggeration. Even Socrates’ accusation was clearly informed by comic depictions, according to the Socrates of Plato’s *Apology*: his accusers appear to have thrown all potential criticisms at the philosopher, to see what they could make stick.¹¹¹ In fact, the introduction of new gods in Aristophanes is intended to be a witty reflection on the passions of the comic target. He has his comic Socrates pray to the Clouds, just as Anaxagoras or any of the natural philosophers might, less because he wanted to present Socrates as really believing in the Clouds as gods, and more because Socrates has his ‘head in the clouds’; he is too focused on his investigations. Aristophanes does the same to his comic atheist Euripides, who prays to ‘Air’ likewise because of his associations with natural philosophy, but also prays to the (more obviously ridiculous) ‘twisting of the tongue, Intelligence, and sensitive Nostrils’.¹¹² Just as in the gospel of Matthew in the Bible:

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.¹¹³

Money is not literally a god but an analogue for other obsessions. Similarly, Aristophanes is mocking Socrates and Euripides for their obsessions at the expense of participation in traditional belief and religion, rather than proposing a serious theological system for them.

Regardless of comic presentations, from an emic perspective usurpation was a form of atheism for the Greeks. Aristophanes’ Socrates is presented as adopting what a modern reader might consider to be two distinct positions: that the gods do not exist and, as he is interpreted by Strepsiades and Pheidippides as saying, the gods have been supplanted. It is possible to read this as a confusion of the comic Socrates’ (atheistic) beliefs by Pheidippides and

¹¹¹ Plato’s Socrates repeatedly observes that his accusation is informed by depictions in Comedy: Pl. *Ap.* 18a-20c.

¹¹² Ar. *Frogs* 889-93. Natural Philosophy associations: the *Eur. Vita* 10-14 has Euripides attending lectures of Anaxagoras, Prodicus, and Protagoras, and Teleclides F39-40K says Socrates helped him write his tragedy, as in DL 2.18.

¹¹³ Matth. 6:24.

Strepsiades, who interpret his belief as usurpation rather than atheism. But Aristophanes' Socrates never corrects this interpretation of his view when it is articulated in his presence, which, considering his portrayal as pedantic and petty, is surprising; and both ideas are articulated by Pheidippides, so he, at least, is capable of holding to them simultaneously:

PHEIDDIPIDES: Paternal Zeus indeed! How out of date you are! Do you mean you think Zeus exists? (Ζεὺς γὰρ τις ἔστιν;)

STREPSIADES: He does.

PHEIDDIPIDES: No, he doesn't, he doesn't! Whirlwind is king now; he's driven Zeus from power (Δῖνος βασιλεύει τὸν Δί' ἐξεληλακώς).¹¹⁴

We could argue that the playwright did not really mean his Socrates to say that Zeus does not exist; just that he was no longer relevant or perhaps had been killed. But the idea is quite clear in the *Clouds*: *oud esti Zeus*, says Aristophanes' Socrates, 'there is no Zeus'; it is neither sound nor sensible to excuse him of saying this.

Another plausible way of reading this might be as part of the 'luxuriant multiplicity' in Greek wisdom expressions.¹¹⁵ Many Greeks had a tendency to offer an assortment of different explanations for something, a set of different and potentially mutually exclusive solutions which could be applied simultaneously to a potential theological problem. So Aristophanes' Socrates could be saying: 'it may be that Zeus never existed, or that he was usurped by the Clouds'. He is not concerned to 'correct' either Pheidippides or his father, because it is the same view but from different perspectives: what matters is they do behave as if they believe in some gods, and they behave as if others do not exist. With Aristophanes in mind, the fifth-century reader of (or listener to) Homer might well have taken as the same sort of atheism the Cyclops passage: 'the Cyclopes care nothing for Zeus with his aegis, nor for the rest of the blessed gods (οὐ γὰρ Κύκλωπες Διὸς αἰγιόχου ἀλέγουσιν οὐδὲ θεῶν μακάρων), since we are much stronger than they are'.¹¹⁶ In the end both Polyphemus and Socrates are punished by the gods for their religious offences: Socrates is burned by Strepsiades at the behest of Hermes, and Polyphemus blinded by Odysseus working to dispense divine justice.¹¹⁷ This brand of atheism-as-usurpation does not exist today (or is not

¹¹⁴ Ar. *Cl.* 1468-73.

¹¹⁵ On 'luxuriant multiplicity'; see pg.153-5, and Versnel 2011: esp. 162.

¹¹⁶ Hom. *Od.* 9.272-7.

¹¹⁷ Socrates burned: Ar. *Cl.* 1476-1510. Polyphemus blinded: Hom. *Od.* 9.475-9.

known about). Both of these passages (the *Clouds* and *Odyssey*) demonstrate the complexity of navigating the contours of atheism as the ancients perceived it.

c. Competing depictions of the gods as atheism

Atheism and ‘religious innovations’, of the sort visible in the *Clouds*, were part of the same intellectual and social phenomenon in the eyes of the Greeks. Though there was no orthodoxy, improper additions or ideas about the gods caused aversion in those that heard them, and even punishment. Take the prayer that Hecuba offers to Zeus in Euripides’ *Trojan Women*:

Hecuba: You that support the earth and have your seat upon it, whoever you may be, so hard for human conjecture to find out, Zeus, whether you are the necessity of nature (*anagkē*) or the mind of mortal men (*nous brotōn*), I address you in prayer! [...]

Menelaus: What is this?! What a strange new prayer you offer to the gods!¹¹⁸

Hecuba’s bizarre and impious prayer is only matched by her bizarre and impious intentions, in trying to persuade Menelaus to kill his wife Helen, and Menelaus is shocked by the innovative nature of the prayer. The aversion to religious innovations is revealed in the accusation against Socrates, where it is equated to atheism: ‘Socrates is guilty of failing to believe in the gods of the state, and introducing new gods (ἀδικεῖ Σωκράτης οὓς μὲν ἡ πόλις νομίζει θεοὺς οὐ νομίζων, ἕτερα δὲ καινὰ δαιμόνια εισφέρων)’.¹¹⁹

Allegorical interpretations of the gods, beginning with Theagenes of Rhegium in around 525BC and popular by the fifth century, lay at the heart of this association between innovations and atheism. Though Theagenes’ allegorical interpretation was originally intended to defend against criticisms of immorality levelled against the Homeric gods and reconcile the new scientific thought with the rough collection of ideas and customs that comprised traditional religion, instead they were perceived as having reduced the gods to nothing.¹²⁰ It may be helpful to compare the idea of innovations about the gods as atheistic,

¹¹⁸ Eur. *Tro.* 884-8.

¹¹⁹ From Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.1. Similarly Favorinus ap. DL 2.40; cf. also Philodem. *de Piet.* 1696-7, Pl. *Ap.* 24b-c.

¹²⁰ Theagenes: Scholium (Porphyry) on Venetus B, Hom. *Il.* 20.67. Tatian *To the Greeks*, 21: ‘[Metrodorus] spoke very stupidly when he turned everything into an allegory. For he says that Hera, Athena and Zeus... are

with attitudes towards Baruch Spinoza: commentators since have described his work as everything from the pinnacle of ‘true atheism’ to the ‘truest vision ever had of God’, and the man himself as both a ‘gotttrunkener Mensch’ (‘god-drunk man’), and the inspiration to some of the most notorious atheists.¹²¹ Spinoza’s work was an exercise in theology which attempted to explain God and respond to criticisms of Him; but the radical innovation Spinoza proposed to the understanding of God (necessary to excuse him of traditional criticisms) was perceived by some as an atheist manifesto. Depending on the perspective of the reader, Spinoza’s god may saturate everything or may simply be a name for the godless universe. It was difficult to divine the limit between acceptable alterations to defend god(s) and innovations so extreme that they destroyed the idea of the god.

Theagenes’ dislike of the morally ambiguous depictions of the gods was shared by many others in the Greek world, who believed that those who portrayed the gods as immoral were either wrong or atheists. Xenophanes condemned the immoral depictions of the gods: ‘Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all things that are blameworthy and disgraceful for men: stealing, committing adultery, deceiving each other.’¹²² Heraclitus observed that Homer and Archilochus both deserved to be ‘thrown out of the contests and beaten with a stick’, and argued that Homer had deceived men.¹²³ Plato’s Socrates heavily criticised the poets for their portrayal of the gods as immoral, in Book Three of the *Republic*, where the works of Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were condemned.¹²⁴ The Socrates of the *Republic* does not go so far as to call Homer and Hesiod atheists (though they

hypostases of nature and arrangements of elements.’ See also Phld. *On Piety*, 1.518-41. Janko 2006: 52 argues they aimed to reconcile religion and philosophy.

¹²¹ ‘true atheism’: *Encyclopédie* 1751-80: 15: 463-74; ‘ein gotttrunkener Mensch’: Novalis 1946: 93; ‘The truest vision ever had of God’: Renan in Buckley 1987: 11-12; Nietzsche, wrote to Overbeck in 1881 that Spinoza was his precursor: in a postcard, July 30th 1881; see Kaufmann 1974: 140. Likewise, Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* 2.14.2, DK F59 A 113 [II 31, 18-19] called Anaxagoras atheist; Augustine *De Civ. Dei* contra Paganos, 8.2 considered him one of the great theologians. See Buckley 1987: 4.

¹²² Xenophanes DK F17 B11; see also F18 B12; Graham 2010: 108-9. Asmis 1992: 40.

¹²³ Heraclitus DK F15 B42, DK F16 B56, Graham 2010: 146-7.

¹²⁴ Pl. *Rep.* 10.607b5-6, ‘the ancient quarrel’ between poetry and philosophy; 2.377b-378b: criticising immoral depictions of the gods. On Plato and the immorality of the poets see Asmis 1992, Murray, P. 1996: 15, Urmson 1982: 128-9.

are liars in 2.377a-c), and nor did Xenophanes or Heraclitus. However, in the *Laws*, Plato's Stranger does call atheists those who claim to believe in immoral gods:

No one who believes, as the laws prescribe, in the existence of the gods has ever yet done an impious deed voluntarily, or uttered a lawless word: he that acts so is in one or other of these three conditions of mind—either he does not believe in what I have said; or, secondly, he believes that the gods exist, but have no care for men; or, thirdly, he believes that they are easy to win over when bribed by offerings and prayers.¹²⁵

So, across Plato's works, belief in the wrong type of gods (gods who do not care about men or can be bought and controlled) makes one an atheist. The author of the Hippocratic *On the Sacred Disease*, observed something similar, not of poets but of magic-users:

He who by purifications and magic can take away such an affection can also by similar means bring it on, so that by this argument the action of godhead is disproved. By these sayings and devices they claim superior knowledge, and deceive men by prescribing for them purifications and cleansings, most of their talk turning on the intervention of gods and spirits. Yet in my opinion their discussions show, not piety, as they think, but impiety rather, implying that the gods do not exist, and what they call piety and the divine is, as I shall prove, impious and unholy... I am sure that they are impious, and cannot believe that the gods exist or have any strength, and that they would not refrain from the most extreme actions'.¹²⁶

For pseudo-Hippocrates, as for Plato's Stranger, believing in gods who behave in a way that is too egregiously different from their own conception is a form of atheism (for more on these two passages see Chapter Six).

d. Rejection of the state gods as atheism: the limits of relativism

Rejection of the state gods was another form of Greek atheism. This type of atheism might seem to be equivalent to modern theists rejecting the gods of other religions: a Christian, for instance, would be an atheist with respect to the gods of Hinduism, or a Jew to the Greeks.¹²⁷ But this interpretation should be resisted. The significance of this form of atheism was very

¹²⁵ Pl. *Laws* 10.885b-c.

¹²⁶ [Hp.] *SD* 3.8-21, 4.5-10. Martin, D. 2004: 40-6.

¹²⁷ Jews are atheists to Apollonius in Joseph. *Ap.* 2.148.

different in the ancient city. The embeddedness of Greek religion in the *polis* meant that the city manifested and self-identified through its state gods. The values of the religion of their *polis*, *deme*, or even street, offered for the Greeks of the *polis* a shared language, as part of a collective whole across the panhellenic world, in which each *polis* had its own unique set of generally shared values. To deny these gods was to some extent a denial of the binding values of the *polis*, undermining not only the religion and potentially the morality of the collective, but the foundations of the political and social life of the community. In some ways, the Greeks appear to have been extremely open to new gods and religions, but this did not extend to failing to worship one's own gods.¹²⁸

It is often argued that the Greeks were relativistic with regard to religious practice, in that they believed that different cultures worshipped roughly the same gods in different ways appropriate to their culture.¹²⁹ For instance, the universality of Herodotus' gods is emphasised: different peoples worship the same gods but differ only in cultic practice, which specific gods were worshipped (and their names), and the characteristics each identified or emphasised:

They believe in no other gods except Dionysus and the Heavenly Aphrodite; and they say that they wear their hair as Dionysus does his, cutting it round the head and shaving the temples. They call Dionysus, Orotalt; and Aphrodite, Alilat.¹³⁰

But this view is complicated in various other passages of Herodotus, which reveal a strictness in the appropriate gods that each community should or should not worship. The most famous passage that explores this details the stories of the Scythians Anacharsis and Scyles.¹³¹ Anacharsis, in secret, established rites to the Mother of the Gods at Cyzicus, but another Scythian encountered him and reported this to the king who killed Anacharsis. Scyles, king of the Scythians, was a Hellenophile: he dressed as a Greek and travelled the city unguarded, but when he attempted to become a Bacchic initiate, his house was struck by a thunderbolt

¹²⁸ E.g. Xen. *An.* 7.8.1-6, in which Eucleides the seer chastises Xenophon on his failure to appropriately sacrifice to Zeus Melichios. See Garland 1992 on Greeks and foreign gods.

¹²⁹ Relativity: esp. Rudhardt 2002 and Harrison 2000: 208-22. Harrison does complicate the view, but complicating examples are 'lapses', where the universal principle is 'momentarily forgotten' (214).

¹³⁰ Hdt 3.8.3; see also 1.216: Scythian digression; 2.50 esp. the origin of the names of the gods in Egypt and the Pelasgians. Harrison 2000: 219, Rudhardt 2002: 179-80.

¹³¹ Hdt. 4.76-80.

and then he was discovered by the Scythians performing Bacchic rites and killed. On this François Hartog remarked: '[a]s in the case of Anacharsis, Scyles's piety occasions his death, for what is piety for the Greeks is the height of impiety for the Scythians.'¹³² This sense of appropriate gods for different communities reflected a more common practice: in fifth-century Athens permission was required to import new gods, and doing so improperly was a serious crime.¹³³ Importing new gods was certainly possible, but the appropriate permissions had to be obtained, the new gods welcomed by the old, and the city had to consent to this major cultural, political, and religious event.¹³⁴ To identify with foreign gods was perhaps to identify with foreign communities and values: unnatural, treasonous, and disturbing behaviour.

e. Failure to recognise manifesting gods

There are also cases where the Greeks recognised that certain cultures or individuals did not recognise certain gods that they should believe in (and worship), as opposed to gods they had simply not encountered or gods not appropriate for them to worship. These instances show a god manifesting, and the expectation of worship, and the culture failing to recognise them appropriately, as in the case of the Getae in Herodotus' *Histories*:

This same tribe of Thracians will, during a thunderstorm, shoot arrows up into the sky and utter threats against the lord of the lightning and the thunder, because they believe no gods exist except their own (οὐδένα ἄλλον θεὸν νομίζοντες εἶναι εἰ μὴ τὸν σφέτερον).¹³⁵

It is clear in Herodotus' story that the Getae recognise the signs of the god, yet they reject his existence; Herodotus is struggling to deal with the idea of atheism in the face of what he perceives to be obvious evidence of deities.¹³⁶ A similar struggle manifests in Herodotus' description of the Massagetae, who, he explains, only believe in the Sun, to whom they

¹³² Hartog 1988: 67.

¹³³ On importing gods: Garland 1992, also Parker 1996: 152-98, 2011: appendix 2. Importing gods improperly was a crime: e.g. Socrates, from Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.1; Plato *Ap.* 24b, *Euthphr.* 3b. See Naiden 2012: 218-9. One implication the accusation against Socrates was that he had not gone through the proper processes to import a god; Cartledge 2009: 87-8.

¹³⁴ Pan, Asclepius and the non-Greek Bendis, as well as others, were imported to Athens in the fifth century.

¹³⁵ Hdt. 4.94.4.

¹³⁶ Herodotus struggling to deal with disbelief: Harrison 2000: 218-9; see also Hartog 1978: 38-9.

sacrifice horses, which they justify as giving the ‘fastest of animals to the fastest of the gods’.¹³⁷ This makes no sense to many readers because it is Herodotus’ explanation of a phenomenon that he does not understand. For Herodotus, it was not necessarily impious to ignore such omens and manifestations, but it was foolish; ignoring them necessarily engendered disaster for those involved.¹³⁸ All of the examples explored already can be explored from this perspective: they are all rationalisations of atheism by believers.

Conclusion: exploring Greek atheisms

This list is only an introduction: it is far from an exhaustive presentation of all of the different forms or aspects of atheism in the ancient Greek world. There were diverse forms and packages of atheism in the ancient world. Atheism could take the form of ritual nonconformism, or of a variety of incorrect and inappropriate beliefs about the divine. Atheistic views were also frequently expressed by individuals who believed in gods: this does not make those views any less atheistic. In order to see the varieties of Greek atheism, Greek atheism must be understood as articulated along the lines of Greek theism: the primacy of ritual performance, and underlying beliefs; the openness to a certain degree of innovations (considering the Greek lack of dogma), but insistence on shared concepts of deity; concepts like *hubris* and the hierarchical positioning of humans and gods; the belief in (and problematizing of) universal deities; and the importance of appropriate state gods. Every manifestation of atheism in the Greek world reflects Greek priorities about religion and society. This thesis, then, explores atheism from the perspective of the Greek, and (on the whole) the theist, but it is also builds on the broader interests of modern readers. It is a social study, and so looks at atheism not as a history of individuals but as a phenomenon (like religion). It adopts a binary and oppositional understanding of atheism, with agnosticism understood as a separate phenomenon. In examining atheism as a phenomenon, the thesis asks a series of questions of the ancient evidence: these questions are of cross-historical, ancient, and modern importance.¹³⁹

Chapter One begins at the beginning: how did the Greeks learn to believe? It is argued that the Greeks believed children were born atheists, and required socialisation in order to

¹³⁷ Hdt 1.216.4.

¹³⁸ Foolish to ignore omens: Mikalson 2003: 43. Caused disaster: Flower 2008: 119-122.

¹³⁹ By allowing the Greeks to define their own concerns within each broad topic, Quentin Skinner’s 2002: 57-89 concerns about the invalidity of ‘fundamental concepts’ should be avoided.

have an appropriate relationship with the gods. The risks of bad or lacking socialisation were apparent to the Greeks, and perceived teachers of scepticism or unbelief were taken to be a considerable risk to healthy development. Building on the idea that atheism correlated with other forms of divergent behaviour, Chapter Two inquires whether the Greeks believed that morality was linked to belief or to the divine, and ultimately whether the Greeks believed that atheists were immoral. After establishing a connection in the public mind in Greece between atheism and morality, it revives an ancient discourse about natural and secular morality independent of divine authority, which evoked the basic social requirements of collective living as sufficient justification for moral behaviour. Chapter Three traces the ‘coercive political and social matrices’ that lay beneath Greek (and particularly Athenian) religious behaviour, ranging from trials to suppression of free speech.¹⁴⁰ These coercive matrices incentivised public conformity in the mechanics of religion.

Leaving behind more tangible considerations, Chapters Four and Five explore the (largely hidden) exchange between religious and atheistic and sceptical thought. Central Greek religious ideas like ancestral fault (the pre-cursor of ideas like ancestral and original sin), and the fickle nature of fortune, developed as broadly theological responses to scepticism and criticism of traditional religious ideas. Through these responses it is possible to detect a healthy to-and-fro of religious ideas and scepticism, and the developing responses of each across the centuries. Unknowability was one such idea, and it served as the ultimate theodicy: unknowability, it is argued, was agnosticism, and a separate sphere of discussion in which different atheistic and theistic ideas were developed in response to one another. Chapter Six develops the idea that the ‘spectre’ of atheism was constructed as oppositional in a way that benefited theism: atheism is considered as an Other. The link between atheism, magic, and superstition is demonstrated: all are part of a process of legitimation of religious identity through opposition.

¹⁴⁰ ‘matrices’: Cohen 1989: 211.

1. Education: how the Greeks learned to believe

The Introduction established that the religious environment posited by Lucien Febvre did not preclude atheism, but this is not to deny that the religious environment had a very significant impact on Greek thought. Exploring the mechanisms of religious education (or socialisation) offers the opportunity to trace how Greek religion was socially and cognitively embedded in Greek children and reinforced in adults, so that it is possible to observe the nature and limitations of this socialisation. The consequence is that this chapter is more about religion than it is directly about atheism, but it is crucial to understanding the nature of the Greek environment in which atheism flourished. Central to this chapter is the question: how do people become religious, and how do they become atheists? What sort of priority was teaching belief given, how seriously did Greeks take the need to educate children into beliefs, and what sort of mechanisms did they use to ensure their children believed and behaved appropriately? Exploring Greek religious education helps identify the nature and strength of this socialisation, and the potential cognitive and behavioural consequences, as well as the gaps in its effectiveness. So another key question posed by this chapter is: how effective was religious socialisation, and how did atheistic ideas and teachings break through the gaps?

Robert Garland recently observed that ‘[w]e know more about children in relation to Greek religion in general and Athenian religion in particular than we do about any other aspect of their lives.’¹ But what do we know about the type of religious education, or socialisation, that children received? There are two key types of evidence on religious education in ancient Greece, both of which offer very different perspectives: first, on the way that Greek education and socialisation actually operated in the ancient city; and secondly, philosophical arguments for the way that education ought to work (both of these, inevitably, overlap in works of writers like Plato). This chapter presents a collage of evidence on education: Athenian and non-Athenian (mostly Spartan), male and female, and wealthy and less wealthy, and where possible, citizen and non-citizen. There are conceptual difficulties: there is very little evidence that the Greeks conceived of the idea of ‘teaching children about religion’ in the same way as it can sometimes be conceived of today. The need for raising children with appropriate beliefs about the gods was certainly recognised in Greece, but the religious ‘education’ Greek children received was largely not of any formal type. Even the

¹ Garland 2013: 207.

more structured forms of education, *paideia*, were more ‘socialisation’ than they were ‘education’.² So rather than formal education, the bulk of evidence concerns how children were exposed to religion and learned by participation, observation, association with their elders, and exposure to the religious environment of the ancient world through the *polis*, *oikos*, and other social, political, and religious constructions. It was largely through the indirectly educational aspects of life in the Greek city that Greeks learned about religion, as every aspect of their life was saturated with the religious. The great nineteenth-century agnostic Robert Ingersoll observed:

For the most part we inherit our opinions. We are the heirs of habits and mental customs. Our beliefs, like the fashion of our garments, depend on where we were born. We are molded and fashioned by our surroundings.

Environment is a sculptor -- a painter.

If we had been born in Constantinople, the most of us would have said: “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet.” If our parents had lived on the banks of the Ganges, we would have been worshipers of Siva, longing for the heaven of Nirvana.³

Greeks knew they were not born believing in their gods. In the Greek world it was generally recognised that children needed to be educated, or appropriately socialised, to have the correct moral approach, and to believe in the right gods. But this was a live topic in the ancient world, just as it is today.⁴

Formal forms of education in Greece and the lack of religious instruction

The formal education of the young Athenian aristocrat was ‘practical and ethical rather than intellectual’.⁵ Elite education aimed to produce the good citizen by teaching skills and

² As Murray and Wilson 2004: 4 observe. See also Beaumont 2012: 152.

³ Ingersoll 1896.

⁴ Children needed education into right belief: Pindar *O* 2.86-8, 9.100-104, *N* 3.40-2. Thgn. 31-8: one learns good from the good and bad from the bad. Joyal et al. 2009: 6, 6-7. See also Pl. *Cra.* 384b: Plato’s Socrates says he would have learned the names of the gods if he had attended the more expensive lectures by Prodicus. Pl. *Prot.* is a discussion of whether people are born good or they need to be taught goodness, which was a fashionable topic of discussion in the Classical period e.g. Arist *NE* 1103a-b; on this see Martin, D. 2004: 67-72, and Engberg-Pedersen 1983. Gagarin and Woodruff 1995: 181-4: on teaching *aretē*. Barrow 1976: 39.

⁵ Kagan 1991: 4 on the practical nature of Athenian education.

character-building, and learning appropriate moral, religious, and political behaviour through mythical traditions such as those of Homer.⁶ In the late fifth and fourth centuries, the education of the citizen male was a preoccupation of the Athenian philosophers, as part of a debate over teaching strategies and a desire for teaching to have a moral dimension and outcome for learners. This was a world that recognised the limits of human nature but believed that nurture was key; even naturally good children needed teaching appropriate values, including on religion, in order to grow into well-ordered adults.⁷ In Classical Athens, schools were not state-run, but were either in private homes or hired rooms, in the open air, or in the *palaestra*, the wrestling ground in a gymnasium or of a private property.⁸ This elite male education was traditionally divided into two: physical training, and mental or moral training, which comprised poetry, music, maths, and dialectic.⁹

The binary distinction in Athenian elite education generally remained into the fifth century, though the latter was later also split into two, leaving three categories by the mid-late

⁶ Focus on morality in education: Pl. *Laws* 2.653b, 659d, esp. book 7, e.g. 7.788a, Aelius Theon *Prog*: xix-xx; Joyal et al. 2009: 36 comment that Solon's laws were more concerned with morality than education; in Ar. *Knights* 182-93 education and the virtuous character (and the inverse) are paired; see also Bloomer 2013: 457, Patterson 2013: 367: on the moral focus of education. Barrow 1976: 56: Athenian education aimed to create balanced, healthy, moderate, sensible people. See also Beaumont 2012: 15-42: idea that children were 'wild, untamed beings' (152) who needed appropriate training. On *kaloskagathos* specifically see Jaeger 1973: 13. On the importance for the *kaloskagathos* of the package of behaviours which included morality, see Atherton 1998: 229-32. On the Xenophontic idea of the *symposium* as key to educating appropriately behaving *kaloikagathoi*, see Hobden 2004. See Robb 1994: 184; see also Barrow 1976: 31.

⁷ On goodness as taught, but recognition of natural evil/goodness: Eur. *Hec.* 592-602. Arist. *NE* 1179b.20. records the debate on naturalness of vs teaching virtue; see De Romilly 2002: 44-9, Mulhern 2004: 327-8, and Ober 2001: 175-207, esp. 188-94 on philosophers as alternative teaching authorities. Pl. *Meno* 93c-94e1: Athenians (and Socrates) believed they should teach virtue to children; see also *Crit.* 50d-51d1, *Ap.* 24d10-e2; Kraut 1987: 296. Socrates, according to Plato, offered the most criticism of the idea that virtue could be taught: see Kraut 1987: 245-94, particularly 288. and Pl. *Prot.* 319e1-320b5, but the Platonic Socrates accepted the importance of moral teaching or exposure, as below. See Pl. *Men.* 70a and *Laws* 2.653a-b.

⁸ On school structures see Beck 1975: 14. No state organised teaching: Griffith 2001: 24, Ober 2001: 175-207.

⁹ Binary division: Pl. *Rep.* 2.376e, *Laws* 6.764c-e, 7.795d-e, Isoc. 15.180-1, Arist. *NE* 1180a25, *Pol.* 8.1337b23; and Ar. *Kn.* 1235-9 toys with this idea, showing the contrast between proper and improper education; Morgan 1999: 49.

fifth century, according to Socrates in Plato's *Protagoras*.¹⁰ These were the three principles of *gymnastikē*, *mousikē*, and *grammata*, with three corresponding *didaskoloi*, or teachers: the *paidotribēs*, a physical trainer who taught the boys to develop and care for their bodies; the *kitharistēs*, a music teacher whose aimed to develop character; and the *grammatistēs*, who taught Greek literacy and basic maths.¹¹ The *paidotribēs* and the *kitharistēs* were expected to teach appropriate moral, religious, and political behaviour, and as such were traditionally valued higher than the *grammatistēs*.¹² Children might also have a *paidagōgos*, a slave supervisor, who protected the child and ensured they maintained their manners.¹³ This structure of Athenian education became traditional, but Athenian education could take different forms and each function overlapped the others in practice.¹⁴ Nonetheless, though religion was a part of the education of elite children into good citizens, Athenian students did not 'study' religion at all.

Beyond the Athenian elite, formal education varied. In Athens, those who could not afford to buy formal education received no formal education, though many could probably afford the low fees for an elementary education.¹⁵ The education of the non-wealthy urbanites did not change a great deal after the introduction of formal education; their education was up to their parents, usually meaning that following their basic informal home education or a simple paid elementary education, they would have been apprenticed or entered into a trade.¹⁶ The only hint of a more public form of schooling in the fifth century is from outside Athens:

¹⁰ Plato backdates the ternary division to the 430s in *Prot.* 312a-b; other fourth century writers take this for granted, e.g. Xen. *Lac. Pol.* 2.1, Arist. *Pol.* 8.1337b23-46; Morgan 1999: 50-1.

¹¹ On the *grammatistēs*: Barrow 1976: 36, 40, Beavis 2000: 412, Beck 1975: 9-13, Muir 2003: 506, Robb 1994: 184-5.

¹² *Paidotribēs* and *kitharistēs*' role was to build character and body: Arist. *Pol.* 8.1339a; Barrow 1976: 42-45. The higher value of the *paidotribēs* and the *kitharistēs* is revealed by the focus on them on vase paintings, e.g. in Beck 1975: 14. Also Cheiron the Centaur, the ideal schoolmaster, is not depicted as teaching letters: *Maxims of Cheiron*, From Hesiod; schol. on Pindar *P* 6.19 quotes it. Beck 1975: 9-23. On the moral teaching of music see Csapo 2004: 241.

¹³ Role of *paidagōgos*: Hdt. 8.75.1.

¹⁴ Education overlapped: Arist. *Pol.* 8.1337b observes.

¹⁵ Most could probably afford an elementary education: Pritchard 2015: 121.

¹⁶ Many Athenians were not or only basically literate, e.g. Ar. *Kn.* 188-9. On Athenian literacy: esp. Morgan 1999: 46-61; also Barrow 1976: 47-8. Apprenticeships: Robb 1994: 201; see also Griffith 2001: 29, Burford 1972: 82-91.

in Herodotus, where a Chian school collapsed and killed 119 students.¹⁷ However, the school was probably just a larger private institution: in most cities private education seems to have been the norm. Outside Athens the organisation of formal education differed, but the aim was always the same: teaching children appropriate moral, religious, and political behaviour in order to create good citizens, the variations mostly driven by different historical traditions and definitions each *polis* had of ‘good citizens’.

Though the Spartan education system is usually described as ‘a mainly secular educational cycle with important religious elements’, religion was omnipresent in Spartan education as it was elsewhere.¹⁸ At the heart of the male education system, as described primarily by Xenophon and Plutarch, was the *agōgē*, entered around age seven (the usual age of entrance to education in Greece).¹⁹ Spartan males did not become full citizens until age thirty, when they were allowed to hold office, engage in political and economic activity, and get married.²⁰ A key figure in the childrearing system was the *paidonomos*, who was in charge of the young and had wide-reaching powers; Sparta was unique in this aspect of state involvement in child rearing.²¹ Spartan education, as far as it is discernible from the remaining evidence, was also organised to produce a good citizen.²² According to Xenophon, Spartan education aimed to produce individuals who subjugated their lives to the state, and served an austere, courageous, community-oriented life.²³ Different deities served to reinforce positive values. The Dioscuri, for instance, embodied values of courage, obedience,

¹⁷ Hdt 6.27, with the Chian children’s school. Cole 1981: 226 argues in Athens and most other places children were sent to a private tutor or home-taught.

¹⁸ Cartledge 1987: 25. As Kennell 1995: 135-7: this secularity is mainly a feature of the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

¹⁹ *Agōgē* as the centre of the Spartan ideal: Kennell 1995: 5. The age of entry was seven according to Plut. *Lyc.* 16.4; Kennell 1995: 32, 117.

²⁰ Xen. *Lac. Pol.* 1.6, 4.7, Plut. *Lyc.* 14.1, 15.1-10, 24.1, 25.1; Kennell 1995: 118.

²¹ *Paidonomos*: Xen. *Lac. Pol.* 2.2, Plut. *Lyc.* 17.2. Kennell 1995: 120-1.

²² Spartan education suffers, like all discussions on that ancient *polis*, from ‘le mirage Spartiate’, coined by Ollier 1933. See Kennell 1995: 16-7: on the problems with Xenophon, and 14-27 discusses sources on Sparta. Yet on Xenophon’s general value and consistency with Plato, Aristotle, and the archaeology see Griffith 2001: 49-50.

²³ Tyrtaeus F12.10-28 West, Plut. *Lyc.* 24, Xen. *Lac. Pol.* 2.1-4.6, and Arist. *Pol.* 8.1337a21-32; Barrow 1976: 23-4, Joyal et al. 2009: 15-18.

and self-sacrifice.²⁴ Artemis Orthia, as guardian of the young, was particularly important to the Spartan ephebic (and female) education.

The education of Greek women was very different from that of men: some women were literate and received some sort of formal education, though, again, women received no formal religious education. In Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, the most influential (and problematic) source on Athenian women, Ischomachus describes how his wife was taught nothing before she came to him, beyond how to weave and dietary requirements, and he is consequently forced to teach her.²⁵ Xenophon presents only a partial picture. Education of women (and men) varied over place, time, and social class, but women were less likely to be literate than their male counterparts in all circumstances.²⁶ There are no clear records of formal schooling of women in the ancient world, but women probably learned to read or write at home, though the evidence for this is limited, indirect, and late.²⁷ Since Athenian women did not participate in the political realm, they would have had less use for reading and writing than men.²⁸

Outside Athens educational opportunities for women may have been better, but the evidence is very threadbare. Some women outside Athens, most famously Sappho, but also Telesilla, and a handful of Boeotian women in the fifth century, were commemorated for their poetry, which included formidable compositional ability.²⁹ There were also female Pythagoreans according to Iamblichos.³⁰ Spartan women were given a public education as well, and vigorous physical training, preparing them for motherhood, unlike their peers in other states, who were trained in ordinary 'feminine tasks' like making clothes, weaving,

²⁴ Sanders 1992: 205-10: on the Dioscuri; Pindar *N* 10.52-4 calls the Dioscuri Sparta's stewards, and they featured on coins of various periods, on reliefs, and in statuary and trophies, and in altars and frequent sacrifices, in Paus. 3.14.7-9, 3.13.6, 3.20.2, and the frequent subject of Spartan origin stories, as in Xen. *Hell.* 6.3.5-6, Pl. *Laws* 7.796b, and Thgn. 1087.

²⁵ Xen. *Oik.* 7.3-6. On women in the *Oeconomicus* see Pomeroy 1994: 58-67.

²⁶ Cole 1981: 219.

²⁷ No evidence of formal instruction of girls: Cole 1981: 225. Late evidence: e.g. a Hellenistic statuette of a woman and girl reading from a book: from Cole 1981: 226, n.43. Also Hdt 4.78 has Skyles' Greek mother teaching him to speak, read, and write Greek. Cole 1981: 226-7.

²⁸ As Harvey 1966: 621 argued.

²⁹ Athens NM 1260 depicts Sappho reading. Cole 1981: 223-4, n.26, Pomeroy 1977: 55-6.

³⁰ Iamblichus *Vita Pyth.* 267 names female Pythagoreans, according to Cartledge 1981: 90-3.

baking, and cooking.³¹ Spartan women were musically trained, and there were some famous female poets from Sparta, like Kleitagora.³² However, this image of the Spartan woman as unusually empowered has been challenged: in reality, very little concrete information is known about female Spartan children.³³

So the Greeks did not have any discernible independent formal religious instruction, beyond the appropriate religious behaviour and beliefs learned by citizen males (in and outside Athens), as part of a package of virtues, values, and behaviours necessary for civic life. Where they did receive instruction, women in Athens, Sparta, and elsewhere do not seem to have received anything like the focus on appropriate civic values, which included religion, that men did in formal education. This is probably because women were not expected to participate in the political sphere, where civic behaviours (appropriate moral, religious, and political conduct) were required. Overall, however, it is clear that formal education was only a small part of the religious learning that certain select demographics in the *polis* received. The bulk of religious education came from outside formal education, in religious socialisation.

Homer and the myths: formal and environmental learning

Reinforcing the elements of formal religious education that Greek citizens received were environmental factors and socialisation: this is particularly visible through learning about Homer and the myths about the gods. Teaching and learning about Homer and the myths was a crucial part of the young Greek's experience and education, and Greeks learned about these in both a formal and less direct way. From the first stories told to them by their nurse to the liberal education provided by the sophists, and the recitations of street performers to

³¹ Xen. *Lac. Pol.* 1.3-4 and Pl. *Laws* 7.806a have them avoiding making clothes but stresses physical training, also implied in Ar. *Lys.* 82; Cartledge 1981: 91, n.40, Millender 1999: 358. Baking: Heraclides Lembus 373.13. On literacy see Cartledge 1981: 93, Cole 1981: 228. Boring 1979: 15.

³² Music: Pl. *Laws* 7.806a. Kleitagora: Ar. *Lys.* 1237, *Wasps* 1245-7.

³³ This extra educational focus has sometimes been seen as part of the extra licence of Spartan women. Arist. *Pol.* 2.1269a29-1271b19; See also Plut. *Lyc.* and *Lys.*, Hdt 5.51.2-3, 7.239.4, on Gorgo; 4.146, on the escape of the Spartans by trading clothes with their wives; 6.52.2-7 on *Argeia*; see Cartledge 1981, stressing the negative elements of the life of a Spartan woman, and Millender 1999, arguing the myth of Spartan female 'license' was the creation of Athenian men.

depictions on pottery, children were surrounded by stories about the gods.³⁴ Since Jaeger's *Paideia* the educational, literary, moral, and religious role of the poet has been recognised.³⁵ Greek boys spent a great deal of time reading, reciting, singing, performing, and even producing *epitomies* and versions of stories about the gods, from the epic poems.

First Homer's works and other epic poems were memorised, and then those of the melic or lyric poets, as they were considered fundamental in moral instruction.³⁶ The method was rote, copying from texts like the *Iliad* onto wooden tablets; indeed, all of the vase depictions that remain which show boys learning or reading are of epic texts or concerning mythology.³⁷ As elsewhere in Greece, Spartan youths learned *grammata* through Homer and the poets, absorbing key moral lessons and the divinities of their world.³⁸ As well as Homer, Hesiod, and other poets, anything to hand of decent style could be reused in education, but most available written material with any significant content (i.e. not basic nonsense-words designed for copying), would have included stories or worship of the gods.³⁹ For instance, it is not difficult to imagine the *grammatistēs* instructing his boys to copy from publicly available texts, many of which (the vast majority, before the epigraphic habit of the fifth century) were cult and temple documents, either publicly displayed or stored in and around the city, particularly in central, sacred spaces.⁴⁰ The role of verse-form and rote-learning in

³⁴ On wet nurses: Parkin 2013: 56; Joyal et. al. 2009: 66-7.

³⁵ See Havelock 1963, who saw the poets as a 'tribal encyclopaedia'. For modern readings see Thomas 1995: 104-123, Goldhill 1991: 116-27., Janko 2006: 52-4, Morgan 2007: 303, and Raaflaub 2000: 23-59: focus on the political.

³⁶ Moral instruction: Pl. *Prot.* 325e-26c; Barrow 1976: 40, Beck 1964: 117, Robb 1994: 184-6, Muir 2003: 506. 'The most important part of the traditional education involved learning the epic poems by heart, for Homer was the fountain of wisdom and the model of Greek behaviour... In the early part of the fifth century, this was as much education as a young aristocrat received.' Kagan 1991: 21. Useful content: Ar. *Frogs*, 1030-5.

³⁷ E.g. Douris 'school cup', Berlin F2285, which includes a text that reads 'Muse sing to me... I begin to sing of wide-flowing Scamander', which is probably a line from Stesichorus, as in Beazley 1948: 337. Pot depictions in Immerwahr 1964: 17-48, esp. 18-19 on the Douris cup; Beck 1975: 16, Robb 1994: 186. The depiction in Walter Barreis 63 is not of epic poetry, but it is 'a mythological aid', as in Immerwahr 1973: 143.

³⁸ Ducat 2006: 277.

³⁹ Morgan 1999: 47 remarks: '[t]here cannot be many written remains of the Classical period which were not, at that time or afterwards, used in one broadly pedagogic context or another'.

⁴⁰ Morgan 1999: 54, Thomas 1991: 31. On archiving and monumentalisation and the Athenian 'epigraphic habit' see Davies 2003: 327-40; central sacred spaces: 337.

memory cannot be overestimated.⁴¹ Memorability is key (alongside ‘appeal’) to the spread and longevity of religious ideas and concepts.⁴² According to the cognitive scientist Harvey Whitehouse, the ‘two modes of religiosity’ are key to understanding the importance of experience and participation alongside formal learning in religion.⁴³ The first ‘mode’ is ‘doctrinal’: highly routinized and formulaic, but unexciting, ritual action. The recitation and rote-learning of Homer and other texts, and frequent recitations by rhapsodes, are perfect examples of doctrinal learning. The stories Greek children learned about their gods would have stuck with them for life.

Homer was the ‘educator of Greece’: Homeric works were central to Greek education, and an adult without extensive knowledge of these poems in the fifth century would have been very unusual.⁴⁴ It was not unknown for ordinary citizens to know every verse of Homer, though the ability to recite at will the *Odyssey* or *Iliad* like Niceratus in Xenophon’s *Symposium* was undoubtedly unusual:

‘My father was anxious to see me develop into a good man (*anēr agathos*),’ said Niceratus, ‘so he made me to memorize all of Homer; and so even now I can repeat the whole *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by heart.’

‘But have you failed to observe,’ questioned Antisthenes, ‘that the rhapsodes, too, all know these poems?’

‘How could I,’ he replied, ‘when I listen to their recitations nearly every day?’⁴⁵

Niceratus is teased for his devotion in learning Homer through study and memorising the texts, but also through listening to rhapsodes every day.⁴⁶ It is clear that the degree of familiarity with Homer that Niceratus displays was plausible, if a little extreme. Niceratus’ example shows how religious learning did take place in a formal context, to some degree, but

⁴¹ Thomas 1991: 123-31.

⁴² Ideas must be remarkable enough to be interesting, i.e. have some memorable breaks from our intuitive understanding of the world, like walking on water, but only a minimal amount of these, to ensure they are memorable; this is minimal-counterintuitiveness. See Boyer 1994, McCauley 1999: 286, Wolpert 1992.

⁴³ Whitehouse 2000, 2002, and 2004 details these modes of religiosity.

⁴⁴ Homer as the educator of Greece: Pl. *Rep.* 10.606e; see also Xen. *Symp* 4.6; Barrow 1976: 22, Muir 2003: 506. Whitmarsh 2016: 29 describes the idea that a Greek would not know Homer as ‘unimaginable’.

⁴⁵ Xen. *Symp.* 3.5-6.

⁴⁶ Xen. *Symp.* 3.6-7. Beck 1964: 118.

it was reinforced through exposure to the religious environment. Greece was both an oral and a literate society by the fifth century, and both oral and literary approaches contributed to the ongoing cultural education of Greeks.⁴⁷ Books served principally as didactic or mnemonic aids to oral traditions for the Greeks, no substitute for the live skills of discourse, in a primarily oral environment quite mistrustful of literature, even in official contexts.⁴⁸ Homer was a part of ordinary Greek life as much as formal education: even citizens who could not afford formal instruction were exposed to singers reciting Homer, pots and buildings depicting Homeric scenes, dramatic adaptations of epic, and of course, conversations about mythology.

Socialisation: learning by association and through experience

Informal religious ‘education’, or socialisation, was the key way a child learned about religion and the gods. As Bremmer observed, ‘Greek children were socialised into religious practice by participation and imitation.’⁴⁹ Some children did receive a formal education which included religious components, but this was partial and restricted to the few; the religious education they did receive was reinforced by experience, as it was for those who could not afford a formal education.⁵⁰ It is clear that education should not be separated from adulthood as ‘prepolitical’ (part of a formal process that ends with citizenship); this is especially the case for religious ‘education’, which was a part of the life of every Greek from birth to death.⁵¹ Most Greeks learned about the gods and myths through experience. Singers on street corners recited Homer and other myths about the gods, dramatic depictions revealed the gods and explored theological issues, religious festivals demonstrated the appropriate behaviour towards the gods, and in Athens *symposia* remained one of the main practical forms of education in religion for elites from the Archaic period.⁵²

⁴⁷ Greece as an oral society: Thomas 1991: 15.

⁴⁸ Mistrust: Pl. *Phdr.* 276a-d, 278a-b; see Robb 1994: 99-120, Thomas 1991: 21-33.

⁴⁹ Bremmer 1995: 33.

⁵⁰ See particularly Bremmer 1995.

⁵¹ ‘Prepolitical and formal’: the traditional view, in Arendt 1958. The collection of essays edited by Yun Lee Too 2001 argue for a more fluid and open, and less formal, long-term education. See Patterson 2013: 379.

⁵² Waterfield 2005: 128 argued for the significance of drama in education. Hearing the recitations of rhapsodes every day: Xen. *Symp.* 3.6; Beck 1964: 118, Thomas 1995: 106-7. See Patterson 2013: 379: religious festivals as education. On the educational nature of *symposia*, see Muir 2003: 506 and esp. Hobden 2004: 134-6.

This sort of socialisation in action is key, because beliefs are not primarily formed from a conscious rational process, for which a more formal education would be crucial, but from reflections, or rationalisations, of intuitions.⁵³ Religious beliefs are shaped by our culture primarily through religious actions and other less reflective processes that tap into our unconscious mental processes. These intuitions have foundations in evolutionary experience, providing basic mental structures like, for instance, agency detection, which is the evolutionary survival strategy that leads humans to believe in divine agents.⁵⁴ Agency detection allows the mind to detect characteristics of agency, including, for instance, non-inertial movement with goal-oriented or complex unpredictable paths.⁵⁵ The human agency detection device is hypersensitive: it sees agency everywhere, including hearing ghosts from a creaking door, and arguably even god from the natural world. Beliefs arise from responses to these intuitions: rejection or acceptance, as conditioned by the learning of the individual. Theism and atheism, then, arise from the same intuition: to believe in deities. Cultural and environmental factors and behaviours condition how people come to believe (and unbelieve) in certain ideas. As Aristotle observed: ‘education by habit must come before education by reason’.⁵⁶

The picture that has been painted of environmental socialisation is typical of Greek religion as it is now commonly understood, as a kind of passive religiosity that often does not gain explicit discussion. Ducat captures this sense of constant non-explicit religious learning:

... [were] the young Spartans were taught religion in a formal way? Certainly not – not, at least, in the modern sense of a subject labelled ‘religion’ with all its own teachers. That would be alien to the whole nature of Greek religion. Religion was, of course, involved in the teaching which formed part of Spartan education, indeed of all education in antiquity. It was through Homer that Spartan children learned their *grammata*, and through Homer that they learned what they needed to know about the main divinities, their moral character and their history. *Mousike* in its various forms –

⁵³ On the insights of cognitive science of religion for religious education see Brelsford 2005: 174-91, who offers an excellent survey of the evidence from the perspective of a religious educator. Boyer 2001: 305-6 argues that beliefs are attempts to justify or explain intuitions, which are themselves the result of ‘implicit’ and therefore hidden mental processes.

⁵⁴ McCauley and Lawson 2002: 21.

⁵⁵ Barrett, 2004, ch.3.

⁵⁶ Arist. *Pol.* 8.1338b.

singing, dancing and poetry, was shot through with a form of religion which was more specifically Spartan. And it was their training in *mousike* which equipped the young to play their part in the community's festivals. But, on the whole, religion was not taught formally. Young people learned it through osmosis, in every social context – starting with the family. It was the community as a whole which gave them their religious upbringing. Their practical training consisted of taking part in festivals. At Sparta the process of joining the community of citizens by means of religious activity started very early, probably at the age of *paidiskoi*. Taking part in religious life was just one aspect of training the young to live as citizens: and that training was the purpose of education.⁵⁷

The constant osmotic nature of religious learning in the ancient city makes religious education difficult to characterise, but Ducat's list of key loci for religious learning provides a solid starting point: Homer (which has already been discussed); *mousike*, which will be covered here as choruses; rites of passage; participation in festivals and taking other ritual roles; and family activity.

Informal learning

a. The family as the locus for religious socialisation

The immediate family remained the most important locus for learning about religion.⁵⁸ Before a boy began his formal education at around seven, he was taught by his nurse and father about right and wrong and piety and impiety: these were ideas crucial to the success of the city, even if they were not always successful as Plato's Protagoras observed.⁵⁹ But the most important way in which a child learned about religion in family life was not in discussion but through ritual participation alongside their parents and extended family. Because there were no religious authorities in Greece comparable with modern religions in regulating and authorising sacrifice, many rituals were the domain of the individual citizen and their family.⁶⁰ Across Greece a child's early family life was saturated with religion, not

⁵⁷ Ducat 2006: 277, conclusion.

⁵⁸ Bremmer 1995: 30-1 and Ingalls 2000: 1.

⁵⁹ See Pl. *Prot.* 325c5-d; de Romilly 2002: 197, Joyal et al. 2009: 45.

⁶⁰ Rituals the domain of the family: Bremmer 1995: 31.

only in the rituals in which they participated but also those performed on their behalf.⁶¹ Children were the subject of rituals to *Eileithya* or *Genetyllis*, safeguarding the health of the mother and child, at the moment of birth, and five days after birth the *Amphidromai* took place, the *dekata* after ten days, and so on.⁶² Children were placed under the protection of *kourotrophic* (child-rearing) deities like Ge.⁶³ Cults celebrating these deities were extremely common, so combined with the high levels of infant mortality, this would suggest that it was believed adulthood could only be attained under the protection of such a deity.⁶⁴ Children were also the subject of magical rituals, being fitted with amulets, charms and pendants that they wore until the age of three or four.⁶⁵ As Burkert remarked: '[t]he formation of the rising generation appears almost the principle function of religion, where ritual concentrates on the introduction of adolescents into the world of adults'.⁶⁶

Children accompanied their parents and family in various ritual and religious actions, and this offered the most substantial instruction on proper ritual behaviour. Children were participants at many ordinary rituals like weddings, sacrifices, and mourning rituals, participating in the *prothesis*, or laying out of the body, as well as in the *ekphora*, or funerary procession; they served as adjuncts in many rituals where they did not have an active part.⁶⁷ Children were a part of the full spread of Greek religious life. Isaeus, the orator, in his speech *On the Estate of Ciron*, records the normal activities of a father dealing with his grandsons:

⁶¹ Garland 2013: 207: on early life rituals.

⁶² *Eileithya* and *Genetyllis*: see Garland 2013: 208, Dillon, M. 2002: 230-1, and Parker 2006: 432-3. *Amphidromia* marked the inclusion of the newborn into the family under the protection of Hestia, and the ritual *opteria* (gifts); On the *Amphidromia* see Hamilton 1984, Golden 1990: 23, Neils 2003: 144, and Pomeroy 1997: 68-9.

⁶³ On *kourotrophic* deities: e.g. Hes. *Theog.* 346-8: the progeny of Tethys included *kourai*; see Parker 2006: 426-39.

⁶⁴ Infant mortality was maybe as high as 300 per 1000. Parkin 2013: 41, 48, 50; see also Saller 2007: 87-112; based on model life tables from Coale, Demeny, and Vaughan 1983. Belief that deities ensured survival of child: Garland 2013: 210.

⁶⁵ Amulets etc: see figures and discussions in Beaumont 2012: 62, Garland 2013: 210, Neils 2003: 143-4.

⁶⁶ Burkert 1985: 260.

⁶⁷ On mourning see Oakley 2003: 163-94; rituals: e.g. Thebes Museum BE 469; Neils 2003: 139, 157-8; Garland 2013: 220.

...as was natural, seeing that we were the sons of his own daughter, Ciron never offered a sacrifice without our presence; whether he was performing a great or a small sacrifice, we were always there and took part in the ceremony. And not only were we invited to such rites but he also always took us into the country for the festival of the Dionysia, and we always went with him to public spectacles and sat at his side, and we went to his house to keep all the festivals; and when he sacrificed to Zeus Ktesios – a festival to which he attached a special importance, to which he admitted neither slaves nor free men outside his own family, at which he personally performed all the rites – we participated in this celebration and laid our hands with his upon the victims and placed our offerings side by side with his, and took part in all the other rites, and he prayed for our health and wealth, as he naturally would, being our grandfather.⁶⁸

In the speech, Isaeus is trying to persuade the jury that the two sons of Ciron's daughter are legitimate. In doing so, he shows how Ciron performed all of the normal range of ritual and religious activities with his grandchildren that a grandfather would be expected to. While it is inevitably idealistic, the passage demonstrates the range and importance of religious activity as part of a normal family routine, and how it served to legitimise family relationships. The other side of this can be found in a speech from Demosthenes:

On arriving at manhood you assisted your mother in her initiations, reading the service-book while she performed the ritual, and helping generally with the paraphernalia. At night it was your duty to mix the libations, to clothe the catechumens in fawn-skins, to wash their bodies, to scour them with the loam and the bran, and, when their lustration was duly performed, to set them on their legs, and give out the hymn...⁶⁹

Demosthenes is mocking Aeschines' poor upbringing, by claiming that he helped his parents in all sorts of inappropriate ways, including in religious rites unfit for a respectable young man. Not all religious rites were shared with the family or with children: children ought to take appropriate ritual roles that helped secure and reinforce their position in society.

b. Ritual roles

⁶⁸ Isaeus 8.15-16. trans. E. Forster.

⁶⁹ Dem. 18.259.

Plato's Stranger, in the *Laws*, recommended that children between the ages of three and six should gather periodically at village sanctuaries, for an unspecified purpose that was probably an explicit induction into the local religious lore.⁷⁰ The Stranger is concerned to ensure that children meet a minimum requirement of knowledge about the gods, to be able to function in society, which he assumes will be largely achieved without direct instruction. Children ought to learn enough of the gods to prevent them from blaspheming and ensure they speak with appropriate piety when sacrificing and praying.⁷¹ The Stranger accepts that children will learn primarily through socialisation, by experience:

the stories heard so often in earliest infancy, while still at the breast, from their mothers and nurses – stories, you may say, crooned over them, in sport and in earnest, like spells – and heard again in prayers offered over sacrifices, in conjunction with the spectacle which gives such intense delight to the eye and ear of children, as it is enacted at a sacrifice, the spectacle of our parents addressing their gods, with assured belief in their existence, in earnest prayer and supplication for themselves and their children.⁷²

The ideal image presented by the Stranger in the *Laws* was not far from reality: children across Greece served roles in sanctuaries, festivals, or in rituals, which might have offered a more formal route for religious instruction. Children functioned as temple servants, and could take on a variety of roles, like the priest of Zeus at Aigion, a young boy; the priestess of Artemis at Patrai and Aigeira, a *Parthenos*; or *pais aph'hestias* ('hearth-child'), which was an intermediary between the initiates and the divine, maintained at public expense at Eleusis for the Mysteries.⁷³ Girls carrying *kanephoroi* (baskets containing ritual objects) are shown in religious processions from very early periods, as in a 7th-6th C Middle Corinthian bottle in the British Museum.⁷⁴ *Parthenoi* took part in the *Panathenaea*: thirty-one are depicted on the Parthenon frieze carrying wine containers and incense burners for purification; and they also

⁷⁰ Pl. *Laws* 7.794a; approaching formal education: Garland 2013: 219.

⁷¹ *Laws* 7.821c-d; Plato's aims discussed in Garland 2013: 219.

⁷² Pl. *Laws* 10.887d, trans. Taylor. See also Eur. F484N², and Pl. *Rep.* 2.377.

⁷³ Priestess at Patrai and Aigeira: Paus. 7.19.1, 7.26.5; Zeus: Paus. 7.24.4. *Pais aph'hestias*: Porph. *Abst.* 4.5; Garland 2013: 218. Pre-pubescent children frequently feature in lists of priests at sanctuaries, especially in rural areas: Neils 2003: 158.

⁷⁴ BM 1865.7-20.20; discussed in Oakley 2013: 155.

participated in women-only festivals like the *Haloa*, *Skira*, *Stenia*, and *Thesmophoria*.⁷⁵ Two girls belonging to the *genos Praxiergidai* served annually as *loutrides*, whose duty it was to wash the ancient olive wood image of Athena at the *Plynteria* and *Kallynteria* rituals.⁷⁶ Children played special roles in festivals and ritual performances too. At the *Pyanopsia* festival, children with living parents were *paides amphithaleis*, cutting branches for the wreaths of athletic victors, and girls carried the suppliant's branch in the cult of Apollo to the Delphinion on the sixth day of *Mounychion*.⁷⁷

By the Classical period boys are depicted assisting in rituals in a variety of roles, including assisting the priest at an altar for a sacrifice, taking the role of *splanchnoptai* (those who roasted the entrails on a spit), leading the animals towards the altar, or *extispicy* (divination with a liver).⁷⁸ Indeed, over 40% of surviving Attic votive reliefs include child figures, most of whom are engaged in making offerings.⁷⁹ Although children, particularly young boys, were useful in these contexts for their innocence and ritual purity, it is tempting to view this formative experience as a more structured educational opportunity for the young.⁸⁰ It is also worth noting that these children who were enlisted to help in sacrificial rites could be slaves as well as sons of citizens, which offers a rare insight into the potential for religious learning of slave children.⁸¹ It has also been persuasively argued that some children were actively involved in the production of ritual items like pottery, or those with symbolic iconographical and mythical subjects, from the early Iron Age onwards.⁸² This system of learning through ritual roles and production, to reinforce stories and education in

⁷⁵ Women-only festivals: Ar. *Thesm.* 1150; Dillon, M. 2000: 470, 475-6, Garland 2013: 217-8.

⁷⁶ *Loutrides*: IG I³ 7; Xen. *Hell.* 1.4.12; Plut. *Alk.* 34.1; Hsch. and Phot. s.v. *loutrides*; Dillon, M. 2002: 132-6, Garland 1992: 100-2, 2013: 217.

⁷⁷ *paides amphithaleis*: Poll. *Onomast.* 3.25, ThesCRA 6.46. Garland 2013: 218. Girls carrying the suppliant's branch: Plut. *Thes.* 18.1-2. Beaumont 2012: 160, 165.

⁷⁸ *Splanchnoptai*: e.g. of a boy leading the animal to the altar: Neils and Oakley 2003: 158, fig. 22; Oakley 2013: 165. *Extispicy*: e.g. depiction of a boy holding an organ next to a warrior on an Attic red-figure amphora from 480BC in Würzburg; Oakley 2013: 155-6, fig. 156.

⁷⁹ Lawton 2007: 42, based on Edelmann's 1999 corpus.

⁸⁰ Formative experience: Beaumont 2012: 156.

⁸¹ Slaves: Isae. 8.16; Beaumont 2012: 160.

⁸² Children producing pottery: Langdon 2013: 174-89.

other contexts, was probably as successful in embedding religious learning in the young as Plato's Stranger envisioned.

c. Rites of passage

The Greek child's progress through life was marked by countless rites of passage, which served as exciting and memorable religious markers of age, status, and experience. The rites of passage introduced the child to the divine in its different manifestations and roles, and were crucial to the education of the child in the role that they had to fulfil as adults dealing with the gods and their place in the *polis* and other social subdivisions: 'religion provided the main avenue for children into the life of the *polis*'.⁸³ Around the end of their first year, a boy was introduced to his *phratry*, and his legal guardian was required to swear that the boy was a legitimate son of an Athenian woman.⁸⁴ When he turned fifteen, he was registered as a *phrater*, a formal member, and sacrifices were performed on his behalf, his hair was ritually cut, and the young men probably then performed the *oinisteria*, bringing an offering of wine to Herakles.⁸⁵ Boys participated in the *Anthesteria*: on the second day, called the *Choes*, boys of around three were crowned with a wreath and given a small pitcher of wine to participate in the ritual, for the first time introduced to one of the state's major deities alongside his year group.⁸⁶ Both sexes were also depicted on the *Choes*, shown in various states of play and occasionally in more direct ritual contexts.⁸⁷ The importance of their participation in the *Choes* should not be underestimated: the age of children seems to have been reckoned in the amount of *Choes* in which they had participated.⁸⁸

These rites of passage marked the child's development into adulthood. At the *Oschophoria*, the *Ephebes*, an elite band of five hundred youths, were expected to compete in a race carrying bunches of grapes on branches; this religious component later saw expansion

⁸³ Golden 1990: 41. Rites of passage were key in educating the child on their position in the *polis*: Garland 2013: 211.

⁸⁴ On the oath: Isae. 8.19, Dem. 57.4; [Dem.] 59.60; on the festival: Parker 2006: 458-61.

⁸⁵ On the *Oinisteria*: Athen. *Deipn.* 11.494; Garland 2013: 213.

⁸⁶ *Anthesteria*: Philostr. *Her.* 12.2.720, IG II² 1368.127-36; Parker 2006: 297-301, ThesCRA VI.41-5; Garland 2013: 212, Neils 2003: 146.

⁸⁷ *Choes*: Oakley 2013: 166, Neils 2003: 145-9, e.g. cats.95-7.

⁸⁸ In Ar. *Thesm.* 746-7 Mnesilochus asks a mother the age of her child by saying 'Three Choes? Or four?'; Neils 2003: 146.

under Lycurgus (around 338BC), when initiates were required to tour Athens' sanctuaries to begin their training.⁸⁹ *Ephebes* were expected to lead the victim to the altar and lift the animal to have its throat cut.⁹⁰ *Ephebes* also took part in a rite involving a statue of Athena, purifying the *Palladion* in sea water.⁹¹ They participated in other ritual competitions too, of recitation of works in festivals.⁹² Young Spartans were also required to attend and participate in state festivals like the *Gymnopaïdai*, *Karneia*, or the *Hyakinthia*, all of which required prior preparation and learning (like learning musical instruments and horse-riding), some of which was handled by public education and other aspects expected to be learned in private.⁹³ As many as 100,000 sixth-century lead figures have been found at the shrine of Artemis Orthia, of which hoplite types may have been linked to rites of passage.⁹⁴ Through these rites of passage, children were bonded to one another and the gods, learning their place in a political community manifest through its religion.

At Sparta, initiatory ceremonies were also crucial for developing and strengthening social bonding between young men.⁹⁵ An example of one of these rituals is the notorious 'Cheese Race'; these contests did occur in the Classical period, though most of the evidence is late.⁹⁶ In this race young boys competed to steal cheese from the altar of Artemis Orthia, and they were whipped while doing so. There are indications that this race had subversive and sacrilegious elements, particularly in the use of violence in sacred areas; but it was sanctioned and overseen by religious figures like the priestess of Orthia, as a form of ritualised inversion.⁹⁷ The Cheese Race was praised for teaching strategy, training in endurance and pain, and offering moral lessons about fame and suffering, though its religious

⁸⁹ *Oschophoria*: Plut. *Thes.* 23.2-3; Pind. F6c; Tours: [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 42.2-5; Garland 2013: 213-14.

⁹⁰ *Ephebes* leading victim and cutting its throat: Eur, *Hel.* 1562; Bremmer 1995: 32.

⁹¹ Purifying the *palladion*: Burkert 1970: 356-68, Garland 2013: 217.

⁹² Recitation: Pl. *Tim.* 21b, Beck 1975: 38.

⁹³ *Ephebes* at the *Gymnopaïdai*: Paus. 3.11.9; *Karneia*: Hesych. s.v. *Hyakinthia*: Polyc. ad Athen. 4.139d-f; Ducat 2006: 249, 262-77.

⁹⁴ Discussion of figurines in Kennell 1995: 136-7.

⁹⁵ Kennell 1995: 137.

⁹⁶ On the cheese race and ritual contests: Stele of Arexippos (fourth century); Xenophon *Lac. Pol.* 2.9, Paus. 3.16.10-11; Ducat 2006: 249, Joyal et al. 2009: 19-20.

⁹⁷ Subversive also in the choice of cheese; see Ducat 2006: 253 and Kennell 1995: 128.

connotations are not explicitly remarked on by any of the commentators, Xenophon, Plutarch, or Pausanias.⁹⁸

Boys more frequently seem to have undergone rites of passage than girls, but Greek girls participated in religious rituals at home and in the city, and did participate in a number of key rites of passage.⁹⁹ Girls made dedications of toys, locks of hair, belts, and other possessions associated with childhood to specific deities at important points in their development: on attaining puberty, on marrying, and when giving birth.¹⁰⁰ Artemis was typically the favoured deity of girls in Greek cities, but Athena, Hera, Hippolytus, and others, were also the objects of devotion.¹⁰¹ As for Sparta, figurines show that women were involved in running races that served as a rite of passage, and choral dancing.¹⁰² There were special Spartan festivals in which young women danced and sang in the nude, again, as part of a process of rites-of-passage in their ritual nudity and athleticism, paralleled at other sites in Greece.¹⁰³

These rites and festivals all had religious meaning and explanatory mythology attached to them, which the girls would have learned in the process of their participation: the *Heraia*, for instance, was reputedly a thanksgiving rite instituted by Hippodameia in gratefulness for her marriage to Pelops (the marriage link underlined its role as a rite-of-

⁹⁸ Suffering and fame and strategic, didactic, implications: Xen. *Lac. Pol.* 2.9; Pl. *Laws* 1.633b: Megillos talks only of it as systematic training in endurance of pain, not mentioning the location; Ducat 2006: 250-1.

⁹⁹ Rituals: Bremmer 1995: 33; rites: Garland 2013: 211, 214, 223.

¹⁰⁰ Spartan women shaved their heads: Plut. *Lyc.* 15.5. Garland 2013: 214, Neils 2003: 152-3.

¹⁰¹ Favoured deities: Garland 2013: 214.

¹⁰² 6th C bronze figurines of girls running: Inv. 3305, from Sparta; and Inv. 3072, from Delphi; National Museum Carapanos 24, from Dodona; BM 208, from Albania. Alc. *Parth.* 1.39, 3.8-9, refers to a ritual race associated with the cult of Helen; Paus. 3.13.7 described a similar type of race, and it is alluded to by Ar. *Lys.* 1307-15; and Paus. 5.16.2 describes the run in the Heraian games. Millender 1999: 367, and particularly Scanlon 1988: 185-202 for a detailed discussion of the ritual components of these competitions, as well as Neils 2003: 154 for a summary.

¹⁰³ Spartan festivals: Plut. *Lyc.* 14.4-6, *Mor.* 227e. Other sites: Sanctuary of Artemis at Braurion: see Millender 1999: 368-9, and Scanlon 1988: 189-200.

passage).¹⁰⁴ Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* includes a list which is frequently cited as evidence of the religious duties and roles that some elite girls could perform:

As soon as I was in my seventh year I became an *arrhephoros*. Then in my tenth I was a Grinder (*aletris*) to the Foundress (*Archgetis*). Then wearing a saffron robe, I was a bear (*arktos*) at the festival of Artemis Brauronia. Next on becoming a beautiful girl (*pais*), I was a Basket carrier (*kanephoros*), wearing a string of figs.¹⁰⁵

Only select women would be able to undertake these roles, but for those women, and probably others who observed, they were significant rites-of-passage. In Athens, the most famous of the rites of passage that girls might undertake was 'acting the bear' (*arkteuein*) for the *Arkteia*, consecrating young girls to Artemis, as depicted on various vessels from the archaic period.¹⁰⁶ *Arktoi* performed rituals including dancing, racing towards an altar, holding garlands and torches, and sacrificing goats, which, in many cases, were performed naked. Of the other rituals mentioned in Aristophanes, the *arrhephoroi*, bearers of the sacred objects, were two or four seven-year-old girls chosen by the *archōn basileus* (the senior religious official in Athens) to bear the warp for working Athena's sacred *peplos* during the *Chalkeia* festival, and ended with a nocturnal ceremony where they carried mysterious objects in a basket to the shrine of Aphrodite north of the Acropolis.¹⁰⁷ The *aletrides* are obscure, only mentioned by Hesychius, but they were from one of the noble families and performed some form of menial task, using querns, related to sacrificial cakes.¹⁰⁸ Lastly, the *Kanephoroi* were bearers of the baskets containing the sacrificial knife, barley, and fillet, who must have served at the *Panathenaia*.¹⁰⁹

Rites of passage ensured the full religious participation of adult citizens, as well as the transmission and memorability of theology and mythology. In the cognitive sciences, the second 'mode of religiosity' – that is, actions that ensure rituals and beliefs are memorable

¹⁰⁴ *Heraia*: Paus. 5.16.2-3. He offers an alternate explanation: that it was introduced after the Elean treaty of the early 6th century. Scanlon 1988: 816.

¹⁰⁵ Ar. *Lys.* 638-47.

¹⁰⁶ *arktoi* on *krateriskoi* vases found at the sanctuary of Artemis like that at Braurion: e.g. Neils and Oakley 2003: 151-2, fig. 11; Oakley 2013: 155, 165, see Garland 2013: 207, 215-16, Neils 2003: 151.

¹⁰⁷ *Arrhephoroi*: Paus. 1.27.3; Garland 2013: 216.

¹⁰⁸ Hesy. s.v. *aletrides*; schol. *ad. Lys.* 643. Garland 2013: 217.

¹⁰⁹ *Kanephoroi*: [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 18.2, Thuc. 6.56.1, cf. Ar. *Peace* 948. Oakley 2013: 155, Garland 2013: 217.

and transmitted to younger generations – is ‘imagistic’, which involves infrequent but exciting, memorable actions.¹¹⁰ Rites of passage are exactly the sort of ‘imagistic’ rituals that would have been highly memorable moments in the girls’ and boys’ lives. The combination of ‘doctrinal’ (unexciting but highly routinized ritual actions) and ‘imagistic’ modes of religious transmission will have ensured a powerful and ingrained religious education by early adulthood. By marking significant moments in a child – and adult’s – life with religious ceremonies, religion was woven into the most fundamental structures of personal and political life. This ensured that in order to fully, or even partially, participate in adult civic life, one had to have been exposed to a range of religious rites.

d. the Chorus

The institution of the Chorus went beyond performance training, and acted as a vehicle for the religious and general education of boys and girls.¹¹¹ The importance of the chorus is clear: in some Greek *poleis* the institution for the education of the young was called ‘*khoros*’: a word which also denoted the central political space in Sparta.¹¹² By the fifth century, choral education was seen as a part of traditional, old-style, education, alongside gymnastic training, as it is caricatured in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*.¹¹³ For Plato’s Stranger, the purpose of this education was in religious education and character formation, of nobility and manliness in boys, and good order, temperance, and chastity in girls, to which contributed the music, lyrics, dance, ritual aspects, and the recited and memorised mythological content of the material.¹¹⁴ In his *Laws*, Plato’s Stranger details his ideal system of education in religion: ‘all the three choruses must enchant the souls of the children, while still young and tender, by rehearsing all the noble things which we have already recounted’.¹¹⁵ Plato’s Stranger argued that it was possible to teach young people values: one only needed to decide what values to

¹¹⁰ Whitehouse 2000, 2002, and 2004 details these modes of religiosity.

¹¹¹ Focus of chorus was education: ‘The man without choral formation is a man without education’, from Pl. *Laws* 2.654a-b; see also Athen. 14.623e-33e, Philolaus of Tarentum F44b6 and 11 Diels and F37b4, 6, 7; Anderson, W. 1966: 1-110, Calame 1997: 221-44, Ingalls 2000: 1-2, 18, Wilson 2000.

¹¹² *Khoro*s: Pollux 9.41-2; Paus. 3.11.9; Wilson 2000: 2.

¹¹³ Ar. *Cl.* 961-83. See also Pl. *Laws* 2.654a-b, 2.672e; Ingalls 2000: 2.

¹¹⁴ Pl. *Laws* 2.655d, 7.802e. Ingalls 2000: 2-3. On Plato as the Athenian Stranger see Halverson 1997: 74-101.

¹¹⁵ Pl. *Laws*, 2.664b.

inculcate in them. The method he considered best for educating the young was in choral participation.

The real-life choral environment in Athens was agonistic, as choruses of boys and girls competed against each other.¹¹⁶ At the City Dionysia, ten choruses of fifty boys representing the ten Attic tribes competed at the dithyrambic choruses, and likewise at the *Thargelia*, *Hephaisteia*, *Prometheia*, and the *Koureotis*, boys were divided into different divisions along tribal lines.¹¹⁷ These divisions were significant, bonding the children to their city and tribes through a ritual process.¹¹⁸ Choruses were very important in Spartan education too, just as they were elsewhere in Greece.¹¹⁹ In Sparta, girls were ordered into choral age groups like the boys.¹²⁰ For Spartan girls, the focus of the chorus was, as it was for Sappho, preparation for marriage, which took place between eighteen and twenty, and was the key religious and ritual rite of passage in a Spartan woman's life.¹²¹ Across Greece, choral activity, then, contained a set of rituals marking the transition between childhood and adulthood for girls, as it did for boys.¹²² From choral dances to *pyrrhic*, armed, dances, *parthenoi* and women of marriageable age participated in a variety of performances.¹²³ Choruses performed at festivals and were organised in a way that emphasised moral lessons, shaming cowards and rewarding the brave, alongside musical and athletic contests that helped to develop an agonistic spirit in young people.¹²⁴ Through long training and rehearsal

¹¹⁶ Agonistic chorus environment: Garland 2013: 219.

¹¹⁷ City Dionysia and Thargelia: IG II² 1138.6, 11; [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 56.3; Antiph. 6.11. Hephaisteia and Prometheia: IG II² 1138.11, Koureotis: Pl. *Tim.* 21b.

¹¹⁸ Garland 2013: 219.

¹¹⁹ Choruses important in Sparta: Athen. 14.623f-633a.

¹²⁰ Alc. *Parth.* 52, Pind. F112. Scanlon 1988: 187.

¹²¹ Marriage was key religious festival: Plut. *Lys.* 30.7, *Cleom.* 1, *Lyc.* 15.4; Ingalls 2000: 1. The nature of this marriage rite, and the ritual capture in Plut. *Lyc.* 15.4-7 are contentious. See Cartledge 1981: 94-5, and 101-2 on capture.

¹²² Transitional rituals: Ingalls 2000: 1, Calame 1997: 10-15, 258-63.

¹²³ Ritual performances discussed in Beaumont 2012: 168-9.

¹²⁴ Choruses at festivals: Plut. *Lyc.* 21.1-2; moral lessons: Xen. *Lac. Pol.* 9.5; music and athletics creating an agonistic spirit (esp. in men): Xen. *Lac. Pol.* 4.2; Ingalls 2000: 3. Girls competed physically and performed ritual dances: Plut. *Lyc.* 14.2-3; Ingalls 2000: 3.

and practise of songs, which entailed learning the myths that were their subject matter, girls drew moral and religious lessons.¹²⁵

Performance is a ‘chief medium’ for the interaction of myth and ritual, as with the Greek choral song, transcending time concerns and allowing the communication of mythic narratives and ritual performance.¹²⁶ An evocative picture of this process has been painted by Barbara Kowalzig, detailing how sacred choral performance involved the re-enactment of aetiological myths. This re-enactment involved breaking down the mythical past and ritual present, and rebuilding and rebinding the ritual and mythical aspects, as well as repackaging, reformulating, and in some sense creating new ritual and mythical narratives.¹²⁷ Kowalzig describes how the choral performances at Delos, a ritual centre in the fifth century, allowed for new and competing narratives of Artemis’ birth to be marshalled for their aetiological power: the choral groups formed part of a creative process which provided a fresh symbolic and religious value to their environment.

One example of a poem learned and performed by young girls is Alcman’s *Partheneion*: the performance of this poem to the community was part of a ceremony to Artemis, presenting the beautiful young women to the goddess as a pre-harvest ceremony to the goddess of dawn.¹²⁸ The first part of this, as it remains, is a couple of myths, of Castor and Polydeuces’ conflict with their cousins the sons of Hippocoön, and the second is a ritual performance. In this myth the Hippocoontids attempted either to obtain (inappropriate) brides or to abduct them, and the Tyndarids killed them in response. The strength and dangers of female sexuality, and the correct dominant role of the man in marriage, for instance, were developed in the Hippocoontid myth in Alcman’s *Partheneion*.¹²⁹ The poem also teaches two metaphysical lessons: that fate cannot be averted and that evil brings destruction from the gods:

Having devised evil deeds, they suffered in a way that cannot be forgotten.

There is such a thing as retribution from the gods.

Blessed is he who, with a sound disposition,

¹²⁵ Drawing lessons from practise and rehearsal: Calame 1997: 231; Ingalls 2000: 4-5.

¹²⁶ Kowalzig 2007: 68.

¹²⁷ E.g. Callimachus’ *Hymn to Delos* 4.300-15. Kowalzig 2007: 56-129.

¹²⁸ For a discussion of Alcman’s *Partheneion* see Ingalls 2000: 6-11.

¹²⁹ On the *Partheneion* and moral lessons see Ingalls 2000: 6-9, Stehle 1997: 31-2. Kennell 1995: 137-8.

weaves through the time of day
without punishment that makes him weep.¹³⁰

Alcman's *Partheneion* shows how girls were educated through participation in the development of theological ideas. They were practicing their myths, and in the process learning how to operate in Greek society, learning appropriate values and behaviour, and producing their own theological ideas.

The gap between childhood and full citizenship: Sophists, *Sunousia*, and Socrates

The religious socialisation of Athenians was extremely effective, but it was not all-encompassing. Formal schooling for children ended at around age fifteen, and Athenians became full citizens at the age of twenty-one: the exact boundaries of this group are not important, only that it represented a gap in education and supervision. The formal *ephebeia* was the eventual response to the need for more oversight for young men of this age, but the *ephebeia* was only implemented in the late fourth century.¹³¹ For the fifth and most of the fourth century, young men in this gap were called *meirakia*, the *meirakion* being a young man between fifteen and twenty-one.¹³² This period in a young man's life was one of informal learning through *sunousia*, or 'association', that ensured that values and learning were passed on in what remained a predominantly oral culture.¹³³ Though *sunousia* comes across particularly in Plato and Xenophon, it was widely recognised idea based on the earliest forms of elite education before formal education came into existence.¹³⁴ The process of learning by association can be seen in the *Iliad*, through Patroclus' learning under Achilles, and Achilles' study under Phoenix; and the *Odyssey*, with Mentor, who served as a 'mentor' for Telemachus.¹³⁵ But it is best summed up in 'Theognis' – at least, the corpus of Megarian aristocratic poetry, unified by its shared social and political worldviews, that is usually called

¹³⁰ Alcman. *Parth.* 35-40; Ingalls 2000: 8.

¹³¹ On the creation of the *ephebeia* in 335BC see De Marcellus 1994, particularly 48-49.

¹³² *Meirakia*: Robb 1994: 201.

¹³³ Orality: Havelock 1986: 4-5, Robb 1994: 198.

¹³⁴ Based on earliest forms in which individual teachers were key: Barrow 1976: 36. Joyal et al. 2009: 2, Robb 1994: 197.

¹³⁵ Phoenix: Hom. *Il.* 9.162-70, 430-526. Mentor: Hom. *Od.* 2.224-30, 253-67.

‘Theognidean’, and may or may not be largely of a single author.¹³⁶ ‘Theognis’ says, in his advice to Cyrnus:

do not seek the company of base men, but always cling to the noble. Drink and dine with them, sit with them, and be pleasing to those whose power is great. For from the noble you will learn noble things, but if you mingle with the base, you will lose even the sense you have. Knowing this, associate (*symmisgēs*) with the noble, and one day you will say that I give good advice to my friends.¹³⁷

Theognis advised that the young man should associate with an experienced and good adult citizen or citizens, and avoid bad men: it is expected that the primary learning experience for Cyrnus, at his age, is through association with older men. These skills were not learned from a specific teacher but by association with skilled men, usually a family member or mentor, from whom they learned good character, wisdom, and skills through *sunousia*, by their example.¹³⁸ Plato’s Socrates, for instance, described his own process of learning through a combination of speaking with wise men, seers, poets, craftsmen, and teachers, as well as the cultural influence of reading Anaxagoras.¹³⁹ *Sunousia* continued beyond the limits of adolescence, and was crucial to the transmission of information, and for developing trust and power bonds between the older and younger men.¹⁴⁰ The term ‘*sunousia*’ is only a neat tag for the surrounding ideas here, like the role of association and influence, and the emphasis placed on these for a good education, and how bad ‘association’ could serve to disrupt the attainment of religious knowledge through socialisation.¹⁴¹

A revolution in education: the influence of the Sophists

¹³⁶ On this question of authorship and date, and the argument that Theognidean poetry is unified by theme rather than author see esp. Figueira and Nagy 1985. See a response in Hubbard 2007, arguing that the *sphrēgis* elegy complicates this view, and cannot be reconciled with an authorless tradition.

¹³⁷ Thgn. *To Cyrnus*, 26-38.

¹³⁸ On *sunousia*: Robb 1994: 199-200. On the learned virtues see Pl. *Meno* 91a-b. Finding *sunousia* with men around the city: Xen. *Symp.* 8. Barrow 1976: 18. Oral and literate education in Aristophanes: Woodbury 1976: 349-57.

¹³⁹ Pl. *Ap.* 20d, 26d. Morgan 1999: 48.

¹⁴⁰ Robb 1994: 198.

¹⁴¹ Plato’s Socrates, for instance, talks in Pl. *Tht.* 151b-c about the concept of association without using the term.

Half way through the fifth century a minor revolution occurred in education, and a group of intellectuals began to take advantage of the gap in the formal *paideia*, and created a more professionalised form of intellectual education.¹⁴² Although in principle *meirakia* ought to have found *sunousia* with prominent men around the city, the informal nature of this process and sudden lack of supervision meant that in practice this was an awkward age with little to do.¹⁴³ This was before the young men became full citizens, and were expect to marry and take on the management of their own estates, and engage in business and politics.¹⁴⁴ Meanwhile, Athens was the perfect place for the new group of intellectuals to operate. Although a prominent Pan-Hellenic, particularly Ionian, tradition of criticism already existed, there was a rising spirit of enquiry into the natural world in Athens in the fifth century, in which the likes of Prodicus, Gorgias, Protagoras, and Antiphon came to prominence.¹⁴⁵ The new educational options meant that anyone who had the means could now pay for it, which interrupted the traditional education processes in which values were passed on by heredity and example through the aristocratic classes.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, the idea of providing an intellectual education at a higher level was entirely novel in Athens at the time.¹⁴⁷ Still, the role of the new group of sophists in children's education never replaced *sunousia*; sophists just charged variable rates for their services for those who could pay.¹⁴⁸ These intellectuals particularly appealed to those who had little inherited status, but with enough money to afford their lectures.¹⁴⁹

The sophists had a reputation for challenging religion, but ultimately, the spirit of open enquiry in Athens meant that all sorts of new 'authorities' arose on a variety of subjects.¹⁵⁰ The sophists were perceived as teaching atheism and impiety, and relativism with regard to the gods, like Protagoras' famous opening statement to *About the Gods*: 'about the

¹⁴² Revolution in education: Robb 1994: 201; sophists stepping in to fill the gap: Robb 1993: 87.

¹⁴³ Robb 1993: 87.

¹⁴⁴ Plato *Laws* 4.721a-b proposed punishing any man who was unmarried at 35.

¹⁴⁵ Rising spirit of enquiry: Barrow 1976: 51-2.

¹⁴⁶ Sophists caused permanent changes in education: De Romilly 2002: 4.

¹⁴⁷ De Romilly 2002: 30.

¹⁴⁸ Never replaced *sunousia*: Barrow 1976: 52-3.

¹⁴⁹ Joyal et al. 2009: 59.

¹⁵⁰ Reputation for challenging religion: e.g. Ar. *Cl.* 1354-8 jokes that they drove out the fashion of singing poetry after dinner. De Romilly 2002: 85, 94-5, 103-11 discusses the radical challenges made to religion and the gods by some of the sophists; see also Thomas 1995: 119.

gods, I cannot ascertain whether they exist or whether they do not'; the sophists, scientists, and new intellectuals now suffered from 'the taint of irreligion'.¹⁵¹ Sophistic philosophical ideas were disseminated alongside other intellectual peddlers of various types, like historians and poets, or alongside *technai*, like doctors, or painters.¹⁵² The lack of dogma and official religious authority in Greek religion meant that anyone could be a teacher.¹⁵³ In a religious environment like Athens, with so many freely competing ideas, individuals peddling these ideas would have held a great deal of power, especially over children and adolescents, provided they could establish themselves as authorities. Research, by Sperber, Sørensen, and Atran, has shown how authority is key to transmitting beliefs to the young.¹⁵⁴ By offering public services in exchange for money, and offering ranges of services in teaching various *technai*, anyone could cast themselves as an authority, and have a serious influence on the views of their followers. This made the sophists particularly threatening, with their reputation for radical irreligious ideas, and their high profile and influential teachings.

Philosophers, scientists and intellectuals taught across Athens to anyone who could pay, or even offered their services or engaged in discussions for free, as Rihll observed:

Dissemination of scientific and philosophical ideas was not a marginal or low profile activity in classical Athens. Ordinary Athenians in their thousands were exposed to philosophical ideas in the agora, gymnasia, and theatre, amongst other places. There were formal lectures and informal gatherings, which could take place in public or in private, and which could be spontaneous or arranged. Depending upon the needs and desires of the teacher, and the status of teacher and student as citizen or metic, a

¹⁵¹ Prot. F3, Graham 2010: 696-7. The sophistic caricature of Socrates in Ar. *Cl.* is also a good demonstration of attitudes towards the sophists, and shows Socrates as immoral and impious. 'Taint of irreligion': Waterfield 2005: 133; see also 134-5.

¹⁵² Rihll 2003: 174-7.

¹⁵³ Whitehouse 2002: 147. Scholars interpret this lack of central authority in the interpreters, omen and portent readers, with different reputations. In the 'Wooden Wall' episode in Hdt 7.140-4, the Athenian *demos* acted with greater authority as interpreters of the oracles than any individual interpreters.

¹⁵⁴ Authority is key to transmission: e.g. Sørensen 2005: 475. Mystery ideas: Sperber 1985: 84-5. Most research has rested on authority in the transmission of texts, e.g. Atran 2004: 91, this still works for oral and non-doctrinal contexts.

'student' might come and go freely, or have to pay for attendance on or attention from the teacher...¹⁵⁵

As a result of the public nature of Sophistic teaching, Rihll argued, the audience for these philosophers and teachers could vary, from paying students to the interested bystander.¹⁵⁶ It is likely that almost everyone in Attica with business in the city, financial, religious, or so on, would have had some form of experience of these public teachers. Though many sophists charged high rates for their lectures, not all did, and some also charged different amounts for different courses.¹⁵⁷ For instance, though students at the Academy of Plato did need to be able to afford their own living costs, they paid no fees, so there were occasionally poor students who kept their place through support from the wealthy, or earned it through night work or private tuition.¹⁵⁸ Poorer citizens might not have had direct access to many professional teachers, but the impressionable young boys were as capable of listening to the public sophistry and philosophy freely peddled by the new intellectuals on the streets of Athens as their richer peers, if they had the time to spare outside their apprenticeships.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, the attraction of associating with their wealthier, better-bred, and already more politically notorious peers, might have led some of them into the arms of the sophists. This was an environment in which information of various sorts was absorbed by everyone in the city, to different degrees.

But the primary objects of sophistic teaching were the wealthy *meirakia*, and as a result, the increasing prominence of the sophists gradually came to be viewed with alarm by many of the aristocratic families. The dominance of aristocratic families over the informal process of *sunousia* had ensured continual good breeding and education was largely restricted to them. In Aristophanes' *Clouds*, Better Argument argues against Worse Argument, that the traditional education system was superior to new forms:

my education bred the men who fought at Marathon, whereas you teach the men of today to spend their lives muffled in cloaks; and so I choke with rage when they're

¹⁵⁵ Rihll 2003: 189.

¹⁵⁶ Rihll 2003: 176.

¹⁵⁷ Pl. *Cra.* 384b records Prodicus had a fifty drachma course and a one drachma course.

¹⁵⁸ Wealthy supporters: DL 4.38; night work: e.g. the Stoic Cleanthes in DL 7.168; private tuition: Athen. *Deipn.* 11.509c-e.

¹⁵⁹ Apprenticeships: Robb 1994: 201.

supposed to be dancing at the Panathenaea and one of them's holding his shield in front of his haunch with no regard for Tritogeneia! Accordingly, my boy, boldly opt for me, the Better Argument, and you will learn how to hate the agora and steer clear of bath houses... No, you'll be hale and glistening and pass your days in gymnasia, not in the agora chattering about the thorny subjects currently in vogue, or being dragged into court about some trifling, obstinacious, disputatious, ruinatious case.¹⁶⁰

As described in the *Clouds*, the sophists – many of whom taught at the *agora* – were perceived as peddling pointless criticism, dialectic, rhetoric, and other socially dangerous arts. But, as the *Clouds* demonstrates, the sophists were also perceived as having created an alternative social and educational network among the young men, which was at odds with the traditional processes of education, and circumvented the traditional ties to the clan, father, family, and city.¹⁶¹

It may be the influence of the sophists that spawned a sort of 'youth movement' in criticism, scepticism, and atheism in the late fifth century.¹⁶² Plato's *Stranger* makes it clear in his *Laws* that he believes the sophistic class is responsible for encouraging a group of young men in impiety.¹⁶³

Stranger: These, my friends, are views which young people learn from the sophists, both prose-writers and poets, who assert that it is the height of justice to succeed by force; from which the young people fall into impiety, as though the sum of the gods were not such as the law commands us to conceive of them; and, because of this, factions also arise, when these teachers draw them into the life that is 'right according to nature', which is really being master over others, and not a slave to others according to custom.

Clinias: What a horrible statement you have described, Stranger! And what

¹⁶⁰ Ar. *Cl.* 987-1005, see also *Kn.* 985-96; Ford, A. 2001: 107.

¹⁶¹ Robb 1994: 205, see also Havelock 1986: 21: undermining traditional ties was the reason for Socrates' indictment.

¹⁶² Mikalson 1998: 292-3, 242-9 posited a 'youth movement' in Athenian religion in Hellenistic Athens. Garland 2013: 214.

¹⁶³ This 'atheist underground' has been most recently explored by Sedley 2013: 329-48.

widespread corruption of the young in private families as well as publicly in the States
(καὶ ὄσῃν λώβῃν ἀνθρώπων νέων δημοσίᾳ πόλεσίν τε καὶ ἰδίῳ οἴκοις)!¹⁶⁴

The Stranger sees sophistic ideas as dangerous in themselves, but the key danger, he identifies, is that they teach them to the young men.¹⁶⁵ Plato's Stranger makes a very clear allusion to the prosecution of Socrates for corrupting the youth with atheism. Book Ten of Plato's *Laws* is directed against a group of young men who were of an age where they were particularly belligerent, and spent their days ridiculing traditional religion. Collins observes that 'Plato regards professionals with what we might describe as a charismatic influence over others as especially dangerous, and his laws are justifiably aimed at containing their influence'.¹⁶⁶ It is these figures whom Plato's Stranger blames for the religious corruption of the young men. Some of this may have been imagined by the older generations, nostalgic of their strict, conservative upbringing, and complaining of 'the youth of today'.¹⁶⁷ While the existence of these groups, at the end of the fifth century, is certainly historically significant, there is no reason to believe, with David Sedley, that they mark the origin of atheism in the history of the West.¹⁶⁸

Still, it is telling that Plato has his Stranger complain that when the young men first learned philosophy, they simply liked indiscriminately to refute everything, destroying ideas wherever they encountered them and rebelling against their elders.¹⁶⁹ This class of young men are determined that their ideas are right, with the obstinacy of youth, and cannot be convinced otherwise; they argued against religion, and for the principle that 'might is right'. This sort of 'might is right' attitude no doubt lay partly behind the youth movement in oligarchic opposition to the democracy that Forrest observed.¹⁷⁰ Forrest observed that these same young men in the 420s were enamoured with, and empowered by, the sophists, who taught them the skills of persuasion and naturalistic, relativistic, and even atheistic ideas.¹⁷¹ It

¹⁶⁴ Pl. *Laws* 10.890a.

¹⁶⁵ Pl. *Laws* 10.884a: 'outrageous acts of the young'; 10.888a: 'My child, you are still young'; 10.888b-c: 'no man who adopted this opinion in his youth'.

¹⁶⁶ Collins 2008: 140-1.

¹⁶⁷ See Woodruff 2011: 91 on the perception by conservatives of a concerted attack from the New Learning.

¹⁶⁸ Sedley 2013: 329.

¹⁶⁹ Intellectual children: Pl. *Rep.* 6.498a; refuting behaviour: *Rep.* 7.539b; Rihll 2003: 181.

¹⁷⁰ Forrest 1975.

¹⁷¹ Forrest 1975: 42-3. Empowered: Pl. *Laws* 10.884a; teaching: 10.886a-e, Robb 1994: 205.

was these same men, Alcibiades and his social group, who were accused of the mutilation of the *Herms* and the parodies of Eleusinian Mysteries (events considered in detail in Chapter Three). As Davidson has observed, ‘age-groups have always played important roles in Revolutions’.¹⁷² By the time Plato was writing his *Laws* in the mid fourth century, it was still possible for him to depict his Stranger remarking scathingly on the young men running around Athens claiming that the gods did not exist.¹⁷³

Socrates and the religious corruption of the young

Socrates was invested in the business of education, and in the public eye there was no easy distinction between him and the sophists.¹⁷⁴ Socrates was fascinated with the young, and they were drawn to him through his powerful personal magnetism.¹⁷⁵ In Plato’s *Laches*, set in 425BC, two men are making an arrangement based on *sussitia*; sharing meals together, and having their sons share their table and associate with them, alongside the generals Laches and Nicias.¹⁷⁶ At one point Laches remarks that it is bewildering that they invited them (Laches and Nicias) instead of Socrates, who at the time had (according to Plato here) a reputation in conservative circles for teaching children excellence.¹⁷⁷ A story from the *Theages* is even more explicit in his role in *sunousia*.¹⁷⁸ In this dialogue, Plato has Demodocus request Socrates take his son as a pupil, but the philosopher claims that the young learn simply through exposure to him, not formal instruction: the Platonic Socrates insists that he was not a teacher. Although he is concerned with the business of education and people learn from

¹⁷² Davidson 2006: 37.

¹⁷³ Pl. *Laws* 10.885c-888c.

¹⁷⁴ In Xen. *Ap.* 20-1 Xenophon’s Socrates says he is a teacher, and considered education the greatest good. That he was a teacher in *Clouds* and his final indictment implies he was perceived as a teacher. See also Kahn 1996: 89-91 arguing the *Apology* reveals Socrates as a ‘seeker’ rather than teacher, helping to bring out intrinsic *aretē*. Kraut 1987: 294 highlights the contradiction between his denial of being a teacher and his focus on virtue yet denial of the possibility that virtue can be taught, e.g. Pl. *Prot.* 319e-320b, and his aim to improve the city by educating them. See also Mintz 2014: 735-747, that Plato’s Socrates’ claim he was not a teacher is based on his desire to separate from other teachers. Likewise Zoller 2010 esp. 97 emphasises Socrates’ rejection of both conventional and sophistic methods of teaching, arguing Socrates aspired nonetheless to a form of self-help. Leibowitz 2010: 151-2 notices that ‘he does not quite deny that some learn from him’.

¹⁷⁵ On Socrates’ fascination with the young see Guthrie 1971: 78 and Zoller 2010: 82-3.

¹⁷⁶ Pl. *Lach.* 179a-c.

¹⁷⁷ Pl. *Lach.* 180c-e.

¹⁷⁸ [Pl.] *Theages* 130a. See Guthrie 1971: 80-1.

him, he simply encouraged their innate positive attributes and discouraged their negative ones.¹⁷⁹ Plato's Socrates likened himself to his mother: both were midwives; she birthed bodies, and he birthed minds.¹⁸⁰ Plato's Socrates hinges his defence in the *Apology* on this distinction between teaching and learning by association, in order to distinguish himself from the sophists who taught specific disciplines.¹⁸¹ But in the eyes of the public, and even some of his associates, there was no obvious distinction between Socrates and the Sophists.¹⁸² Socrates' association with teaching remained, but the events of the intervening years from 425BC, when the *Laches* is set, and 399BC, changed that reputation to a negative one.¹⁸³ This culminated with Socrates' indictment and trial in 399BC for corrupting the young in religion:

Socrates is guilty of not believing in the gods of the state, and introducing other new gods: and also of corrupting the young (ἀδικεῖ Σωκράτης οὓς μὲν ἡ πόλις νομίζει θεοὺς οὐ νομίζων, ἕτερα δὲ καινὰ δαιμόνια εἰσφέρων: ἀδικεῖ δὲ καὶ τοὺς νέους διαφθείρων).¹⁸⁴

The charges have usually been seen as alluding to Socrates' part in educating the aristocrats who were members or supporters of the Thirty Tyrants.¹⁸⁵ In other words, scholars have claimed that the trial of Socrates was primarily political and not religious.¹⁸⁶ But there are reasons to believe that a solely, or hidden, political motivation is an anachronistic interpretation of later historians. Plato does not impute any nefarious political schemes to the

¹⁷⁹ As in the *Meno* and *Theaetetus*. See also the article by Nails in the 2014 SEP, which is excellent on the distinction between teaching and learning, and also Scott, G. 2000: 13-23 on the importance of not taking his denial to be a teacher 'literally' as a denial of being any form of educator.

¹⁸⁰ Pl. *Tht.* 149a-151a.

¹⁸¹ Pl. *Ap.* 33a-b. Plato's Socrates hinges the defence on this distinction: Mintz 2014: 743-4.

¹⁸² Socrates' associates on him and sophists: e.g. Pl. *Symp.* 215b-d. on his captivating method of speaking. Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 19, Woodruff 2011: 91 says 'this association is one of the few things we know about him with historical certainty'.

¹⁸³ Reputation changed to negative: Robb 1994: 201.

¹⁸⁴ Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.1, similar to Favorinus ap. DL 2.40; see also Pl. *Ap.* 24b-c. cf. also Philodem. *de Piet.* 1696-7.

¹⁸⁵ Socrates was charged for educating thirty tyrants: e.g. Dover 1976: 155-7, Stone 1988, Burnyeat 1988.

¹⁸⁶ E.g. O'Sullivan 1997, or Todd 1993: 308: 'It is tempting to assert that Athenian religious trials were all about politics: a surprisingly high proportion of known impiety trials reveal, on examination, a surprisingly strong political agenda.' Wallace 1994, 2004a: 231.

prosecutors of Socrates, for instance.¹⁸⁷ Brickhouse and Smith have suggested that Polycrates effectively invented the political interpretation in his treatise on Socrates.¹⁸⁸ Moreover, the accusation itself furnishes scholars with sufficient grounds to justify the trial against Socrates, without positing additional motivations.¹⁸⁹ Why should the religious aspect of impiety (with its own political and religious connotations) be unworthy of being considered a crime in itself?¹⁹⁰ Without a doubt, accusations of impiety could be used for political purposes, and complex political feelings lie behind the accusation against Socrates.¹⁹¹ But in with the absence of contemporary evidence that clearly shows a political motive, it is unwise to hinge the interpretation of the trial solely on politics.

Though the political motivation is overstressed, and the idea of a nefarious ulterior political motivation is wrong, there was certainly a political component to the prosecution. This is the case if only, as Parker has argued, because the political and the religious were interwoven in Greece, and especially in the Athenian courts.¹⁹² Nonetheless, the idea that Socrates was prosecuted for educating the political classes, particularly members of the notorious Thirty Tyrants, is probably correct.¹⁹³ By the mid-fourth century, the link had already been made: Socrates' associations with Plato's uncle Charmides, one of the Thirty, as well as Critias, the leader of the Thirty, were well-established.¹⁹⁴ But Socrates was equally known for educating Alcibiades, a figure with the support of the democratic factions, many of

¹⁸⁷ Finley 1977: 65 argues on the basis of Plato *Letters*, 7.325b where he mentions the prosecution by 'men in power/authority' but no specific political machinations or scheme; see Connor 1991: 50.

¹⁸⁸ Brickhouse and Smith 2002: 7.

¹⁸⁹ See Bussanich and Smith 2013: 302. On the 'religious interpretation', which is to say, taking the accusations against Socrates as sufficient to explain the trial, see Brickhouse and Smith 2002, Burnyeat 1997, Connor 1991, and McPherran 2002.

¹⁹⁰ As Saxonhouse 2005: 100-112 argue; and Brickhouse and Smith 2002: 1, Connor 1991: 49-56, for discussion on this.

¹⁹¹ Used for politics: O'Sullivan 1997: 147; politics partially responsible: Vlastos 1983.

¹⁹² Parker 1996: 202.

¹⁹³ No evidence...: Nails 2006: 7; see Slings 1994: 92 on the political implications. On the political and religious interpretations see Chapter Three.

¹⁹⁴ Socrates was executed for educating Critias: Aeschin. 1.173. Charmides: Xen. *Mem.* 3.7.1, *Symp.* 4.32, DL 2.29; on their association. Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 19-21.

whose actions were considered as damaging to Athens as those of the oligarchs.¹⁹⁵ Xenophon records that the Thirty were opposed to Socrates, even legislating against him, and records that Socrates was accused of educating both the worst of the oligarchs and the worst of the democrats:¹⁹⁶

his accuser argued, having become associates of Socrates, Critias and Alcibiades did a great deal of harm to the state. For Critias, of all involved in the oligarchy, bore the palm for greed and violence, while Alcibiades exceeded all in licentiousness and arrogance under the democracy.¹⁹⁷

The problem with Socrates' teaching was not his oligarchic political leanings, but something more fundamental: he corrupted the religious and moral characters of the leading statesmen of his age, no matter their political affiliations.¹⁹⁸ 'Socrates could have been considered a corruptor of the youth because his philosophical life *had the effect of* undermining traditional beliefs in the god', Bussanich and Smith recently observed, so 'Athenians could have considered Socrates a threat to the democracy *without attributing any positive political beliefs to him.*'¹⁹⁹ The case that Meletus wished to present to the jurors was that Socrates had corrupted the young particularly in their religious and consequently moral behaviour, as the Socrates of Plato and Xenophon interpreted it in the respective defence speeches.²⁰⁰ Plato's

¹⁹⁵ Socrates taught Alcibiades: Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.24-48, and in Isoc. 11.5, who records the tradition but refutes it. Alcibiades' political views are complicated. Plut. *Alc.* 25 records that Alcibiades did try to install an oligarchy in Athens, but this was entirely for his own personal gain, not for a broader political reason. Wallace 2004a: 230.

¹⁹⁶ Thirty legislated against him: Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.31; Dover 1976: 155. On the democratic defenders of Socrates see the probably appropriately neutral Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 170-73, and Kraut 1987 on 'Socrates and Democracy': 194-244, arguing that Socrates was very pro-Democracy. Also Waterfield 2012: 291-96, which is more neutral, but confirms he was neither oligarch nor democrat. Bussanich and Smith 2013: 315 observe that 'there is no evidence that he [Socrates] was an oligarch or interested in political revolution.'

¹⁹⁷ Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.11-12.

¹⁹⁸ See Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 194-7 on idea that the jurors and Socrates both understood that this the reference to alleged corrupted 'students' was not specific, and referred in general to those who learned from him across the political spectrum.

¹⁹⁹ Bussanich and Smith 2013: 319, their emphasis.

²⁰⁰ Xen. *Ap.* 10, 19-20, and Pl. *Ap.* 23d. Strauss 1972: 129-33 shows how Xenophon conflates the charges. The charges are typically divided: Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 30 understand the charges as three distinct points: first, atheism of the state deities, secondly, introducing new divinities, and finally, corrupting the youth. Nails 2006: 11 observes: 'Athenian law forbade impiety, and that is the single law Socrates is charged with breaking –

Socrates understood that Meletus' accusation hinged on his role in *sunousia* in the *Apology*, and believed that if he could prove he had not corrupted the young then the impiety charge was unimportant, because 'the Athenians do not care if a man is clever, as long as he does not teach his clever ideas (*sophias*)'.²⁰¹ In other words, most Athenians did not care about personal beliefs, no matter how concerning, as long as they were not taught. For this reason Plato's Socrates never directly addresses the charge of disbelief in the city's gods, instead only vaguely showing the illogic of Meletus' argument that he believes in no gods, yet introduced new ones.²⁰² But accusations of atheism might have been bundled alongside any number of other accusations, some even contradictory, because the aim was to demonstrate impiety, not to offer a coherent summary of the accused's philosophical position.

It has also been argued that the religious aspects of the accusation were only about ritual participation and not belief.²⁰³ The main arguments for Socrates' accusation as based on ritual nonconformity rather than belief were effectively refuted, however, more than a quarter of a century ago.²⁰⁴ It is clear that *nomizein* included belief in the context of Socrates' trial, and that Socrates' belief was a key component in the accusation.²⁰⁵ Though Xenophon only

in two ways (not believing..., introducing...), with one result: corruption of the young'. Bussanich and Smith 2013: 319-27 and Burnyeat 1997: 227 support the idea of a single combined charge of religious (and other) corruption.

²⁰¹ Pl. *Euthphr.* 3c7-d2. *Sunousia*: Pl. *Ap.* 19e-20a; Robb 1994: 204. No one was concerned with beliefs cf. 2c-d. Nails 2006: 9-10.

²⁰² Burnyeat 1997: 227-8 notes the absence of any claim to believe in the city's gods.

²⁰³ On belief: see Versnel 1990: 125. E.g. Allen 1980: 17-18: 'Athenian religion was not a matter of creed and dogma, but of ritual observance, of dromena, things done, rather than legomena, things said... Impiety, in short, normally lay for definite kinds of acts.'

²⁰⁴ Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 30-1 detail the arguments on Socrates' accusations based on ritual conformity and their refutations. This is in part based on the extremely problematic account of the twentieth-century philosopher A. E. Taylor 1951, who argued that Socrates was a forward thinking monotheist: 'a profound concern for the unseen moral order and a religious faith not common in the society around him in God and the immortal soul' (94), with an undeserved reputation for atheism. He argued that the offence was only 'technically' (110) one against state religion, but really a political manoeuvre, and had 'nothing to do with the "supernatural sign" of Socrates' (114). See Versnel 1990: 126. Plut. *Mor. De. Gen.* 580b-c also views the charge as one of atheism: he had 'no use for the divine (*hupereōra ta theia*)'.

²⁰⁵ Cohen 1989: 214. That belief was key has been denied by a variety of figures, from Todd 1993: 311: 'we may note that Sokrates is charged not with what he thinks but with what he teaches', to Giordano-Zecharya 2005. On the ensuing debate: e.g. Versnel 2011: 539-59.

stresses the orthopraxy of Socrates rather than his beliefs, orthopraxy would have been taken as good evidence of Socrates' belief by the jury.²⁰⁶ And while it would have been clear to the jurors that Socrates was not entirely godless, his modification of the gods were so significant that they would have been unrecognisable to the average Athenian. His religion was not theirs, as Vlastos observes:

What would be left of [Hera] and of the other Olympians if they were required to observe the stringent norms of Socratic virtue which require every moral agent, human or divine, to act only to cause good to others, never evil, regardless of provocation? Required to meet these austere standards, the city's gods would have become unrecognizable. Their ethical transformation would be tantamount to the destruction of the old gods, the creation of new ones – which is precisely what Socrates takes to be the sum and substance of the accusation at his trial.²⁰⁷

The charges of impiety against Socrates 'had some prima facie plausibility', given his representation in the *Clouds* and elsewhere, just as they were plausible for other intellectuals.²⁰⁸ Many of the arguments credited to Socrates are easy to mistake or misrepresent. In the *Memorabilia*, for instance, Xenophon's Socrates argues that the gods did not care about the size of the offering but only the piety of the giver, which could have been misinterpreted as against normal ritual practice.²⁰⁹ Likewise, the debate between Socrates and Euthyphro portrayed in the *Euthyphro* could easily have been interpreted as one that shows Socrates undermining piety and holiness.²¹⁰ As far as is possible to tell from the disparate evidence, Socrates did believe in his Divine Sign (and other gods): though that belief itself may have been viewed as impious (see Chapter Four, pg.184).²¹¹

²⁰⁶ Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.2-5, 1.1.5; evidence of belief: Burnet 1924: Pl. *Ap.* 24c1, Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 31, McPherran 2005: 14. Plato also shows his Socrates using and recommending divination; e.g. his 'orders' to pursue his mission in *Ap.* 33c; see also *Crit.* 43c-4b, or *Phd.* 60e-1a.

²⁰⁷ Vlastos 1991: 166. See also Samaras 2007: 3: 'he evades the issue which is probably uppermost in the minds of the jury: even if he believes in gods, does he believe in their gods?'

²⁰⁸ Plausibility: Connor 1991: 50. Also Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 19, Janko 2006: 48.

²⁰⁹ Xen. *Mem.* 1.3.3, cf. Pl. *Euthyphr.* e.g. 14d-15a. Connor 1991: 53.

²¹⁰ Connor 1991: 53.

²¹¹ Classicists have sometimes dismissed Socrates' beliefs: Cohen de Lara 2007, considers the idea that Socrates was on a divine mission as a 'misconception': instead, 'the Apology portrays Socrates as providing a reasoned – not religiously inspired – response to the divine...' See also Brickhouse and Smith 2005, Partridge 2008.

Socrates was prosecuted for his beliefs, but not only for his beliefs: he was also prosecuted for ‘being a missionary’ and preaching them to his followers.²¹² In the *Apology of Socrates*, Plato’s Socrates defends himself by arguing that for years the Athenians have listened to him, many of whom have now grown up and surely wised up to any potential corrupting influence he had on them, and he challenges anyone to come forward with evidence of wrongdoing.²¹³ In the *Laws*, Plato’s Stranger dismissed atheism as a youthful folly.²¹⁴ It is reasonable to speculate that Plato had the Stranger voice this opinion in response to claims of Socrates’ corruption of the youth. In fact, the group of young men taught by Socrates, and the sophists in general, did not suddenly cease in their impiety as they grew older. The students of Socrates had become associated with everything from the loss of the Peloponnesian War, to the mutilation of the *Hermes*, and other systematic impieties committed by the aristocracy, which were inevitably connected to the famous plague of 430, 429, and 427-6BC, too. In the minds of the jurors, Socrates and his fellow teachers had corrupted the men responsible for these disasters, turning them towards impiety. So, as Brickhouse and Smith remark, the real question is not why Socrates was brought to trial, but why he was not brought to trial sooner.²¹⁵ There is far more to say about the trial of Socrates: subsequent chapters return to it. What is clear is that the trial of Socrates should be read in context of Greek approaches to religious education and the corruption of the young in religion.

Conclusion

The formidable religious socialisation in the ancient world resulted in a strength of religious conviction and action, regardless of (lack of) doctrine.²¹⁶ Children were exposed to religion from birth to death. They were raised listening to stories of the gods, they were at the centre of and participated in religious ceremonies, and they were involved in the production of religious myths and ritual materials. Religious socialisation was a lifelong process: unlike a class in religious education, it did not end with graduation. The environment of Athens was saturated with religion: not just in temples, but with the rhapsodes reciting Homer, and even

²¹² Hansen 1995: 26.

²¹³ Pl. *Ap.* 33c-34b; See also Pl. *Men.* 91e, where Plato’s Socrates comments that no one noticed Protagoras was corrupting the young for the forty years that he taught.

²¹⁴ Pl. *Laws* 10.888a-b.

²¹⁵ Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 23. They argue that Socrates’ oligarchic friends, Critias and Charmides, protected him during the coup, but after 403 they were powerless or dead.

²¹⁶ On doctrine see pg.96 n.109.

down to the iconography on the pottery used at parties and social gatherings. The *polis* and *oikos* environments bombarded Greeks with religious imagery and theology, and this served to reinforce the formal and less formal education that Greeks had experienced growing up. Febvre's argument, that was discussed in the Introduction, suggested that in an environment like this atheism was impossible, but this is clearly untrue, as we observed there. With a heady religious atmosphere, combined with social anxieties about teachers of irreligion, there were still teachers prepared to teach atheistic ideas about gods openly. The lack of clear religious guidance and formal education in religion made it very difficult for critics to know where the lines of acceptable scepticism in public were.

The ongoing process of religious socialisation and education was partly driven by the recognition of the possibility, and threat, of atheism. As a result of their belief in nurture over nature, the Greeks, and particularly the Athenians, were anxious about the corrupting influences of individuals. They recognised the importance of individual authority for the transmission of appropriate beliefs and behaviour. At each stage in a child's development appropriate authorities in religion were set up: from wet-nurses to teachers, in particular the *kitharistēs* and *paidotribēs*, to certain family members from whom they learned how to conduct religious rites. But at certain points in a Greek's life they were under less supervision. The new intellectual culture that arose during the fifth century challenged this process of socialisation, particularly in Athens. Intellectuals, like Socrates and Protagoras, exerted an unprecedented influence on the Athenian youth, and taught them critical attitudes towards gods and religion. These attitudes were not entirely new: there had always been a strong critical and sceptical tradition in Greek society. But they were now being taught to the young men who would end up in charge of the military and political force of Athens. After the serious disasters of the fifth century, the Athenians knew who to blame and who to punish: for decades the sophists had educated their children in the wrong attitudes to citizenship, morality, and the gods.

The particular historical episode discussed in the final part of this chapter – on *sunousia*, and the corruption of the young by Socrates and the sophists – is revealing of the broader approaches to religious education in ancient Athens. The Greeks generally believed that children were not born believing in the gods: this is evident throughout their approach to education, and it has profound implications for our understanding of the nature of Greek atheism. Greeks believed that they were born without belief and needed education not just in the appropriate ways to behave but also in the appropriate ways to think about the gods. As

such, Greek education and socialisation aimed to create the appropriately thinking and acting citizen, which included religious belief and behaviour. This was achieved through education in religious matters as a part of their general education in how to be a good citizen, and through the participation of children and learning by example. The good citizen was, at all levels of education for the rich and poor, the result of appropriate moral, civic, and religious teachings. Teaching children the wrong things about religion, or failing to teach them the right things, would compromise their character as a whole.

2. The imagined and real moral consequences of atheism

The results of atheism in the Greek world were believed to be much broader and more significant than a personal religious viewpoint which was, in isolation, unproblematic. In the previous chapter, it was argued that atheism was perceived by many as the key to the religious, political, and moral corruption of Athens' political classes by Socrates and the sophists. The religious and political aspects of atheism are much better understood than the moral, and they will be reconsidered throughout this thesis. This chapter examines and expands the less well-understood basic hypothesis that was posited in chapter one: that by the late fifth and early fourth century in Athens, atheism was believed to result in immorality (or the reverse), at least by enough jurors as to make the arguments of Socrates' prosecutors persuasive. The chapter begins by examining the preconceptions about morality and religion inherent in modern academic approaches. It is argued that it should not be assumed that atheism has any inherent connection with morality, or that Greeks would map the connection in the same sort of way to the way it commonly is in the Christian West. From a very early period in Greece atheism was believed by some to result in immorality, but it was not, and never became, a ubiquitous or inextricable connection. This connection was placed more in the public eye in the late fifth and early fourth centuries, for two main reasons: first, because the assumption that atheists were immoral underwrote accusations of impiety against perceived atheists (like Socrates); and secondly because in this period major secular, humanist moral theories were developed that would have resulted in different moral behaviours, often by the same figures who were later accused of atheism.

The legacy of thought on morality and religion

When examining the nature of the connection between morality and belief in Greek thought, it is crucial to avoid being trapped by a Western and Christian history of thought on morality and religion. The idea that morality comes from god (or more broadly religion) is founded in the Bible, as is the corollary, especially important for our purpose, that the irreligious are immoral:

The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.¹

¹ Psalm 14, *New International Version*.

‘Fool’, according to the notes in the New International Version, denotes ‘one who is morally deficient’: this moral deficiency is a consequence of his atheism. The belief in the necessary moral deficiency of atheists has been cultivated for millennia in the Christian West, and permeates the history of modern moral theory. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74AD), who was foundational for modern moral theory, developed his moral theory in response to St Augustine (354-430AD), who had been famously unsure whether to prefer a wicked Catholic or an atheist who lived an otherwise blameless life.² Aquinas forcefully argued instead that ‘the sin of unbelief is greater than any sin that occurs in the perversion of morals’: unbelief was a moral crime in itself, and not just a gateway to others.³ Although Martin Luther (1483-1546AD) argued that reason offered some knowledge of natural morality in the impious (as observable in Aristotle and Cicero), he stressed that sin weakened our powers of reason, lack of belief in the law failed to ‘bridle the wicked’, and that the impious lacked grounding in moral law as revealed in doctrine.⁴ Like Luther, John Calvin (1509-64) tried to reconcile the study of the old pagan philosophers with belief in the immorality of atheists, arguing that the moral law is ‘written in our hearts’ (as Paul said in *Romans* 2.14) so these men are worth studying for their wisdom, but man is too ‘shrouded in errors’ to understand it reliably without study of revealed doctrine.⁵

Although there were undoubtedly more thought-experiments on humanistic or atheistic morality during the Enlightenment, belief in the immorality of atheists persisted.⁶ In a letter promoting the importance of toleration of different religious views, liberal empiricist and influential Enlightenment thinker John Locke (1632-1704AD) wrote that ‘promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no effect on an

² Augustine *On Baptism, against the Donatists*, iv, 20. He tentatively resolved this uncertainty by arguing first that other sins naturally followed from atheism just as drunkenness also leads to argumentativeness, temper, and jealousy, and secondly that the grace of God’s goodness must exist in the atheist regardless of belief.

³ Aquinas *ST* 2.2 Q.10, A.3 (*Whether unbelief is the greatest of sin?*).

⁴ Luther *Commentary on Galations*, from Dillenberger 1962: 139. See Schneewind 1998: 26-7.

⁵ Calvin *Institutes* 2.8.1. Schneewind 1998: 33.

⁶ On these thought-experiments see Schneewind 1998: 37-57. In addition to the examples below, see Voltaire 1767: 39-51, Edmund Burke 2003: 77: religion is ‘the basis of civil society, and the source of all good’; J. P. Sartre 1946: who, as an atheist, claimed that there can be no objective standards for morality; and F. Dostoevsky 4.11.4, or 2003: 753: his Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* famously observes that without god everything is lawful. See Zuckerman 2013: 497-510.

atheist’, and so the state should not tolerate them.⁷ The eighteenth century Christian apologist Richard Bentley (1662-1742AD) shared Locke’s view, arguing that ‘no atheist as such can be a true friend, an affectionate relation, or a loyal subject’.⁸ A. E. Taylor (1869-1945AD), one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, wrote that ‘science divorced from wisdom and the fear of God’ was to blame for both world wars and the modern war in general.⁹ At the heart of this is the belief that moral systems have no compass without god, since as Paul Tillich (1886-1965AD) would argue, scientific moralities do not offer philosophical justification for behaving morally.¹⁰

A consequence of the strength of the connection between atheism and immorality is that throughout the history of the Christian West appeals to moral consequences have formed the most substantial attacks against atheism.¹¹ In 2011, in a series of studies surveying students at the University of British Columbia on the perceived trustworthiness of atheists, a team of psychologists found that atheists were one of the least trusted types of people, if not the least.¹² In their second study (n=105), nearly half the respondents imagined that a typical criminal is more likely to be both a criminal and an atheist than a criminal plus any other category, including a rapist or murderer. The general stereotype of the atheist in the West today is that they are materialistic, they lack ‘values’, and they are dishonest, careless, self-centred, shallow, and overconfident.¹³ The fact that atheists can behave morally is often explained by the idea that an individual can be ‘better than his creed’, or argued to be only a veil for immorality.¹⁴ The perceived negative consequences of atheistic moral systems have

⁷ Locke 1689: *Letter concerning toleration* 71, 52; Martin, M. 1990: 4-6.

⁸ Bentley 1724, in Martin, M. 1990: 4.

⁹ Taylor, A. E. 1947: 158-9.

¹⁰ Atheistic morality offers explanation but not justification: see Tillich 1963: e.g. 13, esp. his first three chapters, on secular morality as ‘graceless moralism and normless relativism’.

¹¹ Martin, M. 1990: 4-23. See also Smith, G. 1989: 275 on immorality as the key criticism of atheists. One of the key reasons for opposition against evolution today is that it is seen as encouraging immorality, according to Anderson, E. 2007: 215-30.

¹² Survey: Gervais et al. 2011: 1189-1206. Studies 2-4 are particularly relevant: 1194-1198.

¹³ The caricature of atheists as dishonest, careless, etc has been observed in, for instance, Dennett 2006: 303, Martin, M. 1990: 4-5, Smith, G. 1989: 4.

¹⁴ Coplestone’s attitude towards Russell, B. 1975: 150 was that he was ‘better than his creed’, for instance. It was also Cicero’s attitude toward the lives of virtuous Epicureans: Cic. *On Moral Ends* 2.80-1, 96, 99; Meyer 2008: 120.

subsequently overshadowed the positives, and atheism has frequently served as a moral scapegoat throughout the history of the West.¹⁵

Academic studies, for instance those in the cognitive sciences, also demonstrate the ongoing tendency to posit a connection between religion and morality. Part of the task of the cognitive sciences is to explain why religion, which appears at first glance to be positively mal-adaptive from an evolutionary perspective (with wasted resources, self-harm, etc), has not been 'weeded out by natural selection'.¹⁶ William James believed that religion made us more 'effective' (healthier, more efficient, etc), and 'morally better': religion survived because it is good.¹⁷ Modern cognitive scientists have often taken the same view: religion somehow enhances our moral and cooperative capacities. Such studies have shown that religions enhance community coherence, which means that they offer social and cultural infrastructures for creating and maintaining moral teamwork.¹⁸ All religions do undoubtedly include positions on a variety of moral issues, whether or not they are moralising religions (in the sense of having morally indifferent gods or spirits).¹⁹ As Steven Weinberg observed, 'one often hears that theology is not the important thing about religion – the important thing is how it helps us to live'.²⁰ In this view, atheism is undesirable not just because it endangers the collective religious piety of the community, but because atheists cannot have morals beyond those culturally influenced by religion.²¹ In addition to religion, belief itself is sometimes argued to result in moral behaviour in the cognitive sciences. Covey and his colleagues, for instance, showed that people are less likely to cheat if they know they are being watched.²² Yet, more recent modern studies in the cognitive sciences have increasingly

¹⁵ Broom 2003: 164, Shermer 2004: 16-17. Negatives tainted the positives: Ruse 2004: 27-34. Atheistic approaches to ethics: the collection of essays in Clayton and Schloss 2004, De Waal 1996 and 2006, King, B. 2007, and Shermer 2004.

¹⁶ Bloom 2012: 183.

¹⁷ James 1902: 331. On religion as a morally positive force see also Flew 1967: 37-43, Huxley 1893.

¹⁸ Religions enhance community coherence and moral teamwork is recognised in Broom 2003: 189, Bloom 2012: 186, Haidt 2007, 2012.

¹⁹ All religions have moral positions: Broom 2003: 4, 10. Bauman and Boyer 2013 use 'moralising religions' for those with superhuman agents that have 'highly specific moral prescriptions', like Christianity.

²⁰ Weinberg 1993: 193.

²¹ Arguments that it is impossible to be good without god: e.g. Lane Craig 2010: 127-46.

²² Covey et al. 1989.

abandoned the idea that religions are necessarily connected to morality, or that ‘moralising religions’ really result in more moral societies and individuals than atheism. For instance, Bauman and Boyer, in the most recent research review article on morality, religion, and the cognitive sciences, observe that:

automatic intuitions precede conscious moral reasoning, as well as the explicit justification of moral choices, which often reduces to a posteriori rationalization. That is why moral intuitions are the same in religious and non-religious people, and adherence to particular beliefs only marginally affects prosocial behaviors²³

In other words, regardless of doctrine or religion, people are generally motivated to behave cooperatively. In fact, there is no persuasive evidence that any positive connection exists at all between religion and morality. As Zuckerman has argued, the overall picture in modern research is that immorality, at an individual and societal level (what he calls ‘societal health’), correlates directly with higher levels of theism; the reverse is also true, i.e. that morality correlates with irreligion and atheism. Theistic nations have the highest levels of homicide, the worst social welfare and healthcare systems, the worst progression in equality, and they are the least peaceful (according to the Global Peace Index, that measures both intra- and inter-societal peace); secularised or atheistic societies rank consistently the best in these factors and many others (also the case when comparing states within the USA).²⁴ Since Covey’s study on the impact of being watched on morality, Gervais and his colleagues have shown that Covey’s study reveals the *belief* that a watching God ensures moral behaviour rather than the *fact* (which is not true) that theism actually does result in more moral behaviour.²⁵ The conflation of perception (the belief that atheists are less moral; which is common) and reality (that atheists really are less moral; which is untrue) has confounded approaches in modern research.

To conclude: atheism is not inherently morally damaging, and theism is not innately morally beneficial; in fact, it is the *belief* that atheism is immoral (and theism moral) that has historically informed research, and not any real correlation. But neither is necessarily the case for the ancient Greeks: there is no reason to believe that atheists would have behaved less

²³ Bauman and Boyer 2013: 276.

²⁴ See Zuckerman 2013: 497-510 for detailed discussion of all of these claims. See also G. S. Paul 2005, 2009, 2010.

²⁵ Gervais et al. 2011: 1197.

morally, nor any *a priori* reason to believe that Greeks would have assumed that atheists would, either. Morality and religion have not always been perceived as necessarily interdependent across cultures and history, and they were not always in Greece. The Greeks did not connect morality with religion in the same way that it is in the West today, or use the same justifications for connecting them.

The immorality of atheism in the Greek imagination

E. R. Dodds, in his epochal *Greeks and the Irrational*, argued that:

[It is a] characteristic feature of archaic religious thought – the tendency to transform the supernatural in general, and Zeus in particular, into an agent of justice. I need hardly say that religion and morals were not initially interdependent, in Greece or elsewhere; they had separate roots. I suppose that, broadly speaking, religion grows out of man’s relationship to his total environment, morals out of his relation to his fellow-men. But sooner or later in most cultures there comes a time of suffering when most people refuse to be content with Achilles’ view, the view that “God’s in his Heaven, all’s wrong with the world.” Man projects into the cosmos his own nascent demand for social justice; and when from the outer spaces the magnified echo of his own voice returns to him, promising punishment for the guilty, he draws from it courage and reassurance.²⁶

Dodds argued two key things here: that the connection between morality and religion in Greece was not a necessary one; and that it was a consistent characteristic of archaic thought to try to create a connection, in response to theological criticisms of ancient beliefs (an argument further developed in Chapter Two).

By at least the fifth century there was a connection between unbelief and other negative values. The collection of negative adjectives including atheism – the concept, rather than the term *atheos*, which is not always present in depictions of atheism – is a common trope by the end of the fifth century at the latest, especially found in Euripides.²⁷ In his *Bacchae*, the chorus exclaim: ‘let justice manifest, sword in-hand, and slit the throat of the

²⁶ Dodds 1951: 31-2.

²⁷ Whitmarsh 2016: 116.

atheist, this lawless, unjust (*ton atheon anomon adikon*), earthborn son of Echion'.²⁸ In Euripides' *Andromache*, the chorus proclaim that the murder of Andromache and her child would be 'godless, lawless, and loveless' (*atheos anomos acharis*).²⁹ And in his *Helen*: 'you were proclaimed throughout Hellas: betrayer, faithless, lawless, godless' (*prodotis apistos adikos atheos*).³⁰ These examples all paint a picture of atheism as part of a collection of morally bad behaviours that are socially harmful, damaging, and dangerous for both individual and society. More specifically, they are the absence of morally desirable behaviours (of lawfulness, justice, love, trustworthiness, faithfulness, and theism), as implied by the alpha-privative.

But the use of atheism as one of a collection of morally bad behaviours was not restricted to Euripides. For instance, in the *Defence of Palamedes*, a rhetorical work composed by the Sicilian Gorgias, who put forward a fictional defence of the ancient hero Palamedes, the rhetorician warns the fictional jury against finding Palamedes guilty. The defendant claims the jury will be committing 'terrible, ungodly, unjust, unlawful things' (*deinon atheon adikon anomon ergon*).³¹ This is particularly interesting because it is in an imagined legal context: it plays on the common practice of accusing the defendant of committing atheistic, immoral acts. Indeed, the connection between atheism and immorality was not just a dramatic trope, nor just a standard and thoughtless formula for condemnation: immorality was a crucial component in the depictions of atheism from the Classical period.³² In Thucydides' depictions of the plague, for instance (discussed more fully in the next chapter) the historian records how the Athenians saw that men were being killed indiscriminately by the plague so they abandoned sacrifices and worship.³³ According to Thucydides they consequently stopped caring about 'all law, sacred and profane' (*hierōn kai hosiōn*): in Thucydides' view, as is argued in the next chapter, their despair leads to atheism, and corresponds with *stasis*, including the breakdown of the body politic and all sense of

²⁸ Eur. *Bacch.* 995, repeated at 1015.

²⁹ Eur. *Androm.* 491

³⁰ Eur. *Helen* 1148.

³¹ Gorg. *Pal.* 36, see Graham 2010: 774-5.

³² Lefkowitz 1989: 71 argued that 'In antiquity, being atheistic or impious (the terms are not synonymous) signified an inability to distinguish right from wrong.' She gives some additional examples.

³³ Thuc. 2.47.3-53.4.

morality.³⁴ In the *Theaetetus* Plato's Socrates argues that men can choose either to live by divine morality, or an atheistic way of life, which was necessarily immoral: 'Two patterns, my friend, are set up in the world, the divine, which is most blessed, and the godless, which is most wretched.'³⁵ Socrates' argument here is probably the clearest statement that morality was living with god, and atheism was immorality.

Perhaps the most important evidence that atheism could be perceived as immoral is in the trial of Socrates. In Chapter One it was argued that Socrates' alleged atheism was seen as corrupting, in a religious, political, and moral sense. This moral connotation is made explicit in Plato's *Apology*, where his Socrates views the accusation of atheism as one equivalent also to a claim of immorality: 'Socrates is a wrongdoer because he does not believe in the gods' (*adikei Sōkratēs theous ou nomizōn*).³⁶ Plato's Socrates embraces and inverts this association between atheism and wrongdoing. He argues that his accusers claim that he believes in some gods, and since this is the case he must therefore not be an atheist and a degenerate (*ouk eimi to parapan atheos oude tautē adikō*).³⁷ It is partly his insistence on the connection between impiety and immorality, at the trial and elsewhere, perhaps in similar discussions to those in Plato's *Euthyphro*, that hurts his case. As Burnyeat observed, though Greek religion was 'not particularly focused on what we would call morality', Socrates' conception of the gods 'demands a radical questioning of the community's values and its religion.'³⁸ As argued in Chapter One, a central part of the accusation of corruption against Socrates was in his teaching. For perhaps Socrates' most notorious student, Alcibiades, historians would later use his impious acts to demonstrate his immorality.³⁹ Atheism and impiety conflicted with being a good citizen or individual.

The link between Socrates' atheism and his immorality that Plato assumed in his depiction of the trial was informed by the comic depiction of Socrates in Aristophanes two decades earlier. In the *Clouds*, Aristophanes depicts Socrates teaching impiety and atheism: disbelief in the traditional gods, as well as comic veneration of the 'Clouds' and other natural

³⁴ Mitchell-Boyask 2008: 42 on the moral consequences; Patel 1992: 53 on *stasis*.

³⁵ Pl. *Th.* 176e-77a.

³⁶ Pl. *Ap.* 27a.

³⁷ Pl. *Ap.* 26c-d.

³⁸ Burnyeat 1997: 234-6.

³⁹ Alcibiades: Thuc. 6.53, Xen. *Hell.* 1.4.14-20, and the later Plut. *Alc.* 19.5, *DS* 13.5.1-4.

phenomena, and rejection of things like oaths.⁴⁰ This is an interesting parallel to the comment of John Locke above (p.81), on the untrustworthiness of atheists in covenants and oaths. As the lengthy rhetorical argument on oaths in court in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* shows – most of our evidence on oath-breaking comes from rhetorical legal contexts –, refusing to take an oath was perceived as an indicator of impiety.⁴¹ However, untrustworthiness with oaths was expected, atheist or not, and 'side-stepping' was common.⁴² Maybe the most illuminating example of oath-breaking is in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, where it is a sign of Persian moral decline. Rather than oath-breaking being directly associated with atheism, then, it is only indirectly associated: oath-breaking is associated with immorality and impiety, with which atheism was also associated. Returning to the Aristophanic Socrates: as well as atheism, he also teaches moral relativism in the *Clouds*. As Parker observes, the problem with the Aristophanic Socrates' atheism is not:

'[t]hat it angered the gods, as is often stressed in modern accounts, [which] is not stated in the play. What is stressed instead is how, allied with rhetoric, it subverts social morality.'⁴³

Aristophanes' Socrates teaches how to argue for anything, and how Strepsiades can escape the debts that his son Pheidippides has caused him; and he encourages Pheidippides to abuse the old customs of morality like the affection and respect of children to parents.⁴⁴ The result is that Pheidippides, although able to help his father, is not inclined to obey him at all: he is entirely selfish, individualistic, materialistic, immoral, and impious, having accepted the

⁴⁰ Ar. *Cl.* 221-62, 363-83.

⁴¹ Arist. *Rhet.* 1376b20-4. Lyc. *Leoc.* 76: Leocrates has perjured himself impiously if he swore the *ephebic* oath, and if he did not swear it he has been avoiding his duty. Dem. 21.120: it is impiety to say a man is a murderer and then swear you never said that; Andoc. 1.30-3: the jurors swear to obey piety and impiety and not put an innocent man to death; likewise Ant. 5.88. On oath-breaking see Plescia 1970.

⁴² Side-stepping: see Bayliss 2014: 243-79.

⁴³ Parker 1996: 205.

⁴⁴ On impiety: e.g. Ar. *Cl.* 221-74, 360-436. Escaping debts and moral relativism: Ar. *Cl.* 1321-44. Relativistic caricatures were extremely common in the ancient world: Gagarin 2002: 31-3; the substance of the Platonic and Aristotelian criticisms of Protagoras were based on criticisms of relativity: Sherman 1989: 190-200; on the commonality, diversity, and nature of the dialogue about (non-moral) relativism post-Protagoras, in Plato, Aristotle and Democritus, see Lee, M. 2005.

teachings of Socrates, including the nonexistence of the gods.⁴⁵ Although the play ends with Strepsiades burning Socrates for his offences against the gods, it is both the impiety and the immorality of his son that makes the protagonist realise the madness of Socrates.⁴⁶

The connection between atheism and immorality was also drawn in Aristophanes' depiction of Euripides.⁴⁷ Just like his Socrates, the atheism of Aristophanes' Euripides is a combination of disbelief in the traditional gods, and encouraging others to do the same (in *Women at the Thesmophoria*), and belief in new 'personal gods' that are very clearly parodies (as in the *Frogs*). These 'gods' are 'Air', 'twisting of the tongue, Intelligence, and sensitive Nostrils', which are (as argued in the Introduction) not meant to be taken literally as gods, but are comic exaggerations of Euripides' obsessions.⁴⁸ Euripides of the comic stage is imagined to be immoral and atheistic, justifying breaking oaths, portraying immoral subjects on stage like incest and whores, and failing to set an appropriate moral standard.⁴⁹ The comic playwright Aristophanes naturally takes this to the extreme in his *Frogs*, where he has his comic incarnation of Aeschylus argue that Euripides has almost single-handedly caused the moral decline of the entire population:

Of what crimes is he not guilty? Didn't he show pimps, women giving birth in temples, sleeping with their brothers, claiming that life is not life? And then our state is filled with these bureaucrats and oafish democratic apes always cheating the people, and there's no one able to carry the torch anymore because of lack of training.⁵⁰

Impiety is only one part of this passage, in rejecting the instruments of ritual (torches), and giving birth in temples.⁵¹ Here Aristophanes takes what must have been a common

⁴⁵ Ar. *Cl.* 1311-20 on Pheidippides, and specifically his disbelief: 1467-75.

⁴⁶ Ending: Ar. *Cl.* 1445-1510.

⁴⁷ Euripides was also believed, later in antiquity, to have been charged with impiety, but this is unlikely: Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1416a; other factors: Ar. *Thesm.* 445-53. Satyrus *Life of Euripides* POxy 1176, vol. 9, pg.153, 15-21, F3, col 10; 4, Aetius *Plac. Phil.* 1.7.2; Eus. *PE* 14.16.1.

⁴⁸ Disbelief: Ar. *Thesm* 450-1; new gods: *Frogs* 889-93.

⁴⁹ Oaths: Ar. *Thesm.* 275-6, *Frogs* 102, 1471; using his line from Eur. *Hipp.* 612. Incest: Ar. *Frogs* 850, whores: *Frogs* 1043. Moral standard: 'a poet should conceal wickedness, not bring it forward and teach it. For little boys have a teacher who advises them, and grown-ups have poets.' Ar. *Frogs* 1053-5.

⁵⁰ Ar. *Frogs* 1078-88.

⁵¹ On the types of impiety see Chapter Three.

complaint, of role of the stage in moral corruption, and reduces it *ad absurdum*. The connection is clear, that Euripides' atheism led him to teach Athenians to behave immorally, just as it had in the case of Socrates.

So, morality certainly was a part of many traditional caricatures of atheism, but the question remains: was immorality always and inevitably a part of depictions of atheism in the Greek world? There is an obvious obstacle for making the argument that it was: if the connection between immorality and atheism was cemented in the Greek mind then it would not have been necessary always to specify that an atheist was immoral. It is undoubtedly true that the connection cannot have been so obvious as not to require stating, but the rhetorical nature of our evidence on depictions of atheism also impacts this. Aristophanes is making fun out of atheists, so he picks up any and all potentially negative associations available to him and takes them to the extreme. Socrates and others on trial are defending themselves against rhetorical attacks that, again, utilise any ammunition available to them.

Still, there are some surprising details given this rhetorical backdrop. For instance, for the most notorious atheist, Diagoras of Melos, who was exiled from Athens for atheism in the late fifth century, there is no intimation of immoral behaviour beyond impiety itself in any of the records of his accusation.⁵² Even more surprising is the case of Anaxagoras, who is not only never accused of immorality, but clearly had a reputation for beneficence, civic duty, and selfless moral behaviour. In fact, Diogenes Laertius says of Anaxagoras that 'he was outstanding in nobility and wealth, and also in generosity'; he gave away his inheritance to his relatives, and separately, when offered any gift from the rulers of Lampsucus, he asked for an annual holiday for the children on the anniversary of his death.⁵³ Plutarch in his *Pericles* says that Anaxagoras bestowed 'dignity and intelligence' on Pericles more than any other adviser, and 'elevated and gave purpose to his character'.⁵⁴ Likewise, in spite of being driven from Athens in the late fifth century on suspicion of teaching atheistic natural philosophy, Protagoras also retained a positive reputation. Plato's Socrates explicitly remarks on this in the *Meno*: 'I believe he died about seventy years old, forty of which he spent in the practice of his art; and he retains undiminished to this day the high reputation he has enjoyed

⁵² Ar. *Birds* 1072-8, Lys. 6.17. On the date of his expulsion see Romer 1996: 394-401.

⁵³ DL 2.6-15.

⁵⁴ Plut. *Per.* 4.4.

all that time'.⁵⁵ Protagoras was also widely credited with the creation of the constitution of the Athenian colony of Thurii in around 443BC.⁵⁶ The founding of Thurii was a unique event, in which well-respected and wise figures like the historian Herodotus and Hippodamus of Miletus, the city planner, were reputed to have taken part.⁵⁷ So Protagoras must have had a reputation for wisdom in Athens at the time, and it is reasonable to presume he kept that reputation in Thurii. (For more on the details of the trials for atheism of Diagoras Anaxagoras, and Protagoras see Chapter Three.) These examples sufficiently demonstrate that a reputation for immorality was certainly not inevitable for those with a reputation for atheism.

So, to conclude briefly, there was a longstanding but not inevitable connection in the public mind in Greece between atheism and immorality. It seems clear that immorality was perceived as part of a wider negative representation of atheism. Immorality, civic irresponsibility, legal deviancy, and so on, are bundled together as potential consequences of atheism. However, the connection between immorality and atheism was not inevitably drawn upon when thinking about atheism; immorality does not appear to have been seen to have necessarily correlated with atheism, even if it was a potential and perhaps even common association. In many cases, immorality may have been implied by atheism, but the connection does not seem to have been inevitable.

The connection between morality and theology

The reason that the connection between immorality and atheism was not fixed or clear is partly because the connection between morality and theism was not any clearer. Morality and piety could be the same, but were not always and not for all people. There are two main views on the connection between morality and piety in Greece, the first of which is represented by Dover. Dover argued that there was a clear distinction in early Greece between what the gods desired, and what was morally best according to humans, but that piety and morality became increasingly equivalent in the fourth century.⁵⁸ One of the key

⁵⁵ Pl. *Men.* 91e.

⁵⁶ Kagan 154-69.

⁵⁷ De Romilly 1992: 21.

⁵⁸ In the conception of Den Boer: 'Demonically incalculable is the character of the god, whose law is not the law of man, the god of universal life and wisdom. His way of acting is supra-ethical and arbitrary.' Den Boer 1979: 14; Adkins 1972. Dover 1994: 250-55.

implications of the eventual convergence of morality and piety was that, Dover argued, ‘virtue, not the performance of sacrifices, is the way to win the gods’ favour’, as the desires of the gods came to be understood as, broadly, justice, and moral behaviour.⁵⁹ Menander, for instance, observed that ‘anyone who believes that he secures the god’s favour by sacrifice... is in error. For a man must be useful by not seducing virgins or committing adultery or killing for money.’⁶⁰ Yet even then, at the turn of the third century, Menander was defending his idea and attacking the opposing view: he implicitly recognised that some people do believe that piety and morality are different. Indeed, this image of progress towards belief in the pious as the moral has since been significantly complicated. Andrej and Ivana Petrovic, for instance, have argued that certain core concepts in Greek religious beliefs did have a moral dimension from the earliest periods. They argue that:

the notion of inner purity is often interlocked with notions of honesty, loyalty, faithfulness, selflessness, and assertion of the principles of justice, righteousness, and of sexual decorum. Inner impurity, on the other hand, is regularly associated not just with wrong intentions and transgressive thoughts in the ritual context, but also, and relatedly, with disregard of and disrespect for moral values—inner impurity is intertwined with dishonesty, perjury, unfaithfulness, scheming and plotting, selfishness, self-serving intentions subordinating and undermining the interests of the group or community, and inappropriate sexual impulses.⁶¹

The Petrovics see the relationship between inner purity and morality as one that is revealed from the earliest Greek texts, and continues beyond the Classical period. In fact, rather than a linear progression towards convergence of religious and moral dimensions, there are multiple competing moral theories throughout Greek history, some of which fuse morality and piety, while others do not.

Crucial to articulating the difference between divine and human behaviour was the *hosios* and *eusebēs* (pious), or actions of which the gods approved, and the *dikaios* (righteous), actions approved by men.⁶² Theognis especially desired the gods to be just, and

⁵⁹ Dover 1994: 253-4.

⁶⁰ Menander F683. See also Isoc. 2.20, Xen. *Ages.* 11.2, with similar sentiments in the fourth century.

⁶¹ Petrovic 2016: 265.

⁶² *Hosios* and *dikaios*: Ant. 1.25, Lys. 8.3. Dover 1994: 248.

clearly struggled to fuse morality and piety.⁶³ In one long fragment (quoted below, pg.160-1), he describes Zeus as omnipotent and omniscient, but expresses his confusion and dismay that Zeus does not consistently police justice for mortals.⁶⁴ In this fragment, Theognis laments the lack of an obvious and clear set of rules for men, and details the struggle of the good man, who must forge a moral world for himself against the odds, and without the help of the gods.⁶⁵ In a separate fragment, Theognis explains this apparent lack of justice as explained by ancestral fault (see Chapter Four), but it seems unwise to read this interpretation of ancestral fault into the poem since in this fragment it is clearly left open as a lamentation of injustice of the divine and the separate human responsibility for moral behaviour.⁶⁶ Instead, Theognis offered different solutions, if he offered a solution at all, in different poems. In the works of other authors, the division between morality and piety is even clearer. Bacchylides, in his *Ode for Hieron*, sings of Croesus' fall, and in light of this story he recommends to Hiero: 'Do *hosia* and cheer your heart; for this is the greatest of benefits'.⁶⁷ As Adkins points out, this does not mean that it is most beneficial to do what is *right*, but to do what is *pious*: Croesus is saved from the Pyre by his pious deeds to Apollo, not by any moral righteousness.⁶⁸ Likewise, Xenophon, in the fourth century *Memorabilia* (by which time Dover believed morality and piety had largely fused), described Socrates' piety and his beneficence as different virtues.⁶⁹

There are as many texts in which morality and piety were merged to different extents. Aeschylus, in his *Seven Against Thebes*, has his Eteocles observe that Oecles is 'moderate, just, good, and pious' (*sōphrōn dikaios agathos eusebēs*), thus treating his morality and his piety as separate but related and associated virtues.⁷⁰ The view put forward in Aeschylus sits reasonably well with the impression Demosthenes gives, in his *Against Meidias* (and elsewhere), a speech that ends with a comment that conviction would be just for both divine

⁶³ Thgn. 373-400.

⁶⁴ Thgn. 373-78.

⁶⁵ Thgn. 377-89, 394-400.

⁶⁶ Thgn. 197-208.

⁶⁷ Bacc. 83.

⁶⁸ Adkins 1972: 82-3.

⁶⁹ Xen. *Mem* 4.8.11.

⁷⁰ Aesch. *Seven* 610.

and human justice.⁷¹ ‘The two realms are juxtaposed’, as Gunther Martin observes, but they are both types of justice.⁷² A similar but much more developed perspective is revealed in Plato’s *Euthyphro*. Plato’s Socrates and Euthyphro attempt, more systematically than elsewhere, to make sense of the differences between moral and pious behaviour. The dialogue betrays, as Bryant observes, ‘that while religion and morality are not wholly separate in this period, the link between them is tenuous’.⁷³ Moreover, the attempt to sketch these divisions explicitly implicitly recognises that the divisions are unclear or contentious, as they are revealed in the less artificially structured evidence like Aeschylus. Though Socrates and his companion agree that it is just to be pious, Euthyphro does not think that pious action is always just.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, Socrates and Euthyphro both agree that being *hosios* is part of ‘what is right’: the two parts of being *dikaios* are piety and holiness to the gods and human justice.⁷⁵ As Rudhardt has emphasised, what is *hosion* can also govern basic social behaviour that clearly has some bearing on morality: oaths, murder, the behaviour of children to their parents or adults to one another, respect for other people’s lives, hospitality; and the *hosios* man is expected, by some like Thucydides at least, to be a just and good man.⁷⁶

The Melian dialogue from Thucydides’ *History* is one of the most illustrative examples in the fifth century of the conflict in practice (as opposed to theoretical, as in the *Euthyphro*), between the two different modes of understanding the nature of the connection between morality and piety. The Athenians and Melians are debating the justice of the Athenian invasion of Melos:

Ath.: ‘So far as the favour of the gods is concerned, we think we have as much right to that as you have. Our aims and our actions are *perfectly consistent with the beliefs men hold about the gods and with the principles which govern their own conduct*

⁷¹ Dem. 21.227, and see 19.311 where jurors are encouraged to cast their votes for ‘divine and human justice’, and again in *Against Leptines*, esp. 20.126-7, where he ‘maintains a distinction between human and divine justice, introducing a hierarchy with the divine sphere following a stricter idea of what is just: nothing that is not in accordance with human justice can be just with the gods.’ Martin, G. 2009: 246.

⁷² Martin, G. 2009: 30.

⁷³ Bryant 1996: 38.

⁷⁴ Pl. *Euthphr.* 12a. Pearson 1962: 32: ‘There is no suggestion, either in Plato or elsewhere, that there was a tendency among Athenians to explain justice in terms of piety, to fall back on a religious explanation of ethics.’

⁷⁵ Rudhardt 1958: 32. Annas 2006: 37-8.

⁷⁶ Thuc. 3.84. Rudhardt 1958: 31.

(οὐδὲν γὰρ ἔξω τῆς ἀνθρωπείας τῶν μὲν ἐς τὸ θεῖον νομίσεως, τῶν δ' ἐς σφᾶς αὐτοὺς βουλήσεως δικαιοῦμεν ἢ πράσσομεν). Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can...⁷⁷

The Melians claim to be doing the *dikaïos* thing – what is ‘right’, ‘just’, or ‘customary’ –, and as a result, they argue that they are backed up by the gods: they equate their understanding of justice and the will of the gods.⁷⁸ The Athenians (and Thucydides) counter this with a realist, hard-headed, and coldly rational response, arguing they are supported by the gods because it is a natural rule for the stronger to rule the weaker, as they do.⁷⁹ These two arguments seem similar in principle, at least at first glance, but the argument of the Athenians is, unlike that of the Melians, not an appeal to morality. For the Athenians, appropriate behaviour at the state level is dictated by expediency, not morality, and this amoral (not necessarily immoral) behaviour is not offensive to the gods.⁸⁰ The Athenian response is, as Connor observes, striking because of ‘its unsentimental clarity in the analysis of power’.⁸¹ It is also radical in its dismissal of traditional conceptions of the divine role in justice: as Hornblower observed, the Melians ‘speak in more traditional terms’ than the Athenians.⁸²

In judging the acceptance of the idea that expediency was a rule of the day, and was not perceived as impious, ‘it is only necessary’, Adkins argues, ‘to consider Athens’ (fifth-

⁷⁷ Thuc. 5.105.

⁷⁸ Thuc. 5.104.

⁷⁹ Athenians and Thuc dismiss the naïve view: Connor 1984: 151, Meiggs 1972: 388. On the law that the stronger dominated the weaker see also their earlier appeal to this during the Spartan Conference before the war, in Thuc. 1.76; cf. Thuc. 4.61.5, Pl. *Gorg.* 483c-e; Connor 1984: 151. Hornblower 2010: 244, on 5.105.2 has argued that the Athenians were not saying that ‘might is right’, but that ‘might’ superseded ‘right’. The gods, therefore, support might over morality. As Hornblower *ibid* observed, this is similar but not exactly the same as the sort of argument Callicles makes in Pl. *Gorg.* 483c9-d6 in that – see Low 2007: 161-3 – Callicles develops a new sense of justice and morality, rather than eschewing it, claiming that it was ‘natural justice’ for the weaker to rule the stronger. Callicles’ argument solves the problem of the gods condoning injustice, but only by changing the idea of justice.

⁸⁰ Behaviour dictated by expediency is appropriate: Low 2007: 163.

⁸¹ Connor 1984: 157.

⁸² Hornblower 2010: 242, on 5.104. Hornblower highlights that both uses of ‘divine fortune’. 5.104, 112 are by the Melians.

century) foreign policy'.⁸³ Yet, later in Thucydides, in contrast to the proud and cold Athenians of the Melian dialogue, the Athenians appear to switch modes and appeal to the justice of the gods.⁸⁴ The disaster at Sicily that led to the later meek Athenian response was, Connor observes, clearly foreshadowed by the Melian dialogue.⁸⁵ The Athenian response about the law of the stronger strongly resembles, in its language and content, the words of Xerxes before the invasion of Greece in Herodotus; and of course, the Melian dialogue directly precedes the Sicilian expedition in Thucydides.⁸⁶ After the destruction of the navy in Syracuse, Nicias reassures the army that they will survive, since they are pious and humble men so the gods will not punish them anymore, and the gods have forgiven them for earlier transgressions.⁸⁷ This, as Macleod argued, is not a change in thought but a change in circumstance.⁸⁸ The Athenians are no longer the dominating power, and so they have to appeal to a different conception of the gods, and their attitude to justice; the same understanding that they had earlier firmly rebutted when the Melians articulated it. There are competing understandings of the connection of morality and piety: one rejecting any connection between justice and piety, and the other arguing for it, each dictated by the situation, but grounded in the assumption of divine favour.⁸⁹

The overall picture, then, is one of profound messiness: the connection between piety and morality is much more chaotic than Dover argued, in all periods of Greek history. *Hosios* and *dikaios* are used in a variety of different ways depending on the user and context. Throughout Greek history morality and its role in pleasing the gods, and even the morality of the gods themselves, remained live issues. Many people clearly considered piety as a subsection of justice, alongside morality, or believed the two to be connected or overlap in a variety of other ways; but equally, plenty of Greeks believed the two to be separate spheres. Ultimately there was no broader consensus linking piety (and therefore theism) and morality, and consequently there was no strict link between impiety and immorality. This explains why it is possible for some individuals (like Meletus) to leverage the idea that atheists were

⁸³ Adkins 1960: 234.

⁸⁴ Nicias in Thuc. 7.77.

⁸⁵ Connor 1984: 156.

⁸⁶ Hdt 7.8.

⁸⁷ Thuc. 7.77.2-3.

⁸⁸ Macleod 1983: 144-5.

⁸⁹ Parker 1997 explores the frequent claims, on very different bases, that Athens was favoured by the gods.

immoral, but the link is not consistently raised or assumed in such contexts. Atheism would not have been perceived as inevitably immoral at any point before the third century (after which our study ends), but plenty of individuals might subscribe to a worldview which saw atheism as morally pernicious, or as a consequence of immorality. The question remains as to why this link between morality and piety was never cemented on a larger scale (as it was in, for instance, the Christian West as observed earlier), and why the link between morality and religion only remained one that could be optionally drawn.

Why were morality and religion only tenuously connected?

The tenuous connection between (im)morality and (a)theism can be explained by two foundational aspects of Greek theology. The first is that the gods are not consistently presented as moral arbiters, and the second is that there was no doctrine of a theological or moral nature. First, the Greek gods did not consistently act as enforcers or arbiters of moral behaviour. In the cognitive sciences, Ara Norenzayan et al have hypothesised that theists in religious societies connect morality and religion and believe that theists are more moral (and atheists less) because the gods are believed to be prescribing and enforcing moral rules, and failing to believe in the gods would therefore mean an individual would lack the deterrent against immorality.⁹⁰ If gods are moral agents, then unbelieving in them means lack of a moral compass, and if the gods require moral behaviour then unbelief means lack of a moral paradigm. As Baumard and Boyer have observed, the assumption that the gods are moral agents is a key part of this hypothesis, which cannot be easily sustained in the ancient world.⁹¹

It is undoubtedly true that, as Lloyd-Jones insisted, the gods could act as moral agents in the earliest and (by the Classical period) traditional conceptions of the gods in Greece.⁹² The gods were sometimes held to the same moral standards as men: they were expected to obey rules of friendship, cooperation, reciprocity, and exchange, and possibly enact justice,

⁹⁰ Norenzayan et al 2008.

⁹¹ Baumard and Boyer 2013: 276.

⁹² Lloyd-Jones 1971: 1. Inconsistently ethical gods: Den Boer 1979: 13.

and they sometimes took pity on humans.⁹³ For instance, in one of the more frequently cited passages on the justice of Zeus, Hesiod describes how he enforces for his daughter Justice:

Zeus' eye, which sees all things and knows all things, perceives this too, if he so wishes, and he is well aware just what kind of justice this is which the city has within it.⁹⁴

This passage is entirely open for interpretation. One could read it as Zeus unproblematically acting as an agent of justice, as the passage is commonly understood.⁹⁵ But it can also be read as fundamentally self-interested. Zeus' enforcement of justice is justified on a personal level: Justice is the daughter who has been personally offended, and Zeus is her father acting in her defence. In fact, 'if he so wishes' (*ai k'ethelēs*) implies that Zeus' dispensation of justice is not consistent, but relies on his personal inclinations.⁹⁶ Either of these readings was open to an ancient Greek. In Sophocles' *Ajax*, Athena herself confirms that 'the gods love sensible men (*sōphronas*) and hate the bad (*tous kakous*).'⁹⁷ She predicates this on the advice that Odysseus should learn from Ajax's example: 'never yourself utter an arrogant word against the gods, nor assume conceit because you outweigh another in strength or in profusion of great wealth.'⁹⁸ It is possible to read the hatred of the gods for injustice as a general maxim, or that it is not injustice that caused Ajax's punishment, but *hubris*: personally offending the gods. Similarly, in Euripides' *Hippolytus* Artemis appears in a capacity of judgement over the characters' justice: to 'clearly reveal the righteous mind' of Hippolytus (*ekdeixai phrena... dikaiān*).⁹⁹ On the one hand, one could read this as the gods serving in their capacity of agents of justice, but on the other, Artemis is a god behaving in an entirely self-interested way, defending and advocating for her own worshipper. While some Greeks naturally understood the gods as moral agents, to some extent at least, the picture from our evidence is that the gods had the capacity for justice but they were not consistently or necessarily agents

⁹³ Obey rules: e.g. in comic guise, in Ar. *Peace* 363-425; Justice: Eur. F151, Ar. *Cl.* 902-19, Dem. 25.11; Dover 1994: 78-9, 255, Pearson 1962: 17.

⁹⁴ Hes. *WD* 256-85.

⁹⁵ As in Petrovic 2016: 265-6, for instance.

⁹⁶ Hes. *WD* 268.

⁹⁷ Soph. *Ajax* 132-3.

⁹⁸ Soph. *Ajax* 127-30.

⁹⁹ Eur. *Hipp.* 1298-9.

of justice, and even those passages that appear to state a general maxim of the justice of the gods are complex, and could be read in multiple different ways.

Indeed, in Greek literature more broadly, the gods only inconsistently abide by the moral standards that mortals would. They have their own modes of behaviour: they are jealous of their own superiority, brutal in their vengeance, and fundamentally self-interested.¹⁰⁰ The gods were not consistently compassionate or moral: gods played games with men, and frequently caused them considerable suffering.¹⁰¹ The popular Greek conception of the gods as amoral reflected the world as Greeks experienced it: unforgiving, unfair, and populated by creatures with mixed motives.¹⁰² The essentially good gods of the Platonic Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle responded to earlier portrayals that they argued insufficiently portrayed the moral agency of the gods.¹⁰³ But not all of these earlier depictions removed moral agency from the gods. Certain individual gods had clearer moral roles in some depictions, as especially did Apollo. Alcaeus, for instance, describes Apollo's role at Delphi 'as a prophet of justice'.¹⁰⁴ Apollo plays the role of moral teacher through his position at Delphi in the tale of Glaucus in Herodotus (and elsewhere), in which the Spartan is punished by the god for immoral behaviour.¹⁰⁵ As Davies puts it, Apollo had 'taken shape in

¹⁰⁰ Lloyd-Jones 1971: 3-4.

¹⁰¹ Some do claim the gods have compassion: Eur. *El.* 1327-30, Lys. 2.40, Thuc. 7.77.4, Men. *Epirr.* 855, 873-5. Playing games, as in Eur. *Hipp.* esp. 47-50, 1420-22. See Democritus B175, Eur. *IT* 380-91; Isoc. 11.38-40; Dover 1994: 80.

¹⁰² The unpleasantness of the human experience was a mainstay of Greek thought, e.g.: Hom. *Il.* 24.525-6, Hes. *WD* 90-110, Semon. F1.20-22, Bacch. 5.159-62. Unjust gods: for instance, Strife in Hes. *WD* 25-6, or Apollo in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, 530-50.

¹⁰³ In Plato's *Tim.* 29d7-30c1, for instance, the craftsman god is essentially good. For Aristotle, for instance, the beings in the universe can be ranked, and that at the top, the Unmoved Mover, is the most good and has goodness automatically without needing to obtain it unlike lesser beings; Aristotle *De Caelo* 11.12, *Parts of Animals* 1.5, *Nic. Eth.* 1141a; Dover 1994: 17, Dillon, J. 2004: 157, Nussbaum 2001: 373-4; and on the theories of Plato, Aristotle etc, see Irwin, T. 2007 e.g. 63-4 on Plato. Vlastos 2000: 63 argued that Socrates' innovation was partly because of his moral role. Vlastos 1991: 166 again, argues that the austere ethical conception of the gods by Socrates and Plato would have led to abandoning the vast majority of earlier depictions of the gods.

¹⁰⁴ Alc. F142 West.

¹⁰⁵ Glaucus: Hdt 6.86. It is perhaps significant that foreigners portrayed as sensible and just show special respect to Apollo, e.g. Datis returning the looted statue of Apollo 6.118 – this may be connected with his association with justice in Herodotus, as he shows himself just with Croesus at 1.86-7.2, as Mikalson 2003: 48-9 observes.

the collective imagination of at least some Greeks as the patron, or direct author, of laws and of a moral order'.¹⁰⁶ There were also 'let-out clauses' (which will be explored in Chapter Four) that helped explain the apparently inconsistent moral agency of the gods. But these were, again, only one way of envisioning divine morality, and they are certainly not present in all texts or depictions of the divine. While the gods (especially certain gods) could always be perceived as moral agents in certain contexts and by some individuals, they were not universally or consistently perceived to be moral arbiters. As a result, this left the arbitration of morality at a basic level in the hands of humans, which meant that disbelief in one or more of the gods would not have necessarily been connected with rudderless morality.¹⁰⁷

The second key reason why morality and religion were only tenuously connected is that Greeks lacked any doctrine to dictate moral behaviour with divine backing. Modern doctrinal religions usually include belief in an absolute morality. In revealed religion a hidden order to the universe is usually identified, and actions have good or bad moral qualities. As revelation, doctrines are thus partially moral guides. But Greek religion did not have a doctrine in the way it is meant today: there was no codified set of rules or codes to which one could appeal.¹⁰⁸ Homer and Hesiod were sometimes used as examples or common reference points for views about the gods, and they had educative properties regarding the gods, but they were not doctrines or dogmas, nor was there an authoritative priesthood to guide in their interpretation.¹⁰⁹ Neither Homer nor Hesiod were a rulebook or tool for moral instruction. Most importantly, these key Greek texts were 'inspired' and not 'revealed'.¹¹⁰ There were widely held moral principles, but there were no clear and fixed rules. This concerned some

¹⁰⁶ Davies 1997: 47.

¹⁰⁷ Human morality could be seen as part of divine justice, too: see Chapter Four. Harrison 2000: 110-11.

¹⁰⁸ In spite of radically different approaches, the idea that there was no doctrine or priesthood in Greece is now a nearly ubiquitous feature of books on religion. Gould, J. 1985: 7 and Harrison 2007a: 383 recognise the lack of doctrine as proof of the 'fundamentally improvisatory' nature of Greek religion, and argue that there was no inherent need for literary texts; similarly Bremmer 1994: 1, 1999: 7-8. Others have stressed the importance of the *polis* structure in replacement for doctrine: Sourvinou-Inwood 1990: 17-19, Kindt 2012: 30. Others, like Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992: 27, Finley 1984: 4, and Price 1984: 10, 1999: 3 argue that the lack of doctrine is part of the absence of belief and primacy of ritual.

¹⁰⁹ The educative properties of Homer and Hesiod: see Chapter One, and Hdt 2.53; Bremmer 1999: 7, Burkert 1985: 120, Harrison 2007a: 383. They have been sometimes used as an equivalent to doctrine, to 'fill a gap': Gould, J. 1994: 104-5, Price 1999: 67.

¹¹⁰ Inspired not revealed: See Dillon, J. 2004: 155-6, Parker 2006: 105.

Greeks, as in Theognis (discussed below pg.160-1): ‘Are there no divine guidelines for mortal men, no path to follow that will appease the gods?’¹¹¹ These principles could conflict with each other, as they do in Plato’s *Euthyphro*, there is a conflict between the idea that killing of any kind incurs pollution and the claim that blood is thicker than water.¹¹²

Euthyphro chooses the former because he believes it is more in line with divine law, but most Athenians would have chosen the latter; at least, so Dillon has argued.¹¹³ This is not uncomplicatedly a choice between divine justice or human morality, but it demonstrates the competing moral claims that the individual could choose from, with no clear divine guidance through doctrine.

Usually context served to resolve these moral conflicts, but ultimately, there was no fixed authority about morality. While oracles could serve as moral guides, the impracticality of Greeks consulting an oracle every time they had a moral decision to make is obvious.¹¹⁴ Oracles at Dodona and Delphi did offer pronouncements, but these were not general pronouncements about morality; they were specific responses to questions that were ideally precise and not a general set of rules.¹¹⁵ There were also local officials in some *poleis* who were in charge of monitoring and advising individuals on various religious actions. In Athens, for instance, there were the *exegetai*, who were a board of two of the *eupatridai* clan who probably made joint responses, one elected by the people and in charge of queries about correct performance of sacrifice and ancestral rites, and one appointed by the Delphic oracle in charge of queries about purification.¹¹⁶ However, again, these gave general answers on that focused on correct performance of ritual, rather than straightforward remarks on belief or morality.¹¹⁷ There are references to unwritten and unshakable rules of the gods, which were sometimes explained as cultural standards common to humans, and sometimes as laws prescribed by the gods that explain many of the underlying similarities and common laws and

¹¹¹ Thgn. 373-82.

¹¹² Pl. *Euthphr.* 8a-9e, esp. 9a.

¹¹³ Most Athenians would have picked ‘blood is thicker than water’: Dillon, J. 2004: 160.

¹¹⁴ Glaucon at Hdt 6.86 is a significant moral dilemma, but it is also a once-in-a-lifetime decision.

¹¹⁵ On the nature of oracular pronouncements see the previous chapter.

¹¹⁶ On the *exegetai* and Eupatridai see Oliver 1950, and more briefly Pocock 1962: 219.

¹¹⁷ Answers were on ritual not morality: Dillon, J. 2004: 155-6.

principles between peoples.¹¹⁸ Still, there was no single set of rules; there were generalised axioms that might conflict with one another. Instead of a moral rule-book or interpretative moral authorities, Greeks made moral choices based on common wisdom and precedent.

The landscape of atheistic morality: justifying civic values without gods

Humanistic practical morality

The best example of practiced morality – and ‘evidence for popular morality’ – is in the Athenian courts, and these take a largely humanistic approach.¹¹⁹ Morality had been explored and decided in the law-courts for centuries.¹²⁰ As Demosthenes observes, the function of the law was to:

aim at what is just and good and advantageous. They seek this, and when this has been found, this is established as a general order, equal and similar for all, and this is a *nomos*. The law is that which all men ought to obey for many reasons, but above all because every law is an invention and gift of the gods, a tenet of wise men, a corrective of errors voluntary and involuntary, and a general covenant of the whole community, in accordance with which all men in that community regulate their lives.¹²¹

Edward Harris has argued that the law partially derives its legitimacy from several sources:

‘1) the will of the gods, 2) human reason, 3) moral improvement, and 4) the agreement of the community... A law in the fullest sense of the word was not only

¹¹⁸ Unwritten laws: Pl. *Laws* 838a-b, Arist. *Pol.* 1287b, Soph. *Ant.* 450-7., Xen. *Mem.* 4.4.19-21, cf. Eur. *Suppl.* 433-7 on written versus unwritten laws; divine origins for laws: homicide: *Ant.* 1.3, Areopagus: *Dem.* 23.70. Bryant 1996: 174, Dover 1994: 22, 255, Den Boer 1979: 193, Thomas 1991: 32. Against the tradition championed by Dodds that morality and religion were separate until the later periods, Den Boer argued that the ‘idea of law from a divine revelation’ was part of Greek thought from the earliest periods, but his argument is unconvincing, largely because he conflates morality and purity, and impiety and immorality. Den Boer 1979: 15-21, Gill 1980: 374-418.

¹¹⁹ Harris, E. 2006: 290.

¹²⁰ Wallace 2005: 357-371.

¹²¹ *Dem.* 25.16.

passed by the Assembly, which granted the approval of the community, but also sanctioned by the gods.’¹²²

As Harris observes, sets of moral standards were developed by building on legal precedents and known wisdom in the courts, and by judging the benefits of each decision individually, all of which was built on a broadly religious foundation. Speakers passed statues of the gods when entering the court, they (presumably) opened with prayers and sacrifices, they made oaths under the gods, and they might have suffered religious consequences (like pollution) for making the wrong decision; it was in this context that moral standards were being explored.¹²³ They frequently dealt with subjects like piety and impiety (the subject of Demosthenes’ *Meidias* that will shortly be discussed), and individuals accused their opponents of impiety in court, in which case, the expectations and desires of the gods were naturally taken into account on moral decision making.¹²⁴ Human justice was conceived of as an aspect of justice as a whole, which included divine justice (on which see Chapter Four). This environment was not just background noise. Nonetheless, the actual mechanisms for making moral decisions in court were based on human (and not divine) agency, so they are in this sense humanistic.

In the fourth century, orators considered the expediency and justice of a measure as equally important: these were different components of the *ad hoc* humanistic approach to morality that was taken in the lawcourts.¹²⁵ As Ober argues, in the courts ‘democracy can align political choices with moral choices to produce outstanding results’.¹²⁶ There were frequent appeals to consequences of behaviour or of the decision of a jury for all citizens. Lycurgus, for instance, argues that Leocrates must be punished because he betrayed the living as well as the dead; the Athenian ancestors who, had they acted as he did, would have left the

¹²² Harris, E. 2006: 51.

¹²³ Boegehold 1995: 39 makes the argument about sacrifices: ‘It would be consistent with the seriousness of the undertaking for *dikasts* to swear their oath at the beginning of the trial, and for there to be an altar and a sacrifice, but no such sacramental or ceremonial functions are attested’. Rabinowitz 2008: 66, for instance, assumes the role of sacrifices before trials, but does not discuss evidence.

¹²⁴ See also, for instance, Lysias ap. Athenaeus 12.76, F195 Carey, in which Lysias argued Cinesias was impious and the laws should help deal with him to satisfy justice just as his friends had died from divine justice.

¹²⁵ Arguing on expediency as much as justice: e.g. Dem. 20.1; cf. also Thuc. 3.56.7.

¹²⁶ Ober 2008: 6.

city ruined.¹²⁷ Jurors were not expected to behave in accordance with the law or sets of moral rules, but primarily to decide consistently.¹²⁸ The focus on consistency and the appeals to consequences suggest that the jurors were involved in developing their own moral norms on a case-by-case basis. The court-system allowed for general moral standards, alongside the conception that different moral behaviour and qualities could work for different individuals, as long as these moral standards complemented the rest of society.¹²⁹ The *ad hoc* approach suggests that the Athenians were thinking in terms of ‘good things’, without an absolute idea of ‘the good’, but with a general conception of the broader impact of moral decisions by individual on society.¹³⁰ Complex webs of moral standards were made possible through this process of the development of moral standards.

In Demosthenes’ *Against Meidias*, for instance, Demosthenes argues that mercy should only be given by a jury to good citizens.¹³¹ To justify this he appeals to a piece of common wisdom, that it is possible to make claims on a friend’s money by loaning responsibly to them: if someone is generous and kind to others then he deserves to be able to claim the same in return. Meidias does not deserve this leniency, Demosthenes argues, because of his previous harmful actions.¹³² So he builds a new moral standard, that only good men deserve judicial leniency, on the basis of another piece of common wisdom. There is a similar process in Demosthenes’ *Against Aristocrates*. Euthycles (for whom Demosthenes composed the speech) is attempting to demonstrate that Charidemus does not deserve the *graphē paranomōn* that declared his person inviolable.¹³³ To achieve this he argues that there are always circumstances in which the killing of a person is moral. This he bases on a series

¹²⁷ *Lyc Leoc.* 59-60; cf also the appeal to consequences in *Dem.* 25.20. Dover 1994: 219.

¹²⁸ Decide consistently: *Dem.* 20.135, 23.143. Dover 1994: 219.

¹²⁹ Complementary rather than the same virtues: Morgan 2015: 494.

¹³⁰ Richard Robinson, in his *An Atheist’s Values* 1964: 20, writes: ‘If there were a god he would have no right to give orders. It would be wrong for a father to say to his child: ‘I begot you in order to have support when I am past work; therefore you ought to support me.’ It would be equally wrong for a god to say to his creature: ‘I created you in order to do so and so.’ If you procreate a child to get a nurse for your old age, or a plaything, or a defender of the State, your intention does not oblige your child to seek the end you had in mind. Similarly, if god created us human beings for some end which he had in mind, his act does not morally oblige us to pursue that end.

¹³¹ *Dem.* 21.184-6. Dover 1994: 218-9.

¹³² *Dem.* 21.186.

¹³³ *Dem.* 23.55-6.

of legal precedents, including that if someone kills another in athletic contest then they are not to be found guilty or punished; intentions are key to criminal punishment. It was, then, entirely possible for the ordinary Greek to conceive of the mechanisms of moral systems in mostly human terms: while significant in itself, the religious landscape or backdrop did not prevent this in ancient Greece, as it does not today.

Philosophical perspectives

For the philosophically minded there were also theoretical naturalistic, atheistic, and humanistic moral systems. The mentality revealed in traditional conceptions of the cosmos, which gave the sense that mankind was ‘on its own’, was foundational for later philosophical accounts. Indeed, the idea that men had developed their own moral laws, and this was the only reason that they were restrained from barbaric behaviour, was as old as Hesiod.¹³⁴ By the fifth century humanistic moral systems were quite developed. Plato’s Protagoras, for instance, presents a coherent humanistic moral system in which the mechanisms of moral action are justified in human terms. Plato’s Protagoras argued that individuals ought to obey moral requirements because they are necessary for the continued survival of a political community, which was in turn necessary for individual survival.¹³⁵ For Plato’s Protagoras, man needs more than just the individual skills to get food, shelter, clothing, and even fire (the *demiourgikē technē*), because he also has to be able to survive against wild animals, for which he needs to live communally (requiring the *politikē technē*, or morality, including virtue, justice, and respect).¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Natural barbaric behaviour: particularly Dem. 25.15, 20, but see also Hesiod *WD* 276-80, Antiphon F44A, Eur. *Supp.* 201-4, *Or.* 1554-5, Isoc. 3.5-6, Xen. *An.* 5.7.32, *Cyr.* 5.2.17, *Hiero* 7.3, *Oik.* 13.9; Bryant 1996: 174-5, Dover 1994: 74-5, 89.

¹³⁵ If Protagoras’ views are based on Plato’s *Protagoras* and *Theatetus*. It is not important for our purposes whether this accurately represents Protagoras’s own views – they may represent other non-Platonic views that were common at the time. For an excellent discussion of Plato’s Protagoras in Plato’s *Protagoras*, focused particularly on *technē*, see Nussbaum 2001: 89-117.

¹³⁶ Pl. *Prot.* 321C-2C. Moral *aretē* (virtue), *dikē* (justice), and *aidōs* (respect); later expanded to *dikaiosyne*, or justice, *sophrosyne*, or moderation, sound-judgement and temperance, honesty and trustworthiness, skill, even-temperedness, courage, wisdom, and *hosion* or *eusebia*, or piety. See Pl. *Prot.* 322B-E; *Symp.* 194E-7E; and Xen. *Ages.* 3, 4, 5, 6.1-8; see also the narrower conception of Pindar, *Isth.* 2.35-45; Adkins 1972: 76, Dover 1994: 66, Nill 1985: 2, 4-7. On *aidōs*: Cairns 1993, particularly 1-5, and on the history of the link between *aidōs* and *dikē*, 152-3.

The survival of a community thus required that citizens at least reached a minimum standard of justice.¹³⁷ Plato presents Protagoras as believing that the moral requirements of a society were fulfilled by laws alone.¹³⁸ Ultimately, therefore, the motivation for behaving morally was based in individual and consequently communal benefit. The best and most moral cities benefitted each citizen most, and the city further incentivised morality by offering rewards of special status and recognition in the community.¹³⁹ Protagoras' model justified morality in human terms: for Protagoras, 'man is the measure of all things'.¹⁴⁰ Plato's Protagoras does include the gods in his moral system: he claims that the first human communities were unsuccessful because men lacked the skills (the *politikē technē*) which were later given to them by Zeus. The gods are unnecessary for the moral system to function; they are a part of the mythical background or landscape of Greek thought rather than a mechanism necessary for the moral theory to make sense. The humanistic moral system of Plato's Protagoras is quite typical of 'sophistic' investigations of morality, which 'looked to humans for the solutions to their problems.'¹⁴¹

The fifth-century Athenian philosopher Antiphon argued that the *politikē technē* and pressures on communal survival did not either reveal the content of morality or effectively establish that moral behaviour benefitted the individual. Instead, Antiphon argued that morality does not always contribute to the good of an individual, and as a result, he says, moral codes should not always be obeyed on rational premises.¹⁴² Cities could sanction considerable cruelty against the individual, who would have no grounds for protest since what the city decides is in effect what is actually just.¹⁴³ Antiphon distinguished between human laws and customs (*nomoi*), the penalty for transgressing which you could avoid as long as you were not noticed; and natural laws (*phusis*), which applied whether anyone saw

¹³⁷ All citizens are just: Pl. *Prot.* 323a2-3, 324d7-325a5, 326e8-327a2; men are differently just: Pl. *Prot.* 323c, 326e-7c, 329e, 349d.

¹³⁸ Protagoras believed that morality was fulfilled by law: Nill 1985: 8-9, 14, 23.

¹³⁹ Pl. *Prt.* 327b; Nill 1985: 38-9.

¹⁴⁰ Pl. *Tht.* 152a, and compare also with Socrates' reference in Pl. *Cra.* 386a. Nill 1985: 27, Meyer 2008: 117.

¹⁴¹ Gagarin 2002: 33.

¹⁴² Antiphon's ideas on justice are mostly from the lengthy fragment Ant. F44a-c, in Pendrick 2002: 159-191, or 46a in Graham 2010: 812-3; Nill 1985: 2. He does not positively approve of breaking *nomoi*, but he implies approval: Gagarin 2002: 74.

¹⁴³ For a discussion of Antiphon's criticism that cities could sanction cruelty see Nill 1985: 24-5, 27, 32-3.

or not.¹⁴⁴ As a result, Antiphon theorised, it is never true self-interest to obey *nomoi* that conflict with *phusis*, but self-interest to obey those *nomoi* when witnesses were present.¹⁴⁵ *Nomoi* restricted a person's ability to pursue self-interest, so the actions of *nomos*-abiding agents are not positive because they involve more suffering than is necessary.¹⁴⁶ For Antiphon, although *nomoi*, justice, and morality could be theoretically advantageous, they are unrealistic, unworkable, and insufficient incentive to moral action in the long term. Obviously, this sort of conclusion has alarming results in moral behaviour.

Antiphon's conception of morality is strongly reminiscent of the most notorious of atheistic texts, the Sisyphus fragment. This fragment records an imagined speech by Sisyphus in a late fifth-century tragic or satyr play, probably written by the oligarch Critias:

There was a time when the life of men was unordered, bestial and the slave of force, when there was no reward for the virtuous and no punishment for the wicked. Then, I think, men devised retributory laws, so that Justice might be tyrant <...> and have arrogance as its slave, and if anyone sinned, he was punished. Then, when the laws prevented them from committing open crimes of violence, and they began to do them in secret, <...> some wise and clever man invented for mortals fear of the gods, that there might be some means of frightening the wicked, even if they do, say, or think anything in secret. Hence he introduced the Divine, saying that there is a God flourishing with immortal life, in his mind hearing and seeing everything said and done among mortals[...]¹⁴⁷ And even if you plan something evil in secret, the gods

¹⁴⁴ Distinction between *phusis* and *nomos*: Ant. F44a.2.20-5.35; Nill 1985: 54. *Nomoi* only punished when observed, but *phusis* always punished: Ant. 44a.1.10-35; Nill 1985: 54. Gagarin 2002: 73-4 has argued that Antiphon here is talking about morality, or at least behavioural norms.

¹⁴⁵ Self-interest not to follow *nomoi* when unnoticed: Pl. *Rep.* 359c-60c. *Nomoi* conflict with self-interest: Ant. 44a 4.22-4, 32-53. see Sisyphus F., Democ. B181, Graham 2010: 676-7, and Xen. *Mem.* 4.4.21. *Nomoi* conflict with *phusis* because they place restrictions on what you can and can't do, this restricting your ability to pursue self-interest; *Phusis* as human nature: Ant. F44a 2.30-4.22, 4.32-5.24; Nill 1985: 56-62, Pendrick 2002: 65.

¹⁴⁶ Restricted ability to pursue self-interest: Ant. F44a 5.4-13. Nill 1985: 65. This was a sort of extension on a traditional norm of Greek morality – that it was moral to help one's friends and hurt one's enemies; see Gagarin 2002: 75-6.

¹⁴⁷ I have abbreviated this part for clarity. Whitmarsh 2016: 124 translates this in full as: 'Hearing in his mind, seeing, thinking, Attending to these things and having a divine nature, Who will hear everything said among

will not fail to notice; for they have surpassing intelligence. In saying these words, he introduced the sweetest of teachings, concealing the truth with deceitful speech. He said that the gods dwelt in the place where it would most frighten men, whence he knew was the origin of mortals' fear and rewards for the hard life: in the upper periphery, where they saw lightnings and heard the dread rumblings of thunder, and the starry gleam body of heaven, the beautiful embroidery of Time the skilled craftsman, whence come forth the bright mass of the sun, and the wet shower upon the earth. Such were the fears with which he surrounded mankind, and the argument through which he established the deity, in a fitting place, and quenched lawlessness among men... Thus, I think, for the first time did someone persuade mortals to believe in a race of deities.¹⁴⁸

The Sisyphus fragment embraces traditional themes, particularly from Hesiod (who may be the 'wise and clever man' here), but it was also based on pre-existing presocratic philosophical ideas.¹⁴⁹ The passage implicitly assumes that some people imagined that the gods did have a role in punishment for wrongdoing. But for Sisyphus' character, the gods were invented to provide a motivating factor behind moral behaviour, as part of a package that included the shame of behaving badly in front of other men and fear of behaving badly in front of the gods.¹⁵⁰

As Whitmarsh has observed, a great deal of scholarship has been dedicated to marginalising the fragment, as with many other key texts in the history of Greek atheism like

mortals, And will be able to see everything that is done.' νόφ τ' ἀκούων καὶ βλέπων, φρονῶν τε καὶ προσέχων τε ταῦτα, καὶ φύσιν θεῖαν φορῶν, ὃς πᾶν τὸ λεχθὲν ἐν βροτοῖς ἀκούσεται, τὸ δρώμενον δὲ πᾶν ἰδεῖν δυνησεται.

¹⁴⁸ Critias (the tyrant), or Euripides(?) F25 (from 'Sisyphus'). Preserved best in Sext. Emp. *Adv. Math.* 9.54. See Whitmarsh 2014, Kahn 1997 on the fragment. Atheistic: Bremmer 1996: 15-17, Kearns 2010: 149, Parker 1996: 212; 'dangerous': Burkert 1985: 314-5; Whitmarsh's 2014 article is the best modern scholarly discussion of this fragment, but O'Sullivan 2012 is also an interesting (if overly apologetic) discussion on how the fragment can be read as going beyond atheism into a more productive view of religion.

¹⁴⁹ Whitmarsh 2014: 118-20 argues that the 'wise and clever man' may be Hesiod. Presocratic ideas: Kahn 1997.

¹⁵⁰ On shame of behaving badly in front of men and gods see Aeschin. 1.50, 1.67.

Book Ten of Plato's *Laws*.¹⁵¹ It is certainly true that the views of the characters on-stage should not be taken to represent the views of the audience or playwright, just as it is significant that the character who voices these atheistic views is Sisyphus, whose *hubris* gained him punishment in the afterlife.¹⁵² But in Greek drama the final outcome does not determine the interpretation of every dramatic element.¹⁵³ The fragmentary nature of the play makes it even harder to interpret, but regardless of the significance of the ending, which presumably involved Sisyphus being proven wrong about the nonexistence of the gods, it is very important that such ideas could be expressed on the dramatic stage in public. The Sisyphus fragment shows drama in its radical guise. It brings together sets of well-known but shocking philosophical ideas, and develops them to an even more radical conclusion, using drama as a safe space for intellectual exploration.¹⁵⁴ As well as its atheism, the moral connotations of Sisyphus' speech were significant, since without grounding good behaviour in some 'sense' of inner good, atheists had no incentive to behave morally.

The late fifth and early fourth century philosopher and scientist Democritus developed the idea of an inner good, which was a key innovation in solving the sort of problems with humanistic morality that Antiphon and the fictional Sisyphus identified.¹⁵⁵ Just like Protagoras, Democritus argued that obeying *nomoi* was beneficial to the individual because *nomoi* are necessary for a harmonious community.¹⁵⁶ But he added that acting morally nourished the inner good, and improved a man's character, so moral requirements should

¹⁵¹ Scholars have attempted to prove that it is bad Greek, undermined its authorship, and that the character and ultimate demise of the speaker shows the views were not condoned: on this marginalisation see Whitmarsh 2014: 114.

¹⁵² Sutton 1981: 33-8 argues that the identity of the speaker as Sisyphus as 'a cunning rogue, if not a downright criminal', is key in interpreting the fragment: for her, Sisyphus 'is holding these new-fangled ideas up to scorn and ridicule'.

¹⁵³ As argued by Whitmarsh 2014: 112-3. For older scholarship see Sutton 1981: 36-7.

¹⁵⁴ Conservative influence: Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: 1; radical: Parker 1996: 212, Whitmarsh 2014: 113. For older scholarship see Sutton 1981: 36-7.

¹⁵⁵ The same idea of an inner good whereby behaving morally benefits the psyche is found in Plato's *Meno* and *Protagoras*, as well as Pl. *Rep.* 2-4, where he argues that the foundation of happiness is 'psychic' justice; cf. Pl. *Phdr.* 245b. See Guthrie 1971: 166-8.

¹⁵⁶ Necessary for harmony: Democ. B245; safety of *polis*: F252, Graham 2010: 672-3; Nill 1985.

always be obeyed because they always benefit the individual.¹⁵⁷ Thus, even unobserved men had self-interested (rational) reasons for acting morally:

He who uses encouragement and verbal persuasion to instil virtue will prove to be more effective than he who uses the threat of law and force. For one who is kept from injustice by law will probably do wrong in secret, while one who is led to his duty by persuasion will probably not act wrongly either in secret or in public. Accordingly, one who acts rightly by understanding and knowledge becomes at once courageous and upright in his judgements.¹⁵⁸

Democritus' theory depends on *euthymia* (cheerfulness or pleasure), achieved through a harmonious and temperate life. Excesses created imbalances, and pleasure came from expelling jealousy, envy, and spite, and avoiding focussing on single pleasures.¹⁵⁹ The corollary of Democritus' theory is that nothing is inherently bad, but only made bad by excess or improper disposition. Democritus argued that the gods had initially given mortals these good things and men had made them bad through excess.¹⁶⁰ Much like Protagoras, for Democritus the gods are included as part of the mythological backdrop: the mechanics of his moral theory did not require them.

The problem of justifying moral behaviour, given that self-interested immorality is more beneficial than morality, was captured in Plato's dialogues too.¹⁶¹ In the *Republic*, Glaucon offers a form of the *Prisoner's Dilemma* to explain moral behaviour. For him, the social contract involved each party agreeing on a compromise based on what each really wants (i.e. to be able to commit injustice), and does not want (to suffer injustice). Committing injustice can be beneficial, but it is not worth the risk of suffering injustice from other people.

¹⁵⁷ Man's inner good: Democ. B181, Graham 2010: 271, 676-7; see also Democ. 45, Graham 2010: 646-7: 'The wrongdoer is more unfortunate than he who is wronged'; 174, Graham 2010: 638-9; 118, Graham 2010: 646-7; 176, Graham 2010: 656-7: 'he who loves no one is loved by no one'. See also Dem. 45.14, Isoc. 15.221 on the poor decisions of the greedy selfish man; Dover 1994: 223-4, Nill 1985: 2, 75-6, 83-4.

¹⁵⁸ Democ. B271, in Graham 2010: 677.

¹⁵⁹ Excesses cause imbalances: Democ. esp. 131, Graham 2010: 583-93; Nill 1985: 77.

¹⁶⁰ Gods bestowed good: Democ. 173, 175, Graham 2010: 644-5; Nill 1985: 79-80.

¹⁶¹ See Pl. *Rep.* 2.357a-61d, 2.362d-67e. Nill 1985: 41. Thrasymachus and Callicles both argue in *Rep.* 1.338c-e, 1.358c-d that the laws of nature dictate that it is just for the stronger to overcome the weaker; see also *Gorg.* 483c-d; Bryant 1996: 175, Nill 1985: 1.

Glaucon and Socrates agree on the social contract, but it followed that if anyone could commit injustice without being caught then they would commit immoral actions.¹⁶² Plato's Socrates provides justification for moral behaviour in perception of the soul, which has a 'divine quality' to it.¹⁶³ In other words, good behaviour is informed by the soul, and a good soul is informed by the divine. He argues that self-interest is only perceived as incompatible with moral concern for others because most people have a narrow and incomplete conception of self-interest. The two are compatible, as Plato has Phaedrus argue in the *Symposium*, for instance: he argues that the only way to live a satisfying life is by being in love, which makes bad acts shameful and incentivises good civic behaviour.¹⁶⁴ Much like Democritus, Plato's Phaedrus argues that the virtue is better than vice for the possessor, and also that bad but successful men are less happy than good but poor men. The conception of morality that comes across in Plato's corpus as a whole did include the divine as a mechanism for moral behaviour (as opposed to part of the mythical-religious backdrop of the theory), because the basis of the 'goodness' of the soul is in reflection of the divine. However, his moral theory, like those of his contemporaries, is also in large part humanistic.

Conclusion

There are a number of conclusions to make about the relationship between religion and morality in the Greek world. There was a connection between atheism and immorality in the ancient world, and one that is strong enough that atheism would have implied immorality to many Greeks. For those Greeks who subscribed to the idea that atheists were immoral, they believed this was the case because atheists rejected the gods, who were a fundamental component of civic life. Atheists were slandered as immoral as part of a common package of attack: arrogance, individualism, and rejection of other civic values, including morality. In fact, it would be more appropriate to say that certain Greeks believed atheism to be more generally incompatible with being a good citizen and moral individual. However, this connection between atheism and immorality was of a very different sort to the one explored in the Christian West. Most importantly, the connection between immorality and atheism was not inevitable, and it was not always drawn, for theological reasons unique to the Greek

¹⁶² Social contract: Pl. *Rep.* 2.359a–2.360d.

¹⁶³ Pl. *Rep.* 7.518e. McCabe 2006: 75, 97–8.

¹⁶⁴ Self-interest as compatible with morality: Pl. *Symp.* 177d–180b. See also the appeal to mental and physical health in *Rep.* 4.445a–b; Irwin, T. 2007: 111–13.

world. This had significant consequences. The most obvious is in the prosecution of atheists: immorality, and therefore deviant behaviour, is not assumed simply by virtue of atheism, which can be seen in Plato's account of the trial of Socrates, where Meletus has to make the case explicitly that Socrates is damaging society. Atheism was not a prosecutable offence in isolation: it is paired with other offences. But these trials and accusations (that will be explored in more detail in the next chapter) are not just records of ideas; they reflect a live discourse, the terms of which were partly being composed through the courts, plays, and dialogues at the time.

Atheism was inconsistently associated with immorality, and likewise morality was not consistently connected with theism or religion in general. The relationship between (im)morality and (a)theism was extremely complex. While it was not necessary to appeal to the gods for morality, it was possible to do so. Proper and pious behaviour towards the gods were commonly seen as a part of appropriate moral behaviour (a moral standard). The gods were frequently referenced, and a ubiquitous part of the Greek intellectual landscape. Yet, aspects of Greek morality are surprisingly humanistic. The gods were not a core part of the mechanisms of moral decision-making in much of our evidence, like that from the Athenian law courts, though they were obviously ever-present in the Greek physical, mythical, and intellectual landscape. Greek morality was not generally seen as inherently or inextricably dependent on the divine, though some individuals believed this. The Greek gods were, in many traditional conceptions, amoral agents. As such, in the case of everyday morality, humans largely made independent decisions about their conduct rather than appealing to their gods for moral guidance. On a more theoretical level, coherent, sophisticated humanistic moral systems were developed to explain and justify moral behaviour. Without viewing the gods as the ultimate moral agents, or having to contradict any moral doctrine, these philosophers were free to combine their knowledge of the variety of relativistic moral and cultural customs around the world, with a willingness to challenge some traditional conceptions that linked morality and the gods.

By the time of Democritus, these 'sophistic' moral experiments were advanced enough to comprehensively explain and justify morality through naturalistic or humanistic mechanisms. These moral systems were not outliers either: they were developed by principal moral and philosophical thinkers of the day like Protagoras, Antiphon, Critias, Democritus, and even Plato. The development of more radical theoretical humanistic systems in the fifth century, however, may have helped bring the connection between atheistic naturalism and

immorality to the fore in the public arena. By positing atheistic moral theories, these individuals demonstrated that it was possible to explain why people might behave in accordance with civic values despite disbelief, but this was a double-edged sword. These theories did in principle prove the compatibility of atheism with *polis* life. But comprehensive moral theories that only tangentially included the gods as part of the mechanisms for morality were also clearly shocking to many Greeks. Proposing moral theories of this sort must have only enhanced the reputation of philosophers and intellectuals for undermining the foundations of shared Greek values to some, and proven that they were dangerous radicals.

3. The limits of religious freedom

Twenty-five years ago David Cohen identified the central question of impiety and atheism in Athens: '[t]he fundamental question, in my view, is what sort of coercive political and social matrices underlay religious life in Athens...'.¹ These 'coercive political and social matrixes' establish the limitations of acceptable public expression of scepticism and disbelief in each society. Greek religious society was coercive, and not characteristically aggressive or oppressive towards ordinary instances of religious deviation. This chapter is concerned with the bricks-and-mortar of these coercive matrices, which provided a strong incentive to behave as if one believed: attending rituals, offering public criticism of religion only within certain limits, and participating in the religious community. But none of this is to say, with Febvre, that because public atheism was consequently rare or even unheard of in ancient Greece, atheism was 'unthinkable'. The deterrents to publicly identifying as an atheist ('public atheism'), and the incentives to conform with religious norms, are key to understanding the futility of attempting to identify atheists in the ancient world. Unlike theism, atheism does not compel anyone to act in any certain way – it is not a 'worldview' – and there are many reasons beyond religious belief to participate in ritual and religious action.

We have already observed, in the Introduction, that the search for overt, public, confrontational disbelief, 'militant atheism', or those who 'voiced their disbelief', is misguided.² The argument that there were almost no (or no) 'atheists' in the ancient world has been increasingly challenged by the approaches of scholars like Whitmarsh, in his recent volume on ancient atheism, or even Bussanich and Smith who recently observed that: '[a]theism was commonplace in ancient Greece – familiar enough, in fact, that it was a regular feature of popular culture.'³ Even in areas of the modern world where freedom of thought, speech, and religion are protected, 'militant atheism' represents only a fraction of the larger atheist demographic.⁴ To publicly or openly criticise or attack doctrines or belief itself

¹ Cohen 1989: 211; Tim Whitmarsh 2016: 116 has recently reiterated the call to conceive of atheism in social terms.

² Militant atheism: Parker 1996: 211; voiced disbelief: Bremmer 2007: 1.

³ Bussanich and Smith 2013: 322. See Whitmarsh 2016, arguing for extensive atheism in the ancient world.

⁴ In modern America, 'ritual atheists', those who don't believe in God but behave as if they do, attending church and participating in religious communities, are very likely substantially more common than 'militant atheists'.

is at best the epitome of bad manners and at worst a crime in Western countries. But the Greek world as a whole, and Athens specifically, did not allow unfettered public expressions of disbelief in all contexts: many Greeks did not voice their disbelief, ‘probably to avoid having to drink hemlock’.⁵ In the ancient world as today, ‘[s]imply being an atheist may be acceptable – if, that is, one keeps it to oneself.’⁶

This aim of this chapter is to establish the limits to behaviour and speech in Greece, established by various political, legal, and social deterrents. So, in general, how did the Greeks deal with religious dissidents? What could you get away with saying about the gods, and in what context? What might happen to you if you crossed these boundaries? This last question is easiest to answer: there was strong tradition of trials for impiety in Athens, many of which involved accusations of atheism. It is therefore necessary to work backwards, by starting with the punishment and trying to establish the meaning and nature of the crime. Trials (and other punishments), it will be argued, were potential consequences of expressing certain atheistic views in public, and they consequently served as a deterrent to public atheism. How did ancients avoid suspicion of atheistic views? It is argued that Greek philosophers emphasised their religiosity and made sure to take part in religious practices, which protected them from accusations of atheism. The acceptability of certain atheistic or irreligious views depended not just on the individual context (i.e. their reputation for participation in established religion, or their religious context), but also the context in which the ideas were expressed. Ideas like freedom of speech are fundamental to understanding what ordinary Athenians (the focus is almost entirely Athens here, because of the nature of the evidence) were able to say with impunity and in what context, but it has not always been clear where atheism fits in this tradition.

The enforcement of religious norms: some historical examples

First, it may be useful to examine some other historical examples, to see how different societies placed different limits on atheism. The social character of atheism is visible across history, as are the limits to public atheism enforced in societies. Examples from different cultures and time periods offer examples for the sort of limits that societies can place on

In one survey ‘ritual atheists’ numbered 12.5%, while ‘militant atheists’, or ‘anti-theists’, only constituted 15%. 12.5% is a low estimate given the inherent reporting bias. See Silver et al. 2013.

⁵ Stenger 2013: 13.

⁶ Smith, G. 1989: x.

atheism, particularly in the incentives for atheists to remain hidden. Exploring the nature of these limits in society is key to understanding the nature of atheism and the evidence for it. The two key examples used here are of Salman Rushdie and Charles Bradlaugh. They are not direct analogues for the Greek world: neither was put on trial for atheism, for instance. Comparisons can imply that the forces at work in the Greek world are the same as they were in the societies of Rushdie and Bradlaugh, but this is not the intention. Instead, these examples demonstrate in a more general way how a complex variety of different political, social, legal, and financial forces can come into play in generating coercive matrices and pressuring individuals away from public atheism.

Countless examples throughout history show the incentives against public professions of atheism, from Thomas Hobbes, who was threatened with prosecution, to Galileo, who was imprisoned, from Spinoza, whose work was suppressed across Europe, to John Stuart Mill, who had been barred from study at Oxford.⁷ It is unsurprising that these men were reluctant to be explicit in public, or to publish atheistic views during their own lifetime, and even less surprising that they were willing to offer false professions of faith: there were many deterrents against revealing their unbelief and many incentives to conform. Perhaps the clearest example of this is of the author Salman Rushdie. In February 1989 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of Iran, issued a fatwa against Salman Rushdie, for the publication of his *Satanic Verses*. Rushdie was subject to numerous credible death threats and forced into hiding. In 1990 Rushdie repudiated the heresy of his books, and publicly renewed his faith in Islam. Talking of the tremendous pressure to conform, Rushdie has since revealed that he was only ‘pretending’ in his affirmation of faith and abandonment of the *Verses*, and repudiated his work in the ‘hope that it would reduce the threat of Muslims acting on the fatwa to kill him’.⁸ Rushdie remarked: ‘[t]he real wars of religion, I have argued, are the wars religions unleash against ordinary citizens within their “sphere of influence.”’⁹ He recognised the power that religious communities hold over their laity: one that can be utilised, without necessarily any guidance or instruction, to exert tremendous coercive pressure over the sceptical or dissenting individual, to maintain public compliance with the acceptable beliefs or actions of a religion. In respect of the definition of atheism that we

⁷ On the persecutions of Spinoza, Hobbes, Galileo, JS Mill, and in general the history of atheistic persecution, see Buckley 1987.

⁸ Brooks 2008.

⁹ In Hitchens 2007a: 382.

advocated in the introduction, Rusdrie sustained private unbelief, but he was particularly concerned to avoid public irreligion and non-participation to avoid the consequences in his religious community.

Charles Bradlaugh was an MP and law lecturer in late nineteenth-century Britain, who publicly identified as an atheist despite significant social pressures. Christianity was woven into every part of Bradlaugh's life and death, and even the man 'with the frame of a giant and the courage of a lion' found it suffocating.¹⁰ Bradlaugh was educated into Christianity from birth, and for questioning the gospels he was threatened and ejected from his first job, his parents' house, and his church. At seventeen he found himself unemployable, socially untouchable, and homeless, because of his critical attitude toward religion. Headingly, a biographer, remarked: 'it was against his every interest, and, with the prospect of starvation staring him in the face, that he abandoned the old faith'.¹¹ Once Bradlaugh took a job at a law firm, while he was lecturing on religion, he was forced to operate under a pseudonym to protect his employer, and found hostile receptions at almost every town in which he lectured. Bradlaugh was denied paid accommodation, and denied the use of printers for pamphlets and the use of bill-posters, which were graffitied or removed. He was mobbed by crowds led by clergymen, police, armed forces, or local officials, who threw stones, water, flour – soldiers even gassing a hall on one occasion – and he was pelted, kicked, and punched, and even attacked in his home by a knife-wielding fanatic who claimed a mission from God to kill him.¹²

For his lectures Bradlaugh was arrested and prosecuted by local authorities several times, facing a fine of millions of pounds for his paper the *National Reformer*; and he was illegally prevented from taking his seat as an MP for six years. He was finally only allowed to sit in 1886, after repeated arrests and public removals from the House and fines for voting

¹⁰ Healy 1929: 167; Arnstein 1963: 232

¹¹ Headingly 1883: 13, 30: 'no dread of loss, of poverty, of hardship, had ever made him deny any of his opinions... All he had done was diametrically opposed to his material interests... Far from reaping reward, his bold advocacy of Freethought often endangered and reduced his means of earning a livelihood...' Headingly 1883: 168: Bradlaugh became an M.P. 'in spite of the opposition of every social force, exercised by the sectarian and religious elements throughout the country.' Bradlaugh-Bonner 1895: 15: 'from that day almost until his death his life was one long struggle against the bitterest animosity which religious bigotry could inspire. In the face of all this he pursued the path he had marked out for himself without once swerving'.

¹² Knife-wielding maniac: Bradlaugh-Bonner 1902: 60.

illegally, all of which was spurred on by hostile letters from the major religious leaders of the world, Christians, and school-children. Bradlaugh faced a staunchly opposed Christian press, who proclaimed the ‘natural justice’ of the ‘indignant population’ in attacking him, the battle of ‘God vs Bradlaugh’, and numerous slanders; and was subject to a hostile justice and political system, even dividing his own party.¹³ Bradlaugh was bankrupted by the cost of constant legal battles, his home broken and family split up, and he died an early death, possibly from wounds obtained during a forcible ejection from the House when he was trying to take his seat. Bradlaugh’s atheism served as a catalyst to mobilise Christian forces, even those normally quite passive, responding to the threat he posed. Bradlaugh was certainly under a significant pressure philosophically and materially, to recant his atheism and adopt Christianity, the religion of his state. The religious environment provided powerful incentives for him to conform, and deterrents against atheism. He chose to push for atheism as a publicly accepted position, but he was the rare exception: the vast majority of atheists of his age lived behind a guise of religion.

The examples of Rushdie and Bradlaugh in particular offer a great deal of insight into the coercive matrices possible in a society, to deter from public atheism. There are several key points to take away. First, they show how strong and effective deterrents against public irreligion could be. Secondly, these examples show how legal action (like trials) was not the only consequence of public irreligion, but often the last resort that followed from powerful social, financial, and political responses. Thirdly, the historical examples also reveal a certain amount of (largely silent) support for the irreligious: in Bradlaugh’s case, crowds heard him speak in rallies, protested on his behalf, and elected him to Parliament. And finally, the examples used are of those who crossed certain boundaries, rather than those who were deterred from them: it is the nature of the evidence that these are the visible examples.

Over the past few centuries it has become possible to trace people who were deterred from publicly identifying with atheistic views when alive, like Charles Darwin, partly through posthumous publication of works that reveal atheism.¹⁴ In the ancient world posthumous publications of this type probably never existed, and if they did then they have not survived. One key distinction that it is important to make between the ancient and other

¹³ Lord Coke, for instance, claimed that ‘All infidels are in law perpetui inimici; for between them, as with the devils whose subjects they be, and the Christian, there is perpetual hostility’, during *Calvin’s Case*, 1608.

¹⁴ Darwin’s atheism was only revealed in his autobiography, published five years after his death, in 1887.

historical examples is between ‘guises’ (i.e. those with atheistic views who were aware of the need to hide) and legitimate intellectual or philosophical positions. The argument in this chapter is not about cognition, nor is there any attempt to establish the impact of the Greek environment on thought here. In many cases in the Greek world these were not ‘guises’ but represent legitimate and complex religious positions which allowed the individual to incorporate a variety of different religious and irreligious positions into a single worldview (as is especially argued in Chapter Six). Deterrents to action are only one side of the coin: the other is the way in which beliefs themselves were shaped, which is the subject of the next chapter.

***Asebeia* and appropriate beliefs**

The place to start our examination of coercive matrices in the ancient world is in the most public aspect of punishment for atheism: in trials for *asebeia*. These are the most public and best documented examples of punishment for impiety, which could include atheism. There were many deterrents against atheism in ancient Greece, and numerous ways in which the religious dissenter was punished and discouraged from being openly critical of religion or the gods. Part of the cosmic package of justice involved not only waiting for the gods to enact punishment or reward on the impious or pious respectively, but requiring that human societies police and punish as well, as observed in Chapter Three.¹⁵ This idea partly motivated trials for *asebeia*, or impiety, against those accused of religious crimes.

The meaning of *asebeia* was inherently flexible.¹⁶ *Asebeia* prosecutions took place for various infractions of proper process, like the sacrificing of a victim by an inappropriate party or on the wrong day.¹⁷ The position taken against impiety in Plato’s *Laws*, in which he proposes different legislation for punishing different types of impieties and atheisms, seems like an obvious benchmark, but it is not easy to determine how far the strictures suggested by

¹⁵ Human responsibility in dispensing justice: Aesch. *Eum.* esp. 526-65, or *Soph. Ant.* 1347; argued in Gewirtz 1988: 1044-5, Lloyd-Jones 1973: 93-4, Tzanetou 2012: 54, 61-3; Zakin 2009: 178.

¹⁶ *Asebeia* as vague and flexible: Finley 1969: 162, Rubel 2014: 33, Todd 1993: 307-10. On the debate: Cohen 1989: 81-105, Kindt 2012: 117, Parker 1996: 199-217, Rudhardt 1960: 87-105, Versnel 1990: 123-30, and 2011: 139.

¹⁷ Naiden 2012: 217-9. E.g. the priest Archias, sacrificing on the wrong day and sacrificing instead of the priestess as was proper, in [Dem.] 59.116.

Plato's Stranger compared with those of Athens.¹⁸ The Stranger's punishments, at least, were not unrealistic, but represented fifth- and fourth-century Athens well: in the *Laws* the unrepentant but generally good unbeliever is condemned to death, just as Socrates was.¹⁹ In the *Euthyphro*, the concept of *asebeia* emerges as unreflective, undefined, and usually assumed, just as many religious concepts were.²⁰ *Asebeia* was also not limited to the legal process: accusations of impiety without a formal legal process or specific details of a religious transgression were frequently used by orators as a general smear tactic.²¹

In its legal applications, *asebeia* could refer to a variety of offences in wrong belief and action. These included offences like profaning sacred rituals, objects or spaces (by robbery, murder, or removing a suppliant), offences against cults or improper ritual practice, holding a sacred office when barred, or violating oaths in various ways.²² The broader conception of *asebeia* did include the more intangible offence of unbelief in the cities' gods, and the introduction of new and inappropriate ones without sufficient recourse to the city officials, as well as certain moral associations of other crimes or actions that, if not legally prosecutable as *asebeia*, were considered impious.²³ But, in Athens, the legal system did not define crimes, or the meaning of crimes, but instead assumed definitions which depended on the beliefs of the jurors attending that day. The attendees were actively engaged in generating the definition, and creating imperfect precedents established through social consensus.²⁴

¹⁸ Not easy: Cohen 1989: 204.

¹⁹ Pl. *Laws* 10.907d-909a; Not unrealistic: Cohen 1989: 216.

²⁰ E.g. Pl. *Euthyphr.* 7a. Cohen 1989: 204-5, Todd 1993: 310-11, Versnel 1990: 123.

²¹ E.g. Lysias 12.24, Antiphon *Tetr.* 2.1.3, 9, 11; exaggerated rebuke: Isoc. 12.203. Cohen 1989: 205.

²² Mysteries and mutilating sacred objects: Thuc. 6.27, 53, Plut. *Alc.* 18.3-19.3, Andoc. *Myst* 1. Temples: Isoc. 4.156, Xen. *Hell.* 4.4.3, Hdt 1.159, 2.139, 8.129; Thuc. 4.97-8, Lys. 2.7, 10; Lyc. *Leoc.* 81, 147. Offences against cults, rituals, and sacred offices: Dem. 22.72-78, 23.51-55, 59.77, 116-17; Andoc. 1.71, 132; Lyc. *Leoc.* 129; Hdt 6.81. Oaths: Arist. *Rhet.* 1377a20-4, 1416a30; Lyc. *Leoc.* 76; Dem. 21.104-5, 120; 59.82; Xen. *Cyr.* 8.8.3; Andoc. 1.31-3; Ant. 5.88; See particularly Cohen 1989: 206. Also Todd 1993: 307-8.

²³ Cohen 1989: 206. Rudhardt 1960 argued that *asebeia* included attitudes. Moral associations: e.g. parricide: Dem. 22.2-3; Pl. *Rep.* 615c, *Symp.* 188c, *Euthyphr.* 3b; Lyc. *Leoc.* 94. Impiety could be belief: Cohen 1989: 206, 211.

²⁴ Cohen 1989: 209, Rubel 2014: 34.

Inappropriate belief (like unbelief) was part of *asebeia*, but wrong belief became a problem primarily when it was taught or caused further impious action.²⁵ Isocrates argued that those who tell and those who believe lies about the gods equally committed *asebeia*: Isocrates clearly viewed public expression and teaching as central to the concept of impiety.²⁶ To disbelieve in the gods was not a legal issue in itself; atheism only became prosecutable *asebeia* when it led others to bad ritual practice, immorality, and misbehaviour through teaching them not to believe, as in the case of Socrates. *Asebeia* typically had a target, as shown by Lysias in his speech *Against Andocides*. Lysias compares Andocides with Diagoras, using him as a foil, arguing that Andocides was even more impious than Diagoras because Diagoras committed *asebeia* in word, and against (foreign) cult, while Andocides committed it in action, and against his own city.²⁷ While the focus of *asebeia* was on corruption of others and on action, the semantic range stretches quite far: Xenophanes, for instance, apparently said that asserting the gods were born was as impious as ‘asserting’ they will die.²⁸ Yet the term ‘assert’, *phaskontes* here, still reflects the idea of publicly asserting beliefs unlike a more passive word like ‘believe’ (*nomizein*).²⁹ It is clear that uncomfortable beliefs only became legal *asebeia* if they were taught or actionable. Many Greeks were not entirely comfortable with atheists not believing, but this would have been tolerated as long as they both avoided teaching others and participated in ritual performances. As Brickhouse and Smith observed: ‘Greek religious sentiments would have been remarkable indeed if the Greeks saw atheism as not impious in itself, so long as proper rituals were performed (in utter hypocrisy *ex hypothesi*) by the atheist.’³⁰

The backdrop to trials: policing religious transgressions and the trial of Socrates

Socrates represents a key moment in the religious trials of the fifth- and fourth-centuries. Some observations have already been made (in Chapter One) on Socrates and his trial. It is

²⁵ Cohen 1989: 211 argued that wrong belief was a problem when taught.

²⁶ Isoc. 11.40.

²⁷ Lysias 6.17. Cohen 1989: 211. One exception to the ‘target’ rule is when someone is called *asebes*, e.g. Hdt 8.109, but it may be that the label of *asebes* assumed a target without needing to specify one. In Herodotus, for instance, the natural reading seems to be that Xerxes is impious against Athens and her gods.

²⁸ Xenophanes in Arist. *Rhet.* 1399b. Cohen 1989: 211-2.

²⁹ On the translation of *nomizein* as ‘believe’ see the introduction, n.49.

³⁰ Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 33.

now possible to build on that discussion, and examine the importance of impiety and belief in Socrates' trial, and its place in the history of trials for *asebeia*. Most scholars have remained quite suspicious of the historicity of the tradition of impiety trials in the fifth century.³¹ The tradition of scepticism about the trials is exemplified by Karl Popper, who praised Athens as the birthplace of the 'open society'.³² 'How could a jury in Greece's greatest democracy have put to death Greece's greatest philosopher?', Connor asks.³³ For many Classicists it has seemed incredible that citizens could be prosecuted and even killed for atheism in the sophisticated intellectual environment of fifth- and fourth-century Athens, birthplace of democracy, free speech, and liberal ideals.³⁴ The trial of Socrates, for most, is an 'aberration', and the other trials largely the result of faulty history by later writers or political machinations of 'opponents'; Athens stands as a bastion of tolerance and free speech.³⁵ Some scholars argued that *asebeia* was used to prosecute people who were politically unpopular but had not committed political crimes; as in the case of Socrates, in which the religious accusation was 'a pretext'.³⁶ But in Chapter One it was observed that Socrates was prosecuted for his (partly religious) education of the political classes, though the trial was not primarily 'politically motivated'.³⁷ Behind the trial lay the characterisation of Socrates as corrupter, but this was not just political: it was also religious, moral, and civic.³⁸ The broader backdrop of the trial and its importance as a part of the broader history of suppression of atheism in Athens is crucial to any interpretation of it.

³¹ On suspicious scholars: Cohen 1989: 211, 215; predominantly those in the tradition of Dover 1988.

³² Popper 1945: 15.

³³ Connor 1991: 49. One important modern example is Stone 1988, who claimed that the Athenians sinned against their own credo of free-speech by putting Socrates to death.

³⁴ Likewise Whitmarsh 2016: 118.

³⁵ 'abberation': Saxonhouse 2005: 102; see also Parker 1996: 147. Other trials excused: e.g. see Wallace 1994: 142-3.

³⁶ 'Pretext': Janko 2006: 48; see Parker 1996: 202, or Cooper 1995 esp. 306; see Rubel 2014: 41 on Anaxagoras. Also Slings 1994: 92, on Anytus' motives as 'of a political nature'; Stone 1988: 138 rejects the religious explanation because, for him, the Athenians *prima facie* did not prosecute people for expressing unorthodox beliefs – and in rejecting Socrates' trial as one such example via cascade effect the other examples of trials for unorthodox beliefs are made less plausible; so Stone's claim becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

³⁷ Against the political motivation: Cartledge 2009: 77 and Waterfield 2009, Bussanich and Smith 2013: 323-4

³⁸ Parker 1996: 202 argues similarly about the inseparability of different anxieties.

The trial of Socrates was brought about in the light of the ‘wounds of recent history’, which generated a sense of ‘religious anxiety’, and a ‘fierce reaction’ from the pious.³⁹ ‘Religious anxiety’ does not just mean scepticism, criticism and atheism. Calamitous events raise interest in theological problems, which, on the one hand, causes scepticism, criticism, and atheism, but it equally encourages further entrenchment of beliefs, superstition, and fanaticism, as has been shown in comparative studies. For instance, Stuart Bell has observed that the trauma experienced during and after the First World War bolstered faith and even created religious fanaticism, for some, but there was equally a trend towards decline in faith and belief, as many people were increasingly troubled by issues of omnipotence and benevolence.⁴⁰ Bell observed that ‘the sheer scale of human suffering must, one might well think, have had a significant deleterious influence on religious belief’, just as Snape and Parker observed that ‘such deterioration of faith was no doubt widespread’.⁴¹ Bell concludes that the War posed ‘questions of faith’, which resulted in different responses.⁴² Some clung to traditional perspectives on God, theologians tended to advocate modifications to theology to explain events, and others saw the war as a Holy War with refreshed divine purpose; others lost their faith entirely. This is what can be observed in Athens in the late fifth century. Paul Cartledge recently observed:

In the extraordinarily awe-ful circumstances of 399, ordinary pious Athenians were practically bound to ask themselves the following questions: since the gods (or ‘the god’, ‘the divine’) were manifestly angry with the Athenians, causing them to lose the Atheno-Peloponnesian War and experience civil war, suffering so acutely in the process, was this because the Athenians had omitted to honour duly (some of) the established gods, or because there were unestablished gods whom they ought to have been propitiating and honouring but for some reason were not? Put another way, had the gods deserted the Athenians – or had the Athenians deserted the gods? Or both?⁴³

The Athenians must have interpreted their real misfortune as reflective of divine anger, or perhaps divine absence. Michael Flower has argued that ‘there was no “crisis” of belief or

³⁹ ‘wounds’: Parker 1996: 147; ‘anxiety’: Rubel 2014: 3; ‘fierce reaction’: Janko 2006: 48.

⁴⁰ Bell 2016: 1-7, 208-306.

⁴¹ Snape and Parker 2001: 408.

⁴² Bell 2016: 307.

⁴³ Cartledge 2009: 82-3.

practice in late fifth-century Athenian religion, but rather a series of challenges'.⁴⁴ There certainly was a crisis of religion (and politics, and other things, though religion is obviously our focus here), but this 'crisis' was not a simple case of mass loss of faith.⁴⁵ Flower is right to stress that it involved a series of challenges: war, suffering, and disaster pose issues of theology and theodicy; they do not make one take a particular position on those issues, but they do seem to encourage extremes or entrenchment of views.

There are three key sets of events in the lead-up to Socrates' trial which explain how this religious anxiety was generated. First, the breakdown in society from the plague of 430-29, and again in 427-6BC; secondly, the mutilation of the *Herms* and parodies of the Mysteries; and finally, the loss of the war due to key moments of miscalculation like the loss of the fleet in Sicily and the failure to treat with the Persians.⁴⁶ Over the course of forty years, as Thucydides records, the Athenians perceived a wave of expressions of impiety which (whether it was imagined or not) had consequences. Thucydides offers the main account of the consequences for religion of the plague of 430-29 and 427-6BC:

[2.47] the supplications made at sanctuaries, or appeals to oracles and the like, were all futile, and at last men desisted from them, overcome by the calamity... [2.52] Bodies of dying men lay one upon another, and half-dead people rolled about in the streets and, in their longing for water, near all the fountains. The temples, too, in which they had quartered themselves were full of the corpses of those who had died in them; for the calamity which weighed upon them was so overpowering that men, not knowing what was to become of them, became careless of all law, sacred and profane. And the customs which they had hitherto observed regarding burial were all thrown into confusion, and they buried their dead each one as he could. And many resorted to shameless modes of burial because so many members of their households had already died that they lacked the proper funeral materials. Resorting to other people's pyres, some, anticipating those who had raised them, would put on their own dead and

⁴⁴ Flower 2009: 1.

⁴⁵ On how the crisis transcended religion see Schaps 2011: 130-1.

⁴⁶ Nails 2006: 10 observes something similar: 'Over the years, as Athens suffered war, plague, loss of empire, and defeat, its citizenry became increasingly alarmed that the new learning was somehow to blame, and anti-intellectualism grew.' Hole 2011: 361-2: mutilation of the *Herms* and the plague led to a 'fear that they were being punished by the gods'. See also Janko 2006: 54-7. Loss of the war as context for trial of Socrates: Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 18.

kindle the fire; others would throw the body they were carrying upon one which was already burning and go away.... [53.4] No fear of gods or law of men restrained; for, on the one hand, seeing that all men were perishing alike, they judged that piety and impiety came to the same thing, and, on the other, no one expected that he would live to be called to account and pay the penalty of his misdeeds. On the contrary, they believed that the penalty already decreed against them, and now hanging over their heads, was a far heavier one, and that before this fell it was only reasonable to get some enjoyment out of life.⁴⁷

There is little reason to doubt the general truthfulness of Thucydides' account as a record of collective memory from the end of the fifth-century of events that occurred around 430BC: certainly not the continuation of religious festivals, as has sometimes been argued.⁴⁸ One of the problems with traditional readings of Thucydides is that scholars have assumed that responses to the great plague of the 430s and 20s must be either atheism or more fanatically religious.⁴⁹ But Thucydides nowhere says that abandoning their religious devotions (as Furley conservatively puts it) was the *only* reaction of those in the city, either at the time or later; in the ancient city different demographics, groups, and individuals had different, and even opposite, reactions to calamity. Thucydides clearly documents a loss of faith under pressure, the weeding out of the good people in Athens because they visited the sick, and the lack of protection afforded by the sanctuaries as they filled with the dead: all of these are reasonable claims and they draw on anxieties about the justice and efficacy of the divine.⁵⁰ In the

⁴⁷ Thuc. 2.47.3-53.4, adapted from Crawley and Warner.

⁴⁸ Mikalson 1984: e.g. 255, for instance, argued the continued religious observation after the plague (and during, by the state) meant Thucydides was exaggerating. This is speculative, and assumes incorrectly that continued religious participation correlates with belief, which has been dismissed since at least Durkheim.

⁴⁹ Furley 2006: 432, for instance, argued that '[a]ccording to Thucydides, the Athenians' more immediate response to the desperate situation caused by the plague was not (pace Rubel) to intensify their religious devotions, but to abandon them altogether as futile.' Furley does recognise that attitudes were more mixed later in his article.

⁵⁰ Weeding out the good people is not quoted, but in Thuc. 2.51. Thucydides' claim of piled corpses is a breach of norms in restricted areas like the temples of Eleusinian Demeter or the Acropolis (which Thuc. 2.17 says are restricted). On anxieties about justice see chapters Two and Four. Athenians were familiar with the idea that doubts about the character and will of the gods come naturally from despairing people: e.g. Eur. *Iph. Aul.* 1033-5.

memory of the historian and, it is reasonable to speculate, the collective memory of Athens at the close of the fifth century, there had been a ‘crisis of religion’ during the plague years.

The historicity of the events Thucydides records (as opposed to the narrative generated and believed) is of secondary importance in a discussion on the backdrop for trials in the fifth and fourth century, but no concrete historical or archaeological justification has ever been offered as to why this passage is not an accurate historical account of events in the 430s. In spite of this, many scholars have been insistent on exonerating the Athenians of this behaviour, and have systematically undermined the importance of the plague narrative and the effects of the plague that it documents on Athenian morality and religion.⁵¹ No, the plague killed a third of the Athenian population: it ‘was the crucial event in the life of the Athenians at the beginning of the war. The consequences of this plague marked the public conscience for a long time.’⁵² The significance of the plague naturally led to the need to explain its origin or cause. As Mitchell-Boyask has explored in his study of the plague and the Athenian imagination, Athens was increasingly viewed as a ‘sick city’, as manifested through the preoccupation with sickness, in both a literal and an abstracted and metaphorical way, that Sophocles and Euripides demonstrate in their plays of the 420s.⁵³ So the plague was

⁵¹ Flower 2009: 3 argued Thucydides’ ‘tendency to minimise the importance of religious activity as a factor in human affairs’ makes him an unreliable source, and 2009: 16 that ‘[t]here is surely some rhetorical exaggeration in all of this’, but offers no evidence that contradicts him (or why those who ‘maximise’ it are not similarly unreliable). That the plague narrative, as Woodman 1988: 35 observes, ‘dramatically and ironically overturns everything of which Thucydides made Pericles boast in the funeral oration’, is ironic foreshadowing in the funeral oration itself and not a reflection on the accuracy of the plague narrative. Rubel 2015 argues the downplaying of the plague narrative comes from the (incorrect) idea that atheism is impossible; and the converse reluctance by some scholars e.g. Hornblower 1991: 62-4 and Furley 2006: 422-3, to believe Thucydides’ ‘irrational’ insistence that the Peloponnesian war had an unusual amount of natural disasters, in Thuc. 1.23.3. Scholars who insist on the importance of the plague for morality and religion in Athens: Mitchell-Boyask 2008, Schaps 2011, and Rubel 2015. The independent evidence collaborates Thucydides’ story, like the mass graves found during the construction of the Athenian metro, as with a fifth-century grave in the *Kerameikos* with 150 male and female bodies hastily thrown in a pit with 30 assorted small vases; see Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002 and Parlama and Stambolidis 2000: 271-3, as well as Flower 2009: 17.

⁵² Rubel 2014: 3.

⁵³ Mitchell-Boyask 2008.

both a manifestation of divine vengeance for impiety and a cause of further impiety, as Thucydides records.⁵⁴

The revelation in 415 that on the eve of the Sicilian expedition all of the phalluses (or beards) of the *Herms* in Athens had been mutilated, in an act of symbolic violence, began a set of investigations into impiety.⁵⁵ It emerged in a series of stunning revelations that an organised overclass (effectively implicating the entire aristocratic class), had been engaged in systematic and concealed impieties, including private parodies of the secret Mysteries.⁵⁶ On the Mysteries, Murray in particular has insisted that calling the Mysteries ‘parodies’ is inappropriate, since they seem to have been accurate performances.⁵⁷ But their nature as ‘illegal, sacrilegious, and immoral’, as Murray puts it, makes them parodies: not in the comedic sense, but in the sense of being a distorted imitation.⁵⁸

It has also been argued that the Mystery performances were the legitimate performances of the rites in private by groups of aristocrats who sought the ‘usurpation of civic office’.⁵⁹ It is right to emphasise the social and political significance of the creation of alternate social groups with their own private ties.⁶⁰ That these aristocrats were able to parody the Mysteries openly among other rich citizens suggests that they at least considered

⁵⁴ At Thuc. 2.64.2 Pericles says the plague was a ‘supernatural’ affliction. Thucydides’ account was later interpreted in Byzantine literature as justifying a divine origin for the plague on the basis that Thuc. 2.50 – see also 2.47.3-4 on its unusual extent and virility – says that it was ‘unusual’ because animals also died; see Reinsch 2006: 775-6. Furley 2006: 431 observes that ‘doubts arose in Athenians’ minds whether the plague might not be god’s punishment of them’.

⁵⁵ Thuc. 6.27-8; Thuc was in exile at the time; Symbolic: Todd 1993: 314, Osborne, R. 1985: 53-4, 65-6.

⁵⁶ As Thuc. 6.60.2 observed, the facts on the Mysteries were never established for certain, and he did not understand the motivations of the *hermokopidai*, violators of the *Herms*. Andocides confessed under immunity and gave up his friends, telling the jury of the aristocrats who assembled to drink, gamble, criticise democracy, and gate-crash parties, explaining how this got out of hand and ended up with mutilation. On the Mysteries and *Herms* see Plut. *Alc*, Andoc. *Myst.*, Lys. 6. Dillon, J. 2004: 168-76, 179-81.

⁵⁷ See Murray, O. 1990: 155-6.

⁵⁸ Murray, O. 1990: 155.

⁵⁹ Original argument in McGlew 2002: 122, elaboration and ‘usurpation’ in Hobden 2004: 149.

⁶⁰ The religious and social importance of the Mysteries Affair, particularly in pitting sympotic bonds against democracy, is explored also in Murray, O. 1990, who argues for the religious explanations of the *Herms* and Mysteries affairs, esp. 157-9 on the weakness of political interpretations.

themselves at no real risk among their peers.⁶¹ That they maintained appearances in public, that the mutilation of the *Herms* took place in secret and at night, and that when discovered the punishments were severe, all suggests a societal gap between the acceptability of impiety among the general population and the highest wealth classes. But that these rituals were legitimate pious performances rather than parodies (i.e. self-consciously impious imitations) is implausible. Private performances of the Mysteries were illegal and impious by definition, so the performers were doing something they knew was impious. It does not make any sense to commit impiety against the gods and rituals by legitimately performing their rites. Anyway, it is clear that the mutilations and parodies of the Mysteries and concealed impieties had been going on for years among the aristocratic classes, and they were connected in the Athenian mind to the disasters of the war years. Likewise, the account of the parodies of the Mysteries involves repeated parodies, not a one-off event.⁶² Thucydides observed that there had been other instances of young *symposiasts* damaging religious statues at night.⁶³

The mutilation of the *Herms*, parodies of the Mysteries, and the subsequent crisis contributed to the conception of religious transgressions as the cause of the loss of the war.⁶⁴ Given that the mutilation of the *Herms* was meant to have occurred only days before the Sicilian expedition – as Thucydides observed, the timing of the mutilations was troubling – it was natural to perceive these impieties as the root cause of that calamity.⁶⁵ And elsewhere, Pythonicus, the person who first accused Alcibiades of profaning the Mysteries, strongly insinuated that this act of impiety would endanger the Sicilian expedition.⁶⁶ Indeed, after Sicily, Thucydides' Nicias observed that the divine retribution was probably the cause of the loss of ships.⁶⁷ Thucydides elsewhere suggested the plague was judgement or punishment (most likely by Apollo) for perceived crimes.⁶⁸ Flower has argued that the strength of the

⁶¹ Dover 1988: 136.

⁶² Andoc. 1.11 *poiounta* 'making', is present rather than aorist, which implies repeated events i.e. 'he has been holding Mystery parodies', rather than 'he held a parody of the mysteries'. Moreover, Andocides records at least five independent occasions in Andoc. 1.11, 15-18, as in Murray, O. 1990: 153-4.

⁶³ Thuc. 6.28; Murray, O. 1990: 151.

⁶⁴ Todd 1993: 312 argues the trial of Socrates and the mutilation of the *Herms* were one large scandal.

⁶⁵ Thuc. 6.27.

⁶⁶ Andoc. 1.11; Schaps 2011: 132.

⁶⁷ Thuc. 7.77.2-4.

⁶⁸ Thuc. 2.53.4; see Flower 2009: 4.

belief in Athens that Apollo was aiding the Spartans against them led to the introduction of the Asclepius cult in 420BC: to heal the ‘sick city’.⁶⁹ The Athenians must have seen all of these events as the cause of divine vengeance resulting in the loss of the war.⁷⁰ This caused increasing hostility towards sceptics and atheists in the fifth century, and a climate of political, religious, and intellectual suspicion.⁷¹

Religious fanaticism had been on the rise in Athens, alongside atheism. The failure of the seers to predict accurately and advise during the war surely led to some, like Thucydides, who lost confidence in their ability; but this increasingly generated a defensive response, with others offering increasingly virulent support for seers.⁷² Indeed, the demand for *manteis* (seers) and *chresmologoi* (diviners, or oracle-readers) significantly increased during times of crisis, as during the plague and after the end of the war.⁷³ In this context those like Meletus, Diopeithes, and indeed Euthyphro, were able to get their way in a ‘wave of religious fundamentalism’, defending ‘traditional religion’ with a ‘fanatical zeal’.⁷⁴ The immediate context of Socrates’ trial in particular reveals this culture of blame rooted in religious wrongdoing. In 400 or 399BC Andocides was prosecuted by the same Meletus who prosecuted Socrates on a double charge of impiety, for attending the Mysteries when banned and placing a suppliant’s bough at the Eleusinian shrine; in the same year Euthyphro prosecuted his own father for impiety, and Nicomachus was tried for introducing new sacrifices and changing traditional sacrifices without authority.⁷⁵

The grim situation in Athens at the dawn of the fourth century lent itself to being viewed as the result of divine punishment due to transgressions against the gods. In her *Envy, Poison, and Death*, Esther Eidinow has argued that the events of the late fifth century had created a ‘trauma’ that is evidenced in the trials of women in this period: ‘the Athenians had

⁶⁹ IG ii² 496, on the introduction of Asclepius from Epidaurus to Athens; see also the attempt to invade Epidaurus, the site of Asclepius’ sanctuary, in Thuc. 2.56.4. Flower 2009: 4-6, Mikalson 1984: 220.

⁷⁰ As well as Flower 2009, Schaps 2011: 129 takes this interpretation.

⁷¹ Wallace 2004b: 266 argues for an increasing climate of suspicion.

⁷² On the scepticism of Thucydides towards seers see Furley 2006.

⁷³ Demand for *manteis*: Gould, J. 1985: 11-12.

⁷⁴ For instance, Thuc. 8.1.1 remarks on the meddling oracles and diviners in Athens at the time of the Sicilian expedition. ‘Religious fundamentalism’: Nails 2006: 5. Euthyphro as a fanatic: Allen 1970: 9-12, Burnyeat 1997: 233. ‘fanatical zeal’: Slings 1994: 94. See also Rubel 2014: 43-5.

⁷⁵ On the religious backdrop: Connor 1991: 51-2.

experienced a severe social trauma, one which prompted a search for meaning and explanations of their experiences, and which was created by, and in turn itself led to, political, social, and supernatural violence.⁷⁶ The long term obstacles to Athens gaining the perceived favour of the gods had created a ‘collective paranoia’, a ‘moral panic’, and the Athenians looked for scapegoats.⁷⁷ As Rubel observed, ‘the Athenians, stricken by a terrible plague, the horrors of war, and the loss of an empire, similarly feared that “the sky would fall on their heads”’.⁷⁸ In this sort of energetic religious environment, the excluded and marginalised are particularly blamed for misfortune, gossip giving rise to allegations.⁷⁹ Most recently, Esther Eidinow has evocatively described this tumultuous period for Athens; she also argues that in the early fourth century, after the war, some of the blame fell on women, who were believed by some (like Plato and Aristotle) to have excessive freedom in Athens.⁸⁰ The need to blame also partly manifested through the tension between the old aristocracy and the newly empowered democracy. The exclusively political reading of Socrates’ trial does not work because Socrates had a reputation for educating democrats as well as oligarchs, as observed in Chapter One. But reading it partly as a conflict between the democracy and the aristocracy does make sense: the former were dumbfounded as to why they had lost the war, and they perceived the religious transgressions of the aristocracy as at fault.⁸¹ The short-lived oligarchic revolution in 411BC had brought a lot of the increasing class tensions to the fore, but it had not expunged them.⁸² After the loss of the war in 403BC, there was a divisive climate of blame, and different factions blamed one another for the events that had occurred:

⁷⁶ Eidinow 2016b: 330.

⁷⁷ ‘collective paranoia’: Garland 1992: 141; ‘moral panic’: Hunter 1985: 157.

⁷⁸ Rubel 2014: vii.

⁷⁹ Eidinow 2007: 236: the ‘dynamics of risk, misfortune, and blame’ lie behind impiety trials; the marginalised are blamed for misfortune, gossip giving rise to allegations.

⁸⁰ Eidinow 2016b: 267-91, 326-36.

⁸¹ On the debate over the relevance and power of the *thetic* rower-class and the aristocracy who, as *trierarchs*, organised and paid for *triremes*, see [Xen] *Ath. Pol.* 2-3; Van Wees 1995, esp. 158-9. Jordan, B. 1975: 221 argues that rowing in the fleet was not only a military act but also a political one: they were asserting their political significance.

⁸² Murray, O. 1990: 149.

it is easy to see how narratives of blame could develop, with the community uniting against well-known agitators, who could serve as scapegoats.⁸³

As for Socrates himself, his reputation for impiety was well established (as discussed in Chapter One), and he had after all educated those political classes whose perceived impieties had apparently brought down divine retribution and the loss of the war.⁸⁴ Almost all who had been revealed as *Herm*-mutilators and mystery-ridiculers had been followers of the sophists and Socrates.⁸⁵ With Socrates the Athenians performed a sort of purification ritual, the persecution of an individual for collective anxieties offering catharsis.⁸⁶ The preoccupation with finding a ‘cure’ for the city of Athens had been foreshadowed in Euripides and Sophocles for years.⁸⁷ It may even be that Socrates understood his role as dying to purify the city.⁸⁸ The most secure of our trials fit a very similar picture: they served to expunge anxieties about divine punishment as a result of impieties after a calamity.

The legal deterrents against atheism: impiety trials

The first religious trials date to shortly after the outbreak of war.⁸⁹ The historicity of the trials, however, has been a hotly contested topic. The evidence on trials is complex: it is based on opaque references in Aristophanes, combined with later (and usually unreliable) biographical

⁸³ Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 19. Socrates as scapegoat: Bussanich and Smith 2013: 301-27, esp. 314-25; Rubel 2014: 74-3, Wallace 2004a: 230.

⁸⁴ Hole 2011: 369 has even suggested that fear of divine retribution led to the vote for Socrates’ death.

⁸⁵ Pythonikos offered the first info, with a slave of Alcibiades who confessed they parodied the mysteries; 9 out of 10 went into exile and the other was caught; all were rich intellectuals and followers of the ‘sophists’. See Athen. 5.220b-c, who records Aeschines’ *Callias* was a lampoon of the sophists Prodicus and Anaxagoras for exactly this.

⁸⁶ Purification: Cartledge 2009: 89-90. Cathartic: Eidinow 2010: 23-4. Diamond, E. 2012 argues that the trials of Socrates and Euthyphro’s father are both about pollution, of *polis* and *oikos* respectively.

⁸⁷ Preoccupation with the illness of the city can be seen throughout Eur. *Hipp.*, in 428, and in Soph. *OT*, in the 420s, both of which use disease in literal and metaphorical ways. On this see Mitchell-Boyask 2008: 6, 45-104.

⁸⁸ Waterfield 2009: 203-4; cf. 2012: 300-1: Socrates’ dying words (‘Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius’) played on the link between *pharmakos*, scapegoat, and *pharmakon*, cure; Socrates presented himself as dying to heal the city’s ills. This resolves Wells 2008’s interpretation that sees Socrates’ death as part of the traditional threefold practice: libation (which Socrates requests but is denied), prayer, and sacrifice.

⁸⁹ Adcock 1927: 478, Gomme 1956: 187, Horstmanschoff 1989: 226: explicitly linked to outbreak of plague; and Rubel 2014: 40 dated Anaxagoras’ trial to a conservative movement spawned in 430. Cf. also Prandi 1977: 26. See Rubel 2014: 64-73.

sources. While it is possible to argue for the historicity of a trial or accusation, very often the details of these are lost: exactly what the accusation was, or even when, can often only be loosely and imperfectly pieced together. This is especially important given the difficult distinction between trials for impiety, *asebeia*, and atheism in this work. Far more extensive discussions of the historicity of certain atheistic behaviours and the trials for impiety have been published than the treatment here: Rubel's 2014 discussion is authoritative, but other accounts like those of O'Sullivan 1997 and Dover 1988 are also valuable, albeit unfairly far too prone to discount the historical trials, as Rubel has argued. Nonetheless, as was observed in the introduction, this thesis is not primarily concerned with the historicity of actions, events, or individual or specific beliefs; it is significant enough that these were viewed as plausible in the ancient world. It is most important to establish that in Athens, at least, having a reputation for performing certain actions or believing certain things could have serious consequences, which reveals the nature of the deterrent against this sort of atheistic behaviour.

A reputation for making atheistic arguments and impious behaviour (like parodying the Mysteries) formed the basis of accusations and prosecutions for impiety in Athens. Diagoras of Melos was accused of impiety in Athens shortly after the scandals surrounding the profanation of the Mysteries and mutilation of the *Herms*, for various acts that demonstrated his atheism.⁹⁰ It was observed above (p.116) that Lysias states that Diagoras was prosecuted for offence of word rather than action. Yet, his purported actions included not only divulging the Mysteries, but also chopping up a statue of Herakles to use as fire wood.⁹¹ He already had a reputation for atheism by the time of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, which was produced before the famous ridicule of the Mysteries in 415BC, probably also the date of his trial.⁹² In the *Clouds*, Socrates is called 'the Melian': a comparison between the sort of atheistic and naturalistic investigations and brazen impiety of the fictional Aristophanic Socrates and Diagoras.⁹³ The association between atheistic views and behaviour continued

⁹⁰ The first reference to Diagoras' atheism is Ar. *Birds* 1071-87, and later in Lys. 6.17. Dover 1988: 135, Rubel 2014: 68-70, Wallace 1994: 128.

⁹¹ Statue of Herakles: Athenagoras *Plea* 4, Suda sv. Diagoras [Suda Online: δ,524]; The Mysteries: Melanthios *FGrHist* 326 F3, Krateros *FGrHist* 342 F16.

⁹² Ar. *Birds* 1071-87. Dover 1988: 137. Trial date: Rubel 2014: 69.

⁹³ Ar. *Cl.* 831.

well into the fourth century: the priestess Ninon, for instance, was prosecuted and executed in the fourth century for impiety and for profaning the Mysteries.⁹⁴ There are other reports of accusations of impiety just for expressing atheistic views. Aristotle reports that Euripides was later reported to have been prosecuted by Hygiaenon for impiety for having represented Herakles as mad in a play.⁹⁵ The tradition of a trial probably comes from impious and atheistic comments in Euripides' plays, comic references, and the association between him, Anaxagoras, Protagoras, and Prodicus.⁹⁶ One anecdote has Euripides edit the opening line of his *Melanippe* on its first performance, because it was so impious it apparently caused such an outcry that the show was stopped.⁹⁷ It is unlikely a trial of Euripides ever occurred, but informal accusations of impiety at least are plausible.

A reputation for natural philosophy could also open one up to prosecution. During or just following the plague, Anaxagoras was accused and brought to trial under *asebeia* for 'not believing in the gods' (τὰ θεῖα μὴ νομίζοντας, according to Plutarch), 'because he declared the sun to be a hot ball of metal' (διότι τὸν ἥλιον μύδρον ἔλεγε διάπυρον, according to Diogenes Laertius) instead of a god, and 'declared the firmament was made of stones' ('Ἀναξαγόραν εἰπεῖν ὡς ὄλος ὁ οὐρανὸς ἐκ λίθων συγκέειτο').⁹⁸ Anaxagoras may have been smuggled out of Athens by Pericles and possibly sentenced to death in his absence, or fined

⁹⁴ Ninon: Schol. on Dem. 19.281. Joseph. *Ap.* 2.267. Eidinow 2010: 13-14, Cooper 1995: 303-18.

⁹⁵ Arist. *Rh.* 1416a., also Satyrus, *Vita Eur.* C10. Herakles as mad: POxy 2400, 3rd Century AD, probably based on Satyrus. Dover 1988: 139.

⁹⁶ On reputed impiety in Euripides' plays see esp. Eur. *Tro.* 884-9, Hecuba's impious prayer, the apparently Prodican *Bacch.* 275-80, and the rebuke of Zeus by Amphitryon in *Her.* 339-47; also, the atheistic Sisyphus fragment, TGrF F1 ad. Sext. *Emp. Adv. Math.* 9.54 is sometimes, though not normally, attributed to him; see Lefkowitz 1989. Lefkowitz 1987: 150-1, 154-8. Comic fragments are unreliable as biography on Euripides; but it reveals popular opinions about Euripides just as comic Socrates does about Socrates; see Dover 1988: 138-9. Ar. *Thesm.* 450-1 shows a woman claims Euripides spoiled her livelihood by persuading people of atheism. Euripides in *Frogs* 889-93 prays only to 'Ether, my food, pivot of my tongue, comprehension, and nostrils'. Lefkowitz 1989: 71, cf. n.5. See also Rubel 2014: 26-8. One tradition has Euripides as the author of the 'Sisyphus fragment': [Plut.] *Plac. Phil.* 1.7. By Critias (the more common attribution): Sext. *Math.* 9.54.

⁹⁷ Fragment by Euripides: Plut. *Amat.* 13; Cf. Lucian *Zeus Rants*. The original line read 'Zeus, whoever Zeus is, for I don't know him, except through hearsay'.

⁹⁸ Anaxagoras accusation: Ephorus, *FrGrHist* 70 F196 *ap.* DS 12.39.2; his fate: DL 2.3.8, 2.3.12-15; Plut. *Per.* 32.1-3. Cohen 1989: 212, Dover 1988: 135. The plausibility of the trial is mostly agreed post-Dover: Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 19, O'Sullivan 1997, Whitmarsh 2016: 120.

five talents and exiled, or acquitted due to illness, or imprisoned and awaiting execution when Pericles was able to obtain voluntary exile on his behalf.⁹⁹ Regardless, the sources all agree that there could be severe repercussions for the sorts of things Anaxagoras is credited with saying and doing. Yunis has challenged the common assumption that the trial was for political reasons, instead arguing that Anaxagoras' naturalistic philosophy made him a target for the seers, diviners, and soothsayers like Dioppeithes.¹⁰⁰

Like Anaxagoras, Protagoras was accused of atheism because of his reputation for natural philosophy: Protagoras' work *Concerning the Gods* opened with a statement of what was perceived as agnostic atheism (unbelief, but not disbelief): 'Concerning the gods, I cannot ascertain whether they do or do not exist' (περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι οὔθ' ὡς εἰσίν, οὔθ' ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν).¹⁰¹ Contrary to the comment of Plato's Socrates in the *Apology*, Protagoras did have a reputation for impiety by at least the 420s: he was described by the Old Comic poet Eupolis as 'an offender in regard to celestial matters' in 421BC.¹⁰² There was probably no trial, but the general accusations of impiety stand, and it is plausible to suggest that shortly after 421 Protagoras was driven from Athens due to suspicion of atheistic natural philosophy.¹⁰³

A similar thing reputedly occurred to Diogenes of Apollonia, a famous natural philosopher and associate of Anaxagoras (and Anaximenes), who argued for a materialistic conception of the world with Air as the universal element and the earth as a spherical rock, weather and climate determined by natural forces.¹⁰⁴ Demetrius of Phalerum records that he almost lost his life due to his unpopularity in Athens: it is unclear whether a trial occurred or this was a general comment on his vulnerability. The ostracism of the obscure Damon of Oea was probably motivated due to naturalistic associations as well. This was certainly a historical event, as reported in the Aristotelian *Constitution of the Athenians* and evidenced

⁹⁹ Smuggled: Plut. *Per.* 32.3; sentenced in his absence: Satyrus in DL 2.3; fined and exiled: Sotion in DL; acquitted due to illness: Hieronymus of Rhodes in DL; voluntary exile: Plut. *Nic.* 23.4. Dover 1988: 140.

¹⁰⁰ Yunis 1988: 66-9. Political reasons: DS 12.39.2, and also Plut. *Per.* 32.3 on Pericles' fear for Anaxagoras.

¹⁰¹ Prot. F3 Graham 2010: 696-7; Eusebius, *PE.* 14.3, 7; Arist. F67 Rose = *Sophistes* F3 Ross. Arist. *ap.* DL 9.51-4; Dover 1988: 136, Parker 1996: 204-10.

¹⁰² DL 9.50 = Eupolis F157, a fragment of the 421BC *Flatterers*. Wallace 1994: 134.

¹⁰³ Wallace 1994: 134-5 argues that Protagoras was driven out of Athens on suspicion of atheistic natural philosophy.

¹⁰⁴ Demetrius of Phalerum FGrHist 228 F42 ap. DL 9.57, Athen. 12.60 = 542e.

by ostraca with ‘Damon’ written on them.¹⁰⁵ Plutarch mentions that Damon was an associate of Pericles alongside Anaxagoras and Zeno, and so Plutarch identifies politics as the key factor in his ostracism.¹⁰⁶ But another interpretation of the reason for his ostracism is quite possible: Plutarch elsewhere opaquely claims that Damon was ostracised for his ‘extraordinary wisdom’ or ‘surpassing ability’, and in his *Pericles*, where Damon receives more attention, Plutarch reveals that Damon was a sophist but ‘took refuge behind the name of music in order to conceal from the multitude his real power’.¹⁰⁷ In other words, Damon cast himself as a musician rather than a sophist, because he understood the danger of the association with natural philosophy. Indeed, it is possible that, as Yunis argued on behalf of Anaxagoras, Pericles may have been damaged by the association with sophistic figures like Damon, with a reputation for irreligion, and increasingly susceptible to ridicule and even persecution: not the other way around.¹⁰⁸

In the fourth century, philosophers seem to have been much more vulnerable to suspicion of atheism. The accounts of the prosecution and acquittal of the philosopher Theophrastus for impiety sometime in the late fourth century (c.318-17BC) also suggest he was prosecuted for atheism.¹⁰⁹ During the trial, Aelian records, Theophrastus was unable to speak to the Areopagos, overwhelmed by their grandeur: the prosecutor Demochares remarked that ‘the Judges are Athenians, not the Twelve gods’, the implication being that Theophrastus had undermined the Twelve gods.¹¹⁰ Diogenes also explains that Theophrastus was forced to leave the city due to a new law excluding philosophers from leading schools without the permission of the council and assembly, under penalty of death.¹¹¹ Finally, in the late fourth century the philosopher Stilpo of Megara was reportedly prosecuted for impiety for arguing that the Athena of Pheidias was not a god, and at the trial defended himself by arguing that he had said she was not a god but a goddess.¹¹²

¹⁰⁵ [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 27.4. Ostraca: see Wallace 1994: 139.

¹⁰⁶ Plut. *Per.* 4.2.

¹⁰⁷ Plut. *Arist.* 1.7: extraordinary wisdom; *Nic.* 6.1: surpassing ability; *Per.* 4.1-3. Wallace 2004b esp. 266-7, agrees and claims his ‘musical investigations’ were perceived as a sneaky, meddling innovations.

¹⁰⁸ Wallace 1994: 142 argues that Damon had a reputation for sophistry.

¹⁰⁹ DL 5.37, Aelian *VH*, 8.12.

¹¹⁰ Either by disavowing them or proposing Alexander as a thirteenth. Ael. *VH* 8.12. O’Sullivan 1997: 138.

¹¹¹ DL 5.38, Athen. 13.92 = 611a.

¹¹² DL 2.116.

The suspicion of philosophy and natural philosophy seem to have become linked to corruption of the youth and impiety after Socrates' trial in 399BC. By the time of the prosecution of Demetrius of Phalerum in 318BC for philosophy, impiety, and corruption of the youth this connection was almost clichéd.¹¹³ Theodorus of Cyrene, nicknamed 'atheist' (*epiklēthenta atheon*, according to Philo), was also prosecuted for impiety in the late fourth-century; the first century Jewish philosopher Philo records that he was either put to death or exiled from Athens for atheism and corrupting the youth.¹¹⁴ This was assumed by Philo to have been the standard substance of accusations for impiety in the fourth century. Prodicus of Ceos, likewise, had a reputation for atheism and was reported to have been executed for corruption of the young.¹¹⁵ His trial was probably a historical fiction, only attested in a scholion on Plato included in the Suda, who advances this based on the silence of Xenophon and Plato about Prodicus' fate: again, the accusation of 'corruption of the youth' is probably a reflection of normality of accusing someone impious of teaching religious dissidence.¹¹⁶ Finally, the famous and highly educated *hetaira* Phryne was also prosecuted with impiety at some point in the fourth century, an accusation which Collins has argued also came with an accusation of 'corruption of the youth'.¹¹⁷

Outside of Athens, there is not a great deal of evidence on trials for atheism or impiety. Plato's Socrates, in the *Euthydemus*, remarks that the sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus were exiled from Thurii.¹¹⁸ He does not explain why they were exiled, but throughout the dialogue they try to trick and mislead Socrates with misleading and sometimes impious arguments, so it is implied that their relativistic impiety and sophistry are to

¹¹³ O'Sullivan 2008: 204.

¹¹⁴ Philo, *Every Good Man is Free*, 127-30. Death: Athen. 13.92 = 611a. Implied exile: DL 2.102. O'Sullivan 1997: 143. Theodorus' atheistic views were shown in his work 'About the Gods' according to DL 2.97, Sext. Emp. *Phys.* 1.55 *Pyrrh.* 3.218, Cic. *De Nat. Deo.* 1.1-2, and Plut. *De. Com. Not.* 1075. The trial was not principally for political reasons as O'Sullivan 1997: 145 has argued; see Bauman 1990: 125.

¹¹⁵ Suda, sv. 'Prodikos' [Suda Online: π,2365]. Reputation for atheism: e.g. Phld. *On Piety*, 9.7, Sext. *Math.* 9.18, 51, 52, Them. *Or.* 30.422.

¹¹⁶ Rubel 2014: 35-6 agrees that it being a fiction is very likely.

¹¹⁷ Phryne: Impiety: according to [Plut.] *Lives of the 10 orators*, 849d-e. On the story see Athen. 13.590d-e. Corrupting the youth: Cooper 1995: 306 argues this because she did business in the Lyceum.

¹¹⁸ Pl. *Euthyd.* 271b-c.

blame.¹¹⁹ Thurii, however, was a Athenian-led colony: it was likely heavily influenced by Athenian culture, not least because it was partly the brain-child of Protagoras and Pericles.¹²⁰ In the late 320s or early 310s, before his trial in Athens, Demetrius of Phalerum was exiled from the Libyan *polis* Cyrene, a Theran colony.¹²¹ There is no evidence that Greece in general, then, including Athens before the Peloponnesian war, people were very concerned to prosecute atheistic views as impiety. The heightened sensitivity that resulted in the common accusations in Athens of the fifth and fourth centuries appears to be due to unique circumstances at the time.

The threat of trials generated by the culture of prosecution clearly impacted upon intellectuals, creating a deterrent against public atheism. Plato's Socrates expresses this sort of thought in the *Apology*, reflecting on the importance of outward orthopraxy versus the possibility for private dissent:

you may be quite sure, men of Athens, that if I had undertaken to go into politics, I should have perished long ago and done no good for you or for myself. And do not be vexed with me for speaking the truth; for no man will preserve his life who lawfully opposes you or any other mass of people and prevents many unjust and illegal things from happening in the state. One who fights for what is just, if he is to preserve his life for even a little time, must live as a private man, and not lead a public life.¹²²

Plato has his Socrates recognise that the Athenian state placed limits on thought, action, and protest. Plato's Socrates understands that living a private life had largely protected him from prosecution and persecution up until then; he could, on the whole, think and do what he decided was best. It was only through his education of those who would later become politically significant that he was vulnerable.

It seems that Aristotle also recognised the credibility of threats against philosophers for impiety. Roman authors record that Aristotle apparently withdrew from Athens so 'that

¹¹⁹ In Pl. *Euthyd.* 302b-303a Dionysodorus tries to trick Socrates into admitting either that he does not have an ancestral Zeus or that his ancestral gods are animals he could sacrifice or sell.

¹²⁰ See Fleming 2002: esp. 8-13.

¹²¹ Plut. *On Exile* 601. O'Sullivan 1997: 143.

¹²² Pl. *Ap.* 31d5-32a3. See Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 172-4 on this passage, and Brickhouse and Smith 2004: 140-1 on the idea that public life corrupted the virtuous.

the Athenians would not sin twice against philosophy'.¹²³ This comment may be based on a comment Aristotle makes in his *Rhetoric*: 'if generals are not contemptible because they are frequently put to death, neither are sophists...'¹²⁴ Aristotle perceived a credible threat against the lives of anyone perceived as a sophist which, as was observed in the case of Socrates, many philosophers risked. An arguably stronger argument is articulated by Plato's *Gorgias*, who recognised the credibility of the threat of being prosecuted and killed for philosophical speculation, foreshadowing the death of Socrates.¹²⁵ Famously, even by the time of the *Apology*, Plato's Socrates was already able to speak of accusations of atheism levelled against philosophers as cliché.¹²⁶

It is clear that by the end of the fifth century in Athens, at least, being put on trial, ostracised, or even put to death were perceived as legitimate possibilities for certain types of atheistic behaviours. Pursuing naturalistic and sophistic investigations, like Socrates, Diagoras, Anaxagoras, and Damon, would have been perceived as risky: all of these individuals were reputedly put to death for behaviour that included philosophy. Writing or teaching ideas that too far undermined the traditional conception of the gods, like Protagoras, was also dangerous. After Socrates, accusations continued to be connected to teaching: it was common for accusations of corrupting the youth to be attached to impiety accusations. The reality of, and belief in, the threat against public atheism, demonstrated not just by historical trials but also by mythologised stories of them, created a serious deterrent against being perceived as an atheist. At the very least, the prominent philosophers Diagoras, Anaxagoras, and Socrates were prosecuted for atheism, and several others were reputed to have been prosecuted with at least connotations of atheism, but even the obviously fake trials represent a culture of anxiety about atheism.¹²⁷ This created a tradition of prosecution and other tangible consequences and punishments for atheistic beliefs, actions, or anything associated with them.

The social deterrents against atheism: book-burning and slander

¹²³ Ael. *VH*. 3.36, possibly from Hermippus.

¹²⁴ E.g. Arist. *Rhet.* 1397b24:

¹²⁵ Pl. *Gorg.* 486a-b.

¹²⁶ Pl. *Ap.* 23d6; O'Sullivan 2008: 206.

¹²⁷ Most scholars agree on the three. See Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 19, O'Sullivan 1997, Rubel 2014: 68-70, Slings 1994: 94, Wallace 1994: 128, Whitmarsh 2016: 120.

Trials were the most aggressive and final step in deterring from or punishing atheism. In addition to trials, Greeks who were suspected of atheism faced other difficulties: personal attacks, character assassination, accusations of intellectual bankruptcy, claims of their insanity, and even the threat of book-burning. On the latter, Diogenes Laertius records that Protagoras' books were collected together and burned in the *agora*.¹²⁸ This is almost unanimously rejected by modern scholarship, and considered instead to be later speculation based on the comment of Timon of Phleious, that the Athenians 'desired' to burn Protagoras' work.¹²⁹ Dover speculated this was a record of a comment made in court that his works should be burnt to prevent further corruption. Yet there are other indications that book-burning was a plausible means of dealing with dangerous written works in this period. Aristoxenos, the peripatetic philosopher, recorded that Plato desired to burn his collection of Democritus' books, and was only persuaded not to because the works were too well known and commonly owned to make a difference.¹³⁰ There are also several decrees that record the Athenian administration burning books for various political reasons.

The meaning of burning books in the Greek world is very different from today. A useful comparison can be found in the Roman world: according to Suetonius, the Roman emperor Augustus burned all of the false or unofficial prophetic books, leaving only the authentic sibylline prophecies, as part of his program of restoration of Roman religion.¹³¹ Burning the books was a purifying process for Augustus; likewise, book-burning may have served as a form of collective purification for the Greeks, rather than primarily as censorship (though the fragment of Aristoxenos on Plato does have this latter connotation).¹³² The suspicion with which fifth-century Athenians in general held the written word (mentioned in Chapter One) contrasts with the collective respect it is given in the West. The ancient Greeks did not share the highly-charged modern revulsion towards book-burning, which is informed by recent history like Nazi book burnings in the 1930s. The Athenians recognised the

¹²⁸ DL 9.52; see also Cic. *de Nat. Deo*. 1.23.6, Timon of Phleious F5, Diels, *ap. Sext. Emp. Math.* 9.56; Dover 1988: 136.

¹²⁹ Timon of Phleious F5 Diels, *ap. Sext. Emp. Math.* 9.56-7; Dover 1988: 143-4. Rubel 2014: 66-7 considers it unlikely but not impossible, and certainly not an implausible threat.

¹³⁰ Aristoxenos F131 Wehrli; Dover 1988: 143.

¹³¹ Sue. *Aug.* 31.

¹³² Decrees: e.g. Andoc. 1.77-9: wiping out records of disenfranchisement due to debts to the state. See Dover 1988: 143-4. Collective purification: Rubel 2014: 67-8.

importance of appropriate education through emulation of behaviour for moral formation, and they consequently recognised the risk of corruption from private study of books. Book-burning should be considered a plausible threat in Athens from the Classical period on.

Plato's Stranger, in Book Ten of the *Laws*, perpetuates a number of common myths which underlined the social unacceptability of atheism. Plato's Stranger calls for the death penalty for atheists, calling them mad, unreasonable, immoral, and dangerous.¹³³ He describes how the young atheists disbelieved the stories they were told in their childhood (that were so important to religious education, as observed in Chapter One), but as they aged they changed their minds: 'not a single man who from his youth has adopted this opinion, that the gods have no existence, has ever yet continued till old age constant in the same view'.¹³⁴ This is reminiscent of the 'deathbed confession' *topos*, which is used as a rhetorical device and a tool of cultural appropriation, to prove that even the most stalwart of atheists eventually convert. In these, notorious atheists recanted their rejection of the gods before they died. Darwin, for instance, was recorded to have converted to Christianity on his death-bed. The evangelist Lady Hope of Carriden claimed that Darwin both repudiated his theory of evolution and affirmed his belief in Christianity, but Darwin's son and daughter who were present at his deathbed attested no conversion and his posthumous autobiography reveals his atheism explicitly.¹³⁵ Charles Bradlaugh and in the modern day Christopher Hitchens were both also claimed (similarly falsely) to have converted.¹³⁶ Stories of deathbed conversions internalise and sanitise dangerously critical figures, blunting their earlier criticisms, and confirming the truth of a religion; they are also unfalsifiable without records of deathbed scenes.

The combination of threat of legal action, book-burning, and social and cultural disapproval would have provided an expansive and very powerful deterrent to anyone from

¹³³ Pl. *Laws*, 10.907d-9a.

¹³⁴ Pl. *Laws* 10.888b-c.

¹³⁵ See Clark 1985: 199, and Moore 1994.

¹³⁶ On Bradlaugh see Bradlaugh-Bonner 1902: 9-10, and his daughter's statement that he 'died on the 30th January, firm in the convictions in which he had lived', in Bradlaugh-Bonner 1902: 110. On Darwin: Fabricated claims that Hitchens converted on his death-bed persist today, particularly in Christian blogs and literature, even after his wife has explicitly refuted them, e.g. in Humphreys, A. 2012; also Taunton 2016, who, in essence, claims that Hitchens converted but was not explicit to anyone.

risking being accused of atheism, or gaining a reputation for atheistic views. The result surely would have been that intellectuals, like Plato, were careful to ensure their lectures did not provide the sort of easy targets for critics of their piety that the works of Anaxagoras or Protagoras had provided.¹³⁷

Avoiding scrutiny: couching scepticism in a religious environment

Trials and other actions against perceived atheism had consequences on behaviour: it was already observed that these provided a deterrent from public atheism, but how did individuals actually portray themselves? By embracing the religious environment, intellectuals such as Heraclitus, Parmenides, Empedocles, and Democritus were allowed considerably more leeway in criticising religion. Heraclitus, for instance, offers keen criticism of some rituals and individuals who perform mysteries or purification rituals, and it is easy to see how some of his comments could have been taken by modern scholars and ancients as impious and atheistic:

They try vainly to purify themselves with blood when they are defiled by it, as if someone who had stepped into mud should bathe in mud to wash it off. One would be thought mad if some man noticed him doing that. And they pray to these statues, as if one should talk with houses, not knowing what gods and heroes are.¹³⁸

It has been argued that, in this passage and other similar fragments, instead of advocating a ‘look at the ritual in the cold light of reason’, Heraclitus was, in fact, defending traditional religion by separating the true meaning of religion from incorrect mortal interpretations.¹³⁹ To some extent, the ‘right’ reading is a matter of perspective based on context, and Heraclitus’ record of religious participation or impiety is open to various modern and ancient interpretations. It may be that these intellectuals did not follow a conscious strategy of protecting themselves by emphasising their religiosity in various ways, but the effect was profound. Heraclitus certainly did not face the same consequences that Protagoras or Anaxagoras did, for instance.

¹³⁷ E.g. Pl. *Ap.* 26d could mention Anaxagoras’ cheap leaflet as a common-known example of impious literature; Prot. F3 Graham 2010: 696-7.

¹³⁸ Herac. F115, Graham 2010: 178-9, F161.

¹³⁹ Osborne, C. 1997 and Adomenas 1999 both follow this line. ‘cold light of reason’ is Osborne, C. 1997: 36. Sandwell 2002: 239, for instance, argues that Heraclitus is arguing against ‘popular religion’. A similar argument is followed towards Xenophanes by Tor.

Intellectuals embedded themselves in the religious environment, teaching in religious centres, celebrating religious festivals, and conducting the rituals of state religion. A reputation for participation in traditional religion reinforced the piety of the intellectual who risked being suspected of impiety. Heraclitus associated himself with the temple of Artemis; Parmenides was a member of the association of Apollo the Healer, attended the Great *Panathenaia* well into his mid-sixties, and set up a shrine for a dead friend; Empedocles sacrificed on behalf of the delegates at the Olympics, and Democritus participated in ordinary ox-sacrifices (in each of their respective traditions).¹⁴⁰ Some of these details may be fictional, but they show how the association of traditional religion was used to reinforce the piety of any individual, just as fictional accusations of atheism, impiety, or corruption of the youth could be used to reinforce the idea that an individual was a religious dissenter. Indeed, of some intellectuals, there are no records of religious participation, and these tended to be more susceptible to prosecution. Neither Anaxagoras nor Diagoras are recorded participating in rituals, and of Anaxagoras it is noted that he actively avoided civic activity and distanced himself from normal social behaviour.¹⁴¹ All of these men were later prosecuted. Socrates was also prosecuted, and Plato has Socrates recognise that his own behaviour was odd, and engendered suspicion.¹⁴² He rejected the traditional stories of the poets and had dangerously innovative ideas about the gods.¹⁴³ Most importantly, Socrates simply took no care to present himself in a socially acceptable way.¹⁴⁴

Through Socrates, Plato knew the consequences of public opinion turning against him: in this respect, then, it is not surprising that the Platonic Academy powerfully demonstrates the protective strength of the religious environment. The Academy was a religious centre as well as a place of education and intellectual exploration, located in a sacred public precinct dedicated to the hero Akademos and Athena.¹⁴⁵ The visitor to the Academy passed through the Dipylon gate into a ceremonial avenue lined with huge

¹⁴⁰ Heraclitus: DL 9.1.1-6; 5-6 says he dedicated his *On Nature* to the temple. Parmenides: shrine: DL 9.3.21-3; *Panathenaia*: Pl. *Par.* 127b; *Herm* that shows membership is in Ebner 1962; Graham 2010: 208-9, n.6.

Empedocles: DL 8.2.51-69; Democritus: DL 9.7.36.

¹⁴¹ Anaxagoras and Diagoras: DL. 2.3.6-15.

¹⁴² Pl. *Tht.* 150d-e. Nails 2006: 8.

¹⁴³ Rejected the stories of the poets: Pl. *Euthphr.* 6a8-9.

¹⁴⁴ Samaras 2007 argued Socrates did not account for what the jury wanted to hear.

¹⁴⁵ Academy as a religious centre: Baltes 1993: 6-7.

ceremonial monuments to the dead and the state mausoleum and bordering on temples to Artemis and Dionysus Eleutherios.¹⁴⁶ This avenue led to the gate of the sacred precinct, which was filled with altars to numerous gods, and in which races were hosted on religious festival days while the ceremonial way held the funeral games for the battle-dead. The image of Dionysus was brought along this avenue at the Dionysia in a procession from the temple in the city to that of Dionysus Eleuthereus.¹⁴⁷ Plato lectured in the gymnasium, or in a small shrine he had erected to the Muses, his patron goddesses of philosophy.¹⁴⁸ On feast days religious celebrations were held, with dinners and *symposia* in honour of the gods.¹⁴⁹ Plato's educative persona was imbued with piety and the paraphernalia of religion. Placing into this context even radical philosophical dialogues – in which, of course, Plato depicted characters like Socrates and the Stranger instead of his own person – into this context could drastically change their interpretation.

It is obviously very difficult to find direct evidence that shows these figures were consciously concerned to portray themselves in a particular way to protect themselves from prosecution or other problems, and this is an overly simplistic view anyway. Plato's Socrates was aware of the need to portray himself properly to avoid prosecution, as observed above, and Plato casts him as knowingly risking his life to pursue to the truth.¹⁵⁰ Likewise, Xenophon records that Socrates claimed the best defence he had against the criticisms and accusations of atheism and corruption was how he had conducted his life in right behaviour towards the gods.¹⁵¹ Indeed, the first defence Xenophon's Socrates makes against Meletus' charges is to reassert his participation in traditional religion:

Socrates came before the jury after his adversaries had charged him with not believing in the gods worshipped by the state and with the introduction of new deities in their

¹⁴⁶ Description of Academy: Paus. 1.29.2; Baltes 1993: 6.

¹⁴⁷ Altars: Eros: Paus. 1.30.1, Athen. *Deipn.* 13.609D, Plut. *Sol.* 1.4; Prometheus, the Muses, Hermes, Athena, Heracles: Paus. 1.30.2; Zeus Kataibates: *FGrHist* 244, 120; Hephaestus, and joined altar of Hephaestus and Prometheus: *FGrHist* 244 147; festival days and runners: Paus. 1.30.2, Plut. *Sol.* 1.4; funeral games: Philostratus *Vit. Soph.* 2.30 (624), *FGrHist* 330 F2; Baltes 1993: 6, n.15, 19, 20.

¹⁴⁸ Muses as patrons of philosophy: Pl. *Phd.* 61a, *Phlb.* 67b; present of the gods to man: *Tim.* 47a-b; Baltes 1993: 7, n.32-4.

¹⁴⁹ Baltes 1993: 9.

¹⁵⁰ Pl. *Ap.* 31d5-32a3.

¹⁵¹ Xen. *Ap.* 3, 5.

stead and with corruption of the young, and replied: ‘One thing that I marvel at in Meletus, gentlemen, is what may be the basis of his assertion that I do not believe in the gods worshipped by the state; for all who have happened to be near at the time, as well as Meletus himself, if he so desired, have seen me sacrificing at the communal festivals and on the public altars.’¹⁵²

For Xenophon’s Socrates, participation in the rites of traditional religion is quite literally the best defence against prosecution for impiety and atheism. In a long digression from the *Theaetetus*, Plato’s Socrates explains how philosophers are misunderstood in the ancient city, and how they become prone to prosecution because they do not participate in civic affairs.¹⁵³ Plato’s Socrates argued that religion was part of a package of ordinary civic behaviour (politics, religion, culture, and so on were not divided into separate realms), and the failure to engage in these would risk suspicion. The reverse must be true: that spending more time doing conventional things rather than philosophy would make the philosopher less susceptible to prosecution. It is certainly cynical to imagine Socrates’ – or any other intellectuals’ – concern to participate appropriately in traditional religion was motivated by the desire to avoid suspicion. But at the very least, Xenophon and Plato both show that Socrates was aware that his history of religious participation might serve this function effectively enough to acquit him at a trial. Yet, it was not enough to acquit Socrates: belief did matter to his jurors, and they perhaps felt (as argued in Chapter One) that he had been too free in his teaching.

The limits of free speech

The context of criticism was key, not just in the sense of who it came from and their reputation for (im)piety: in Athens, the acceptability of criticising of the gods and airing atheistic views inherently relied on concepts of free speech, and which types of speech were acceptable in different contexts. *Parrhēsia*, the ability to say anything, was infused with democratic values, and so played into the different democratic and aristocratic tensions of the late fifth century.¹⁵⁴ But (fluid) limits were part of the idea of *parrhēsia*: which types of

¹⁵² Xen. *Ap.* 10-11.

¹⁵³ Pl. *Tht.* 172c-177c. See Nails 2006: 9 for discussion of the passage.

¹⁵⁴ Balot 2004: 233-4, Hansen 1991: 77, Raaflaub 2004: 48, Saxonhouse 2006: 8, Wallace 2004a: 221.

speech were acceptable depended on the context.¹⁵⁵ There was a *nomos agraphos*, an unwritten law, which embodied expectations about the entitlement of certain individuals to speak about particular topics in specific contexts.¹⁵⁶ Certain forms of speech like *aischrologia*, shameful speech – which included impious speech – were acceptable under certain circumstances.¹⁵⁷

In particular contexts, then, impious and atheistic speech was allowed. Old Comedy, for instance, was renowned for its ‘liberty to transgress the common inhibitions in speech’.¹⁵⁸ In Lysias’ defence speech for Phantias (who was indicted for proposing an illegal decree), the speaker explains that Cinesias was guilty of impiety through acts too ‘shameful for everyone else even to mention, but you hear them from comic poets every year’.¹⁵⁹ This might be read as a condemnation of the comic poets.¹⁶⁰ However, a better reading of Phantias’ comment from Lysias is as an acceptance that impiety is acceptable on the comic stage, but not off it. Impiety was also explored in tragedy, as in the Sisyphus fragment by Critias, though it seems to have been far less acceptable there; as observed in the case of Euripides, it was possible to gain a reputation for impiety as a tragic playwright based on the characters in one’s plays.¹⁶¹

In public contexts, in a law-court or assembly, in literature, or certain social contexts like *symposia*, impious speech was not protected or acceptable. The unwritten rules about appropriate speech were described by Pericles in Thucydides as a ‘social contract of shame’: to break these and speak about impiety in inappropriate contexts would have involved

¹⁵⁵ Free speech not a right: Carter 2004, Mulgan 1984: 15.

¹⁵⁶ *Nomos agraphos*: Halliwell 2004: 115.

¹⁵⁷ Aischrology as ‘language of the agora’ which was condemned as servile by many aristocrats and intellectual snobs like Aristotle *Pol.* 7.1336a39-b12; cf. also *Rhet.* 3.1419b7-9, and *Pl. Rep.* 3.395c-e. Halliwell 2004: 115, 129.

¹⁵⁸ Halliwell 1991: 67; see also Saxonhouse 2005: 131

¹⁵⁹ *Lys.* F53, Thalheim ap. Athen. 12.551, Halliwell 1991: 67-8

¹⁶⁰ Aristophanes may have been prosecuted: *Ar. Ach.* 502-8: ‘now at any rate Cleon will not allege against me that I am slandering the city in the presence of foreigners’ cf. 377-82: ‘I know what Cleon did to me because of last year’s comedy. He hauled me before the Council, and slandered me, and tongue-lashed me with lies’; 628-32, and Cf. also *Wasps* 1284-91, likely about a second confrontation in 424BC. See Sommerstein 2004a and 2004b on alleged prosecutions. These were for embarrassing the city in front of foreigners, not for impiety.

¹⁶¹ Sisyphus F in Critias TGrF F1, ad. Sext. Emp. *Adv. Math.* 9.54; Dover 1988: 148-9.

considerable shame.¹⁶² It is quite believable that in the ‘talk of the agora’ impiety and atheism were common, but these would not be spoken in more formal contexts, in the assembly, the law-courts, or other machinery of the state. Nor could they be written down with the certainty of avoiding prosecution. As well as prosecution, individuals who said unpopular things could be shouted down or harassed.¹⁶³ Using *thorubos*, which was an aspect of *parrhēsia*, the *demos* could interrupt, cheer or jeer, shout, heckle, laugh at or mock speakers.¹⁶⁴ The jurors can be seen shouting Socrates down throughout his trial in Plato’s *Apology*, including during his claims that the Delphic oracle told Chaerophon that no one is wiser than Socrates, which could certainly be perceived as an impious story.¹⁶⁵

Conclusion: self-policing as the consequence of restricted speech

We have explored the boundaries of speech and action, and the potential consequences of crossing these boundaries, or being perceived as doing so. Speakers were well aware of the need to balance the benefits of free speech and its potential hazards, and orators and democrats stressed the courage of public speaking in the face of such adversity in the fifth century.¹⁶⁶ Particularly revealing is the energy that orators put into ‘how to express oneself safely, tactfully, and effectively.’¹⁶⁷ Many of the key processes of the Athenian state involved exercising free-speech, which in turn exposed statesmen to potential backlash of various forms.¹⁶⁸ The agendas of the speakers impact these portrayals. What someone says, and what is recorded of them, is determined by a process that involves several layers of filters. It is not only in avoiding what is potentially prosecutable, and what might bring shame or *thorubos* in

¹⁶² Thuc. 2.37.3.

¹⁶³ Balot 2004: 234. Like Thersites in the *Iliad*, shouted down and beaten into silence by Odysseus: Hom. *Il.* 2.212-83; see also *Od.* 1.374-404. Ahl 1984: 175, Raaflaub 2004: 44.

¹⁶⁴ E.g. Thuc. 4.28: the mob pressuring Cleon to sail. On heckling see Lys. 12.73, Dem. 19.113, Aeschin. 1.78, 2.51; mocking: Dem. 19.46, Aeschin. 1.80, Pl. *Euthphr.* 3b-c; Roisman 2004: 264, n.7, Wallace 2004a: 223. *Thorubos* equivalent to Thersites’ beating: Finley 1985: 82. *Thorubos* was a tool of democracy, versus governments like monarchy or oligarchy, where one was expected to sit and listen, e.g. Thuc. 8.66 on the silence of the people during the oligarchic coup in 411BC. Wallace 2004a: 225-7. Pl. *Gorg.* 461d-462a: that Athens guarantees the right to speak but not be heard. Wallace 2004a: 228, see also Monoson 2000: 55.

¹⁶⁵ Pl. *Ap.* 20e-21b.

¹⁶⁶ E.g. Thuc. 2.40.2-3; Balot 2004.

¹⁶⁷ On expressing oneself safely see Ahl 1984: 174.

¹⁶⁸ Sinclair 1988: 136-61.

a given context, but also what the speaker wants to achieve.¹⁶⁹ The speaker in the law-court desires to persuade his audience, so the content of their speech was further restricted in what would appeal to the jury; the speaker in the *symposium* will be following the codes of conduct determining appropriate dinner conversation, and desire to avoid making a fool out of themselves in front of their peers; the teacher at the Academy will be passing on the teachings most valuable to their students in their given walks of life; and so on.

So, why is there no evidence of explicit, public, self-identifying atheists in ancient Greece? The answer is because scholars unwisely expect them in the first place. There are two aspects that might explain their absence: restriction of thought (as argued by Febvre), or incentives for and deterrents against public expression of their thought. The former has already been excluded (in the Introduction), but this chapter has demonstrated how powerful the latter can be. As Vlastos summarised with respect to Socrates:

Born into this system of religious belief, Socrates, a deeply religious man, could not have shrugged it off. And he could not have reasonably denied it without good reason: when a belief pervades the public consensus the burden of justifying dissent from it falls upon the dissident. And here his problem would be aggravated by the fact that the religious consensus has legal sanction. To flout it publicly is an offence against the state punishable by death.¹⁷⁰

Socrates, the ‘deeply religious man’, believed in the gods, certainly, but he also engaged with and taught a variety of beliefs and unbeliefs, as we argued in Chapter One, which were condemned through his prosecution. Nonetheless, Vlastos is correct in observing the deterrent legal sanction provided: a medley of social, political, legal, and other restrictions provided the most powerful deterrents to open, free, public admissions of atheism, and even to more private forms that might have survived to be read by us. On the whole, intellectuals self-policed their action and thought in order to protect themselves. As Sedley has insightfully observed, ‘[i]t is no accident at all, I suggest, that, despite Plato’s clear evidence for the existence of an established atheist movement, we cannot name its protagonists and authorities.’¹⁷¹ Sedley argued that these groups chose to remain anonymous because they

¹⁶⁹ Raalte 2004: 279.

¹⁷⁰ Vlastos 2000: 56.

¹⁷¹ Sedley 2013: 335.

understood the dangers of public atheism. Hussey observed something similar twenty years ago:

There were in fact some who were atheists, though they had good reason to keep their opinions hidden.¹⁷²

As had Sutton before him:

an obvious question: if these atheistic ideas were Critias' own, why should he care to advertise the fact? There would be little to gain and much to risk both in terms of personal reputation and of political chances.¹⁷³

Though these comments are essentially true in emphasising that there are different reasons why individuals might be hesitant to express atheistic views, they are speculative and do not map out the real incentives and deterrents that shaped the expression and recording of atheistic views in Greece.

In exploring the incentives and deterrents in ancient Greece, it was argued that the expression of atheism was highly contextual: whether atheistic views were acceptable depended on the context. If they were voiced by an appropriate person in an appropriate place and time, then they were acceptable, and perhaps even ordinary. This explains why some scholars have argued that atheism did not exist in ancient Greece: because the nature of the evidence means that only the reputedly pious were allowed to express atheistic views safely; or the comics, none of whose performances were to be taken seriously; or the tragedians, for whom the expression of impiety was expected to be accompanied with suitable punishment for the character who expressed them. These are the contexts in which atheistic views were acceptable, largely *because* in each there is a built-in defence to ensure that the views are either foiled, defused, or refuted. So it is always possible to find a reason to explain away any given individual example of atheistic thought. All evidence that remains was subject to selective normative pressures: these are the views that were acceptable enough to record, and that later individuals decided were desirable to continue to preserve. This creates another tautology: the only records of atheistic thoughts and ideas are those that are, inherently, undermined. They are undermined by being proven wrong, as in tragedy, or they are dismissed as subject of comic ridicule, or they are neutered by expression alongside theistic

¹⁷² Hussey 1995: 536.

¹⁷³ Sutton 1981: 37.

ideas. But this is the nature of the evidence, and not the nature of Greek thought: these are the contexts in which atheistic thoughts could be expressed, written down, and survive. Having explored how the nature of Greek society affected behaviour, action, and self-identification, it is now possible to turn to the other question from the start of this chapter: how Greek atheism helped shaped religious thought.

4. Rethinking scepticism: the interrelationship of scepticism and belief

This chapter explores how ‘radical’ ideas like atheism thrived, and how they competed with other ideas. It traces a history of atheistic criticism indirectly through the adaptations made in response in theology and theodicy, similar to the methods of Hunter and Wootton, discussed in the Introduction. The theory partly informing this approach is that of ‘representations’: the successor of Richard Dawkins’ meme theory. Ideas are not just things held and consciously determined by human beings, they are in a sense active agents, interacting with one another, and shaped and governed by pressures that play out on a platform of human individual and social minds. So, this chapter explores some of the various discourses of Greek theology, that is, theories on the nature of the divine and religion; and theodicy, or attempts to explain how the gods can exist and be just in spite of the existence of natural injustice. Through the interaction of these ideas it is possible to demonstrate how the sceptical and religious ideas were involved in a longstanding dialogue of exchange. Different religious ideas were posed, exposed to criticism (that could be atheistic), and modified as a result. The focus in this chapter is on the justice of the gods, which posed the key problem through which the reaction and counter-reaction of theism and atheism was played out. In this view, atheism was not only loosely ‘thinkable’ in the ancient world: atheistic thought was central to the evolution, survival, and enduring relevance of Greek religion over more than a millennium.

Radical ideas in a competing marketplace: the significance of atheistic ideas

To begin to explore the forces (including atheism) that shaped Greek theological discourses, it is first necessary to understand the intellectual basis on which ideas (including religious ones) were proposed and survived; how ideas coexisted and competed with other ideas. At this point it makes sense to clarify precisely what is meant by ‘atheistic ideas’. It was argued in the Introduction that atheism is best understood as an expansive concept that spans, and can include, a variety of other phenomena, including agnosticism. Atheistic ideas here are understood as ideas that imply uncertainty about, or unbelief or disbelief in, a god or gods. They can also include those that undermine other conceptions of the gods, either in their traditional forms or their existence as a whole, as well as those that wrote gods out of areas that were normally their domain (e.g. metaphysical systems). The proponents of these ideas might not have been advocating an atheistic worldview, but the individual ideas are

nonetheless atheistic. One of the overarching characteristics of these ideas is that they are combative in some way against theistic conceptions of the gods; they were competing with theistic ideas in a limited market-place of ideas.

How and why religious ideas tended to survive in this competition depends on two key principles, of memorability and evocativeness, both of which rely on how ‘intuitive’ ideas are. ‘Intuitive’ concepts are those that are essentially in line with assumptions that humans naturally make about given classes of objects (e.g. that humans walk on the ground and cannot fly), and ‘counterintuitive’ ideas are those that, in small, large, many or few ways, invalidate those assumptions. Ideas most likely to thrive exist within a kind of goldilocks zone of intuitiveness and counterintuitiveness, as Pascal Boyer, anthropologist and cognitive scientist, has argued.¹ If an idea is not at all counterintuitive then it is not memorable or evocative (i.e. it is boring), but if an idea is too counterintuitive, then it may be evocative but it is not easily recalled. The ‘best’ ideas are ‘modestly’ or ‘minimally’ counterintuitive ideas: those that are counterintuitive in few, but radical, ways, so they are maximally evocative while remaining memorable. Religions generally involve at most ‘modestly counterintuitive’ ideas.² Jesus famously walked on water: this story only contains a single radical point of ‘counterintuitiveness’ (a human being able to walk on water), and the story (like many religious stories) is therefore both memorable and evocative. In contrast to religion, science can frequently involve maximally counterintuitive concepts.³ There are various basic elements of human cognition, like the Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (discussed in Chapter One), that make belief in gods intuitive to us. The idea of a god is intuitive or minimally counter-intuitive, and so tend to dominate the intellectual marketplace of ideas, while naturalistic or scientific theories that remove gods are maximally counter-intuitive, and less likely to be memorable.

Nonetheless, plenty of naturalistic and atheistic ideas, which contradicted basic ‘intuitive’ understandings about the way that the world works, were produced in the Greek world, and held in spite of tremendous social and intellectual pressure. Self-contained,

¹ Boyer 2001.

² Religion as minimally counter-intuitive: Boyer 2001, Boyer and Ramble 2001, and cf. Sperber 1985: 85. More recently Porubanova-Norquist et al. 2013 in the other contexts; and Upal’s 2010 work differentiating between context-based and non-context (content) based minimal-counterintuitiveness.

³ McCauley 2011: 8-9, 105-117.

materialist, cosmological systems that removed the need for a god (even if they still contained deities) were common among presocratic thinkers, as Aristotle later observed in his *Metaphysics*.⁴ This raises further questions. If atheistic theories naturally struggled to compete in the competing marketplace of ideas, did they have any influence at all in the development of ideas? Were they simply posed, caricatured, and ridiculed (as will be examined in Chapter Six), and only half-remembered as alarmingly implausible accounts about the universe? The importance and impact of atheistic ideas (and arguably other radical ideas) does not have to be in their own significance in isolation. Atheistic ideas were certainly evocative and confrontational. Their significance lies in part in the influence they had on other ideas.

The protection and elaboration of religious ideas in response to scepticism

So atheistic ideas were significant in how they interacted with religious ideas, causing the modification, adaption, and strengthening of these religious ideas in response. This is basically the Socratic method: in the agonistic environment of Greece in the fifth century, intellectuals pitted idea against idea, and modified their conclusions based on the outcome. Regardless of doctrine or priesthods to enforce it, there was a broadly coherent body of beliefs to which one could subscribe, or against which doubt or scepticism could be directed.⁵ The dynamism of Greek religion, and the lack of doctrinal thinking, meant that Greek religious ideas could be adapted in response to scepticism, just as scepticism could to religious ideas. Michael Hunter observed (quoting Fotherby's *Atheomastix*) a similar phenomenon with respect to Early Modern England:

Quite apart from the actual existence of 'atheism', the spectre of it undoubtedly allowed authors to rehearse arguments on matters 'most needefull to be beleueed; yet least laboured in by Diuines.' By visualising unbelievers who 'must be refuted by the principles of nature onely, for all other arguments they scorne', writers were given an excuse to expound the principles of natural theology.⁶

⁴ Arist. *Met.* 1.983b.

⁵ Price 1999: 126 argued that scepticism was not based in responses to religious ideas because these religious ideas were not coherent enough or enforced. See Harrison 2007b: 133-4 for a response, arguing that lack of doctrine does not mean lack of coherence or generally recognised body of beliefs.

⁶ Hunter 1985: 146.

Hunter believed that atheistic ideas were not only significant to the development of theology, but they were positively useful to believers: they allowed for the strengthening of ideas in modification, and righteous confirmation that the core idea was correct, which could only be obtained through adversity and refutation of criticism. Likewise, in Greece it was through the response and adaption to scepticism that the most important religious ideas were developed and articulated. The importance of the ‘spectre of atheism’ in catalysing new theological responses underlines the importance of differentiating between different agents in the sceptical tradition.

One of the complicating factors for this picture of evolution and adaption through response is the existence of ‘blocks to falsifiability’.⁷ The idea of ‘blocks to falsifiability’ was originally proposed by the nineteenth-century anthropologist E. B. Tylor in order to explain the persistence of magical practices, and their application was greatly expanded by his fellow anthropologist Evans-Pritchard into the entire span of magical beliefs, and finally to all generalising systems of thought.⁸ Tylor proposed blocks to falsifiability in order to explain what he considered a central question of belief: why do ‘honest but unscientific people’ go on ‘practising occult science in good faith’.⁹ Tylor gives many examples of blocks to falsifiability, including the indefiniteness (in time, place, and other details) of predictions, the recognition of successes versus the lack of impact of failures (usually ascribed to improper procedure during the rite, or some other human failing), the self-fulfilling power of prophecies, and the combination of magical practices with techniques that do predictably bring about the appropriate results.¹⁰ In a similar vein, Evans-Pritchard offered twenty-two reasons why the Azande failed to comprehend the falsity of their beliefs.¹¹ As Skorupski has argued, each of these twenty-two reasons ‘describes a way in which facts and theories lose their potential for coming into direct opposition.’¹²

‘Blocks to falsifiability’ might obstruct the natural development of ideas, leading to ‘relativist doubts about the possibility of explaining changes of overall belief in rational

⁷ ‘Blocks to falsifiability’: E. B. Tylor; see Skorupski 1976 and Evans-Pritchard 1965.

⁸ A discussion of the history of ‘blocks to falsifiability’ can be found in Skorupski 1976: xiii.

⁹ Tylor 1891: 134-5.

¹⁰ Skorupski 1976: 5 on Tylor.

¹¹ Evans-Pritchard 1976: 201-4.

¹² Skorupski 1976: 5.

terms'.¹³ In simpler terms, how do religions evolve if they are protected from criticism? It has been observed that faith is most healthy, powerful, and dynamic in an environment populated by rationalistic and sceptical memes: the meme for faith exhibits 'frequency-dependence fitness'.¹⁴ To generalise: religious ideas are most successful when they are challenged and forced to adapt. In anthropology it has been argued that 'proto-science' and 'proto-religion' part company when ideas move into an area of immunity, whereby either they are through some means made immune from scepticism, or they either adapt significant and wide-ranging responses to potential scepticism.¹⁵ Historians appropriately no longer insist on dividing scientific and religious ideas in this way, but it is clear that religious ideas do survive partly through being couched in protective ideas and 'secondary elaboration'.¹⁶ They are like memetic antibodies: mostly latent and available to defend core ideas whenever necessary. These 'blocks to falsifiability' functioned as solutions, which were not abandoned or replaced once a better form appeared:

The traditional thinker's intellectual toolbox, when he comes into contact with alternative ideas, runs to accumulation, becoming crowded with a collection of methods and ideas which might come in useful. The scientist's is relatively sparser, with wholesale discarding of outworn equipment at regular intervals...¹⁷

If an old response to a criticism became relevant again, Skorupski realised, it could easily be revived, remaining in the toolbox of potential solutions even if it were not being actively referenced. As Dover once eloquently observed of the Greek world: '[o]nce ideas and attitudes are expressed, no matter in what context, they do not die; they are fed into the consciousness of society, and they can grow in the dark.'¹⁸ Ideas could be 'passive', in-built, latent responses to criticism or doubt of all kinds. When a new critical or atheistic idea was

¹³ Skorupski 1976: xiii.

¹⁴ In an environment with few skeptics the faith meme can remain dormant: Dennett 1995b: 349, 2006: 230-1. Of 'blind faith' Dawkins 1976: 198 observes that the meme 'secures its own perpetuation by the simple unconscious expedient of discouraging rational inquiry'. 'Blind faith' did not exist in the Greek world; rational enquiry was not systematically discouraged (though it was sometimes disparaged).

¹⁵ E.g. Rappaport 1979, Palmer and Steadman 2004: 141-5.

¹⁶ Skorupski 1976: 196.

¹⁷ Skorupski 1976: 199.

¹⁸ Dover 1976: 157.

developed, it might replace older ones, or it might coexist with them, but older ‘let-out clauses’ could always be revived in the face of new criticism.

‘Blocks to falsifiability’ have been influential in studies of Greek religion, where they have also been known as ‘let-out clauses’.¹⁹ In his ‘Greek States and Greek Oracles’ Robert Parker examined how divination and oracular pronouncements had evolved to include a variety of ‘let-out clauses’ and built-in explanations, to offer authoritative and accurate advice to believers and to protect the oracles from potential criticism.²⁰ Greeks could be suspicious and sceptical of oracles, as Herodotus’ story of Croesus’ testing the oracles of Delphi and Amphiaraus reveals.²¹ But as Thucydides astutely and candidly observes following his description of the plague in Athens, oracles could never really be disproved:

At this time of distress people naturally recalled old oracles, and among them was a verse which the old men claimed had been delivered in the past and which said:

“War with the Dorians comes, and a death will come at the same time.”

There had been a controversy as to whether the word in this ancient verse was ‘dearth’ rather than ‘death’; but in the present state of affairs the view that the word was ‘death’ naturally prevailed; it was a case of people adapting their memories to suit their sufferings. Certainly I think that if there is ever another war with the Dorians after this one, and if a dearth results from it, then in all probability people will quote the other version.²²

Oracles could not ever be entirely disproven, because of the ability to re-evaluate in hindsight; because people were ‘temperamentally disposed’ to believe them, and there were varied mechanisms whereby their truth could be proven.²³ Oracles could manage the expectations of consultants in various ways, like setting basic limits to the suitable forms of question and answer.²⁴ This seems to be the case for many of the oracles recorded in

¹⁹ Let-out clauses: Harrison 2007a: 380, Parker 1985.

²⁰ Parker 1985.

²¹ Hdt. 1.46.3-49.

²² Thuc. 2.54.

²³ Parker 2006: 14-15.

²⁴ Lane Fox 1986: 214: ‘Their service could only survive and retain credit at this practical level by setting limits to the suitable forms of a question and answer. The gods were prepared to consider a choice between alternatives, but if mortals asked for too much, they risked provoking a god’s displeasure... The god then could

literature, but as is clear from the remaining tablets at Dodona, at least, most of the questions asked there were basic and answered simply with a yes or no, or one of two choices.²⁵ Negative results from obeying oracles could be a consequence of a bad question, or the asker wanting to know too much; it might be the lesser of two potential evils, the gods might be angry with the asker and intentionally give a bad reply, or, since there was no time limit on the answers of oracles, it might just be that the right result had not come about yet.²⁶ The oracular persons were likely politically informed, and may have been skilled at psychological techniques, allowing them to predict the answer that the asker wanted: on the whole oracles probably offered relatively reliable advice.²⁷ Oracles could also be corrupted, which allowed incorrect oracles to be excused as individual exceptions rather than causing scepticism of the whole.²⁸ Not limiting oracles to specifics like time, place, or single applications, combined with the use of hindsight, created a powerful set of blocks to falsifiability.

In a similar fashion to Parker's study on the Delphic oracle, it is valuable to ask how the nebulous and dynamic collection of Greek religious ideas evolved to develop protections and mechanisms to enhance the effectiveness and plausibility of foundational religious ideas, and protect them from sceptical and atheistic ideas. It is through the responses to atheism that its 'spectre' is revealed. The monumental texts from the Epidaurian *Asklepieion* are one particularly neat example that show the process of scepticism being used to reinforce belief. These texts emphasise that many did not believe in the efficacy of magical healing when they came to the sanctuary to take part in the incubation process, but the god healed them and

not be refuted. If he advised action and the result was disastrous, questioners were left to reflect that the alternative would have been much worse.'

²⁵ On the subjects of ordinary questions see Eidinow's 2007: 125-8 analysis of tablet records of oracle questions at Dodona; and on most questions as a binary choice rather than open-ended, Eidinow 2007: 132-4.

²⁶ On explaining negative results, see Lane Fox 1986: 214, and Eidinow 2007: 133-4. There are a number of lessons against finding out too much and giving the gods too much involvement in your life, e.g. in Hdt 4.155, Battus visiting the oracle for help with a stammer and getting told to found a colony; and solutions to that, e.g. limiting scale of questions in Eidinow 2007: 134. Harrison 2000: 140 on the lack of time limit for prophecy.

²⁷ Psychological techniques: Malkin 1987, in Eidinow 2007: 33.

²⁸ E.g. Cleomenes bribing the Pythian Oracle to condemn Demaratus: Hdt 6.66; Cleisthenes corrupting the Pythian Oracle to tell Sparta to free the Peisistratids: Hdt 5.63, 90; Pleistonax and his brother bribe the Delphic Oracle to free them from Spartan exile: Thuc. 5.16.2-3; Eidinow 2007: 35. Ambiguity in sources: Eidinow 2007: 34-5; Bowden 2005: 22-4.

instilled in them a new belief.²⁹ These texts deserve quoting in full, but there is only space here for one, which records an oral tradition about a sceptic:

3. A man whose fingers, all but one, were paralyzed. He came to the god asking for help. When he looked at the tablets in the sanctuary, he did not believe in the [miraculous] cures and made fun of the inscriptions. As he slept in the sanctuary, he had a vision. He dreamed that he was playing dice in the temple, and as he was about to make a throw, the god appeared to him and leapt onto his hand and stretched out his fingers. As the god left, still in his dream, the patient clenched his fist and extended the fingers one by one. After he had managed to stretch them all, the god asked him whether he still refused to have faith in the inscriptions on the tablets around the sanctuary. He said “No.” “All right,” the god answered, “but since you did refuse to believe what is not unbelievable, from now on your name will be ‘the Doubter.’ ” When it was day, the man left and was cured.³⁰

The aim of these monumental texts, which would be read by visitors to the sanctuary, is to address scepticism directly. Scepticism is expected, was obviously given, and was clearly not very harshly punished: fraud and disrespect garnered far worse penalties from the god than ordinary scepticism. However, scepticism of the divine is always proven wrong according to the texts commissioned by the priests. This inscription is about disproving disbelief, and it is triumphalist; it aims more at helping firm up the belief of believers than convincing the unbeliever (who, in reality, was probably not likely to visit the *Asklepieion* for a magical cure).

As at the *Asklepieion*, let-out clauses served as self-defence mechanisms, answering a fundamental doubt: at core, they were answers to questions and doubts. In the Greek world ‘blocks to falsifiability’ were often presented in the form of what Gould called ‘luxuriant multiplicity’, as *gnomai*, or ‘summing up of human experience’.³¹ As Gould observed:

²⁹ Discussion of the healing texts at *Asklepieion* in Luck 2006: 186.

³⁰ IG 4.951-2. 4, 7, 9, and 10 are equally direct about refuting scepticism. Luck 2006: 187-9. For the texts as record of oral tradition: LiDonnici 1992: 36.

³¹ ‘summing up’: Dodds 1989: 81. Gould, J. 1989: 79. See Versnel 2011: 198-200 on the idea of luxuriant multiplicity, and Harrison 1997: 112-16 on this in Herodotus. Gould borrowed the term from anthropology: see Lewis, I. 1985: 72-77.

[W]e are not dealing with the sort of unified and structured set of ideas that we are entitled to call a theory, but rather with a set of metaphors of very different implications, [...] the different explanatory generalizations, each containing a truth, which though each pretending to give a general explanation, when juxtaposed in one context, may provide contrasting and even mutually exclusive ‘solutions’.³²

Let-out clauses did not provide a single coherent answer, or a set of cohesive beliefs, but offered an assortment of different causal explanations, or solutions, any combination of which might be applied simultaneously as solutions to a potential theological problem or answers to a situation.³³ The believer had a collection of these unfalsifiable let-out clauses from which (s)he could select, combine, or interpret at will. Versnel observed that different ‘let-out clauses’ might even conflict:

[When] confronted with unaccountable, in particular catastrophic events, (many) Greeks of the archaic period seem to have shared one general feeling more than any other: that there is not one universal and monolithic principle of causation, or if there is, that no single definition would suffice in a world of great complexity. Many texts, from Homer down to the Classical period, serenely juxtapose two pictures of divine causation which—in our eyes—are incompatible: the one of seemingly amoral, arbitrary meddling, the other of moral and just intervention. In the texts which I have in mind, the two visions are not differentiated in terms of sharp boundaries, nor reconciled in an intellectually satisfying coherent system. It is my view that this picture of multiple causality must be rated among the most characteristic and pervasive traits of archaic Greek theological expression.³⁴

That the Greeks did not typically find potential conflicts problematic, as Versnel observed, is not because they did not perceive them. They understood that these were particular nuggets of wisdom for specific applications. It was also generally accepted that the divine world was

³² Gould, J. 1989: 79.

³³ See also Collins 2008: 47 for some examples. See Harrison 2000: 102-21, particularly 105-6: ‘[The] moral explanation of human suffering is not the only form of divine explanation adopted by Herodotus – other ‘amoral’ explanations for misfortunes, that they are omens or that the divinity is capricious, are also available.’

³⁴ Versnel 2011: 162.

ultimately unknowable (as will be explored in the next chapter), so to create a strict overarching schema was hopeless. But also, as Walter Burkert once observed:

...only an atheist will demand statistical proof that pious action is successful; to test this by experiment was a risk no one could bear. Thus it was found unthinkable to try to overcome any major crisis without religion, and a successful outcome was readily accepted as the good gifts of the gods that confirm the value of piety.³⁵

Greeks rarely sought to disprove the gods; they were instead typically looking for ways to explain problems with their conception of the divine, whether in hindsight, at the time, or even in advance. They worked through their issues with the divine sporadically, through the development of ideas or even through religious institutions like the Delphic Oracle.³⁶ That the ‘luxuriant multiplicity’ of Greek religion is one of the most characteristic traits of Greek religion is revealing. Greek religion was responsive: the development of Greek theology was constantly performed through subjection to atheistic and sceptical criticism, which led to the adaption of theological views. Without a doubt the best arena for exploring how atheistic ideas were dealt with and the impact they had on Greek theology is through discussions of divine (in)justice.

The problem of divine (in)justice: a key obstacle to belief

The central ‘problem’ for Greek theology was the justice of the gods, and through this problem it is possible to observe how atheistic criticism led to the evolution of Greek theology. The problem of divine justice was this: if the gods ruled the cosmos then the daily injustice Greeks experienced was a consequence of their wills.³⁷ As it was later articulated by Semonides: ‘Loud-thundering Zeus controls the outcome, lad, in everything, and makes it how he wants.’³⁸ So suffering in the world must either come from the gods or be condoned by them: either way the gods were unjust. Religions have grappled with questions about the

³⁵ Burkert 1985: 268.

³⁶ The Oracle helped to guide the inquirer as to the source of their problem and the solution for it – the *lysis kakōn* or ‘release from evils’ – thus serving as a practical aid and a theological one, as Parker 1985: 304-5 argues.

³⁷ Tuberculosis was a particular problem, as in Aristotle *His. An* 3.2, [Aristotle] *Prob.* 7.279, Hdt. 7.88, Hp. *Aph.* 5.9-11, Hp. *Ep.* 1.1.2; or the catastrophic plague during the Peloponnesian War Thuc. 2.54.5. Gallant 1991: 26, Sallares 1991: 241-53.

³⁸ Semonides F1, trans. West.

justice of the divine for millennia, and it was a particular problem in the ancient world, as noted in Chapter Two. There were a variety of responses and solutions to the problem of divine injustice offered by the Greeks. In order to set up a conversation, I have partly divided these answers into ‘sceptical’ and ‘theistic’, but this is not representative: all of these answers were broadly ‘critical’. I also trace the conversation chronologically, but again, many aspects of ideas that became developed in later periods were already present in the earliest literature, while other older theological ‘solutions’ that seemed to have evolved into more complex forms might reappear in later periods, or different writers, playwrights, or philosophers might choose to engage with or espouse older material, and so on.

The idea of divine justice already did not sit at all comfortably in some of the earliest Greek literature, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which are more alike in their treatment of divine justice than they are different.³⁹ The gods of the *Iliad* are not amoral, but their concern for justice is inconsistent, and subjugated to their own agenda. The closest there is to a broad principle of divine justice in the *Iliad* is in Book Sixteen, used as a simile for the horses of Troy:

As in Autumn the whole countryside grows dark and heavy with rain under a stormy sky when Zeus sends torrential downpours; he is angry, and rages at men who deliver crooked rulings in public assembly and drive justice out, regardless of the eye of the gods.⁴⁰

The passage is a simple theology: that the storms and rains might be a divine response to injustice. The idea of indiscriminate natural disasters as divine anger would obviously create issues for divine justice in later discussions, particularly in the suffering of innocents. This passage is also fascinating for its mention of dispensation of justice against people who act ‘regardless of the eye of the gods’ (i.e. atheists). There is an obvious shadow of sceptical critique here: lawmakers act only on human concerns, and are convinced that the gods have nothing to do with justice. Part of the reason, perhaps, that Zeus was concerned to refute that principle in this passage is because divine concern with justice in the *Iliad* is haphazard and only driven by personal feuds or the varied motivations of individual gods. The gods of the

³⁹ Allan 2006 has rightly argued that the traditional conception of amoral divine in the *Iliad* vs moral divine in the *Odyssey* is flawed. Literature like Homer and Hesiod is not created ex nihilo: they (and us with them) enter the scene at a time when theology and theodicy were already advanced.

⁴⁰ Hom. *Il.* 16.384-390.

Iliad were clearly only inconsistent agents of justice. It is, however, in the *Iliad* that the first semblance of generational punishment is present. While trying to gain Apollo's support against the Trojans, Poseidon argues for the appropriateness of punishing the Trojan descendants of Laomedon for his crimes in robbing them of the reward they were promised for building the Trojan walls and herding their cattle.⁴¹ Though Allan rightly argues that this is an example of divine concern with justice, it is only justified by personal grudges held by individual gods.⁴² There is no sense here that Apollo or Poseidon are concerned to uphold some cosmic or even impersonal concept of justice. The Iliadic Poseidon would not have been concerned to enforce justice against the Trojans if he did not hold a grudge against them.

The *Odyssey* offers a similar image to the *Iliad*, of the gods and their inconsistent concern for justice. Eumaeus, the loyal farm-hand of Odysseus, remarks to his master with reference to the unpunished suitors: 'the blessed gods do not love cruel deeds, but they honour justice and the righteous deeds of men.'⁴³ Eumaeus makes no comment on the gods' actions: the gods may love justice and hate cruelty, but there is no sense that they will necessarily police either. When the suitors do eventually come to justice, at the hands of Odysseus and his allies (including Athene), this is seen as confirmation *ex post facto* of the justice of the gods (e.g. by Laertes at 24.351); but there is still no sense in which the gods would *necessarily* have brought the dispensation of justice. They dispense justice at arm's length, inconsistently, and only when it suits their agenda. So both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are 'theologically challenging', in Allan's words, 'since each shows the simple model of divine justice to be in various ways both problematic and naïve'.⁴⁴

Likewise, Hesiod's corpus reveals a concern that the gods might have been behind the unjustified suffering of humans, particularly in the form of disease or natural disaster. In his *Works and Days*, Hesiod wrote:

countless miseries roam among mankind; for the earth is full of evils, and the sea is full; and some sicknesses come upon men by day, and others by night, of their own

⁴¹ Poseidon reminds Apollo of their shared animosity to the Trojans: Hom. *Il.* 21.442-62. Story of building the wall: Hom. *Il.* 20.144-8. On this passage as generational punishment see Lloyd-Jones 2002: 2.

⁴² Allan 2006: 6.

⁴³ Hom. *Od.* 14.83-4.

⁴⁴ Allan 2006: 2.

accord, bearing evils to mortals in silence, since the councillor Zeus took their voice away. Thus it is impossible to evade the will of Zeus in any way.⁴⁵

For Hesiod, the suffering of mankind was palpable. But he was also insistent on the power of the deity (more so than anywhere in Homer), which logically meant that Zeus accepted the suffering of mortals as part of the cosmic order.⁴⁶ Hesiod sustained his belief in the power of the gods, and shared with Homer a conception of the gods as dispensing justice (and apparent injustice) depending on their whims.⁴⁷ The humans of Hesiod are wretched creatures, often oppressed by incomprehensible divine punishment: humans live their lives in toil, for instance, because Zeus has hidden the ‘means of life’ as a result of his dispute with Prometheus.⁴⁸ Lloyd-Jones was entirely correct that Greeks ‘would not have thought it reasonable to expect Zeus to have their own interests at heart in preference to his own’, but he went too far in suggesting that the Greeks did not rail against the injustices (or lack of care for cosmic justice) perpetrated on them by the gods.⁴⁹ The portrayals of the earliest works, in Homer and Hesiod, were at once an issue and a defence for problem of divine (in)justice in Greek religion: while the idea of differently motivated gods reconciled the existence of the gods with natural injustice, it made it more difficult to maintain that the gods were just.⁵⁰ A central question then, à la Lloyd-Jones, is ‘when did the Greeks begin to perceive the injustice of the gods as a problem or obstacle to belief?’

The result of divine injustice: Archaic pessimism and the first hints of scepticism

By the Archaic period, the general uneasiness about divine justice in Homer and Hesiod had evolved into a more concrete scepticism. This is so-called ‘Archaic pessimism’, which became a prominent feature of poetry in the archaic period.⁵¹ Archaic pessimism is perhaps

⁴⁵ Hes. *WD* 100-105.

⁴⁶ As Allan 2006: 27 argues: ‘The very structure of the Theogony expresses Zeus's supremacy: the Muses sing the history of the cosmos culminating in the ascendancy of Zeus’.

⁴⁷ Allan 2006: 27.

⁴⁸ Hes. *WD* 42-7; cf. also 287-92, where he comments that the gods have placed *aretē* at the end of a long hard road; as Beall 2006: 168-70 argues, this is a persuasive technique, in which *hubris* is only less desirable because it is more of a burden on humans than *dikē*.

⁴⁹ Lloyd-Jones 1971: 33.

⁵⁰ Versnel 2011: 151-155.

⁵¹ Versnel 2011: 155 on archaic pessimism.

best demonstrated by the *Hymn to the Muses* composed by the famous Athenian lawgiver Solon in the sixth century:

Zeus oversees every outcome, and suddenly, just as the clouds are quickly scattered by a spring wind which stirs up the bottom of the swelling and undraining(?) sea, ravages the lovely fields over the wheat-bearing land, reaches the gods' high seat in heaven, and again brings a clear sky to view; the strong sun shines in beauty over the fertile land and no longer can even a single cloud be seen—such is the vengeance of Zeus [...] Often agony results from a slight pain and no one can provide relief by giving soothing drugs, whereas another, in the throes of a terrible and grievous disease, he quickly restores to health with the touch of his hands. Fate brings good and ill to mortals and the gifts of the immortal gods are inescapable. In all actions there is risk and no one knows, when something starts, how it is going to turn out. The man who tries to act rightly falls unawares into great and harsh calamity, while to the one who acts badly the god gives success in all things, an escape from his folly.⁵²

Archaic pessimism as represented by Solon reflects acceptance of the fragility of human fortune, and the apparent injustice of outcomes, because the gods were less interested in justice than in playing games with humans. The historical Solon was also actively engaged in governance. His uncertainty about the gods' desire for justice partly manifested through a desire to lay down clear human justice and legal systems. Through the establishment of law and constitution Solon aimed partly to establish known actions and their predictable causes, Lewis has argued, tracing the boundaries between established human culpability versus unpredictable divine *dikē*.⁵³ But it is not always clear that Solon places responsibility for natural injustice at the hands of the gods:

The force of snow and hail comes from a cloud, and thunder from a flash of lightning. The sea is stirred up by the wind. But the ruin of the city comes from unjust men and the people fall into the slavery of a tyrant by ignorance.⁵⁴

⁵² Solon F13, *Hymn to the Muses*, from Stob. 3.9.23: 14-25, 56-67.

⁵³ Lewis, J. 2006: 74-95, who discusses the similar argument in Vlastos 1995: 46.

⁵⁴ Solon F9.1-4.

Solon contrasts the causes of weather effects, which may be read as natural injustice, with the causes of human injustice.⁵⁵ He does not mention the gods as the cause of natural injustice. Solon's conception of cause here seems naturalistic, as Vlastos has argued, but it may simply be avoidance of the problem of injustice; either shows that he recognised the difficulties involved in positing divine cause behind natural injustice.⁵⁶ Solon's actions as *archōn*, in developing a fairer Athenian law-code, must have been driven by this recognition of natural injustice, and the division between uncontrollable natural events and justice in the *polis*. The Herodotean Solon expresses similar sentiments in his discussion with Croesus, in which he argues that Tellus and then Cleobis and Biton are the most fortunate because they died happy and honoured, while equivalent (but alive) men like Croesus have time to fall from grace before they die: an observation that proves prescient, as Croesus is shortly defeated by Cyrus and dethroned.⁵⁷ Harrison has argued that such Solonian wisdom in Herodotus is in reality a reflection of common thought in the Archaic period: 'observations such as that "no man is happy until he is dead", that divine jealousy disturbs human affairs, human fortune is inevitably mixed, or that "death is better than life" are myriad, especially in archaic poetry or tragedy, though they find their reflections also in pre-Socratic philosophy.'⁵⁸ Indeed, the commonality of this sort of pessimism means that it is observable even in corpuses that are usually considered more traditionally 'theistic', as in the sixth-century Megarian elegiac poet Theognis:

Dear Zeus, I'm quite surprised at you. You're king of all,
the honour and power is yours alone;
you understand the heart and mind of each man,
and yours, Lord, is the highest majesty.
So how can you, son of Cronos, bring yourself to treat alike
wrongdoers and the law-abiding man,
whether we are disposed to sensible restraint
or err towards unrighteousness, injustice, and crime?

⁵⁵ This contrast is explored in Lewis, J. 2006: 47.

⁵⁶ As argued by Vlastos 1995: 33-4.

⁵⁷ Hdt 1.30-2.

⁵⁸ Harrison 2000: 40-1; full references for all of these are available in Harrison's fns. 17-20, and vary from Homer, Hesiod, and Pindar through Aeschylus and Sophocles, to Xenophanes.

Are there no divine guidelines for mortal men,
no path to follow that will appease the gods?⁵⁹

In Chapter Two it was proposed that rather than reading other Theognidean fragments into this one, and arguing that his solution to the problem of divine injustice was in something like Ancestral Fault (as in Thgn. 197-208), here Theognis does not offer a clear answer to his own question: the problem of divine injustice is left open. This interpretation is more persuasive now, given the backdrop of the discourse on divine injustice, and commonality of expressions of confusion or frustration at the apparent lack of divine interest in justice. For Theognis here, there is a problem, in that the gods are powerful and capable, but they allow or even cause injustices to occur in the mortal realm. But Theognis also implies one answer to the problem: that there might be some ways of pleasing the gods, but mortals do not know them. Theognis may have been suggesting that the problem was less that the gods were unjust and more, perhaps, that humans did not know the right way to be just: a problem of Unknowability that will be considered further in the next chapter. But Theognis leaves this open-ended. He is not convinced by his own answer, and he understands that the problem of divine (in)justice posed a considerable issue for any conception of just gods.

Theodicy

a. The 'first attempt at theodicy': human responsibility

During the Archaic period there were attempts to solve the problem of divine justice that had led to the common archaic pessimism observed above. In a monologue by Zeus at the opening of the *Odyssey* there is what has been called the 'first attempt at a theodicy':⁶⁰

It's astonishing how ready mortals are to blame the gods. It is from us, they say, that evils come, but they themselves, by their own reckless stupidity, have sufferings beyond their fated share.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Thgn. 373-82 trans. West. See also 743-6: 'Also, king of the immortals, how is it right that a man who keeps from unjust deeds and does not commit transgressions and perjury, but is just, suffers unjustly?'

⁶⁰ Nestle 1944 [1975]: 24: 'älteste Versuch einer Theodizee'. Cf. Jaeger 1974: 86: 'Diese Theodizee schwebt über dem ganzen Gedicht', rendered less precisely by the English edition as 'The entire poem is filled with the same purpose – to justify the ways of God to man.' 1946: 54.

⁶¹ Hom. *Od.* 1.32-4.

Zeus does not say that humans do not suffer as a result of the gods, in fact he implicitly accepts that they do in 'their fated share'. However, the strength of Zeus' argument, as put into his mouth by Homer, is that the tendency to blame the gods could, in any individual scenario, be defused by deflecting the blame to the victim (or their enemies), which served to shift the focus away from divine injustice. This is not so much a solution to the problem of divine injustice as a (rather effective) way of evading it in practice. Placing partial responsibility for justice and injustice in the hands of men (themselves or others) remained a key answer to the problem of divine (in)justice for centuries.⁶² But there continued to be nothing really specific about this shifting of responsibility on to humans rather than the gods. The mechanisms of how (e.g. natural) injustices might have been caused by mortals were not worked out, as in Theognis:

It's all gone to the dogs, to ruin, and we can't blame any of the immortal blessed gods, Cynus. It's human violence, craft, and insolence that have cast us from success to misery.⁶³

Theognis does not offer any insight into how humans have thwarted the divine desire for justice, or develop a clear argument that explains why the gods are prepared to allow this injustice. Theognis simply gives a sense that the responsibility is human, not divine, shifting the responsibility in response to criticisms that blamed injustice on the divine: this was part of his discontent with certain aspects and forms of human society, and with the general inability of humans to sustain just societies.⁶⁴ Theognis' view creates a further problem because, as Versnel has argued, the capability and power of the gods is not questioned (in Theognis or elsewhere).⁶⁵ This contradiction between blaming humans for injustice and sustaining the absolute power of the gods to resolve injustice would later become an issue during the

⁶² Ashforth 2005: 96 from Eidinow 2007: 191: 'I have yet to encounter anyone who accepts that his own poverty is inherently meaningless, that it represents nothing more significant than his own personal misery... to questions about the inequitable distribution of good and bad fortunes, other answers are readily available. Suppositions informed by the witchcraft paradigm offer one of the most emotionally satisfying: 'We are being held back and are suffering because of other people's malice'. Note that the problem of injustice, as Burnyeat 1997: 233-4 calls the sort of question posed in the *Euthyphro*, is different from the problem of evil: the former is about justice and the latter goodness.

⁶³ Thgn. 833-836.

⁶⁴ Lane Fox 2000: 35-51.

⁶⁵ Versnel 2011: 157.

development of another key theodicy, through the idea of reversals of fortune. Nonetheless, the idea that humans, and not gods, had a clear responsibility for dispensing justice, and avoiding causing injustice, survived well into the fifth century, as the philosopher Democritus argued:

The gods have given all good things to men both in times of old and now. But things that are bad, harmful, and unprofitable, these the gods have not conferred on men <either> in times of old or now, but men bring them on themselves through blindness of mind and ignorance.⁶⁶

Democritus placed a clear and explicit distinction between the good things, which were from the gods, and the bad, which were due to humans; but he does not offer any explanation of natural disasters, or other natural injustices, which were theologically problematic even for Homer. Democritus' view was not unusual, however. The idea that divine justice was partly the responsibility of humanity was elaborated and developed in the fifth century and into the fourth; dispensing divine justice became seen as the responsibility of the *polis*, in particular the law courts. Human justice was seen as bundled into the process of retribution, as particularly exemplified in the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus. The *Eumenides* has often been seen as a transitional point between divine and human justice.⁶⁷ However, an alternate reading, most recently advocated by Tzanetou based on Lloyd-Jones, sees the reconciliation of divine and human conceptions of justice as the central point of the play, in a new 'divine and mortal partnership': for Aeschylus no system of justice could be entirely secular or executed only by humans.⁶⁸ Likewise, no proper system of justice was to be left only to the gods: humans were expected to participate. The result was the same as in Homer. Continued injustice could be blamed on human failure to shoulder their proper responsibility in dispensing justice.

Through the *Eumenides* it is possible to observe how the nonspecific shift in responsibility for dispensing justice from the divine onto humanity developed into a more concrete civic responsibility to prosecute the unjust; this was no longer simple theology, but had significant real life application. In the case against Andocides in 400 or 399BC, an orator

⁶⁶ The quote is Democritus F107, in Graham 2010: 644-5, n.238.

⁶⁷ E.g. in Zakin 2009: 178.

⁶⁸ 'Divine and mortal partnership': Tzanetou 2012: 54; see 61-3. Aesch. *Eum.* 526-755; Gewirtz 1988: 1044-5, Lloyd-Jones 1973: 93-4. A similar message can be found in Soph. *Ant.*, esp. 1347.

in the tradition of Lysias argued that while it might surprise the jurors that the impious atheist Andocides travelled safely on the sea (a dangerous domain in which survival relied on the goodwill of the gods), the gods were, in fact, still in the process of bringing retributive justice upon him.⁶⁹

[Andocides] has made it plain to the Greeks at large that he does not revere the gods. For without a sign of misgiving for his actions, but with an air of assurance, he took to ship-owning, and went voyaging on the sea. But the deity was enticing him on, that he might return to his iniquities and pay the penalty at my instance. Well, I hope that he will indeed pay the penalty, and there would be nothing to surprise me in that; for the deity does not punish immediately, as I may conjecture by many indications, when I see others besides who have paid the penalty long after their impious acts, and their descendants punished for the ancestors' offences. But in the meantime the deity sends upon the wrongdoers many terrors and dangers, so that many men ere now have desired that their end had come and relieved them of their troubles by death. At length, it is only when he has utterly blasted this life of theirs that the deity has closed it in death.⁷⁰

The gods here provided several layers of punishment, tormenting Andocides during his life, then punishing him with death (at an unknown point), and finally tormenting and punishing his ancestors. This passage demonstrates how the problems with one explanation (that punishment is delayed) could be alleviated by reference to another explanation: that even if people did not initially appear to have been punished for injustice, they might be tormented in unseen ways. A very similar argument is made in a Lysian fragment, in which the orator argues that Cinesias is the 'most impious, lawless person alive', and his friends all died by divine justice as a result of their impiety, but Cinesias had been forced to live with the misery of his life and destruction of his legacy.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Lysias 6.19-20, see also 31-2. This speech was long rejected as a spurious work by a 'disappointed religious extremist', as Todd 2000: 63 puts it, because it 'eschews both historical narrative and legal argument' in favour of a concentration on the resulting dangers to the community if impious Andocides is not punished. It is increasingly considered genuine, as the speech of the prosecutor or an assistant. Andocides' lack of belief in divine retribution is as explicitly and practically atheistic as the prosecutor's religious views are fanatical.

⁷⁰ Lys. 6.19-20.

⁷¹ Lysias ap. Athenaeus 12.76, F195 Carey.

b. injustice is due to nonspecific 'divine forces'

The belief in justice as governed by unseen means had quickly morphed into faceless cosmic forces or principles of balance. The 'reversal of fortune' was a complex theodicy that relieved the gods of fault for divine injustice, and can be found in the works of Homer, Theognis, Bacchylides, Simonides, Pindar, and many other Greeks.⁷² The Greeks recognised the inherent instability of fortune; that men suffered misfortune and fortune in mixed proportions during their life, and each could come at any time.⁷³ They elevated this obvious truism to a cosmic rule in order to explain the apparent failure of the gods to protect the fortunes of the just and punish the unjust, and to avoid blaming a specific god. But the gods could not be, and were never really entirely written out of responsibility for reversals of fortune: instead, reversals were seen as dependent on divine will. Reversals of fortune are one of the key narrative structures of Herodotus' *Histories*, where it is demonstrated especially in the *logoi* of Croesus, who is told about reversals by Solon, and eventually falls from power; and Polycrates, who is told by Amasis to throw away his most prized possession to protect himself from the *phthonos*, or envy, of the gods, but the ring is returned to him (which Amasis perceives as a mark that his fate cannot be averted) and he is assassinated.⁷⁴ The divine role in reversals of fortune, and the problem this posed for the conception of just gods, is most clearly and explicitly articulated in Archilochus, the seventh-century Greek lyric poet, in a way typical of his no-nonsense attitude:

It all depends upon the gods. Often enough, when men are prostrate on the ground with woe, they set them up again; and often enough, when men are standing proud and all seems bright, they tip them over on their backs, and then they're in a plight—a man goes wandering, short of bread, out of his mind with fright.⁷⁵

⁷² Reversals: 'There is no evil which men cannot expect; and within a brief time god turns everything upside down.' Simonides F527, Theoph. *Ad Autol.* 2.37, trans. D. Campbell. See also Hom. *Il.* 24.527-51, Thgn. 155-8, 159-60, also, to a lesser extent, 1013-16, Bacchylides fr. 24, Isoc. 7.4, Pind. *Isth.* 5.52; Versnel 2011: 153-60.

⁷³ Humans get mixed fortune: Theognis 167-8, 441-6, 1013-6, Bacchyl. F25, F54, Andoc. 2.5-6, Solon F14, Mimnermus F2, Simonides F526.

⁷⁴ Croesus: Hdt 1.30-89, esp. Herodotus' judgement at 1.34.1; Polycrates: Hdt 3.39-43, 120-5. See Harrison 2000: 33-63 on reversals of fortune.

⁷⁵ Archilochus F130, trans. West.

For Archilochus, fortune was inherently fickle: the fortunes of men were made and broken easily and quickly. This sort of view is both a criticism of the gods and a solution to the problem that maintains the existence of the divine. Reversals of fortune offered a way of explaining and understanding the universe, including natural injustice, in a non-systematic way that sustained the existence and participation of the gods in human affairs; they were ‘a way of making sense of experience’.⁷⁶ But positing the fickleness of fate and the possibility of reversals of fortune limited the power of the gods, or it underlined their fickle and selfish nature. When Croesus blamed the ‘God of Delphi’ for his fate, he was corrected:

“The god of the Hellenes is responsible for these things, inciting me to wage war. No one is so foolish as to choose war over peace. In peace sons bury their fathers, in war fathers bury their sons. But I suppose it was dear to the divinity that this be so.” [...] [T]he priestess (it is said) made the following reply. “No one may escape his lot, not even a god. Croesus has paid for the sin of his ancestor of the fifth generation before, who was led by the guile of a woman to kill his master, though he was one of the guard of the Heraclidae, and who took to himself the royal state of that master, to which he had no right. And it was the wish of Loxias that the evil lot of Sardis fall in the lifetime of Croesus' sons, not in his own; but he could not deflect the Fates. Yet as far as they gave in, he did accomplish his wish and favour Croesus: for he delayed the taking of Sardis for three years. And let Croesus know this: that although he is now taken, it is by so many years later than the destined hour. And further, Loxias saved Croesus from burning.”⁷⁷

Herodotus spins a variety of explanations into his narrative: Croesus paid for the sins of his ancestor as a consequence of Fate, and was not punished by Apollo, who tried to reward Croesus for his piety and justice.

In order to solve the theological problem created by making the gods powerless to fate, and affirm the control or power of the gods over justice, there were generally two approaches: first, making vague references to a culpable deity, while avoiding blaming specific gods, and secondly, blaming specific malevolent forces that served as outlets. The non-specificity in blaming gods for misfortune in the Greek world is quite similar to the

⁷⁶ Eidinow 2016a: 232; see in general 222-32.

⁷⁷ Hdt 1.87, 1.91.

process observed by Evans-Pritchard, who found that the Azande were careful to understand specific misfortune as explained by the supernatural, but not misfortune in general.⁷⁸ Instead of blaming a specific named god, Herodotus turns to ‘necessity’, to ‘reversals of fortune’, or to *phthonos*, but he also uses vague mentions of divinity – *to theion*, the divine, *daimoniē tis hormē*, ‘some divine impulse’, or *ho theos*, ‘the god’.⁷⁹ (We will return to non-specificity in the next chapter, on Unknowability.) Non-specificity was not the typical approach to referencing the divine in literature: Herodotus and the Greeks in his *Histories* are happy to identify specific gods who were responsible for fortunate events. For instance, the Greeks dedicated the plunder of the Persian wars to specific gods: Delphic Apollo, Olympian Zeus, and Isthmian Poseidon, in recognition of their aid in giving the Greeks victory.⁸⁰ They could be equally specific about negative agency, but only with certain types of forces or gods.

The divine forces specifically named as responsible for misfortune were typically those who had specific roles in justice, cosmic order, or misfortune, particularly *daimones*, which separated them (in linguistics and theology) from the Olympian gods.⁸¹ Tragic poets sometimes had their characters blame individual gods, but there was still a reluctance to attribute misfortune to the gods, unless they were known malevolent forces. In instances of positive association characters often refer to ‘*theos*’, and in instances of negative association (e.g. misfortune or injustice), they refer to ‘*daimon*’. For instance, in Aeschylus’ *Persae*, the *theoi* are typically the source of visions and oracles, and perhaps changes in fate, but when referring to the powers behind distress then the term typically used is *daimon*. At one point, the chorus bemoans the ‘troublemaking spirit’, referring to the source of the cruel disaster that has occurred, yet just a few lines later prayers are addressed not to the *daimon* but the gods:

Chorus: [515] Oh troublemaking spirit (*dusponēte daimon*), source of our cruel
distress, with what crushing weight have you fallen upon the whole Persian race!

⁷⁸ Evans-Pritchard in Collins 2008: 12.

⁷⁹ *To theion*: Hdt. 1.32.1, 3.40.2; *daimoniē tis hormē*: 7.18.3; *ho theos*: 1.32.9, 7.10e, 7.18.3 (*tou theou*), 7.46.4. Mikalson 2003: 151-2. Mikalson 1983: 66 excludes references to ‘the gods’ as exceptions to the norm, but does not justify this.

⁸⁰ Greeks dedicated a large gold tripod with snake-stand at Delphi, a statue of Zeus at Olympia and of Poseidon at the Isthmus, in Hdt 9.81.1; and the Poenician warships captured at Salamis, in Hdt 8.121. Mikalson 2005: 16.

⁸¹ The lower orders of spirits: Hesiod *WD* 109-93. Luck 2006: 228.

Atossa: How the utter destruction of our host distresses me! O vivid vision of my dreams at night, how clearly did you signify misfortune to me! [520] And all too lightly did you in turn interpret it. However, since your explanation determined thus, first of all I wish to offer prayers to the gods (*theoīs men prōton euxasthai*), and then I will return after I have brought from the palace a sacrificial cake as a gift to Earth and the dead.⁸²

It is possible that two distinct entities are being referred to here – the Olympians and the lower order spirits called *daimones* – but there is no reason to believe that the playwright intended to make such a specific division. Instead, it seems to reflect a trend in attributing the positive to the gods explicitly, while giving a general air of vagueness as to the specific spiritual source of negative things. This linguistic and conceptual trick did not solve the problem of divine injustice, but merely distanced it. Later Greeks, like the anonymous character in a fragment of Menander in the fourth century, working on the ambiguous distinctions between spirit and god, could not even allow that a spirit could be evil:

To each human being is assigned at the moment of his birth a good spirit (*agathos daimon*), his guide through the mysteries of life. We should not believe that the spirit is evil and can harm our lives; he is good, and there is no evil in him. Every god must be good. But those who are bad themselves, who have bad characters and make a muddle out of their lives, managing everything badly through their own foolishness [...] they make a divine being responsible and call it ‘bad,’ while they are actually bad themselves.⁸³

The unwillingness of Menander’s character to accept any bad divine agents was perhaps an inevitable evolution: as more semi-divine agents were introduced to explain misfortune, their importance was elevated, and they were excused of causing misfortune. Evil spirits were never really sufficient to explain the problem of divine injustice. In fact, shifting the responsibility for injustice from the gods in one way or another was not enough.

c. the world is just, but justice is sometimes invisible or delayed

In order to solve the problem of divine injustice, it was most desirable to accept that the gods policed justice successfully; all the other theodicies discussed before now have failed at one

⁸² Aesch. *Pers.* 515-24.

⁸³ Menander F714 Sandbach [=550-51 Kock], trans. Luck.

of these points. But how could this be achieved in the face of a world filled with apparent injustice? As well as offering an example of ‘Archaic pessimism’, Solon gave his own answer to the problem of divine justice; in fact, he gives a list of potential answers:

one man pays the penalty at once, another later, and if they themselves escape the penalty and the pursuing destiny of the gods does not overtake them, it assuredly comes at another time; the innocent pay the penalty, either their children or a later progeny.⁸⁴

This collection of answers are the components of a system of cosmic justice maintained by the gods. Solon gives two separate explanations for how justice is actually dispensed: that justice can be delayed until a later time in the lifetime of the wrongdoer, or until later generations. Both of these ideas are essentially different from the other theodicies already examined, because instead of explanations that excuse the gods of responsibility for injustice, they involve believing that the problem does not exist at all. Instead, Solon argues, men only think that injustice is occurring because of their limited knowledge of the way the world works, but in fact the gods do punish injustice in a variety of ways, even though they might not be immediately apparent. Tragedy allowed for especially good exposition of the principle of delayed justice through dramatic irony, as the audience were aware of divine machinations that the characters were not. So, for instance, in both the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus and *Orestes* of Euripides, Orestes, who killed his mother (an injustice, despite its obvious justification), is not immediately brought to justice. Instead he suffers invisibly (from the perspective of the characters) over the long term, but the audience know that Orestes is tormented by madness, guilt, and the Erinyes. On the other side of things, in Sophocles, Hyllus the son of Heracles blamed the gods for the injustice of Heracles’ suffering: Hyllus was not aware that Heracles would be deified on his death.⁸⁵ Justice is dispensed invisibly and not immediately to the characters in each case. This is a much more effective type of theodicy than any of the others examined.

We have already observed some references to the idea of delayed justice in texts like the Lysian *Against Andocides*, above (p.165-6). Lysias also composed a speech against

⁸⁴ Solon F13, *Hymn to the Muses*, from Stob. 3.9.23: 26-31.

⁸⁵ Soph. *Trach.* 1264-78. Lefkowitz 1989: 78-9

Cinesias, a well-known poet whose atheism had been the target of Aristophanes' ridicule.⁸⁶ Both of the Lysian extracts, *Against Andocides* and *Against Cinesias*, explicitly respond to atheists. Cinesias, Lysias argues, established a drinking club on an ill-omened day, with a name that parodied equivalent religious groups, in order to revel in impiety. Lysias argues that while some of Cinesias' friends have been brought to justice by dying, the man himself has not.⁸⁷ Lysias explains this through a series of parallel explanations. He explains that Cinesias had been allowed by the gods to live in order to suffer over his lifetime and provide an example to others against such behaviour; additionally, he explains, this might also be interpreted as delayed punishment passed on to Cinesias' ancestors, but that is normally reserved for less serious crimes.

The main formulation of the idea of delayed justice was in ancestral fault (*progonikon hamaptēma*), which was the precursor to 'original sin' or ancestral guilt, and was probably the most effective solution to the problem of divine justice.⁸⁸ Ancestral fault was identified by Gagné in his *Ancestral Fault in Ancient Greece* as a collective social guilt or responsibility for violent actions of the past.⁸⁹ It is referenced in a huge variety of contexts and genres in the Greek world, from epic and tragic to legal, historical, or rhetorical contexts, and across time: ancestral fault was an idea perfectly in line with the Homeric system and retained its relevance until long after the end of the Classical period.⁹⁰ Ancestral fault was more than just a literary *topos* referenced in occasional texts and cultural artefacts. The Mysteries of Eleusis, the second of Demeter's gifts to mankind, offered the hope of a better

⁸⁶ Cinesias in Ar. *Eccl.* 325-32, describing how he urinated on a shrine of Hecate, defiling it; *Birds* 1380-90, seeking admission to the new community. See Todd 2000: 356-9.

⁸⁷ Fragment of Lysias on Cinesias, ad. Athenaeus 12.551d.

⁸⁸ Original sin is best illustrated in the Bible, e.g. Exodus 20:5: 'I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the father to the third and fourth generation.'

⁸⁹ Gagne 2013.

⁹⁰ There is too much material to list, but on ancestral fault see Aeschin. 3.110-12, Aesch. *Ag.* 1497-1504, *Seven* 720-91, *Supp.* 434-7; Eur. *Hipp.* 1370-80, *Iph. Taur.* 178-202, *Ph.* 865-95; Hom. *Il.*, 4.155-65; Hdt.: Croesus in books 1, e.g. 1.8-13, and Glaucus in 6.85-6, esp. 86d, are the best examples; Hes. *WD* 281-85, Pl. *Laws* 9.854a-c, Solon F13, *Hymn to the Muses*, from Stob. 3.9.23: 25-32, Soph. *Ant* throughout but see esp. 853-7, *OC* 960-1013, *El.* 1417-21, Thgn. 197-208. Gantz 1982 argued that if there were no indisputable attestations in tragedy, for instance, and West, M. 1999 does the same for Sophocles as well as Aeschylus, but Gagne 2013: 14 has persuasively argued for the prominence of the idea in tragedy. Some have argued that it only appears in later texts, but Gagne 2013: 177 has again convincingly demonstrated it in Homer. See also Parker 1983: 202.

afterlife so that, by using the rites as a kind of cure, the initiated would be purified.⁹¹ Burkert traced this process to the need for freedom from an ‘ancient cause of wrath’, which generated the need to purify the initiated from this- and other-worldly misfortune.⁹² At the heart of the Eleusinian Mysteries was the need to escape ancestral fault. Ancestral fault principally served as a buffer against the natural injustice of the human experience (a ‘problem of evil’), as a catch-all explanation in response to potential accusations of injustice, and how this could cohere with powerful, guiding, and just gods.⁹³ It offered a clever explanation for why good people were seemingly afflicted with unfortunate circumstances, and why bad people were allowed to do bad things with no apparent retribution; indeed, misfortune for one person could even be perceived as an omen for another person, or part of their punishment.⁹⁴

The potential explanatory possibilities of ancestral fault were almost endless, which is part of why the idea of ancestral fault has been so powerful, pervasive, and long-lived. Through exploitation of the mechanisms of psychology the idea of hidden and delayed justice allowed Greeks to explain radically different types of events across time, even after-the-fact. Identification after the fact was crucial because it allows one to explain an apparently unjust (or not obviously divine-related) event, apply various explanations to identify the cause of the event, and reinterpret the apparently unjust event as part of a cosmic system of coherent divine justice. However, delayed justice could also work the other way, predicting into the future; for instance, Herodotus says in commenting on the Athenian abuse of the Persian ambassadors from Darius:

Just what disagreeable consequences were suffered by the Athenians for this treatment of the king’s messengers, I am unable to say; perhaps it was the destruction of their city and the countryside around it – though I do not myself believe this happened as a direct result of their crime.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Pl. *Rep* 364e-5a, Ar. *Frogs* 448-59, and see also Hdt 2.81 on the precision of Orphic burial rituals; Burkert 1987: 5, 21-5.

⁹² Pl. *Phdr.* 244d-e. Burkert 1987: 24.

⁹³ Parker 1983: 202 identified this aspect of the belief as an idea that ‘protects the belief in justice against crude empirical refutation’.

⁹⁴ E.g. the prediction of the wrecking of Athenian ships in punishment for the lawlessness of the Athenian leaders in Hdt. 8.96-7.

⁹⁵ Hdt. 7.133.

Extended explanations across time, place, and person allowed the assumption of divine justice for a pious or impious act even when the punishment or reward was not apparent to the observer. It became a non-specific predictive system.

Survivorship bias is another major aspect of human cognition that delayed justice manipulates. At the trial of Andocides, the defendant argued that Andocides had taken many journeys at sea and surely in one of these the gods would have destroyed him if he had been an impious man.⁹⁶ Meanwhile the prosecutor argued that the gods had spared Andocides so that the Athenians could prosecute him, or so that they could punish him or his descendants more at a later time.⁹⁷ Both were clearly theologically legitimate interpretations. When Walter Burkert observed, as quoted above (p.156), that ‘only an atheist will demand statistical proof that pious action is successful’, he had in mind the anecdote told of Diogenes, the famous atheist from Melos:

When someone expressed astonishment at the votive offerings in Samothrace, his comment was, ‘There would have been far more, if those who were not saved had set up offerings.’⁹⁸

Those who survived catastrophic events were inevitably more vocal about their fortune than those who died were about their misfortune. But it was only by dislocating justice from immediate repayment that Greeks could interpret later and earlier events in light of confirmation of divine favour, or repayment for earlier justice (or injustice). The system of delayed justice was also self-proving: the pious who survived confirmed their own piety and the justice of the gods in rewarding it, and likewise, no matter how someone irreligious died, it was interpreted as divine punishment.⁹⁹ Delayed justice, particularly through ancestral fault, was an extremely powerful theodicy, and it had only arisen and evolved as a result of long-term subjection of theology to critical thought. However, for many Greeks the collection

⁹⁶ Andocides 1.137–9; Harrison 2007a: 381.

⁹⁷ Lysias 6.19–20, 31–2.

⁹⁸ DL 6.59. In the same vein Mikalson 2005: 190 observed ‘many a sailor who had prayed to Poseidon for safety no doubt perished at sea’

⁹⁹ A later, but evocative, example is Dicaearchus, the notoriously irreverent admiral of Philip V, who set up and sacrificed on altars of Impiety and Transgression, and was killed by being ‘racked and scourged’, in Polyb. 18.54; Polybius explains he met a just end according to men and gods. On the ‘sense of relief’ that accompanied such punishments, see Meijer 1981: 216–63.

of theodicies available even at the earliest periods were still insufficient to explain the problem of divine injustice.

The failure of theodicy: atheism and divine injustice

By at least the fifth century, the problem of divine (in)justice was recognised by some as an insurmountable obstacle to belief in the gods. When faced with the injustice apparent in the world, instead of denying this injustice existed or excusing the gods of blame for it, some Greeks concluded that the gods did not exist at all. This was the idea that Euripides put in the mouth of one of his characters, most likely Bellerophon, from a fragment of Euripides' play of the same name:

Does anyone say that there are gods in heaven? There are not, there are not (*ouk eisin, ouk eis*), if a man is willing not to foolishly believe the ancient story. Consider it for yourselves; don't base your opinion on what I say. I say that tyranny kills very many men and deprives others of their property, and tyrants break their oaths and attack cities; and in doing this they prosper more than those who day by day quietly practise piety. I know too of small cities honouring the gods which are subject to larger and more impious ones, having been over-powered by an army greater in number.¹⁰⁰

The justification for Bellerophon's atheism is the manifest injustice in the world; he pits conventional conceptions of human expectations and criteria for justice against the belief that gods are just, and concludes that since injustice is apparent, there can be no gods. The response is a reasonably natural one that builds on common philosophical ideas at the time like the problem of injustice and the false nature of the ancient stories about the gods, and its coherent and well thought-out exposition here suggests that this was not its first airing. Indeed, the fragment builds on and responds to a long tradition of pessimism towards the justice of the gods explored above.

Another example of an atheistic response to the problem of divine (in)justice – or a parody of one, at least – is in Aristophanes' *Clouds*:

¹⁰⁰ Eur. *Bell.* F286. The problem of divine injustice is a common idea in Euripides. On the natural injustice of pious men subject to disaster: *Scyr.* F684; the unpredictability of fortune leads to lapses in faith: *Hipp.* 1102-10; and reassuring oneself that the gods will maintain justice, punishing the evil and rewarding the good: *Alc.* 604-05, *Ion* 1621-22. See Riedweg 1990: 40-1.

Strepsiades: But tell me, where does the lightning bolt come from, blazing with fire, that burns us to ashes and singes survivors? For it's manifestly obvious that Zeus throws it against perjurers.

Socrates: How's that, you moron, you Croniant,¹⁰¹ you antediluvian! If he really strikes perjurers, then why hasn't he burnt up burnt up Simon, and why not Cleonymus, or Theorus? Yet they're principal perjurers? Instead, he throws them at his own temple, and at the Sounion, the headland of Athens, and at large trees. What's the point? An oak tree doesn't perjure!¹⁰²

Aristophanes' Socrates argues in the *Clouds* that the gods do not exist because 'Simon the Sophist', Cleonymus, and Theorus were not punished by the gods for their impious behaviour. The fact that Aristophanes makes the problem of divine injustice a central component of Socrates' package of unbelief shows that he recognised that his audience would find it a believable motivation for disbelief. In the *Clouds*, Aristophanes' Socrates is a teacher of dangerous ideas, and by the end of the play his Thinkery is burned to the ground, with all of its students and teachers inside, as an unusually violent message by Aristophanes of the damage that these ideas could do, and the retribution for teaching them. Evidently, the possibility of concluding that the gods did not exist made the problem of divine (in)justice a significant, and perhaps dangerous, idea, and it cannot have been an uncommon one: the ideas in the *Bellerophon* and the *Clouds* built on established philosophical traditions, like that of Archaic pessimism and, by the fifth century, the naturalistic theories of the presocratics.

But the point of this chapter is not to give a list of atheistic viewpoints. It has been to trace the evolution of Greek theology and theology in response to critical and atheistic ideas. Ultimately, the remaining sets of atheistic responses that remain from the fifth century are only a snapshot of those for whom theology and theodicy were insufficient, but as observed, atheistic perspectives and responses are nonetheless visible in the extant material. These responses are unsurprisingly less directly and visibly atheistic in the early periods, but they are still apparent through the types of responses in theology that can only have been stimulated by a healthy philosophical milieu involving critical atheistic ideas.

Conclusion: the evolution of theology through atheism

¹⁰¹ Celebrant of a festival of Cronos, Zeus' father; i.e. someone who is archaic or old-fashioned.

¹⁰² Ar. *Cl.* 394-403.

One key aim of this chapter has been to complicate the distinction between atheism and atheists. Many of the atheistic or critical ideas traced here were recorded or espoused by individuals who clearly believed in relatively well-defined deities. But these ideas nonetheless contribute to the provision of an invaluable record of atheism, even if these ideas were only recorded by those who espoused them only to refute them. Still, as Robert Parker saw twenty years ago, there is a need to distinguish between attacks from within and without in Greek religion:

We need to ask what in all this was truly threatening or ‘impious’; what constituted an *attack from without* rather than *from within* the traditional religious framework, that loose and accommodating structure within which certain forms of doubt, criticism, and revision were, in fact, traditional.¹⁰³

As seen in the previous chapter, in a sense, most individuals in the ancient world were ‘critics from within’, in public at least: they insist on their support for traditional religious practices and beliefs, while offering partial criticism. The potentially severe consequences in admitting public atheism, combined with a robust religious education and socialisation (as explored in earlier chapters), and a thriving critical milieu that allowed criticism of religion within a protective traditional framework, removing any incentive to public atheism in the ancient world. This is another reason for the importance of emphasising ‘atheistic ideas’, rather than focussing on ‘atheists’, which is a futile exercise: accurately distinguishing between a religious ‘guise’ and someone who was genuinely religious is impossible, as explored in the Introduction. Raising the ‘spectre’ of atheism allowed critics to distance themselves from extreme atheistic views (which they may or may not have held), while still raising important criticisms. This allowed, as Skorupski observed, a ‘received core of beliefs coexisting with localised scepticism on the one hand and idiosyncratic speculative elaborations of a metaphysical or cosmological kind on the other’.¹⁰⁴ So, both sides of a critical exchange – articulation of and response to criticism – could even take place in the mind (or work) of a single individual.

The most important function of this chapter has been in demonstrating that theology is indispensable to understanding atheism, and vice versa. The fundamental building blocks of Greek religious thought developed from the ground up and evolved over time in response to

¹⁰³ Parker 1996: 210, my emphasis.

¹⁰⁴ Skorupski 1976: 8.

scepticism, through a competitive and responsive marketplace of ideas. This means that an understanding of sceptical ideas is indispensable for developing our understanding of Greek religious ideas, and likewise, that it is possible to observe the (often silent) existence of sceptical strands of thought in the responses and adaptations made by religious ideas in response to them. Any picture of atheism that includes only the most overt and explicit (often abrasive or comic) portrayals, like that in *Bellerophon* or *Clouds*, is only a very partial picture. Instead, this chapter has attempted to trace atheism through theology and the converse: some ideas that were central to how the Greeks viewed their gods, and how these ideas were conceived and shaped through responses to scepticism. This is how the Greeks ‘coped with their gods’.¹⁰⁵ Complex collections of ideas developed that allowed for a diverse and varied understanding of how the gods interacted with humanity, and offered built-in responses to scepticism about key theological ideas like the justice, efficacy, power, location, or even the existence of the gods. The process of evolution in Greek theology, and the healthy sceptical and atheistic ideas floating around throughout the centuries, demonstrate the enduring strength of Greek religion through flexibility, in confronting and addressing scepticism that might otherwise have much more serious consequences for belief if left without response.

¹⁰⁵ See Versnel 2011.

5. Unknowability: the central place of agnosticism in Greek religion

What is the relationship between the spectrum of atheism and theism on the one hand, and agnosticism on the other? In the Introduction it was argued that agnosticism is not a middle-ground between belief and unbelief, but instead an answer to a different question; albeit one crucial to understanding the nature or type of the theism or atheism in question. Agnosticism is not about whether gods do exist or not, but about what knowledge is possible regarding them, such as of their nature or names. Forms of agnosticism can involve questioning the possibility of knowledge of the gods' existence, i.e. they can be atheistic, just as those that question the form, names, or other features of the divine are theistic. So, according to the definitions set up in the Introduction, that we argued better represent these phenomena in Greece and in general, agnosticism is always either theistic or atheistic. Working out the distinctions between each is key to understanding the types of (un)beliefs in the ancient world, as well as to avoiding common categorical confusions about unbelief, like saying that Protagoras was 'agnostic *rather than* an atheist'.¹ So, on one level it is necessary to work out what agnosticism means in the ancient world, simply to separate it from atheism, which justifies the removal of figures like Protagoras from that category.

In the ancient world, agnosticism took the form of unknowability: the idea that there can be no certain knowledge about the divine. Yet, little attention has so far been paid to the role of 'unknowability' in the assembly of a sceptical or atheistic worldview. This is unfortunate since unknowability is crucial to a history of atheism in two key respects. First, that unknowability enjoyed its prominence in religious thought, because it was useful in combating scepticism towards the gods. Secondly, that unknowability was useful for those making atheistic critiques, partly because it could be remodelled into cutting relativistic criticisms of human conceptions of the divine, and partly because its association with piety allowed those inclined to think critically about the gods (within reason) to do so, without fear

¹ Bremmer 2007: 13, my emphasis. Likewise O'Sullivan 2012: 172 and Meijer 1981: 220 both use agnosticism as a retreat from atheism; as does Flower 2009: 11: 'it was perhaps not so much the atheism of Prodicus as the agnosticism of Protagoras' that drove the mystery parodies and mutilations of the *Herms*. Whitmarsh grapples with similar problems e.g. 'this cannot be a simple statement of agnosticism', 2016: 88; he is unwilling to use agnosticism to excuse atheism and calls Protagoras an atheist; he still seems to conceive of agnosticism as a mid-ground, but appears to recognise that there is a conceptual problem.

of being outcast or even punished for atheism (a real possibility, as argued in Chapter Three). Without recognising the breadth of unknowability, and exploring it as a phenomenon separate from both theism and atheism, it is easy to confuse sceptical statements for religious ones, and vice versa. Both of these make an investigation of unknowability, and its role in Greek attitudes towards the gods, worthwhile. The neglect of atheistic perspectives on unknowability is partly because atheism has traditionally been studied as history of individuals, rather than history of ideas. It is also because unknowability has been viewed as a central part of religious thought, where its role has been explored at length, rather than as an idea that spans the religious and the sceptical as argued here. In sorting out the different types of expressions of unknowability, from theism to atheism, this chapter begins with pious expressions of unknowability, and then forms of divergence from this piety. This method will help to set a basic standard of piety, against which it is possible to judge the impious forms of expressions of unknowability.

Unknowability and Greek religion: the piety of agnosticism

Unknowability is ‘a central category of Greek religion’, and such a theologically critical idea that it was embedded in the basic building blocks of Greek thought and language about the divine.² As Simon Price observed, the Greek word for god (*theos*) is not a name (unlike the modern ‘God’): it is a predicate noun, highlighting a quality of something; it is not a clear and direct reference, but a sort of description of a vague category, capturing a sense of divinity.³ Though there were appropriate applications of *theos* (for instance, for Zeus), there were no institutional controls over appropriate usage of *theos* and no clear boundaries of definition, which made it hard to exclude particular beings.⁴ The semantic range of the term *theos* is ultimately unclear because no ancient source offered any systematic semantic analysis of it.⁵ But it seems likely that *theos* had a broad and unfixed range, as Kearns argues.⁶ She observes

² Quote is Sourvinou-Inwood 2000: 20. On the critical role of unknowability see also Harrison 2000: 191-208. Uncertainty built into core terminology: Alvar 1985: 236-7.

³ Price 1984: 79.

⁴ No institutional controls or boundaries of definition: Price 1984: 80-1.

⁵ Carneades in Cic. *De Nat. Deo*. 3.43-52: extended discussion of the nature and meaning of god, and distinguishing between other figures like satyrs and the Olympians. See also Pl. *Ap.* 27b-28a: Plato’s Socrates discusses the children of the gods, and the spirits and heroes, and concludes they are all ‘divine stuff’.

⁶ Kearns 1995: 512-13.

that it can refer to ‘a particular god, some god unknown or unspecified, or a more impersonal concept of deity’, and that the only consistent connotations of *theos* are very broad: of ‘power, deathlessness and unpredictability’.⁷ There is no genre or type of literature in which references to the anonymous abstract collective of gods does not appear, with *theos* conveying a sort of vague sense of ‘godkind’.⁸ So when the Greeks talked about gods, they did so with language that presumed uncertainty over the form and nature of their referents, beyond certain basic assumptions. But uncertainty was not only embedded in terms for the gods, it was also built into terms and concepts that the Greeks had about their own beliefs.

The vagueness about individual and specific deities built into the language of belief reflects the belief itself: one of the central ‘problems’ for scholars of Greek religion is in trying to work out individual divine identities. There was a hugely complex system of gods and epithets in the Greek world, as the two pioneering scholars of religion, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Walter Burkert, (unusually) agreed. Vernant stressed the inseparability of the individual gods, and Burkert the variability of characteristics depending on time and place.⁹ Gods could be generalised, like ‘Zeus’, but they were also localised and specialised: ‘the Zeus of Olympia’ or ‘Zeus of Guests’. In some contexts, the Greeks clearly divided local and generalised gods from one another, while in others, they were treated as unified.¹⁰ Parker has articulated the problem neatly: ‘Is there such a thing as Zeus, or are there just a huge host of Zeuses?’¹¹ There is no answer to this question, because the difficulty in resolving divine identity is not a ‘problem’ but a feature of Greek theology: the Greek conception of their gods depended on the vagueness of divine identity. Gods could be entirely nonspecific and vague, or they could be named and sacrificed to, depending on the context.

⁷ Kearns 1995: 512; see also Alvar 1985 on *theos* and unknowability.

⁸ References abound to ‘godkind’: see Francois 1957; Parker 2011: 65, Parker 2006: 11-17, Mikalson 1983: 66-8, 1991: 22-5.

⁹ Complexity of divine: Vernant 1991, particularly 277-8 on inseparability of gods; Burkert 1985, particularly 119, on variability of time and place. Versnel 2011: 30 discusses these.

¹⁰ See e.g. Xen. *An.* 7.8.1-6, with Xenophon’s problems caused by neglect of Zeus Melichios even though he was a regular worshipper of Zeus Basileus; cf. the assertion of Xenophon’s Socrates in *Sym.* 8.9 that, ‘Zeus, though he has many epithets, is nonetheless believed to be the same god’, trans. Parker. See Parker 2003, 2006: 11-17, and 2011: 65-79, for his most recent and best treatment; and Versnel 2011: 60-87.

¹¹ See Parker 2003: 182.

Expressions of unknowability were a part of the Greek conception of the divine since the earliest literature. At first glance at least, the anthropomorphic, named, physically present gods of Homer might appear to conflict with ideas about unknowability: the gods are large humans, who are petty and unjust, but powerful, longer lived, and beautiful.¹² Homer's confident descriptions of the gods might make the gods seem entirely tangible (albeit larger than life). Yet as Kearns has observed, the divine was 'inexplicable and extreme, whether the extremity manifests itself as "the other" or as "like humans but more so" – both versions are embedded in Greek, as perhaps in most, religious thought'.¹³ The Homeric characters also reveal a certain degree of uncertainty about the gods. Gods were exceptionally difficult to identify when they appeared in the human world. They might roam the battlefield, fighting invisibly on behalf of one side or another; or they might appear to the aid of an individual; they might even disguise themselves and observe the behaviour of humans; or they might appear veiled from sight to interact, for instance, healing a sick man.¹⁴ Most of the time, though, gods did not appear, nor were they expected to. Georgia Petridou, for instance, has remarked on their association with 'remote' places, and the 'ambiguity and interstitiality' of their location in 'dangerous and marginal landscapes'.¹⁵ Even when the gods appeared to speak to men, as occurs several times in the *Odyssey*, they are described as 'difficult to recognise'.¹⁶ 'Gods', for the unknown composer of the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, 'are hard for mortals to see'; the nature of epiphany in the Greek world is 'essentially ambiguous' and 'markedly vague' from the earliest epics to the Hellenistic period.¹⁷

¹² Gods look like larger humans: Versnel 1987: 43-4.

¹³ Kearns 1995: 512.

¹⁴ Fighting on behalf of one side or an individual, as they do in the *Iliad*, e.g. 5.297-351, the battle of Diomedes and Aphrodite, fighting on behalf of the Trojans; gods fighting on the behalf of humans is a continued feature of the Greek tradition: e.g. Hdt 8.38-9: defence of Delphi in 480BC from the Persians by Phylakos and Autoonoo; Diod. Sic. 15.53.4: by Heracles at Leuctra in 371BC; Diony. Hal. 6.13: in the Roman tradition, with the appearance of the Dioscures at the battle of Lacus Regillus in 494BC. Versnel 1987. The masking of gods in haze in Hom. *Od.* 16.161, or unmasking at 5.127-33. Versnel 1987: 44. Healing a sick man: POxy 1381, Versnel 1987: 47-8.

¹⁵ Petridou 2016 195-197.

¹⁶ Gods difficult to recognise: e.g. Athena appears to Odysseus, Hom. *Od.* 13.220-29, 311-29.

¹⁷ Hard to see: hDem 110. Ambiguous and vague: Versnel 1987: 42-55.

In Homer, unknowability reinforced the existence of the gods, particularly through ‘contingent denials’. These contingent denials take the form of ‘if... then’ expressions about the gods’ existence. For instance, Odysseus, having been hit by Antinous, is furious at the injustice and exclaims that if (*ei*) there are any gods for beggars, they will ensure that Antinous will die.¹⁸ This sort of comment about the gods is a type of exclamation in which the speaker seems to premise the existence of the gods on contingencies, and is a very common type in Homer. This is a bargain with the gods, that by performing an action on Odysseus’ behalf, the gods confirm their existence to him. Antinous is, of course, the first of the suitors to die in the *Odyssey*, and so Odysseus proclaims ‘By Father Zeus, you gods are still there on high Olympus if those Suitors have really paid the price for their outrageous insolence!’¹⁹ So while these contingent denials seem on one level to be impious, and they are arrogant, they are a narrative form of unknowability that ultimately served to prove the gods’ existence, as a consequence of the broader narrative in which the gods do, in fact, appear and fulfil these sorts of prophecies.

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, for instance, Odysseus addresses the unknown river at the edge of the land of the Phaeacians as a suppliant, ‘listen, sire, whoever you are’; just as Telemachus had earlier addressed Athene, ‘listen to me, you God that came to me yesterday’.²⁰ The recognitions of unknowability in the *Odyssey* show a pious caution towards the gods. In both cases the individual is trying to get something from the gods, which forces them to try to latch on to some certainty, but they are still unable to be very specific.²¹ Such expressions of unknowability occur across the Greek evidence, especially in Euripides.²² In Euripides’ *Hippolytus* the nurse has an intuition that divine forces are involved in the whole affair. But the identity of the divine agent to blame for Phaedra’s illness in the play is a mystery; in this case the nurse says that it could be Pan or Hecate, the Korybantes or the

¹⁸ Hom. *Od.* 17.464-78.

¹⁹ Antinous: Hom. *Od.* 21.97-101, 22.1-22. Proclamation: 24.351-4.

²⁰ Listen sire: Hom. *Od.* 5.445-9; god that came yesterday: Hom. *Od.* 2.262.

²¹ Importance of performative nature of unknowability: Fraenkel 1950: 160, Pulleyn 1994: 17.

²² As Lefkowitz 1989: 80 has argued, the *Medea*, *Bacchae*, *Hippolytus*, *Andromache*, *Helen*, and *Alcestis* of Euripides all touch on unknowability.

Mountain Mother, or Dictynna.²³ Of course, the dramatic stage and the worlds created in literature, where the gods appeared clearly and frequently, were not the everyday experience of the Greek.²⁴ The audience of the *Hippolytus*, for instance, know that Phaedra is ill because Aphrodite made her love Hippolytus, to punish Hippolytus' irreverence towards her.²⁵ The characters in the *Hippolytus* experience uncertainty that the audience does not.

Yet unknowability was not just a feature of literary or dramatic expression, but a clear part of the Greek ritual experience. Consultations of the oracles at Delphi and Dodona show ordinary Greeks struggling to determine which god was angry with them, or to whom they should sacrifice or pray.²⁶ On the other side of the coin, highly detailed documents like sanctuary decrees, which detail the precise steps for ritual, show the importance of unknowability by striving for certainty wherever it can be found.²⁷ Reminiscent of the nurse's list of potential deities in Euripides' *Hippolytus* are those in curse tablets, such as this early fourth-century binding curse tablet found in Attica:

²³ Eur. *Hipp.* 141-69. See also Eur. *Tro.* 884-6: 'Hecuba: whoever you are, most difficult to know, Zeus, whether necessity of nature or the mind of men, I address you in prayer'. See Gould, J. 1985: 10-11, Lefkowitz 1989: 72.

²⁴ The absence of the gods comes across far more crisply in Sophocles than Euripides, the reputed atheist: e.g. Soph. *Trach.* 1264-74; Lefkowitz 1989: 73-4, 78-9. Gods more present but ambiguous: Vernant and Vidal Naquet 1981: 9.

²⁵ Eur. *Hipp.* 1-58.

²⁶ Consultations that codify unknowability in literature include Xen. *An.* 3.1.5-8: Xenophon asks Delphi to whom he should sacrifice to have a prosperous journey; Plut. *Arist.* 11.3, from 479BC: the Delphic oracle informs Aristides that the Athenians and Greeks must pray to Zeus, Hera of Kithairon, and other deities, to beat the Persians; Dem. 21.51-2: a list of gods to pray to for individual things like good health and fortune, based on oracles from Delphi and Dodona. See Versnel 2011: 46-7 on these. The Dodonan tablets, catalogued in Eidinow 2007: 72-138, record real-life responses that avoid the narrative elaboration, as argued by Parker 2016: 70-1. Some ask which gods to worship e.g. Eidinow 2007: 89 n.1: 'Hermon (asks) by aligning himself with which of the gods will there be from Kretaia offspring for him, in addition to those he has now?', see also pg.112, n.1. Asking which god to pray to was common for a range of consultation subjects. On having children: 89-93, n.6, 7, 15; on recovering from illness: pg.104-7, n.1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 10; on property: pg.108-10 n.1; on attaining prosperity or aims: pg.110 n.1, 6, pg.121 n.3. Eidinow pg.77 n.9; pg.90-1, n.4, 5, 6; pg.96-99, n.6, 8, 13, 14 (etc), make requests of 'the god'. Others are more specific in address.

²⁷ Specificity in rituals: Alvar 1985: 236.

If anyone put a binding spell on me, be it man or woman, slave or free, alien or citizen, from my household or from outside it, be it out of envy toward my work or my actions, if anyone put a binding spell on me before Hermes, be it Hermes Eriounios or Hermes Restrainer or Hermes Trickster, or before some other power, I bind in return all my enemies.²⁸

The person cursing here has no idea which god might have overseen a curse against them, but it is not a simple case of listing them: they understand that divine identity is not easy. The focus on divine activity (manifest by attribution through epithets) rather than a specific name is also a function of unknowability. A name is only ‘shorthand’ for ‘portfolios or packages of attributed imagined powers’, so it felt safer to identify broad divine activities that related to the observable world.²⁹ This is the tension between the recognition of unknowability and the practical need to identify the gods.

Greeks recognised the necessity of naming individual gods during rituals, for pragmatic reasons, but this process of naming was pragmatic, and did not diminish unknowability. This is what Emily Kearns called the ‘paradox at the heart of Greek religion’: that in some ways the Greeks ‘believed that they knew little about the gods, in other contexts they acted as though they knew a lot’.³⁰ The distinction between belief and action is key here: Greeks were forced to behave as if they were certain for the purposes of ritual. As Simon Pulleyn observed: ‘knowledge of the name is an essential prerequisite to any form of communication’.³¹ Naming a god was necessary to ensure that the message of a cult act was communicated to the correct deity, and avoid the risks of getting it wrong (ineffectiveness or even impiety).³² Although failing correctly to identify and communicate with a god might be

²⁸ Curse tablet: Jordan, D. 1999: 115-24, n.1, side A.

²⁹ Davies 1997: 44.

³⁰ Kearns 2006: 311.

³¹ Pulleyn 1997: 97.

³² E.g. Hes. *WD* 724-6 talks about ‘libations to Zeus’: it is clear that libations were commonly specific. Where oaths make specific mention of the gods, rather than assuming their power, they tend to be specific, e.g. the Achaean *ephebic* oath RO 88: calls a list of specifically named gods as witnesses, who are a mix of local heroes and familiar gods. See Sommerstein and Bayliss 2012 for more examples. Mikalson 1983: 68 observed that specific deities could be named in certain types of cult acts. Need to communicate to a deity driving specificity: Griffiths, J. 1975: 119, Pulleyn 1994: 18, 22, 1997: 96-115, esp. 97, Versnel 2011: 53-4. Ensuring the propitiation was received: Pulleyn 1994: 17, Versnel 2011: 43.

distressing in its apparent results, it helped Greeks cope with a particularly difficult aspect of theology. Something akin to this is argued by Plato's Socrates in the *Cratylus*, during a discussion of the naturalness of names:

[I]f we are sensible, we must recognise that there is one most excellent kind [of correctness], since of the gods we know nothing, neither of them nor of their names, whatever they may be, by which they call themselves, for it is clear that they use the true names. But there is a second kind of correctness, that we call them, as is customary in prayers, by whatever names and patronymics are pleasing to them, since we know no other. Now I think that is an excellent custom...³³

Plato's Socrates believes that the gods are fundamentally unknowable, but he recognises that some knowledge is necessary to contact them: he pragmatically divides what they are really called (which mortals cannot know) from the best guess of humans, which is customary.

Too much knowledge of the gods was dangerous and impious. Even oracles only revealed imperfect information.³⁴ Hence Apollo is called *Loxias*, 'Crooked one', the crooked speaker of oracles.³⁵ Even the *prophētai* did not have direct contact with the gods: they translated their signs.³⁶ The impossibility of contact with the divine is partly why the Athenians would have been concerned about Socrates' divine sign.³⁷ A divine voice that directly contacted an individual and gave them unambiguous advice did not fit the mechanics of traditional Athenian religion, as it directly contradicted the principle of unknowability. Indeed, Plato has his Socrates recognise that he may be the only person to ever experience this.³⁸ Even worse, though Socrates claimed direct contact, the source of this contact remained entirely mysterious: Socrates' sign is radically knowable in one (very impious) way, and yet dangerously unknowable in another.³⁹ Meletus did not need to put in place a special argument for the divine sign as a religious innovation. It is clear that the object of *kaina daimonia* (new gods) in Meletus' accusation is Socrates' *daimonion*, and most

³³ Pl. *Cra.* 400d-401a; see also 384a-b, 387d, 388b, 389c, 397b. Versnel 2011: 51.

³⁴ Divinely inspired figures are only conduits: Parker 2011: 66.

³⁵ *Loxias*: Strabo C250, Ogden 1997: 46.

³⁶ *Prophētai* translate mysterious signs: Pl. *Tim.* 72a-b, Luck 2006: 285-6.

³⁷ See Slings 1994: 97 on the concern of the Athenians being Socrates' divine sign as direct contact.

³⁸ Pl. *Rep.* 6.496c. Partridge 2008: 285.

³⁹ Partridge 2008: 285 observed the fundamentally mysterious identity of the Sign.

Athenians would have instantly understood the issues with Socrates' sign, just as Euthyphro did.⁴⁰

Just as claiming too much knowledge of the gods was impiety, so unknowability could be pious humility: it underscores the magnificence of the divine. This should not be surprising: agnosticism is a central part of pious expression in all religious systems; in the words of the philosopher George Smith, it is 'the universal element linking together the various concepts of god... the central tenet of theism.'⁴¹ In spite of radically different contexts and time-periods, the most pious expressions commonly seem to be paired with ecstatic incomprehensibility and paradox. Tertullian, the third century AD Christian author, observed of God:

[t]hat which is infinite is known only to itself. This it is which gives some notion of God, while yet beyond all our conceptions – our very incapacity of fully grasping Him affords us the idea of what He really is. He is presented to our minds in His transcendent greatness, as at once known and unknown.⁴²

For Tertullian, unknowability is proof of the magnificence of God, just as it would be for Augustine. They are likewise expressed in the famous Nag Hammadi *Thunder* text, a second or third century AD text full of paradox, riddles, and incomprehensible, ecstatic utterances, like 'I am a mute who does not speak, and great is my multitude of words'.⁴³

The Greek gods were not the omni-God of Tertullian's Christianity, or the gnostic god of *Thunder*, but in a similar way the most pious expressions in the Greek world could be the most incomprehensible. The enigmatic Orphic gold tablets, which were deposited in graves from the fifth century onward, combine formulaic analogical stories and instructions for the afterlife with nonsense words. These tablets were part of Dionysiac mystery cult, the central rites of which were impossible to communicate, as Aristotle observed: 'the initiate into the mysteries was moulded and not taught'; this unknowable meaning was communicated in the

⁴⁰ Pl. *Euthphr.* 3b5-6.

⁴¹ Smith, G. 1989: 8-13, 38-9, 41.

⁴² Tertullian *Apologeticus*, 17.

⁴³ *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, trans. G. MacRae. See Miller 1986: 487 and Pulleyn 1994: 23 on the power and 'violently reverent' incomprehensibility in *Thunder*.

tablets themselves.⁴⁴ Tablet 27, for instance, contains specific passwords for the afterlife, but the final word ΓΑΠΕΔΟΝ, is a nonsense word that is written upside down.⁴⁵ Johnston has described this tablet as ‘a sort of crib-sheet for the soul’s most final of exams’.⁴⁶ With its specific passwords and the powerful nonsense word with which it ends, the tablet thus strides the knowable and the unknowable.

On the other hand, while unknowability could be a sign of humble piety, it depended on the context: unknowability could also be used to signal irreverence, impiety, and even atheism. There are brilliantly convoluted addresses like the chant of the chorus of Argive elders in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*: ‘Zeus, whoever Zeus may be, if this name is pleasing to him, by this name I address him. I can compare with him, measuring all things against him, none but Zeus’.⁴⁷ This is a conventionally pious and humble expression of the majesty of the divine by the chorus, who are invoking the potential power of referencing a name correctly.⁴⁸ There is no reason to suspect any ulterior motive here, because of the portrayal of the chorus as traditionally pious in the play, and the type of formulation that focused on names rather than questioning the broader features or existence of the gods.⁴⁹ Yet the prayer of Hecuba from Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, that seems *prima facie* quite similar, is radical and impious. On hearing that Menelaus will condemn Helen to death when they return to Sparta, the foreign queen, now reduced to slavery, says: ‘whoever you are, you are hard to know, Zeus, whether the Necessity of Nature or the Mind of Mortals, I pray to you’.⁵⁰ Menelaus’ reply to this, ‘What does this mean? A newfangled prayer you offer to the gods!’ recognises the radical nature of Hecuba’s prayer. In part, the interpretation of this as impious rests on the

⁴⁴ Aristotle F15 (Ross); see Graf 2007: 140-1 for more context on the unknowability of the experience and the tablets.

⁴⁵ E.g. fourth century tablet from Graf and Johnston 2007: 38, n.27. Greeks speaking in tongues see Luck 2006: 298.

⁴⁶ Johnston 2007: 94, 132-3.

⁴⁷ Aesch. *Ag.* 160-6.

⁴⁸ Harrison 2000: 258 argues for the power of the name, as does Versnel 2011: 50-1. See also Lloyd-Jones 1971: 85 and Zajcev 1996: 203-12 who also believe the passage suggests an appropriate pious humility, and Raeburn and Thomas 2011: 85, who stress the ‘common and traditional’ nature of this contemplation of what name to use during a prayer.

⁴⁹ Cf. ‘Gaia and Themis, one form with many names...’ in Aesch. *PB* 209-10.

⁵⁰ Eur. *Troj.* 885-7.

scepticism Hecuba expresses elsewhere, especially of divine justice.⁵¹ Barlow observed that her ‘belief in divine justice is somewhat inconsistent with the scepticism she expresses elsewhere’, but if this passage is read as an inversion then the expression is appropriate (and does not reveal a belief), not least because, as Lee observed, the play contains a distinct lack of justice.⁵²

Both the chorus in *Agamemnon* and Hecuba in the *Trojan Women* reference unknowability, but one is pious and the other impious, only signalled by the context and formulation. One key difference between the chant of the chorus in Aeschylus and the prayer by Hecuba in Euripides is that Hecuba references natural philosophy, which was, by this time, a recognisable signal of impiety and atheism; she questions whether Zeus is called ‘Necessity’ (*anagkē*) or ‘Mind of Mortals’ (*nous brotōn*). Both are references to the theories of natural philosophers, but the latter is twisted even further to imply that the gods might also be only the inventions of humans.⁵³ Hecuba may be genuinely hedging her bets about whichever gods she is able to reach, or she may be expressing a shocking impiety and irreverence by twisting an ordinarily pious expression into an irreverent one in front of one of her captors, Menelaus, in order to prompt exactly the sort of appalled reaction that he gives. The passages in Aeschylus and Euripides both reveal a broad recognition of the inscrutability and unknowability of divine forces, and relate to more specific doubts about divine identity expressed by the characters in each context, but one is radical and irreverent and the other is pious.

So, to sum up briefly: unknowability, and therefore agnosticism, could be used to be irreverent, but it was a core component of Greek religion, and embedded in some of the most pious of expressions towards the divine.

Coping with the gods through unknowability

But why was unknowability so central to Greek theology, and to practical attitudes towards the gods? What was the function of unknowability? In short: unknowability was key to the

⁵¹ Eur. *Troj.* 469, 1240.

⁵² Barlow 1986: 209, on 884. On justice: Lee, K. H. 1976: xvii, referencing Conacher 1967.

⁵³ E.g. Heinimann 1945: 130-1 connected this line with Empedocles DK 31 B134: F140 in Graham 2010: 412-3; Lee, K. H. 1976: 223, on 884-8 observes the ‘influence of contemporary speculation’ combined with the ‘conventional’ structure of the prayer.

protection of Greek theology from scepticism. It was the ultimate ‘let-out clause’, in the sense discussed in the previous chapter.⁵⁴ Unknowability was the potential answer to nearly any sceptical inquiry about the nature, existence, or justice of the gods. It may, at first, appear to be a concession to scepticism, as David Sedley has it:

Usually, however, the assertion of doubt is nothing more than a disarmingly frank acknowledgment by a committed system-builder that his conclusions are necessarily hazardous and unproven, a self-imposed counterweight to excessive didacticism and dogmatism, a modern sacrifice at the altar of intellectual honesty. There is no suggestion that any of these pre-Hellenistic philosophers derived much comfort from his admission of ignorance or thought of it as anything more than a regrettable expedient. Indeed, it is hard to see what comfort it could afford anybody who was not prepared to renounce a rather fundamental human trait, the desire for knowledge.⁵⁵

The recognition of uncertainty should not be seen as a philosophical failure, but instead as a way of coping with the gods. Half a century ago Jean Rudhardt had already astutely observed that when talking and thinking about the divine ‘the Greeks perceive both its nearness and its distance’.⁵⁶ Rudhardt believed that unknowability was illustrative of the complexity (not failure) of Greek theological thought. Thomas Harrison has more recently developed this line of thought about unknowability as a healthy feature of Greek religion: for him, unknowability ‘complements rather than [represents] qualifications to a traditional model of Greek religion’.⁵⁷ Unknowability was a useful idea, not a recognition of the weakness of religious belief (as Nietzsche would later parody it).⁵⁸

Unknowability was so embedded in Greek religious thought because it had a function: this was the aspect of unknowability as ‘explanation’, through which it served to protect conceptions of the divine.⁵⁹ Perhaps the fullest and most rewarding account of the

⁵⁴ On these see the previous chapter.

⁵⁵ Sedley 1983: 10-11.

⁵⁶ Rudhardt 2002 [1992]: 182.

⁵⁷ Harrison 2000: 191.

⁵⁸ E.g. Nietzsche, *Gay Science* V.2.20: “‘Is it true that God is present everywhere?’” a little girl asked her mother; “‘I think that’s indecent” – a hint for philosophers! One should have more respect for the bashfulness with which nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties.’

⁵⁹ Eidinow 2007: esp. 10-25.

explanatory value of Greek religion has been offered by John Gould, also building on the work of Rudhardt, who had previously observed the flexibility of the Greek concept of the divine.⁶⁰ Gould emphasised that all religious systems are internally rational and self-justifying, arguing that religious explanation is part of a symbolic language for dealing with the natural chaos of the world. So, he argued, the need for rational explanation of the universe and the nature of the gods drove the ‘fundamentally improvisatory’ nature of Greek religion.⁶¹ This improvisatory nature rested on a basic recognition of unknowability. Determining supernatural causality in the Greek world, Gould argued, could never be definitive; the signs are always fundamentally ambiguous, the divinity is always inferred, not revealed, and the motivation for any given divine action is at an even more remote distance from any certain explanation.⁶²

The explanatory role of unknowability makes it crucial for the study of ancient atheism, as part of the ongoing battle between sceptical and religious ideas explored in the previous chapter. When faced with criticism or scepticism, unknowability allows the response that ‘God is a mystery’, perhaps most elegantly articulated by the Christian theologian Augustine:

What then, brothers, shall we say of God? For if you have been able to understand what you say you have, it is not God. If you have been able to comprehend it, you have comprehended something else instead of God. If you have been able to comprehend Him as you think you have, by so thinking you have deceived yourself. This then is not God, if you have comprehended it; but if this is God, you have not comprehended it.⁶³

It was insistence on the ineffability of God that allowed Augustine in his second sermon to develop apparently contradictory theology, like the doctrine of the Trinity: that God is One God inseparable yet also separable as the Son, Father, and Spirit.⁶⁴ In other words, insistence

⁶⁰ Gould, J. 1985. Rudhardt, in his 1958 dissertation e.g. pg.44 ‘le flottement perpétuel de la notion de dieu’. He had worked this into a broader concept in his 1992 article on foreign religions.

⁶¹ Gould, J. 1985: 8-14, and expanded in 1994: 94. Gould 1985: 6-7.

⁶² Gould, J. 1994: 94. According to Dennett 2006: 164 invisible causality is common to all religions, e.g. a sacrifice where the gods do not literally eat. By obfuscating the exact process it protects the notion.

⁶³ Augustine, *Sermon II* [LII Ben.], sect. 16.

⁶⁴ Augustine, *Sermon II* [LII Ben.], sect. 2.

on unknowability protected Augustus' theological principles before he developed them, allowing doctrines that would have been otherwise unsustainable. Unknowability was likewise central to Greek religion as a protective idea, as Thomas Harrison has argued:

‘unknowability’ in fact serves as a necessary complement to traditional conceptions: it was precisely because of the fall-back position that the best way to approach and the best way to envisage the gods were matters inaccessible to men that traditional attributes and forms of worship could continue unchallenged.⁶⁵

So, unknowability served to protect and defend theological ideas; it is a feature of a vigorous and healthy religious environment. Unknowability was pre-emptive and reactive: it was a built-in response to theological issues with the divine, like those revealed by the unforgiving and unjust experience of life in the Greek world, explored in Chapter Two.

The first protective aspect of unknowability is in helping to explain why rituals, appeals, or prayers to the divine were unsuccessful. There were countless ways that Greeks felt any form of propitiation could fail, as Naiden has most recently argued, and getting the wrong god was one of the most important.⁶⁶ The concern with finding the appropriate god to appeal to naturally meant the fear of getting it wrong. Greeks did sometimes feel that they got divine identifications wrong. Xenophon related one such case in the *Anabasis*, in which the general, having bad luck in his affairs, discovers from a seer that this is because he was sacrificing only to Zeus Basileus and not Zeus Melichios.⁶⁷ But Xenophon's is not an example in which he sacrificed to the wrong god so much as neglected to sacrifice to a relevant one. The former is perhaps the case in Herodotus, at Lade, when the Ionians were faced with Dionysius' grim training exercises; they wail proverbially ‘which god did we offend that we are suffering this?’⁶⁸ The oracular examples explored above assume that misfortune will be the result of the incorrect choice of god: ‘to whom of the gods (and heroes) must I pray and/or sacrifice in order that I fare better?’ is the standard formula.⁶⁹ It may be safely assumed that, oracle's answer aside, if the asker of this question did not fare well then they would attribute this misfortune to having made the incorrect choice of divine.

⁶⁵ Harrison 1997: 380.

⁶⁶ Naiden 2012: 131-182.

⁶⁷ Xen. *An.* 7.8.1-6.

⁶⁸ Hdt. 6.12.3. From Versnel 2011: 43.

⁶⁹ SEG 15.395.

Unknowability helped explain why a god might have apparently done something unjust, or failed to fulfil their end of the bargain.⁷⁰

The second protective aspect of unknowability is in dealing with other cultures. How were Greeks to reconcile themselves to the fact that other groups believed in different gods from themselves, and these gods apparently looked after these groups as much (or as little) as the Greek gods did Greeks? This is perhaps most pronounced in Herodotus, which is probably predictable, as the historian spent so much time on ethnographic discussion, but it is not limited to that author.⁷¹ Harrison has argued that Herodotus' answer to the problem of divine identification in foreign cultures is to consider the gods as universal, though recognised in different ways by different groups.⁷² For Harrison, Herodotus' gods are effectively universal, with local versions only differing from each other in which gods were worshipped, how they were worshipped, and the local characteristics of these gods (significant differences, one might think).⁷³ The gods are hidden behind the doors of an advent calendar, different cultures having opened different doors.⁷⁴ According to this view, Herodotus does not appear to believe in foreign gods as separate entities at all: instead he believes in a unified world-belief with different cultic manifestations.⁷⁵ The idea of an universal belief is indeed manifested at several key points in the *Histories*, with the Arabians in Hdt 3.8 (discussed in the Introduction) and the Massagetae in 1.216. Herodotus' belief in universal gods especially manifests in the names given to gods, with references to gods with

⁷⁰ Versnel 2011: 43-4.

⁷¹ Other examples include Eur. *Hel.* 1307 and Pausanias 8.37.9. Pulleyn 1994: 23.

⁷² Harrison emphasises that the 'identification of gods takes place... in spite of what seem extraordinary obstacles' Harrison 2000: 213. Harrison assumes belief beneath Herodotus' portrayal as does this thesis.

⁷³ Herodotus' gods are universal, and cultures only differ by worship: Harrison 2000: 212, Parker 1996: 159, Rudhardt 2002: 175-80.

⁷⁴ Analogy from Harrison 2000: 212. See also Rudhardt 2002: 178.

⁷⁵ Unified belief with different cultic practices: Gould, J. 1994: 103, Harrison 2000: 209, Rudhardt 2002: 172, 180.

different but overlapping epithets: Herodotus mostly imagines these as referring to the same gods.⁷⁶ The famous passage in respect of names of the gods is 2.50:⁷⁷

The names of nearly all of the gods came to Greece from Egypt. I know from the inquiries I have made that they came from abroad, and it seems most likely that it was from Egypt, for the names of all the gods have been known in Egypt from the beginning of time, with the exception (as I have already said) of Poseidon and the Dioscuri – and also of Hera, Hestia, Themis, the Graces, and Nereids. I have the authority of the Egyptians themselves for this. I think that the gods of whom they profess no knowledge were named by the Pelasgians – with the exception of Poseidon, of whom they learned from the Libyans; for the Libyans are the only people who have always known Poseidon's name, and always worshipped him. Heroes have no place in the religion of Egypt. These practices, then, and others of which I will speak later, were borrowed by the Greeks from Egypt. This is not the case, however, with the Greek custom of making images of Hermes with the phallus erect; it was the Athenians who first took this from the Pelasgians, and from the Athenians the custom spread to the rest of Greece.⁷⁸

In this passage, it seems that for Herodotus there is only one set of gods universal to all cultures, though different cultures are differently aware of them.

But elsewhere in the *Histories* the idea of universal gods is heavily problematised. Herodotus' solution to the dilemma was very much in line with unknowability: his gods are simultaneously both universal and local. The universalising principle is frequently subverted by Herodotus, as foreign gods are sometimes identified as entirely unique deities, even when

⁷⁶ Universal gods: e.g. Zeus is known as Ammon: Hdt 2.42, 1.182, 4.181; Zeus as Bel-Marduk: 1.181, 3.158, Zeus as the Persian god: 1.131; Demeter is known as Isis: Hdt 2.123, 2.156; Alilat the Arabian goddess, Mylitta the Assyrian goddess and Hator the Egyptian goddess are all Aphrodite: 1.131, 4.59, 1.105, 2.41; Mendes is Pan: 2.46.4, and Melqart the Tyrian is Herakles: Hdt 2.44. On referring to the same gods: Zeus Purifier, Protector of the Hearth, and Protector of Friends, with different epithets, but explicitly emphasising they are the same god: Hdt 2.53, 1.44; cf. Hom. *Il.* 15.187-193, Hes. *Theog.* 112-38. Asheri et al. 2007: 107, Versnel 2011: 73, 77, 105. Subversion by Herodotus: Harrison 2000: 213; cf. Linforth 1926: 13.

⁷⁷ Direct equations between gods are also made at Hdt 1.131.3, 1.216.4, 2.29.7, 3.8.3, 4.59.2, and 5.7, for instance.

⁷⁸ Hdt 2.50.

cross-attribution with Greek equivalents appears quite natural.⁷⁹ Additionally, as Harrison has recognised, while foreign gods are often imagined as the same gods as those of the Greeks, ‘a clear line is drawn at worshipping foreign gods’ in Herodotus: foreigners who worship Greek gods suffer misfortune.⁸⁰ Acceptable interaction with foreign gods seems to have been restricted to using their oracles, and respecting them and their boundaries.⁸¹ For Harrison, disruptions to the messy picture of a relativism based on universal divinity and localised differences in custom are only ‘qualified’; it is a lapse, where this universal principle is ‘momentarily forgotten’.⁸² While it is clear that on one level Herodotus followed a principle of universal gods, he also feels quite comfortable dealing with gods as localised. It is not simply a failure of consistency or a universal principle being subverted, but a matter of different competing conceptions of the divine. Herodotus selects the approach that best helps him solve the theological or practical problem he is confronted with at different points in his history. It is his underlying recognition of unknowability that allows him to do this. Herodotus’ individual views were complex enough, but there is no reason to believe they were an unusual way of dealing with theological issues of this type.

⁷⁹ The universalising principle is subverted when, for instance, the Apis is described as god of the Egyptians, despite Cambyses’ injury at 3.64.3, i.e. his involvement in Persian affairs; see also 1.172.2: the Caunians remove ‘foreign cults’ and worship only ancestral deities. 5.102 and 9.119.1: Cybebe and Pleistorus are described as local gods, even though Cybebe had an established identification with Demeter, the Great Mother, and Aphrodite: see Charon of Lampsacus *FrGH* 262 F5; Edwards 1993, Harrison 2000: 216, Robertson 1996: 304. Hdt 1.131: Persians originally sacrificed to the sun, moon, earth, fire, water, and winds, but later adopted worship of a number of more recognisable deities; Rudhardt 2002: 176. 1.87.3, and 1.90.2: Apollo is god of the Greeks for Croesus even though he honours him himself; 5.49.3 (Aristagoras), 9.90.2 (Hegesistratus), 5.92-3 (Socles): appeals by foreigners using Greek gods or common gods as witnesses to entreat Greeks; 4.108.2: non-Greeks (Budini) worship Greek gods. These are complicating statements that reinforce the idea of ‘Greek’ and ‘Foreign’ gods, even when foreigners worship Greek gods etc, as in Burkert 1990: 24-5, Harrison 2000: 215.

⁸⁰ Harrison 2000: 217-8. Hdt 4.79.2: The Scythian king Scyles, who is killed; 7.43.2: Xerxes’ worship of the Trojan Athena and heroes of Troy which resulted in a ‘panic attack’; and 4.76.3-5: Anacharsis the Scythian and his death as a result of the vow to create a festival of the mother of the gods. Rudhardt 2002: 185.

⁸¹ Respect: Hdt 6.97: Datis does not intend to harm Delphi and is shocked they thought he would, instead leaving 300 talents of frankincense on the altar; 6.118: Datis returns the golden statue of Apollo from Delium to Delos with instructions for them to return it; Oracles: 1.157-8: Mazares consults a Greek oracle at Branchidae; 1.13: Gyges’ offerings at Delphi; 1.51: Croesus’ offerings at Delphi, etc.

⁸² Harrison 2000: 214.

A third way in which unknowability protected Greek conceptions of the gods was in theodicy: making the motivations of the gods indeterminate and indeterminable made their justice and morality equally unimpugnable. By avoiding attributing negative aspects or events in the world to specific gods Greeks could avoid blaming them for injustice. This was already partially observed in Chapter Four, where the focus was on how Greeks could avoid blaming a ‘good’ god by instead blaming specific malevolent gods for negative events or injustice. Here the emphasis is on how Greeks avoided blaming any specific god at all by simply blaming ‘the divine’. The attribution of malevolent agency to nonspecific ‘gods’ was useful in avoiding blaming a specific deity, and thus risking incurring their wrath, while still identifying or at least implying explanation of the agency behind a certain negative action.⁸³

There are countless examples of nonspecificity in attributing negative agency to the gods, to avoid the impiety of blaming specific gods for misfortune. In the *Antigone*, Creon claims that ‘a god’ has leapt on his head.⁸⁴ Tecmessa, Trojan captive of Ajax in Sophocles’ *Ajax*, remarks of her change of status into slavery that ‘such, I suppose, was the gods’ will’.⁸⁵ In *Oedipus at Colonus* Oedipus conjectures that his past actions were the will of the gods, ‘who perhaps had long felt anger against my family’.⁸⁶ In Euripides’ *Phoenician Women* Oedipus says that he cannot believe his own actions were his own, performed without the intervention of ‘some one of the gods’.⁸⁷ Later in the play, Oedipus observes that each person must submit to their fate, enduring the necessities that come from ‘the gods’.⁸⁸ This unwillingness to blame individual gods for bad things is not only the case in the imagined

⁸³ Likewise the Hippocratic *On the Sacred Disease* esp. 5, as argued by Martin, D. 2004: 41-3, where the author avoids attributing specific diseases to the agency of specific gods, but insists on the ultimate divinity of diseases as a whole, as a consequence of the divine makeup of the natural world.

⁸⁴ Soph. *Ant.* 1273.

⁸⁵ Soph. *Aj* 487-90.

⁸⁶ Soph. *OC* 964-5.

⁸⁷ Actions not his own: Eur. *Ph.* 1612-14. The chorus state that a murderous one of gods was responsible for the Sphinx, Eur. *Ph.* 1031-2. Jocasta complains about the situation she finds herself in, having given birth to Oedipus and then married him, and blames ‘some god’, *theon tis*; Eur. *Ph.* 379-81, see also 1579 ‘the god who brings this to pass’ – for bringing about the destruction of Oedipus’ family, just as The fulfilment of Oedipus’ curse through the death of his sons Eteocles and Polyneices was fulfilled likewise through the actions or will of ‘a god’ or ‘the gods’: 1426: τὰς σὰς δ’ ἀρὰς ἔουκεν ἐκπλήσαι θεός; 69-70: τὸ δ’ ἐς φόβον πεσόντε, μὴ τελεσφόρους εὐχὰς θεοὶ κραινώσιν οἰκούντων ὁμοῦ. Mikalson 1991: 22-5.

⁸⁸ Eur. *Ph.* 1763, 382.

worlds of tragedy, but also apparent in the way that Greeks dealt with real events. Demosthenes attributed the outcome of Chaeronea – the decisive battle in 338BC in which the Greek city states were defeated by Macedonian Philip II – in part, to ‘the god(s)’.⁸⁹ In Xenophon’s *Hellenica* the power balance as a result of Mantinea in 362BC – a key battle between the Spartan and Theban forces in which the Thebans won a tactical victory but lost their dominant general Epaminondas, and had to sue for peace, thereby losing the opportunity to form a hegemony – is attributed to ‘the god’.⁹⁰ In such instances, consistent across a variety of historical and mythological worlds, the god or gods who intervened are not specified, nor how they intervened, or whether it was simply fate, which helps to muddy any potential impiety involved in imagining divine injustice further.

So, there was an unwillingness to attribute negative aspects to specific gods, and while individuals are often able to recognise divine will at play, they can do so in a non-specific manner that avoids confronting the problem of blaming specific unjust gods. Blaming a specific god for misfortune risked angering the gods, and was perhaps impious (especially if the attribution was wrong). This is best illustrated by Croesus in the passage of Herodotus about his downfall, mentioned briefly in the last chapter (p.166).⁹¹ Famously pious Croesus loses faith in the support of the gods and blames Apollo (who he calls ‘god of Delphi’) for his misfortune, as it was due to his oracle that Croesus went to war with Cyrus. Croesus is corrected and rebuked by Apollo, via the oracle, for blaming Apollo, who had delayed his misfortune. It is incorrect and inappropriate to blame the gods, even when it seems like they are to blame, because it is not possible to understand entirely their machinations.

The limits of piety: atheistic agnosticism

The existence of the gods is, in fact, a significant jump from many of the other forms of unknowability, which are largely concerned with the nature of the gods. It is on this distinction – nature vs existence – that both the difference between atheism and theism, and between the piety and impiety of unknowability expressions, seems to rest. It was already observed that unknowability allowed for safe criticism of religion, to a certain degree, but there were limits. Unknowability in the Greek world goes beyond Greek religion: it was a

⁸⁹ Dem. 18.192-4.

⁹⁰ Xen. *Hell.* 7.5.26.

⁹¹ Hdt 1.87, 90.

central part of the scientific and theological thought of intellectuals in the fifth-century. E. R. Dodds, writer of the still-influential 1951 work on *Greeks and the Irrational*, argued for the depth of unknowability in Greek intellectual thought: the ‘honest distinction between what is knowable and what is not’, Dodds argues, ‘appears again and again in fifth-century thought, and is surely one of its chief glories; it is the foundation of scientific humility.’⁹² For Dodds, unknowability was a scientific principle that might have softened some of the barbs of intellectual critiques of the divine by casting them in a frame of theological (rather than an atheistic) humility. So unknowability was an idea that linked views about the gods across the spectrum of (un)belief. This means that atheistic criticisms embedded in critiques of unknowability sometimes look remarkably similar to pious theistic ones. Certainly, unknowability offers the ultimate theistic protection against criticism, but this is done through agnosticism, which can be an aspect of atheistic thought as well.

The most important boundary between theism and atheism can be found in the jump, made by sixth- and fifth-century philosophers, from unknowability of the nature of the gods to unknowability of their existence. By this time it was common in Greek philosophy to challenge the potential knowledge of mankind about everything (including the divine) based on the relativity of conception or unreliability of human sources of knowledge.⁹³ The real breakthrough in relativity, applying the principle of uncertainty to the nature of the gods, came with Xenophanes. Xenophanes famously said of the gods that ‘horses would draw pictures of gods like horses, and oxen of gods like oxen, and they would make the bodies (of their gods) in accordance with the form that each species itself possesses.’⁹⁴ Xenophanes did not directly or explicitly undermine the existence of gods (in the fragments of his work that remain); his comment is instead on the limitations of human knowledge about them, which is also revealed in his rejection of the ancient authorities on the gods like Homer.⁹⁵ The gods, for Xenophanes, were perceived differently by different individuals: they were difficult to conceptualise, and the limits of the human capacity precluded true knowledge of them.

Heraclitus, the late sixth to early fifth century Ephesian philosopher, and later contemporary of Xenophanes, was perhaps most insistent about the unreliability of the senses

⁹² Dodds 1951: 181, quoted in Harrison 2007b: 139.

⁹³ Greek philosophy complicates the attributes of the gods: Sedley 1983: 16.

⁹⁴ Xenophanes F32 B15, Graham 2010: 109-10.

⁹⁵ Xenophanes F29 B11, Graham 2010: 109.

and the equal (lack of) knowledge of men, and he also applied the principle of uncertainty to the gods.⁹⁶ Heraclitus famously remarked that ‘the lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither reveals nor conceals’: true knowledge of the divine was impossible, even when apparently receiving knowledge from them.⁹⁷ Heraclitus likewise criticised not just Homer and Hesiod, but Pythagoras, Archilochus, Xenophanes himself, and other supposed authorities on the gods, claiming the equal basis of all men in wisdom (i.e. that they were equally unwise).⁹⁸ It has long been argued that Heraclitus insisted on unknowability in defence of his conception of the divine.⁹⁹ Fränkel had already identified in 1938 that the idea of unknowability and the limits of metaphysical perception was built into Heraclitus’ conception of the relative power and imperfection of men compared to gods.¹⁰⁰ Heraclitus used the principle of uncertainty to fill out his cosmological and theological theory rather than to undermine the gods.

By the fifth century it was common for philosophers to argue that the knowledge gained from our experience of the world was limited or faulty. Empedocles would later lament the equality of men in their lack of knowledge: ‘each believing only that which he happened to confront, as they are driven everywhere, <every one> claims to have found the whole. Thus these things are neither beheld by men’.¹⁰¹ For Empedocles there were fundamental limits on mortal understanding, and each person only possessed partial knowledge, no matter their certainty of their own worldview. Democritus continued to argue into the fourth century that there were limits to human sensory knowledge, Sextus Empiricus records: ‘in reality we do not understand what the nature of each thing is <or> is not’, and his pupil Metrodorus famously claimed that ‘none of us knows anything, not even whether we

⁹⁶ The unreliability of the senses and means of gaining knowledge: esp. Heraclitus F22, Sext. Emp., *Math.*, 7.126, Graham 2010: 149. F3, F4, F6, F7, F19, F20, F21, F22, F23, from Graham 2010: 135-96.

⁹⁷ Graham 2010: 178-9, F152 [107]; see also F153 [108].

⁹⁸ Criticism of the poets, on people/authorities knowing nothing: F1, F9, F10: ‘Learning many things does not teach understanding. Else it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, as well as Xenophanes and Hecataeus’, F11, F12, F13, F14a, 14b, 15. On the equal wisdom of men: F17: ‘All men have a share in self-knowledge and sound thinking’, F18, F26: ‘Of all those theories I have heard, not one has attained to a knowledge of what the wise is separate from everything else’.

⁹⁹ Burkert 1985: 309 wrote that Heraclitus ‘combines radical criticism with the claim for a deeper piety’. Osborne, C. 1997: 40 concludes generally that Heraclitus does not ridicule religious practices. Adomenas 1999 argued that Heraclitus was not a reformer but an interpreter.

¹⁰⁰ Fränkel 1974 [1938]: 214-20.

¹⁰¹ Empedocles F3, Sextus, *Math.*, 7.123-4.

know anything or not'.¹⁰² Heraclitus, Empedocles, Democritus, and Xenophanes certainly shared the foundation of their criticism of conceptions of the gods in unknowability, and the ideas of any of these philosophers was developed along sceptical and atheistic lines.

Protagoras was the first to pick up this idea about the unreliability of knowledge and develop it to its next natural step: atheism. In the opening to his *About the Gods*, which is the only fragment of this work that survives, he says:

Concerning the gods, I cannot ascertain whether they do or do not exist, or what sort of form they take; for there are many obstacles to knowing, including the obscurity of the subject, and the brevity of human life.¹⁰³

Protagoras here offers an unusually precise statement of a principle that was normally left to the individual to surmise: not only were the features and form of the gods unknowable, but their very existence might also be as well. As a clear statement of agnostic atheism, Protagoras' opening comment was perceived as radically impious, whatever Protagoras later elucidated in his now-lost work.

Protagoras may have (intentionally or unintentionally) crossed a line into impiety by reflecting on the actual existence of the gods, and not simply their features or nature.¹⁰⁴ According to Diogenes and Eusebius, as observed in Chapter Three, Protagoras was prosecuted and executed for impiety, primarily on the basis of his notorious opening sentence (quoted above).¹⁰⁵ A comment by Herodotus, 'whence each of the gods came to be, or whether all of them always existed, and what sort of form they take, they did not know until yesterday or the day before, so to speak', bears a striking similarity to Protagoras' comment.¹⁰⁶ Most interesting is the way in which Herodotus' comment is different: Protagoras says he does not know about the existence of the gods, but Herodotus says he does (despite the Greeks not having always known). Herodotus neuters the proposition at the core

¹⁰² Democritus: F136 32a, F33-7, F40, Graham 2010: 594-7. Metrodorus: DK 70 B1, Euseb. *PE* 14.19.9; Sedley 1983: 14.

¹⁰³ Prot. F3, Graham 2010: 696-7.

¹⁰⁴ As De Romilly 2002: 105-6 argues.

¹⁰⁵ Protagoras accusation: Euseb. *PE* 14.3, 7, DL 9.54; see Dover 1988: 136, Parker 1996: 204-10.

¹⁰⁶ Hdt 2.53.1; cf. Prot. F3, in Graham 2010: 706-7; on the comparison between the fragment of Protagoras and Herodotus see Burkert 1985: 131, Scullion 2006: 201. De Romilly 1992: 221 observed the 'convergences in their thought'.

of Protagoras' argument, effectively writing out unknowability about the current existence of the gods, and instead replacing it with a fairly straightforward comment about the origin of knowledge, warping Protagoras' potentially dangerous comment into a relatively tame epistemological remark with a pious pedigree. On the piety of exploring human opinions about the gods, Plato's Socrates observed:

let us make a kind of announcement to the gods, saying that we are not going to investigate about them – for we do not claim to be able to do that – but about men, and let us inquire what thought men had in giving them their names; for in that there is no impiety.¹⁰⁷

So perhaps another distinction that marks the line between impiety and piety (and also perceived, if not actual, theism and atheism) is in investigating human opinions about the gods versus investigating the gods themselves. Unknowability is useful, in a religious or theological sense, only in so far as it protects the proposition of god's existence: it is not appropriate to use it to question the existence of the divine itself. Like Protagoras, Herodotus accepts the equality of men in (lack of) knowledge about the gods, but instead of atheism, Herodotus turns this principle to a defence against impiety.

In fact, avoiding the impiety of investigating too much into the divine is an important aspect of Herodotus' approach. Herodotus offers two statements in Book Two that demonstrate his reluctance to deal with 'divine things'. First, he explains that he will not relate information on Egyptian belief and theology, beyond 'the mere names of their deities, because I believe that all men are equally knowledgeable about them', which is a comment strongly reminiscent of the philosophical observations of Heraclitus and the philosophers. Secondly, he explains that 'a discussion of divine things is a subject I particularly wish to avoid – any slight mention I have already made of such matters was forced upon me by the needs of my story'.¹⁰⁸ By these statements, Herodotus seems to mean that he will not discuss theology, though he will discuss rituals for anthropological reasons. He does not discuss the Mysteries of Osiris, or those at Eleusis; he refuses to relate the reason why the Egyptians

¹⁰⁷ Pl. *Cra.* 401a.

¹⁰⁸ Hdt 2.3.2, 65.2; see Burkert 1985: 131, 1990: 24-9, Scullion 2006: 200 for discussion of Herodotus' avoidance of discussing divine things.

sacrifice swine at their festival, or to give the name of a person subject to the highest status of embalming; just as he refuses to mention the name of a dead man later in the text.¹⁰⁹

Herodotus does not discuss theology because he believes it is impious, instead insisting that the gods are not knowable. A number of scholars have wrongly dismissed Herodotus' own explanation of his avoidance: the desire to avoid impiety.¹¹⁰ Mikalson and Lateiner both suggested that the cause of Herodotus' self-enforced silence is one of investigative plausibility. There is definitely some truth to this: beliefs are not easily investigated or translatable between cultures; rituals are much simpler to investigate and describe, so Herodotus is able to record them.¹¹¹ The difficulty in investigating beliefs is also an expression of unknowability, and it is entirely in line with Herodotus' explanation: his desire to avoid impiety.¹¹² As Harrison has argued, Herodotus does not believe that investigation into the divine is worthless; he just believes that certain knowledge is impossible, and claiming too much knowledge is impious.¹¹³ The governing tenet of Herodotus' approach to religion in the *Histories* is unknowability, or theistic agnosticism.

Conclusion

Unknowability was a shared theological and critical discourse that served as a safe platform for criticism of religion. Unknowability, it has been argued, is the key context in which agnosticism is explored: this was a massive part of the Greek discourse on the divine, and engagement in it could take both theistic and atheistic forms. The flexibility of Greek polytheism allowed for acceptance of different areas of discourse, folding sceptical ideas into a safe religious context, and thus simultaneously constraining and 'liberating a scientific

¹⁰⁹ Osiris and Eleusis: 2.171.1-2; Egyptian swine: 2.47.2; embalming: 2.86.2; dead man: 2.170.1.

¹¹⁰ Scholars dismissed Herodotus' desire to avoid impiety: e.g. Lateiner 1989: 65, or more recently Scullion 2006: 200. When Herodotus declines to provide more information on the Samothracian mysteries, his own religiosity is implied. Gould is correct to assume that Herodotus was himself an initiate of the Samothracian mysteries; it appears as if Herodotus chose to imply this to the reader: Hdt 2.51; Gould, J. 1994: 92.

¹¹¹ Mikalson 2002: 198, Lateiner 1989: 64-7; on investigative plausibility see also Gould, J. 1994: 94, Harrison 2000: 191.

¹¹² The pious hesitation to talk about beliefs because they are difficult to investigate is also quite reminiscent of Socrates' reluctance to talk about the gods, for fear of angering them, in Pl. *Cra.* 407d-e. Pulleyn 1994: 24 argued that Herodotus is concerned to avoid divulging mysteries.

¹¹³ Harrison 2000: 182-90.

mentality' and criticism (within reason) of religion, as Harrison has argued.¹¹⁴ These critics were as much theologians as they were sceptics: there is rarely any easy distinction. Arguments about unknowability did not coincide with 'an atheism with no illusions', as Rubel puts it; different philosophers might have taken different views with regard to the existence of the gods.¹¹⁵ For instance, Plato's Socrates was clear that his views about the gods, especially his antagonism towards traditional fixed poetic depictions, were in defence of religion, but the views of the historical Socrates were evidently suspect to the Athenians who put him to death.¹¹⁶ There were clearly limits to acceptable forms of unknowability: critiques of the gods based on this principle could only go so far before being perceived as unacceptably impious. Just as there were those like Socrates, there were equally figures like Protagoras and Democritus, who earned statuses as atheists in antiquity (which they contested with varied enthusiasm) by barbed criticisms of the Greek conceptions of gods based on unknowability.¹¹⁷

Unknowability has sometimes been perceived as a weakness of Greek theology, as in Sedley above (p.187). Others, like Nilsson, went even further, and argued that references to 'the gods' as a general and non-specific collective in the criticisms of the fifth century, in particular those of the injustice and immorality of the gods, led to a widespread doubt, and argued that statements of unknowability marked that belief in the gods of Greek religion was in decline.¹¹⁸ In many ways, the opposite is the case. This study of unknowability has revealed a thriving critical milieu, and one that incorporated elements of atheistic and theistic agnosticism. Our study has equally shown the theological significance of unknowability, and how it was deployed as part of the response to criticism. This reveals a vigorous engagement and investment in Greek religion. The unknowability of the gods – the principle of uncertainty – was the most powerful defence against criticism from within and without that developed in Greek religion. Statements of unknowability could be part of a powerful theodicy and articulation of pious belief in the gods.

¹¹⁴ Harrison 2007b: 139.

¹¹⁵ 'atheism with no illusions': Rubel 2014: 21.

¹¹⁶ Defence of religion: *Pl. Ap.* 30a; on Socrates as the gadfly: *Ap.* 30e; gift from god: *Ap.* 31a.

¹¹⁷ For a discussion of the reputations of these, see Chapter Three.

¹¹⁸ Belief in decline: Nilsson 1940: 112, 94, 115, 1948: 66-70, 1964: 260-2. On references to the nonspecific 'gods' as a symptom of decline specifically, see 1948:116. See response in Mikalson 1983: 110-12.

How is it possible to interpret each statement of unknowability, as theistic or atheistic? Context is usually important. The distinguishing factor between a staunch agnostic theist like Saint Augustine and an equally committed agnostic atheist like the twentieth century philosopher Bertrand Russell is in their statements about their own beliefs. But plain statements of belief or unbelief are extremely rare in the Greek world. This is partly a consequence of the often-fragmentary records that remain, but it is also due to the absence of a language of theological distinction in Greece, namely between secular and sacred, theism and atheism, and agnosticism. The central distinction between agnostic atheism and agnostic theism in the Greek world depended on precisely what was viewed as unknowable. The vast majority of expressions of unknowability were acceptable forms of expression about the divine. But there was a line in which these became unacceptable, which varied depending on context and speaker. It was associated with the jump from the specific to general: from specific difficulties in identification of a god, or observing the impossibility of knowledge of names or attributes, to general uncertainty about their existence as a whole. Insisting that the very existence of the gods is unknowable is categorically, not just qualitatively, different from insisting that the name of a god is unknowable. The difference is that one sustains the existence of the gods regardless of the knowledge of specifics, and the other does not: it is between belief and unbelief.

6. The Other: superstition and the impact of scepticism on other beliefs (and vice versa)

This chapter explores the ways in which atheism began to be conceived as an ‘other’ that was set against, and helped to define, normative religion in Greek society. The first section explores the nature of legitimate and illegitimate religion. There were many forms of extra- or para-religious beliefs and behaviours, including atheism, but also magic, belief in ghosts, curses, and necromancy. It is impossible to define these practices accurately and non-tautologically, as has been recognised in the scholarship on magic: they are practices that broadly shared the practical techniques and conceptual backdrop of religion, but can be grouped in a distinct category as practices that were, in some contexts, subject to prejudice and caricature as ‘illegitimate’ or ‘superstitious’. The focus here will be on the attitudes towards those practices, or ‘caricatures’, more than the practices and beliefs themselves. The second section demonstrates that these beliefs and behaviours all played a significant part in ordinary Greek life, but they were perceived as differently ‘legitimate’ by different individuals. Here the thesis is first proposed that thinking through ‘illegitimate’ religion allowed individuals to construct and reinforce their own understanding of ‘right’ religion in an environment that often lacked more concrete guidance about appropriate ways to behave and think.

The third section explores the oppositional tradition through which superstition and atheism were perceived as equivalent. This tradition has informed our modern approaches to religion, and can be traced back to the Greeks. Superstition was one of the categories through which the Greeks defined the religious ‘other’. Through the tradition of writing on ‘superstition’, it is possible to explore the way in which both atheism and superstition were paired as symbols of alterity, as extreme and inappropriate attitudes to the gods, and caricatured to some extent as equivalent or allied phenomena. As a result, it will be argued in the fourth and final section, though criticism of ‘superstition’ was key to developing religious identity, those who engaged in such criticism had to navigate the appropriate levels and types of criticism, and avoid a broader scepticism of the supernatural. This scepticism was a distinct category from other forms of atheistic scepticism, and was about exploring and reinforcing one’s own beliefs through opposition.

The legitimacy of beliefs and practices

Some background to the scholarship on Greek religion is necessary to understand the role of ‘illegitimate’ religion in the way that we, and the Greeks, conceptualised their world. This is fundamentally important for developing the distinction between real practices and imagined conceptions of these practices. In the scholarship on Greek religion one often encounters the distinction between ‘official religion’ and ‘unofficial’ forms of religion. Monographs that discuss religion only take a cursory glance at topics like ‘magic’, cordon it off in a lone chapter at the end (as it has been here, partly to embrace its ‘otherness’), or restrict study on these to a separate volume, in much the same way that they do atheism.¹ This is, for the most part, the result of a distinct history of scholarship on religion, especially in anthropology. Even the terms commonly used to examine subjects like ‘magic’ are contentious. In the same way that the term ‘atheism’ implies various forms of prejudice (as seen especially in Chapter Two), and the appropriateness of its use has engendered a great deal of discussion, terms like ‘magic’, ‘folklore’, ‘occult’ and ‘mysticism’ are all commonly used, but are problematic. They are anachronistic ‘semantic traps’: that is to say they are insufficiently incisive words for ‘unsanctioned religious activity’.² ‘Magic’ – a word which is used to refer to everything from divination to cursing – is the biggest source of contention for the debate over the tradition and definition of ‘unofficial’ beliefs and practices. This tradition has involved creating and insisting on a clear and hard distinction between religion and forms of behaviours and beliefs that are not religion; this is a distinction that cannot be sustained.

‘The scholarly literature’, anthropologists M. and R. Wax observed, ‘contains two principal approaches to the definition and study of magic: an intellectual and a moral’.³ By this they refer to (the legacy of) nineteenth-century Christian-influence anthropological discussions of para-theistic forms of belief like ‘magic’, ‘the occult’, or ‘superstition’.⁴

¹ Kindt 2012: 90-122 has an excellent discussion of the exclusion of ‘magic’ and other ‘unofficial’ forms from discussions on religion. It being ‘cordoned off at the end’ here is appropriate, since this chapter is about marginality.

² On magic as a ‘semantic trap’ see Wax and Wax, 1963: 495-518; on the history of association between science and religion, see Hammond 1970: 1349-56; on magic and religion as non-separate, Winkelmann 1982: 37-66; on the cultural prejudice against magic and the role of magic as a coherent theoretical worldview, Graf 1997: 188. Anachronistic: Luck 2006: 33. Phillips 1997: 262 has magic as ‘unsanctioned’.

³ Wax and Wax 1963: 495.

⁴ This legacy is only one of many such attempts at demarcation over the centuries: see Tambiah 1990 for a much broader perspective.

Discussions of these were underscored by the desire to distinguish religion, which is perceived as intrinsically positive, from all forms of not-religion (including atheism), which are perceived as equally negative.⁵ In the tradition of nineteenth-century anthropology, magic is *Urdummheit* (primordial stupidity) and is intellectually inferior to scientific and intellectual thought, unlike religion which is a stepping stone to rationality.⁶ This was the perspective of James Frazer, one of the founding fathers of anthropology, who argued that magic differed from religion as threats and coercion against the gods, while religion was humble prayer. Yet Greek practitioners of magic not only made curses or spells (*epodai*), but also prayers (*euchai*); both aimed to persuade (*peithein*) the gods, as Plato's Stranger observed.⁷ As Graf has argued, coercion is the last resort of the Greek magician, and not the rule, as is codified in the (albeit chronologically much later) *Greek Magical Papyri*.⁸

Another distinction used to resolve the (im)piety of magic is between 'black' (bad) and 'white' (good) magic, but this distinction does not work for the Greeks either. Magic could be used for healing and helping or destroying and killing: the intent differed, but the practices were similar.⁹ Curse tablets and lead, clay, or wax figurines were melted or pierced with needles used 'contagious' magic (the destruction of part of the intended victim's body with the aim of impacting the whole) to restrain or control their victim.¹⁰ But there were no clear 'black magic' practices, and (sometimes the same) people could use a variety of techniques for different purposes. These were agonistic tools: rarely used to harm seriously, but instead to solve a variety of interpersonal issues, from love to business rivalry.¹¹ They were not either 'good' or 'evil'. Likewise, drugs could be used for positive or negative effects

⁵ Betz 1997b: 244 and Versnel 2003: 910 argue that the negative connotations of magic need combating. See also Tambiah 1990: 4-41 on the history of demarcation of religion from science and magic as individual domains.

⁶ Phillips 1997: 266-8, and Betz 1997b: 245-9 discuss *Urdummheit* and the history of prejudicial scholarship on magic. Tambiah 1990: 8-11.

⁷ Pl. *Laws* 10.909b. Luck 2006: 34. On Frazer's influence on magical scholarship see Graf 1997: 188-9.

⁸ Graf 1997: 194.

⁹ Luck 2006: 33.

¹⁰ Theoc. 2.53-7. 'Voodoo' dolls: Pl. *Laws*, 11.933b; see Ogden 2002: n.236-47, for examples of voodoo dolls. Versnel 2003: 909.

¹¹ E.g. see Ogden 2002: n.239, a binding love spell. Eidinow 2007: 154, 173, Faraone 1991: 165-6, 189-90.

or purposes.¹² Ultimately, all distinctions between religion and other para-theistic beliefs like magic rest on fundamentally faulty premises, by conflating attitudes towards practices and the practices themselves, and are not sustained in the Greek evidence. In fact, many of these ‘unofficial’ beliefs and practices were a routine part of the Greek religious landscape.

The traditional exclusion of ‘unofficial’ religion informed the *polis*-centric model of religion. The Polis Religion model was discussed in the Introduction, where it was observed that while it is useful for many different types of studies, Polis Religion is very problematic. The key issue with the Polis Religion model is that it involves the marginalisation of ‘unofficial’ practices, which is a particular problem for any thesis like this one, in which the subject is a ‘marginal’ phenomenon, but the side-lining of certain forms of religion is also a more general issue in scholarship that has skewed our understanding of the broader shape of Greek religious thought and practice.¹³ The use of the Polis Religion model to examine religion and magic by scholars has thus proven problematic.¹⁴ Conceiving of Greek religion from the perspective of Polis Religion, the lack of state involvement in policing magic is bewildering. In isolation, magic was not strictly illegal in Athenian law. The legal actions in Athens against *asebeia* did not expressly include magic, and while there were laws against specific activities and one could still be punished for committing a crime using magic (e.g. murder via *pharmaka*), there was no general ban against ‘magic’.¹⁵

Probably the clearest example of a prosecuted magic-user is Theoris, who was prosecuted in Athens some time before 338BC for selling incantations (*epoidai*) and drugs (*pharmaka*), and was executed alongside her whole family.¹⁶ Scholars have variously argued

¹² Even in the *Odyssey*, Circe uses a harmful drug to turn the men into pigs and later a healing one to cure them: *pharmaka*, drugs, has a range of potential meanings in the *Odyssey*. Hom. *Od.* 10.385- 97. Scarborough 1997: 139. Range of meanings are explained in Hom. *Od.* 4.230: Helen was given the use of drugs by the gods, which can be both healing or damaging; see Scarborough 1997: 139, n.14 for more specific examples of bad or good drugs. Versnel 2003: 909.

¹³ On this marginalisation see esp. Woolf 1997.

¹⁴ See e.g. Parker 2011: 259-62 on magic.

¹⁵ Phillips 1997: 262-5. Crimes using magic could be prosecuted in the Areopagos according to [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 57.3 or possibly through *graphē asebeias* e.g. Plut. *Dem.* 14.4 and [Dem.] 25.79-83; Eidinow 2007: 152, n.69, 2010: 12.

¹⁶ Dem. 25.79–80. Likewise Aesop *Fables* 56 (Perry): a woman (witch) claims she can placate the anger of the gods with incantations and was taken to court for *asebeia*. Eidinow 2010: 11-13; Luck 2006: 102.

that she was charged with homicide by poison, or planning to commit it, or perhaps for a broader impiety.¹⁷ Theoris' trial does not reveal a clear distinction between legitimate and illegitimate practice or belief. In fact, Julia Kindt has insightfully suggested Theoris' trial may represent an attempt to create a clearer division between magic, as illegitimate, and religion, as legitimate: 'to draw the line between religion and magic, between acceptable and unacceptable religious practices and religious power with the help of the law courts'.¹⁸ Although according to Plato's *Meno* Athens was less inclined than other *poleis* to prosecute magic users, there seems to have been very little inclination to control or regulate magic in the Greek world in general (in the Classical period at least).¹⁹ As Phillips observes, the 'desire to know the future or levitate or heal was not necessarily criminal; but who tried it, in what ways, for what reasons, and at what times could make it so.'²⁰

The division between 'official' and 'unofficial' can be complicated even further. Many 'official' rituals incorporated elements of other para-theistic supernatural beliefs. Mystery cults, which were a part of every-day religion for most Greeks, included magical practices and beliefs, for instance. At Eleusis the story of the fire ritual through which the king's son (Demophon or Triptolemos) had been made immortal was a central component of the mythos of the secret Mysteries.²¹ At Eleusis there were also practiced magical practices like purifications and an oath of secrecy.²² Likewise, as Betz has argued, the Orphic tablets, which offer an invaluable panorama of information on initiates of cults like the Mysteries, include symbols (*sumbola*), formula (*sunthēmata*), and quotations which, as Betz observes, 'cannot be understood without the assumptions of magic'.²³ While magic involved 'inversions' of authority and sacred objects, so did 'official' religious practices, like the 'Cheese Race' discussed in Chapter One.²⁴ Conditional curses were popular and respectable,

¹⁷ Homicide: Collins 2001: 488-9, MacDowell 1999: 60. Impiety: Eidinow 2016b: 42-3.

¹⁸ Kindt 2012: 117.

¹⁹ *Meno* 80a-b, observes that other cities than Athens would have considered Socrates a magician. See Ogden 2002: 275-76; Collins 2008: 133, Phillips 1997: 262. Eidinow 2007: 152. Versnel 1991a: 62-3: argues secrecy about indicates shame not illegality; Faraone 1997: 17 argues secrecy was to avoid averting the curse.

²⁰ Phillips 1997: 266.

²¹ Fire ritual: hDem 226-91.

²² See Betz 1997b: 250 and Versnel 2003: 910 for more discussion on magic in mystery cults.

²³ Betz 1997b: 250. On the tablets: Bernabé and Cristóbal 2008: 1-8.

²⁴ Ducat 2006: 253 and Kennell 1995: 128

and used for everything from gravestones to official contexts; for instance, the Athenian assembly was introduced with a curse on wrongdoers, or those who had been bribed to speak.²⁵

On the other hand, many ‘unofficial’ practices and beliefs (those outside the standard modes of the *polis*) were common, acceptable, and performed similar functions to ‘official’ types. In the Greek world, ‘shamans’ performed similar functions to oracles – the ‘official’ form of contact with the gods in Greek religion.²⁶ The Greek shaman detached his soul from his body so that he could speak with the gods in their own language, make predictions, and gain insight from obscure dreams, as well as harnessing powers over the natural world, and performing initiations at various (Orphic) events.²⁷ Pythagoras, for instance, supposedly had significant powers of prediction, and was able to control the weather and manipulate the human soul.²⁸ Common seers and diviners may have been mocked by Aristophanes, medical writers, and philosophers, but they were also praised in city inscriptions, Thucydides mentions them frequently as part of the normal operation of the city, and it is clear that they were an important and routine part of daily civic life.²⁹ Leaders and other non-specialists might also have been expected to have various skills of divination, and there were official

²⁵ Curse on assembly: Dem. 19.70; at the Areopagus: Dem. 23.67-8, 97; Din. 2.16; parodied by Ar. *Thes.* 335-51. Eidinow 2007: 140.

²⁶ In the Greek world the term ‘shaman’ is used by scholars such as Ogden to avoid more negative ones that the sources use, like ‘sorcerer’, to refer to those who could ‘manipulate their own souls’. See Ogden 2002: 9-60.

²⁷ Ogden 2002: 9. Hermotimus of Clazomenae’s powers of prediction: Apollonius, *Historiae Mirabiles* 3; DS 5.55 on the Telchines. Gaining insight from dreams: Astyages in Hdt 1.107-28, realising the prophecy his dream gave of the conquest of Asia by Cyrus; Ogden 2002: 36-7. Initiation: Orpheus: Strabo C333 F18; Philip the Orphic initiator: Plutarch *Mor.* 224ef; Dactyls: Diod. Sic. 5.64.3-5, 17.7.5. Graf 1997: 192 argues for importance of shamans to initiation.

²⁸ Porphyry *Life of Pythagoras* 28-9.

²⁹ As in Marinatos 1981, oracles reported routinely without criticism include Thuc. 1.25.1-2: Epidamnians gives their city to Corinth on oracular advice; 1.28.2: the Corcyrean-Corinthian dispute is referred to Delphi; 1.103.2-3: Spartans fulfil oracle to let suppliant of Zeus go and helots surrender to them; 1.118.3: Apollo says Sparta will win if they go to war; 1.134.4: Apollo orders Spartans to make emends for Pausanias’ death; 3.92.5: Spartan question about colonising Herakleia; 3.104.1: Athenians purified Delos to comply with an oracle. See also Herodotus 7.140-4 on the Wooden Walls. Part of civic life: Eidinow 2007: 27-9.

city oracle interpreters and personal seers for politicians in high office.³⁰ In the *Anabasis*, for instance, Xenophon consults a seer frequently, but he is also able to perform this function himself.³¹

The major reason that many of these practices were common to ‘unofficial’ and ‘official’ religion is that the conceptual foundation for most beliefs and practices across the Greek world was essentially the same. The most important assumption in all para-religious practices was that the gods were unknowable but powerful divine forces (as explored in the previous chapter).³² Magical practices were part of the interplay between the principle that certain knowledge of the gods was impossible, and the desire to gain insight about, and gain some control over, the gods or the world.³³ Magic was designed to unlock a hidden power, and therefore required the practitioner to hold secret knowledge of the gods.³⁴ This secret knowledge was highly sought after. Curses relied on the exploitation of divine forces in order to achieve a particular result, but the mechanisms and often nature of these forces was mysterious.³⁵ Belief in ghosts and necromancy naturally assumed a mysterious otherworldly presence, usually unexplained, but also resting on assumptions about an afterlife with the usual divine figures like Hades and Persephone and even mysterious ritual behaviour with fundamentally familiar elements like sacrifice.³⁶ Likewise, whether ones from Delphi or those peddled on the street corner, all oracles translated the unknowable and the obscure. The observation of Xenophon’s Socrates astutely summarises this: ‘in short, what the gods have granted us to do by help of learning, we must learn; what is hidden from mortals we should

³⁰ E.g. Themistokles in Hdt 7.6.3-4. Cyrus is advised to learn these skills in Xen. *Cyr* 1.6.2; Eidinow 2007: 30. Oracles and seers for politicians: Plut. *Cim.* 18, *Nic.* 13, and for Stilbides, 23.5; cf. Ar. *Peace* 1026–32; Eidinow 2007: 30.

³¹ Xenophon consults Silenus in *An.* 5.6.29, and consults himself at 6.1.22-4, and he invites any soldier who also happens to be a mantis to attend a sacrifice and divine in Xen. *An.* 6.4.14.

³² Tambiah 1990: 11 makes a similar argument.

³³ Versnel 2003: 910.

³⁴ Collins 2008: 2-5, and esp. Versnel 2003: 909.

³⁵ Eidinow 2007: 140.

³⁶ In Hom. *Od.* 10.488-540, for instance, Odysseus is told he needs to travel to the house of Hades and Persephone; this is book eleven’s necromantic ritual. See Ogden 179-82 for a discussion of the passage and the familiar religious elements versus the mysterious necromantic ones.

try to find out from the gods by divination: for to him who is in their grace the gods grant a sign.³⁷

All supernatural beliefs operated in a world of faceless but powerful entities, from gods to the souls of the dead.³⁸ The gods of traditional religion generated, or were, the forces used in magic, just as they were key agents in the exchanges of traditional religion. The gods referenced in magical practices were most commonly Hermes, Ge, Hecate and Persephone; these are called on as witnesses of binding oaths or curse tablets and their powers are harnessed for spells as early as the fifth century.³⁹ The central figures were the chthonic deities Hermes and Hecate and in the curse tablets these are frequently called *katokhos* and *katokhe* to denote their roles in binding and possession as enacted within the curse tablets.⁴⁰ As Scullion observed in his seminal article on Olympian and chthonian gods, the sharp distinction between the chthonian and Olympian gods has been taken for granted.⁴¹ But the only clear link between different supposedly chthonian manifestations of gods is that they are all associated with the earth, as is the literal application of the term: all other more specific divisions between chthonian and Olympian gods are problematic, and as Scullion observes, ‘tend to collapse when faced with the evidence of actual cult’.⁴² It is not a binary opposition

³⁷ Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.9, trans. Tredennick and Waterfield.

³⁸ ‘Primitive man, therefore, lives and acts in an environment of beings and objects, all of which, in addition to the properties that we recognize them to possess, are endowed with mystic attributes. He perceives their objective reality mingled with another reality. He feels himself surrounded by an infinity of imperceptible entities, nearly always invisible to sight, and always redoubtable: oftentimes the souls of the dead are about him, and always he is encompassed by myriads of spirits of more or less defined personality.’ Lévy-Bruhl 1979: 65. Collins 2008: 8-9.

³⁹ E.g. ‘I register Isias, the daughter of A[u]toleas, before Hermes the Restrainer. Restrain her by your side! I bind Isias before Hermes the Restrainer, the hands, the feet of Isias, the entire body.’ *SGD* 64, from Faraone 1997: 3. Or *SGD* 107, from Sicily, which registers its victims ‘in the presence of the holy goddess’; Eidinow 2007: 146-7. Or Gager 1992: 181, Fig. 20, from a lead defixio found in the Athenian Agora: where Hermes, Hecate, Hades, the Fates, Persephone, the Furies, and a number of unnamed gods (underworld goddesses and gods) are invoked. Eidinow 2007: 149. Gods are invoked, like the Mother of the Gods: DT 72.17, 79.3; Ares: DT 161.132; Hecate, and the heroes: DT 52.7, 72.10, 76.10; and all of these are invoked in curse tablets. Collins 2008: 40. Harnessing power for a spell: e.g. DTA 89, 105; in Eidinow 2007: 147, Faraone 1997: 5. The order of frequency is slightly different in Versnel, based on Kagarow: Hermes, Kore/Persephone, Hecate, Hades/Pluto, Ge, and Demeter. Kagarow 1929: 59-61, from Versnel 1997: 64.

⁴⁰ Collins 2008: 40, Versnel 2003: 909.

⁴¹ Scullion 1994: 76.

⁴² Scullion 1994: 92.

but instead a fluid distinction, based in the inherent multiplicity not of the aspects but of interests of the gods.⁴³ In particular, the chthonic guises of the gods often invoked in the context of magic are not ‘evil’.⁴⁴ It is crucial to avoid tautology: assuming that chthonic gods are ‘bad’ because they are associated with ‘bad’ practices, and vice versa. The gods, mostly but not always chthonian, could participate in even the most ‘macabre’ of magical practices, like curses, or exorcisms, apparently without issue. For instance, curse tablets were deposited in sacred wells, sanctuaries of popular gods (particularly chthonic deities), or graves, with no apparent contamination of impiety or sacrilege.⁴⁵ Theocritus’ description of the rituals of a woman brewing a love potion shows the appeals made to the gods as they were imagined in action:

Cast a fair light, Moon: to you I shall chant softly, goddess, and to Hecate in the underworld, at whom even dogs tremble when she comes among the tombs of the dead and the black blood. Hail, dread Hecate, and keep with me to the end, making these drugs of mine no less powerful than those of Circe or Medea or fair-haired Perimede... Now I shall burn the bran. You, Artemis, who can move the adamant of Hades and anything else as firmly fixed – Thestylis, the dogs are howling for us in the town: the goddess is at the crossroads – clash the bronze quick as you can.⁴⁶

Theocritus’ image of witchcraft is a construction and not an uncomplicated depiction of a Hellenistic woman.⁴⁷ Simaetha, the ‘sorceress’, is unusual and ‘other’, in that she is independent and free, and independent of the traditional roles of women as mother, sister, or wife (so much so that she is, in some sense, portrayed as more of a man than a woman); not to mention her gift for magic.⁴⁸ In some sense, then, it is even more surprising that in this depiction of otherness it is still the gods who were behind the powers harnessed through the different methods of incantations and drugs, and not some unknown and evil powers.

⁴³ Scullion 1994: 89-90, 117-19. Kindt 2012: 117-8.

⁴⁴ Eidinow 2007: 14, Parker 2005, Scullion 1994, Versnel 1997: 64.

⁴⁵ Eidinow 2007: 140-1.

⁴⁶ Theocritus *Idyll* 2.10-16, 33-6.

⁴⁷ Griffiths, F. 1981: 250.

⁴⁸ Griffiths, F. 1981: 248, more of a man: 266-7.

The gods were conceived as a part of (and often at the top of), rather than set apart from, this pantheon of supernatural forces invoked in magic. Deities, for instance, could be invoked in suppressing other supernatural agents. The writer Pausanias and Plutarch tell a story about how the general Pausanias was haunted by an innocent girl he killed (Cleonice), and he haunted the Spartans for starving him to death in a temple.⁴⁹ The way to get rid of the ghosts of Cleonice and Pausanias was by propitiating both Pausanias and Cleonice and the gods.⁵⁰ The mechanisms of ‘official’ religion also spilled into concerns about magical practices: for instance, oracles were consulted on whether to use evocators.⁵¹ And when Aeschylus, in a fragment of his early fifth century *Soul-Raisers* (most likely part of a trilogy followed by *Penelope*, *Bone-Gatherers*, and a satyr drama *Circe*) constructs an elaborate necromantic ceremony, the gods are invoked in order to call upon the dead:

Come now, guest-friend, take up your position on the sacred grassed enclosure of the fearful lake. Slash the gullet of the neck, and let the blood of this sacrificial victim flow into the murky depths of the reeds as a drink for the lifeless. Call upon primeval Earth and chthonic Hermes, escort of the dead, and ask chthonic Zeus to send up the swarm of night-wanderers from the mouths of the river, from which this melancholy off-flow water, unfit for washing hands, is sent up by Stygian springs.⁵²

Here the gods are an ordinary part of the mechanisms for necromancy. So the gods, seemingly unproblematically, were conceived of as part of the mechanics of a variety of different beliefs and practices: sometimes unnamed, as ‘the divine’, and sometimes named. This is because all beliefs and practices, whether perceived as more or less legitimate, rested on similar assumptions and beliefs about divine forces. The divine was fundamentally mysterious, yet at the same time knowledge of and influence on the divine was extremely desirable.

To conclude, Greeks commonly seem to have both participated in religion and used magic, cursing, and other tools for interacting with the gods. These were different practices with different applications that shared a supernatural foundation. But this should not be taken

⁴⁹ Paus. 3.17.7-9 see below, pg.233 n.1038.

⁵⁰ Paus. 3.17; cf. Thuc. 1.134, on Pausanias’ death and haunting, which involved the dedication of two statues to him and Athene. Discussion in Ogden 2002: 28 and Faraone 1991: 184-9.

⁵¹ Christidis et al.1999, n.5., from Ogden 2002: 30.

⁵² Aeschylus *Psychagogoï* F273a; see also F273, F275 TrGF, from Ogden 2002: 26.

to mean that ordinary Greeks were not worried about the legitimacy of particular beliefs and behaviour; beyond concerns about legality and custom in the *polis*, they could decide for themselves whether something was ‘legitimate’ or not. For Greeks with little civic oversight or dogma to guide them (as explored in Chapter One), no beliefs and practices were inherently impious, and there was no clear division between ‘unofficial’ ones and religion in any area of study, from divination to magic.⁵³ So what is the difference between ‘magic’ and religion? Parker’s answer to this was that ‘magic differs from religion as weeds differ from flowers, merely by negative social evaluation’.⁵⁴ ‘Magic’, then, is a conceptual category as well as a real, but unclearly defined, set of behaviours and beliefs: this ‘negative social evaluation’ served to create a category of ‘illegitimacy’ and ‘otherness’.

Creating *l'étrange*: identity and security through opposition

The importance of the category of *l'étrange* – the strange; a powerful sense of the uncanny and otherness – for Greek identity, has long been recognised in scholarship. As Whitmarsh recently observed on atheism: ‘[t]he history of atheism cannot be just that of those who profess not to believe in gods; it must also account for those social forces... that construct it as the other, the inverse of true belief.’⁵⁵ Atheism and a whole set of other para-religious beliefs and behaviours could be used to construct this other. But what function did the construction of a negative social category serve? Scholars have often struggled to perceive how Greeks recognised and practised a coherent set of beliefs and rituals without a guiding doctrine.⁵⁶ Just as the Greeks ‘invented the barbarian’ in order to define their ‘Greekness’ without needing to articulate explicitly or codify what it was to be Greek, they also ‘invented’ the magician, the witch, the oracle-monger, and the atheist to explore and reinforce their religious and communal identity.⁵⁷ Terms like ‘magic’, ‘the occult’, ‘superstition’, or even

⁵³ Faraone 1997: 18.

⁵⁴ Parker 2006: 122.

⁵⁵ Whitmarsh 2016: 116. At 26-7 he earlier contradicted this position by arguing that atheism only began to be constructed as an ‘other’ in Christian late antiquity.

⁵⁶ See pg.96 n.109 on doctrine.

⁵⁷ The construction of an ‘other’ of ‘illegitimate’ religious beliefs and practices: see particularly Stratton 2007: esp. ch.2, Ogden 2002: 33; On the construction of the Greek identity through the invention of the barbarian, see particularly Hall 1989, and Hartog 1988.

‘cults’ today are not directly and unproblematically related to any specific activities; they are representations, receptions, or perspectives.

Magic is one clear example of the construction of oppositional identity, just like atheism: it could be perceived as alien, fraudulent, and immoral. By the Classical period magic was already strongly associated with foreigners (especially Egyptians and Persians), as a source of great alien magical wisdom.⁵⁸ Female users of magic are far more common than males in Greek literature, which involved a further inversion of traditional power dynamics.⁵⁹ The practice of magic was full of inversions too. Rather than the highly symbolic, precious, and sacred items of traditional religion, magical items were often mundane: anything from bits of wood to the most common herbs and plants.⁶⁰ In particular the ‘*goēs*’ (sorcerer), and to some extent ‘*magos*’ (Persian magician), had strong negative connotations of fraudulence and a mercenary attitude.⁶¹ Magic also gradually became associated with undesirable or immoral behaviour, like incest and other social taboos. So, in the fifth century, the historian Xanthus observed, possibly in a book on *Magica*, that ‘mages have sex with their mothers’ and ‘with their daughters and sisters too’.⁶²

Part of the value of constructing oppositional identity was that it allowed for the expunging of doubt about religion in society, by creating straw men to burn. In his *Possession at Loudun* (originally published in French in 1970), the French Jesuit historian

⁵⁸ Foreigners and magic: Aesch. *Pers.* 598-693: the conjuring of Darius’ ghost. Egyptians: perhaps the best example is Helen’s drugging of her husband and his guests in Hom. *Od.* 4.219-24; Homer says that Helen gained the drug and knowledge of how to use it from the Egyptians, which is particularly noteworthy as knowledge of the opium poppy (which the drug is presumed to be) was cultivated in Asia Minor, much closer to the Greeks; see Scarborough 1997: 158-9. Instead the poet attributes it to the Egyptians, because of their reputation for *pharmaka* and magical knowledge. Ogden 2002: 33.

⁵⁹ Females sorcerers included Medea, in Eur. *Med.*, App. Rh. Arg. 3.475-539, 1026-277, 4.123-61, 445-80, 1638-93; and Circe, in Hom. *Od.* 10.133-399; Ogden 2002: 78, Versnel 2003: 909.

⁶⁰ Versnel 2003: 909.

⁶¹ *Magi* as quacks: e.g. Soph. *OT* 385-9; cf. more neutral presentation in Hdt 1.101 as a Median tribe and 7.37 as prophets and advisers; the first reference, is in Heraclitus DK 12b B14 F112, in Graham 2010: 178-9: ‘those who wander in the night: *magoi*, bacchantes, maenads, initiates’, which has a negative sting as Collins 2008: 54-5 argues. *Goēs*: e.g. Eur. *Bacch.* 234-42. *Magos* and *goēs* can be used interchangeably as abuse in Greek rhetoric, as in Aeschines 3.137 where *magos kai goēs* is best translated as ‘scoundrel’. See also Versnel 2003: 908.

⁶² Xanthus of Lydia FrGH 765 F31-2. The historicity of the *Magica* is disputed, as the only reference to this work is in this fragment, from Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 3.2.11.

Michel De Certeau observed the association and correlation between atheism and other ‘superstitious’ beliefs and behaviours. De Certeau found that the increasing identifications of witchcraft in the 16th and 17th centuries coincided with the emergence of public atheism, or at least anxiety about public atheism.⁶³ De Certeau theorised that witchcraft and atheism, and anxieties about these, arose as a result of (and helped to combat) the doubt and uncertainty that plagued the societies living under the collapsing medieval theology of the period.⁶⁴ De Certeau argued that a communal theology under threat must admit doubt, or figures of doubt (like witches or atheists) in to the communal consciousness, in order to be punished or excluded.⁶⁵

This thesis is borne out in the Greek world: atheism, which could be viewed as part of a package of otherness, allowed for the compartmentalisation, demonization, and punishment of figures of doubt and instability. Keeping in mind the thesis (in Chapter Four) about the constant rivalry of sceptical and theistic ideas in Greek religion, the generation of oppositional otherness in order to create a target for doubt must have been a part of the ordinary religious environment. However, this would, inevitably, come to the fore during crisis periods, as, indeed, was already observed (in Chapter Three): the Athenians publicly caricatured, demonised, and finally put to death or exiled a number of those they deemed atheists, the most famous of whom was Socrates. Socrates himself makes this very argument; that the Athenians made him a bogeyman through the caricatures of Aristophanes and his other critics:

many accusers have risen up against me before you, who have been speaking for a long time, many years already, and saying nothing true; and I fear them more than Anytus and the rest, though these also are dangerous; but those others are more dangerous, gentlemen, who gained your belief, since they got hold of most of you in childhood, and accused me without any truth, saying, “There is a certain Socrates, a wise man, a ponderer over the things in the air and one who has investigated the things beneath the earth and who makes the weaker argument the stronger.” [...] But

⁶³ De Certeau 2000 [1970]: 101-3; commentary in Hyman 2010: 6; 2007: 27.

⁶⁴ De Certeau 2000 [1970]: esp. 2, 101-3.

⁶⁵ De Certeau 2000 [1970]: 102-3 argued that ‘doubt and blasphemy must be not only admitted, but punished... They are the accomplices of the chastisement that returns them to the religious ‘society’ and that must return that society to itself.’

the most unreasonable thing of all is this, that it is not even possible to know and speak their names, except when one of them happens to be a writer of comedies.⁶⁶

Socrates' role as scapegoat for the city was achieved by the larger scale caricaturing of atheism as part of a set of (unfixed) beliefs and practices that fall under the 'other'. This was part of a crisis of identity as Athens lost faith in the power of its army, democracy, and customs: 'what it meant to be an Athenian was a focus of concern'.⁶⁷ Certain individuals, like suspicious women, as Eidinow has argued, or philosophers like Socrates who came to be seen objects of broadly moral panic and religious deviancy, became collective scapegoats for Athens during times of heightened tensions or difficulty.⁶⁸ Attacks against these groups demonstrate, as Hugh Bowden has argued, 'a polemical attempt to mark out a particular notion of "proper religion"'.⁶⁹ Spectres of atheism, impiety, and forms of 'superstition' – each with a tangential and difficult relationship to real people and behaviours – were constructed to be an inversion of normal and desirable behaviours through which the Greeks articulated, explored, and attempted to cement their identity.

Superstition and atheism: the extremes of 'otherness'

Atheism and a variety of other non-traditional or broadly para-theistic supernatural beliefs were therefore linked as part of the creation of oppositional identity. One of these modes of thought or categories for otherness is 'superstition'. The OED defines superstition as:

Religious belief or practice considered to be irrational, unfounded, or based on fear or ignorance; excessively credulous belief in and reverence for the supernatural.⁷⁰

Crucial to understanding superstition is that it is not a fixed set of practices or beliefs; it is a subjective attitude towards people, and the way they believe and practice. It is possible to trace discussions of superstition backwards, through the Tudor classicist John Cheke, through Plutarch, on to Theophrastus, and into the earlier Greek material and the general category of 'otherness', articulated in Aristotle, Plato, the Hippocratic author of *On the Sacred Disease*, and others. The reason for doing this is twofold. First, in order to combat the consistent

⁶⁶ Pl. *Ap.* 18b, 18d.

⁶⁷ Eidinow 2016b: 326.

⁶⁸ Moral panic: Eidinow 2016b: 10; suspicious women: 312-26.

⁶⁹ Bowden 2008: 56.

⁷⁰ OED online: 'superstition, n.'.

methodological prejudice against atheism in scholarship (and society as a whole), it is important to understand how atheism has come to be perceived as ‘other’ in the modern day, particularly in its connotations of ‘extremism’, and as a fringe phenomenon, that was discussed in the Introduction. Secondly, as is the primary aim of this thesis, it is crucial to understand how ancient perspectives on atheism were part of a broader package of ‘otherness’, not just in isolation through the negative associations discussed in Chapter Two, but as part of a caricaturing of unacceptable beliefs in the ancient world. This section will therefore help sort the modern perceptions of atheism from the ancient ones.

Sir John Cheke was one of the most influential scholars of Classics in the sixteenth century, especially in his impact on the development of modern conceptions of magic, atheism, and religion, and particularly the perception of a division between religion and magic that was popularised by James Frazer. Cheke was tutor to Edward, the Prince of Wales, from 1544 to 1553, and a close friend of King Henry VIII, as well as the first Regius Professor of Greek at St John’s College Cambridge from 1540 to 1551, where he played a crucial role in rehabilitating Greek studies.⁷¹ As the central figure of a famous group of Protestant Humanists, including Thomas Smith, Thomas Wilson, William Cecil and Roger Ascham, Cheke helped shape the (controversial) religious reforms of the age.⁷² In 1545/6 Cheke presented a translation of Plutarch’s *On Superstition*, with an attached preface in Latin, to Henry VIII. In this preface there is the first surviving mention of the term atheism in the English tradition: atheism, then, entered the English language via Plutarch and his discussion of its role and nature in society, alongside superstition.⁷³ The preface is anomalous: it has a clear theme (unlike his other commentaries), on religion, and it is

⁷¹ See Brandsby in Mullinger 1884: 52-3, Milton, Sonnet XI, and others in McDiarmid 1997: 100-1.

⁷² Cheke’s most famous work, was the *Hurt of Sedition* 1549, a violent polemic critics of the first Book of Common Prayer, in support of Edward Seymour’s reforms. See McDiarmid 2012, ‘Cheke, John’: 183. Controversial reforms: McDiarmid 2012, ‘Cheke, John’: 182.

⁷³ Presentation of *De Superstitione*: Strype 1821: 185; McDiarmid 1997: 100. The text is now in University College, Oxford, MS 171; see McDiarmid 1997, 2012, ‘Cheke, John’: 182. ‘Cheke, John’: 182. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1910: ‘Cheke, Sir John (1514-1557)’. Bryson 2004: ‘Cheke, Sir John (1514-1557)’. ‘Atheism’ may have been used before Cheke – Wootton 1988: 705 claims in 1526 but it is unclear what he refers to – but Cheke borrowed the word from the Greek text rather than from an English or Latin-English work.

abnormally long.⁷⁴ It was the most politically charged of his commentaries: in it, Cheke argued for continued religious reform by offering the king a definition of what constituted right and wrong forms of worship.⁷⁵

Cheke's *On Superstition* lays out the division between proper and improper religion using superstition and atheism as the two extremes of improper religion. Here Cheke divides religion into two parts: knowledge (of God's will) and action (doing God's will).⁷⁶ The first category (knowledge), is comprised of the ignorant, the heretical, and the arrogant (those who are ignorant but pretend knowledge). These men 'mistake the thickest darkness for brightest day-light: and these men think nothing is or can be better than their own conceptions and tenets. Such are they, who spend all their age in Plato's Cave.'⁷⁷ Atheists are of the second category: those who oppose the practical fulfilment of God's will (action).⁷⁸ For Cheke, atheists are practical atheists: that is, they undermine correct action towards God, rather than proper knowledge of God. Atheists, like the superstitious, 'apprehend not how to fear in such a manner as they ought.'⁷⁹ This problem manifests in the opposite way for atheists and the superstitious: atheists do not fear the gods, while the superstitious fear them too much (or inappropriately). In his conception of superstition and atheism as extremes of belief, Cheke, inevitably, had been strongly influenced by Plutarch.

Plutarch, in his *On Superstition*, argued that atheism and superstition stem from the same mistake: they are both consequences of inappropriate degrees of fear of the gods, at opposite extremes. Cheke had differed from Plutarch in his equal condemnation of superstition and atheism. Instead, although Plutarch considered both impiety, the main thesis of the *Superstition* is that atheism was the better form of 'wrong-religion' compared with

⁷⁴ More than six times the length of the next longest preface Cheke presented to the King, and twice as long as the text of Plutarch, as McDiarmid 1997: 101-2 observes.

⁷⁵ Strype 1821: 169 explains the function of the work as a religious lecture: '14. De Superstitione. Ad Regem Henricum. A very learned treatise. This was a discourse drawn up upon the argument of superstition, for the use of that King, in order to the reformation of religion, which in his reign was much pestered with superstitions. This was set by way of dedication before his translation of Plutarch's book of that argument, and writ in a very elegant Latin style.' McDiarmid 1997: 119. McDiarmid 2012, 'Cheke, John': 182.

⁷⁶ Strype 1821: 195-6.

⁷⁷ Strype 1821: 196-7.

⁷⁸ Strype 1821: 198.

⁷⁹ Strype 1821: 198-9, 200.

superstition, which was far less tolerable to others.⁸⁰ At the opening of his *On Superstition* (*peri tēs deisidaimōnias*, lit. about god-fearing), Plutarch distinguishes between atheism and superstition:⁸¹

Ignorance and blindness in regard to the gods (*theōn*) divides itself at the very beginning into two streams, of which one produces in hardened characters, as it were in stubborn soils, atheism (*atheotēta*), and the other, as in moist soils, produces superstition (*deisidaimōnian*) in tender characters.⁸²

Both atheism and superstition, then, are a consequence of ignorance of the gods, or blindness to them, depending on the mentality of the subject. Unlike atheism, in which the unbeliever has made an error of judgement leading to indifference and inaction, in the superstitious emotion is the corrupting factor.⁸³ The superstitious man cares about unimportant things and allows his fear of the gods to dominate his life.⁸⁴ Plutarch describes too much fear of the gods as equivalent to the belief that the gods are evil. So, there are three central parts to Plutarch's judgement: atheism is characterised by a lack of fear of the gods, and superstition by too much fear; atheism is inaction, while superstition is overaction; finally, atheism is an error of reason, whereas superstition is one of emotion.

The idea of superstition as an extreme of belief had already been implied by the fourth-century polymath and pupil of Aristotle, Theophrastus, in his *Characters*. In this set of caricatures, mocking opposing types of characters (e.g. the Filthy and the Fastidious, or the Obsequious and the Arrogant), Theophrastus described the superstitious man as someone

⁸⁰ Both are impiety: Plut. *On Sup.* 169; superstition is worse: *On Sup.* 164, 165d. Meijer 1981: 261-2. Plutarch's belief that superstition was worse than atheism is confirmed in observations Plutarch makes on Alexander elsewhere: Plut. *Al.* 75.1-2: 'while it is a dire thing to be incredulous towards indications of the divine will and to have contempt for them, superstition is likewise a dire thing, which, after the manner of water ever seeking the lower levels.'

⁸¹ Literally 'daimon-fearing': it may mean *daimones* in general, but in this case as the reference to *theoi* in Plutarch immediately makes clear, the focus is on the approach to belief in the gods.

⁸² Plut. *On Sup.* 164e.

⁸³ Plut. *On Sup.* 165b-c.

⁸⁴ Plut. *On Sup.* 165d-7a.

who takes religion too far.⁸⁵ He portrayed the superstitious man as an object of derision, living in a world full of supernatural signs and symbols, and paralysed by his superstition:

The superstitious man (*deisidaimōn*) is the sort who washes his hands in three springs, sprinkles himself with water from a temple font, puts a laurel leaf in his mouth, and then is ready for the day's perambulations. If a weasel runs across his path, he will not proceed on his journey until someone else has covered the ground or he has thrown three stones over the road. When he sees a snake in the house he invokes Sabazios if it is the red-brown one, and if it is the holy one he sets up a hero-shrine there and then.⁸⁶

Theophrastus' superstitious man has such a paralytic fear of the gods that he is unable to get anything done. The *deisidaimōn* (superstitious man) was obsessed with piety, but not in a traditional form: he has little interest in the major gods or communal religion. Instead, he is particularly gripped by Hecate and the crossroads, private worship at home, and fringe sects.⁸⁷ Theophrastus does not mention atheism here: these are 'characters' who might prowl the streets of late fourth-century Athens, and as Diggle has argued, public atheists were certainly not a familiar sight.⁸⁸ Theophrastus' argument that superstition was an extreme belief followed from the idea that balance was key to character, which was argued by his teacher Aristotle.⁸⁹ As Aristotle puts it in his *Nicomachean Ethics*:

...moral virtue is a mean. How so? Namely, that it is a mean between two vices, one of excess and the other of defect; and because it aims at hitting the middle point in feelings and in actions.⁹⁰

For Theophrastus, this idea naturally meant that all values had extremes of excess: he saw *deisidaimōnia* as one excess of belief. Aristotle had argued that all vices come from extremes and excesses, or deficits, and virtue is the moderation between excess and deficiency.⁹¹ For

⁸⁵ Luck 2006: 44, 101, Martin, D. 2004: 22-35.

⁸⁶ Theophr. *Char.* 16.1-4, trans. Diggle 2004. Discussion in Eidinow 2007: 42.

⁸⁷ Hecate: Theophr. *Char.* 16.5, 7, 14; Sabazios and Hermaphroditos and private worship: 16.4, 10; fringe sects: 16.11-12. Diggle 2004: 350.

⁸⁸ Diggle 2004: 8.

⁸⁹ Arist. *NE* 1108a-b. Eidinow 2007: 42, n.1. Diggle 2004: 6 argues for Theophrastus' characters as founded on Aristotle's ideas on balance. Martin, D. 2004: 68-9.

⁹⁰ Arist. *NE* 1109a.

⁹¹ Arist. *NE*, throughout, esp. 1107a-1109a.

Aristotle, those who fear everything are cowards, but those who fear nothing are rash.⁹² Both atheism and superstition come from lack of moderation; they are diverging branches of the same root, of belief (or ‘fear’), but one is belief in excess (or ‘too much fear of the gods’) and the other is a deficit of belief (or ‘lack of fear of the gods’).

These ideas about the importance of balance were part of a broader and older dialogue. In the Hippocratic author’s *On the Sacred Disease*, balance is key, and it is crucial to avoid extremes: for him, illnesses arise, for instance, from too much heat or too much cold.⁹³ To posit that imbalances of belief would likewise lead to extremes of belief (including atheism), as Theophrastus and later authors would, was a natural extension of this logic. However, as Martin has observed, the extremes that are characteristic of Aristotle, and his student Theophrastus, do not map on to specific behaviours: moderation is relative for different people, as Aristotle recognised.⁹⁴ In Thucydides’ *History*, for instance, the author describes Nikias as ‘somewhat over-addicted to divination and practices of that kind’ (*theiasmō*), causing him to refuse to depart at the appropriate time from Syracuse because of a full moon.⁹⁵ In this case, where superstition is taking normal practices to the extreme, Thucydides partly blames Nikias’ behaviour for the disaster. Yet Thucydides also observes that the Athenian people agreed with Nikias, saying the Athenians were deeply concerned about the eclipse. Nikias’ religious caution was, therefore, moderate and ordinary for the people, but is scornfully dismissed as extreme by Thucydides. It is normal to assume that one’s own behaviour is the reasonable middle ground: caricaturing extremes allowed the Greeks individually to construct and reinforce the legitimacy of their own behaviour, while recognising the possibility of other views.⁹⁶ While ideas about otherness were essentially subjective, it is equally clear that the specific practices of magic, curses, and other forms of para-theistic beliefs and practices gained some common connotations of illegitimacy and fraudulence, alongside atheism (rather than opposed to it, as in later texts).

In Plato’s corpus, atheists and religious deviants are grouped together in a subtly different way to Cheke, Plutarch, Theophrastus, and pseudo-Hippocrates. In Plato’s works,

⁹² Martin, D. 2004: 69.

⁹³ [Hp.] *On the Sacred Disease* esp. 13, 17.13-26.

⁹⁴ Arist. *NE* 1106a-b.

⁹⁵ Thuc. 7.50.4.

⁹⁶ Martin, D. 2004: 70.

religious deviants are understood as atheists, as revealed by the incorrect assumptions that they make about the gods. In the *Republic* Plato's Socrates agrees with Adeimantus that the common superstitious beliefs peddled to the rich by priests, diviners, and other false religious authorities and charlatans are pernicious. These lies, that gods can be bribed to expunge past transgressions and magic used to harness the power of the gods, are only sold because they are profitable.⁹⁷

begging priests and soothsayers go to rich men's doors and make them believe that they by means of sacrifices and incantations have accumulated a treasure of power from the gods that can expiate and cure any misdeed of a man or his ancestors, and that if a man wishes to harm an enemy, at slight cost he will be enabled to injure just and unjust alike, since they are masters of spells and enchantments that constrain the gods to serve their end...⁹⁸

The false priests and diviners are frauds, and they take advantage of the gullibility of the rich; Plato's Socrates does not explicitly say that they are atheists, but it is implied. This is a key difference from later works in which atheism and superstition were opposing consequences of the same mistake: here atheism and quackery are the same. Belief that the gods are evil – which Plutarch would later argue was behind the behaviour of a lot of these 'frauds' – was, for Plato's Socrates, at least equivalent to atheism. An allied vision comes across in Plato's *Laws*, where the Stranger is tracing the borders of appropriate religion framed around *hubris*. Plato's Athenian Stranger grouped false diviners and experts in deception alongside sophists, tyrants, and demagogues.⁹⁹ Plato's Stranger argues that there are three types of irreligion or atheism: positive disbelief in the gods, belief that the gods do not care, and belief that they are corruptible or possible to bribe.¹⁰⁰ Plato's Stranger then mounts a rhetorical defence against positive disbelievers: he clearly considers these the most significant offenders.¹⁰¹ The modern reader who is inclined to view atheism as 'extreme' might restrict atheism to only the first category, but for Plato's Stranger these are all different manifestations of extremes of

⁹⁷ Pl. *Rep.* 2.364a.

⁹⁸ Pl. *Rep.* 2.364b. See more broadly Pl. *Rep.* 2.362d-65a.

⁹⁹ Pl. *Laws* 10.908b-d.

¹⁰⁰ Pl. *Laws* 10.885b.

¹⁰¹ Pl. *Laws* 10.885d-90a.

religious ‘misapprehensions’, and they are all different forms of atheism, which fits well with the definitions established in the Introduction.

In fact, the caricature of magical healers as frauds and atheists that is consistent across Plato’s corpus was part of a much larger discourse about the legitimacy and trustworthiness of different practices and beliefs. The idea of religious frauds is common to the Derveni Papyrus, where the author ridicules the idea of paying for wisdom; Aristophanes, who mocks oracles, seers, and diviners as greedy money-makers and false interpreters; and tragedy, where seers can be denounced as frauds, concerned only with making money.¹⁰² These religious frauds are not denounced as atheists in these texts. They are, however, in the Hippocratic treatise *On the Sacred Disease*.¹⁰³ For the Hippocratic author, it follows from their fraudulence that these quacks must be atheists in one sense or another: ‘I am sure that they are impious (*dussebein*), and cannot believe that the gods exist (*theous oute einai nomizein*) or have any strength (*oute ischuein*), and that they would not refrain from the most extreme actions’.¹⁰⁴ For the Hippocratic author, belief that the gods can be controlled and manipulated is incompatible with belief in the gods at all. So, these frauds must believe the gods do not desire (or have the power) to help humans, or they must not believe in them at all.

To conclude: there are two key insights that arise from this discussion on superstition and atheism. First, there were different ways of imagining atheism as part of a category of otherness. In the fifth century, peddlers of alternative beliefs like these could be imagined to be frauds who played on spectacle and tricks, backed up by crowds of gullible believers, whose trickery and greed revealed their atheism. In the fourth century, another way of imagining atheism developed. Superstition and atheism were perceived as two different and opposite extremes with regard to belief. This became a distinct tradition on *deisidaimōnia*, but the tradition on superstition was only one way of imagining atheism as part of an Other

¹⁰² Derveni Pap: Betegh 2004: 363 on col. 20, 1–12; discussion in Eidinow 2007: 31. Aristophanes: Ar. *Wasps* 1–53, 158–61, *Wealth* 1–55. Eidinow 2007: 27–32. Smith, N. 1989: 152 has argued that Aristophanes’ criticisms of oracles, seers, and divination are politically motivated, rather than religiously. But Aristophanes referenced familiar claims – for instance, *Wasps* 50–2 reveals the familiar accusation of money-making for ridiculous dream interpretations – so his accusations should be seen in a presocratic context too (or instead). Tragedy: Soph. *Ant.* 1033–47, 1055, 1061; *OT* 380–403; Eur. *Bacch.* 255–62; Eidinow 2007: 31–2.

¹⁰³ Frauds: [Hp.] *SD* 1–5. Collins 2008: 140.

¹⁰⁴ [Hp.] *SD* 4.7–10. Martin, D. 2004: 40–6.

alongside a variety of different religious beliefs or practices. These two different conceptions of atheism and superstition were both used to define appropriate and moderate religious behaviour through opposition. From Cheke to Aristophanes, they were all part of attempts to caricature, define, or reinforce the nature of improper religious behaviour, and thereby to argue for a subjective interpretation of proper religious behaviour and belief.

The most important insight for our purposes is in revealing the polemic nature of the belief that superstition and atheism are both extremes in religiosity. This idea of atheism as 'extreme' has informed and prejudiced modern scholarship in a way that has caused a great deal of confusion and led to the (false) idea that atheism did not exist in the ancient world. This is one of the things that makes it so difficult to examine atheism in the ancient world. Scholars are not only enforcing modern prejudices on the ancients; there is a mismatch of modern and ancient attitudes which creates a significant hurdle in separating attitude from real life belief and practice. Not only are the ancient texts all different types of polemical works that caricatured atheism, but modern scholarship is also to some extent polemical: scholarship has been insufficiently cautious to avoid being informed by a long history of prejudicial views against atheism. Searching for 'extreme' forms of atheism as if these were the only forms has suppressed a broader dialogue about atheism in ancient Greece, and it lies beneath the methodological issues in Classical scholarship explored in the Introduction. It should now be clear that: first, atheism is a contextual and varied phenomenon across a spectrum as large as that of belief; and secondly, searching for 'radical', 'fundamentalist', or 'militant' atheism is not only misguided but reveals an inherited prejudice against atheism as a form of 'extreme' (ir)religiosity.

The dangers of criticism: reinforcing religiosity through scepticism

The criticisms and scepticism directed at superstition by Plato, Aristophanes, Hippocrates, and others was part of a dialogue, in a milieu that involve a variety of different subjective perspectives on 'proper religion'. Yet, many of the practices criticised as 'improper religion' were used in religious contexts, and more generally they shared theological assumptions with those of mainstream practised religion. This raises a question: what are the contours, and risks, of the identity generation through opposition posited above? Atheism only implies non-belief in the gods, and not non-belief in anything else supernatural, like the afterlife or

ghosts.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, many supernatural beliefs – from ghosts to magic – relied on beliefs and ideas about the gods and their efficacy: they were part of a subjective but broadly shared conception of the supernatural rather than completely different spheres. Critiques of what one person perceived as improper attitudes to the gods might, therefore, themselves be perceived by others as irreligious, or even atheistic. This was the case with Plato and Hippocrates: they critique the conception of the gods held by some of their peers as atheistic. This surely must have opened Plato and Hippocrates up to the same sort of criticisms from the other side.

Plato's Socrates and Athenian were both critical of all sorts of para-religious behaviours, and explicitly condemned and disbelieved in the efficacy of magicians (*magoi*), purifiers (*kathartai*), beggar-priests (*agurtai*), and charlatans (*alazones*), who were presented consistently as impious charlatans selling false beliefs, as observed above.¹⁰⁶ Plato's Stranger in the *Laws* does not offer a statement of general unbelief in magic – in fact, cautiously and explicitly expressing his own neutrality, saying that he 'has no certain opinion' on such supernatural matters – instead maintaining his focus on criticism of specific individuals or roles.¹⁰⁷ Plato's Socrates argued that magic was effective for two reasons: first, it used actual harmful substances like poison, and secondly, there were predictable psychological effects.¹⁰⁸ This explanation is a rationalisation that explains away any belief in supernatural practices. Yet, Plato's Socrates is quite clear in asserting his belief in ghosts, for instance, and in his *daimon*, so it should not be expected that the rationalism of Socrates is some sort of broader, and modern, worldview.¹⁰⁹ Conversely, though belief in the *daimon* and ghosts was, for Socrates, a perfectly ordinary and acceptable conception of the supernatural, the *daimon* is

¹⁰⁵ As Dover 1994: 132 insightfully observed: 'Belief about particular gods must again be distinguished from belief in the existence of the supernatural world as a whole.' It is sometimes assumed that atheism entails rejection of anything supernatural. For instance, take Bremmer's 2007: 1 view of atheism as those who 'reject religious practice altogether'; though religious practice can include the worship of heroes or spirits, or the use of curses, appeals to hidden power, and so on.

¹⁰⁶ Pl. *Rep.* 2.364b–e, *Laws* 905d-909d, 933a-e, *Statesman* 291b-c. Collins 2008: 42-3, Ogden 2002: 22-3.

¹⁰⁷ *Laws* 11.933b. In 10.909a he had called magicians 'ravening beasts' and called for them to be imprisoned.

¹⁰⁸ Pl. *Thet.* 149c-d: midwives offering drugs and spells to ease the pain of birth; or Pl. *Rep.* 4.426b physicians' tools including spells and other magical items. Collins 2008: 42-3. Statement on efficacy: Pl. *Laws* 11.933a–b. Collins 2008: 44.

¹⁰⁹ Pl. *Phd.* 81c-d, has Socrates talk about ghosts roaming burial grounds etc; the wicked who must be chained to a body to exorcise them. Luck 2006: 213-4.

certainly the subject of the accusation of his invention of new gods, and was impious in the opinion of his accusers, and presumably some of the jurors who found him guilty (as observed in Chapter Five).¹¹⁰ The ‘moderate’ beliefs of Socrates were not the same as the jurors at his trial, and it was perhaps his incaution in assuming that others would view them as normal and acceptable that placed his beliefs in the public eye.

The condemnation of magic in Plato’s work, whether voiced by the Stranger or Socrates, is clearly intended to be read as motivated by that character’s belief in the gods and not atheism. In both the *Republic* and the *Laws*, the importance of proper religious education is stressed, and it is argued that improper magical practices are damaging.¹¹¹ Of the false beliefs magicians peddled, particularly offensive to Plato’s Socrates was the idea (which was common to many magical practices) that gods were open to bribes or manipulation, which, for him, made this type of magic equivalent to impiety and atheism.¹¹² For Plato’s Socrates, it was the power dynamic that made this impious, as well, to some extent, as his abstracted notion of divinity: in the Greek world requests made of the god were expected to be reciprocal – the god expected something in exchange for an action – but the god was always in control of this relationship.¹¹³ Meanwhile, the strong sense of unease that Plato’s Stranger felt at magicians, purifiers, diviners, charlatans, and necromancers in the *Laws*, led him to propose to legislate (in his theoretical city) against some of these harmful practices.¹¹⁴ Whether a magical act was criminal for Plato’s Stranger depended on the nature of the act, and its punishment depended on the nature of the crime and the nature of the criminal (professionals were punished far more severely).¹¹⁵ The tiered criminalisation of the Stranger in the *Laws*, then, shows that he viewed magic and a variety of other practices and beliefs as inherently negative or fraudulent. The opposition to these beliefs and practices was clearly motivated in these texts by a desire to prevent individuals from misleading the community or

¹¹⁰ A. E. Taylor’s 1951: 94-137, esp. 110 insistence that the accusation was nothing to do with Socrates’ *daimon* has been very influential but is now widely discredited. See Versnel 1990: 126.

¹¹¹ See Chapter One.

¹¹² Platonic Socrates in Pl. *Rep.* 2.364b-365a; and Athenian Stranger in *Laws* 10.905d-907d. Collins 2008: 139, Ogden 2002: 20. Xenophon’s Socrates was also mockingly sceptical towards magical spells: Xen. *Mem.* 2.6.10-14; Ogden 2002: 100-101.

¹¹³ On reciprocity in prayer see Pulleyn 1997.

¹¹⁴ Pl. *Laws* 10.909b; 933a-e; Eidinow 2007: 31, Dickie 2001: 45, Luck 2006: 211.

¹¹⁵ Pl. *Laws* 11.933d-e; Collins 2008: 140.

individuals in religious matters.¹¹⁶ Plato's Socrates intends to mount a defence of religion, and not an attack on it, as is made quite clear in the *Republic*:

... strangest of all, these are the stories that are told about the gods and virtue: how even the gods have assigned to many good people misfortune and a wretched life, but to those who are the opposite an opposite fate. Wandering priests and prophets approach the doors of the wealthy and persuade them that they have a power from the gods conveyed through sacrifices and incantations, and any wrong committed against someone either by an individual or his ancestors can be expiated with pleasure and feasting. Or if he wishes to injure any enemy of his, for a small outlay he will be able to harm just and unjust alike with certain spells and incantations through which they can persuade the gods, they say, to serve their ends... "How, my dear Socrates," he continued, "do we imagine the souls of young men will react on hearing all this and a lot of other such talk like it about virtue and vice, and the esteem in which they are held by men and gods?"¹¹⁷

Plato's Socrates objects to these portrayals of the gods because they are wrong and harm the religious education of the young. Likewise for the Stranger in the *Laws*:

Ath: May we now say that we have fully proved our three propositions,—namely, that the gods exist, and that they are careful, and that they are wholly incapable of being seduced to transgress justice?

Clin: Certainly we may; and in these statements you have our support.

Ath: And truly they have been made in somewhat vehement terms, in our desire for victory over those wicked men¹¹⁸

Shortly before appointing punishments for atheism, the stranger makes an argument against atheists of all kinds, whether positive disbelievers or frauds like certain diviners and other religious experts.¹¹⁹ The scepticism and disbelief in magical practices in both of these texts,

¹¹⁶ Pl. *Laws* 10.909b; Collins 2008: 43 argues that he did not disbelieve in necromancy, but the passage in the *Republic* clearly sets necromancers up as frauds pretending powers that they do not have. Luck 2006: 211.

¹¹⁷ Pl. *Rep.* 2.364b-c, 365a.

¹¹⁸ Pl. *Laws* 10.907b-c.

¹¹⁹ Pl. *Laws* 10.908d-e.

then, is again very self-consciously marked as motivated by belief in the gods rather than any general scepticism of the supernatural.

A similar sort of opposition, Catherine Osborne (now Rowett) has argued, also marks the works of Heraclitus, writing a century earlier than Plato: Heraclitus was concerned to defend ‘proper’ religion, and not to undermine the supernatural realm as a whole.¹²⁰ The philosopher condemned the ‘night-wanderers’ (*nuktipoloi*), mages, and mystery-initiates to suffering after their death, for their sacrilege (*anierōsti*).¹²¹ Heraclitus believed that the methods of these individuals did not work: ‘they pray to these statues, like as if someone, who knew nothing of what gods or heroes are like, were to converse with the houses.’¹²² Although Heraclitus has sometimes been read as a sceptic, Osborne, in particular, has argued that his fragments should instead be viewed as arguing for appropriate religious practices rather than as the words of a critic of religion.¹²³ For Heraclitus, correct religious practice was about knowing the appropriate things to do, and ignorance of the appropriate way to behave led to absurdity and impiety. Heraclitus’ personal influence rested on a similar type of claim to hidden knowledge to the initiates and mages he criticised: again, there is an element of competition as there would be in Plato and in the author of the Hippocratic *On the Sacred Disease*.

As observed above, the author of the Hippocratic *On the Sacred Disease* shares Plato’s distaste for charlatans and frauds peddling magical cures; his criticism is, like Plato’s, motivated by the desire to defend proper religion against corruption. The author argues at the outset of *On the Sacred Disease* that the charlatans (*alazones*), as he describes his competitors in the field of medicine, claim that their power rests in reverence of the gods, and a greater knowledge of secret things.¹²⁴ To counter this claim of piety the author argues that they are in fact frauds: ‘those who try to cure these diseases in this way believe them to be

¹²⁰ Osborne, C. 1997.

¹²¹ Heraclitus DK 12b B14 F112, in Graham 2010: 178-9; Ogden 2002: n.10. Cf. Plut. *On Sup.* 166a-b.

¹²² Heraclitus B5 F115, in Graham 2010: 178-9.

¹²³ Osborne, C. 1997: 35-42.

¹²⁴ ‘I think that the first people to have projected this disease [epilepsy] as “sacred” were men like those who are now mages (*magoi*) and purifiers (*kathartai*) and beggar-priests (*agurtai*) and vagrant-charlatans (*alazones*). These people purport to be extremely reverent of the gods and to know something more than the rest of us.’ [Hp.] *SD*, 2.1-5.

neither sacred nor divine.¹²⁵ The author grounds this view in a theological claim: magical techniques could be used for attacking and harming men, and so they cannot come from the gods because the gods are good, which means they must be caused by humans. His opponents, therefore, say pious things only in order to deceive other men. Indeed, they are atheists and frauds:

But they seem to me impious (*dussebein*), to believe that the gods do not exist (*kai theous oute einai nomizein*) and that they have no power, and I think there is no extreme action that they would forbear to undertake, since the gods hold no terror for them.¹²⁶

For the Hippocratic author, claiming to enslave the divine is equivalent to disbelief. This is very similar to the argument in Plato. Both attack ‘charlatans’ on the basis of a theological claim (that the gods are always more powerful than men); and both defend, rather than attack, religion. Even more than Plato, the author of *On the Sacred Disease* criticises the other ‘quacks’ because he offers not only a competing service, but a competing theological system.¹²⁷ The author’s argument is analogous to pantheism – a belief that everything is divine, that is commonly considered a form of atheism – which resembled similar ideas in presocratic philosophy, like those of Thales: ‘everything is full of gods’.¹²⁸ The aim of the Hippocratic author is to suggest an alternative method for treating epilepsy, and one that does not rely on magical and religious appeals, but on clinical treatment; the disease does not require a religious authority but a medical one (though he also casts himself as a religious one).¹²⁹ So while in a philosophical sense the sacred disease as imagined by the Hippocratic

¹²⁵ [Hp.] *SD* 3.1-3. For discussion see Luck 2006: 97.

¹²⁶ [Hp.] *SD* 3.14-21.

¹²⁷ Eidinow 2007: 15, 31, Parker 1996: 211.

¹²⁸ Thales 11a3 DK; see also 11a1 DK; Anaximander 12a15 DK that the universe is ‘infinite’ and the infinite is deity; Anaximenes 13a10, 13a7 DK, that everything divine and human had a single origin in air; or Heraclitus 22a1 DK, that everything is full of *daimones*; Collins 2008: 31-2, 2003. Richard Dawkins 2006: 18 flamboyantly but not unreasonably described pantheism as ‘sexed-up atheism’.

¹²⁹ Luck 2006: 97 interpreted the *Sacred Disease* as a scientific treatise opposed to earlier superstitious views. Collins 2008: 33-5 argues that it needs a medical rather than religious authority. Loosely, this is true, though the distinction between the two is unclear, not just because Hippocrates’ alternative was religious, but also because priests had medical knowledge, for instance in curing eye diseases with medicine and healing environments, in the Asclepieia based on evidence from tablets and Ar. *Wealth* 652-747 in which the priest also heals: see

author may have been rooted in (albeit, naturalistic) conceptions of the divine, and the author arms himself with the rhetoric of piety and impiety, the result might have seemed suspiciously devoid of the gods to the casual reader or gossip. Indeed, the consequence of his treatise is to undermine the divine: the gods, here, no longer seem to have a clear role in bringing disease, as they did in the *Iliad* for example.¹³⁰

In working through the distinctions between atheistic and theistic, it is useful to compare the positions of Plato, Heraclitus, and the author of *On the Sacred Disease*, with Thucydides, who systematically excluded the divine. The story mentioned above, of Pausanias' haunting by an innocent girl he killed (Cleonice), and his haunting of the Spartans, is particularly interesting from this perspective.¹³¹ In Thucydides' version of the events there is no mention of ghosts, which leaves his story quite disjointed.¹³² Pausanias' forced ejection from the temple is the motivation for his ghost's requirement to be buried in the chamber (i.e. why they moved his body), as in Plutarch's and Pausanias' version of the story.¹³³ Thucydides explains that the Spartans 'later decided to move his body' back to the temple entrance, because they were instructed to do so by Delphi. Why would the Spartans consult Delphi about Pausanias' burial unless they had an issue with pollution or haunting? Likewise, the presence of the two dead individuals, Cleonice and the general Pausanias, explains the two statues. Why would Delphi instruct two statues unless Cleonice's haunting was also a problem?

Thucydides did not give the gods much of a role in his *History*. It is often argued today, as it was in the ancient world, that the historian 'was (something approaching) an atheist'.¹³⁴ The removal of supernatural components from a story like this must have

Marketos, et al. 1989: 155-65. On the shared naturalistic-pantheistic ideas of Herodotus and the author of *On the Sacred Disease*, see Thomas 2000: 32-5.

¹³⁰ Hom. *Il.* 1.74.

¹³¹ Paus. 3.17.7-9 The story is quite similar with its multiple staged exorcism and bronze statues to Paus 9.38.5, as in Faraone 1991: 186-7. The haunting of the Spartans by Pausanias' ghost is confirmed in [Plutarch], *Mor.* 560e-f.

¹³² Thuc. 1.133-4.

¹³³ For a comparison of the versions see Faraone 1991: 186.

¹³⁴ Quote in Harrison forthcoming: 1; Ancient accusations of atheism against Thucydides: Marcell. *Life of Thuc.* 22, who attributes sources to Antyllus. Badian 1989: 98 talks of the 'contempt' of Thucydides 'for established Greek religion', quoted in Hornblower 1992: 169, who agrees, and observes that Thucydides did neglect

contributed to that reputation. Thucydides did not include gods as part of the causality of the natural world: he never explicitly denies the gods, nor should he be expected to. Unlike Plato, Heraclitus, and the author of *On the Sacred Disease*, Thucydides' exclusion of the gods is systematic, and it is not justified with any statement or suggestion of any competing theological position. This is relevant precisely because it is a very different sort of position to the other authors already considered: Thucydides excludes magic the same as he does religion, because they all rest on assumptions about the supernatural that have no place in his humanistic narrative.

To sum up: there were several ways in which ancient authors ensured they avoided undermining the shared supernatural foundation common to theistic and supernatural para-theistic beliefs. Plato, Hippocrates, and Heraclitus based their criticisms of what they perceive as illegitimate religion on theological claims. Even where criticism is based on rationalistic principles, as with the author of *On the Sacred Disease*, the author elsewhere casts himself as a religious specialist with more authority and expertise than his competitors. So criticism of practices like magic, curses, divination, and necromancy helped build and reinforce the opposition between legitimate and illegitimate religion; these texts are actively engaged in defining and defending religion. This should be distinguished from texts like that of Thucydides, where the author is not attacking or excluding magic to legitimate their own beliefs, but as part of a more systematic dismissal of the supernatural.

Conclusion

'Magic' and other forms of para-religious beliefs and practices, as well as atheism, all seem to have been, and still largely are, defined by their 'otherness' (*l'étrange*). But there is not a single corpus of beliefs and rituals that ancients agreed was 'bad' or 'illegitimate', or that everyone agreed was 'good' or 'official'. Different individuals with different agendas, beliefs, and also methods, argued that different things were legitimate and illegitimate. There is some loose consensus in the ancient world about which practices and beliefs were problematic, for para-religious beliefs and for impiety, but this misses the point.¹³⁵

religion, and concedes he may have been an atheist. Veyne 1984: 232 observed that 'the most surprising feature of Thucydides' account is that one thing is missing: the gods'. Whitmarsh 2016: 82 says a defining feature of Thucydides is that '[t]here is no room in his system for divine intervention'; it 'is a significant moment in intellectual history: the gods are no longer the motors of human action, even metaphorically.'

¹³⁵ Ober 2011: 140 'strong consensus'

Legitimation and ‘illegitimation’, were individual processes: it is not possible, or sound, to piece together shared perspectives into a societal consensus, just to fit a model of religion that requires a broader social platform and ignores individuals.

As was explored in Chapter Two, the ancient Greeks did not hold to a doctrine or dogma that allowed them to fall back on prescribed notions of appropriate belief and behaviour. But it must be stressed that while there is not, and never was, any fixed definition of ‘superstition’, or any other tagline for illegitimate religion, ‘otherness’ was nonetheless a recognisable category for the Greeks. What Plato (for instance), or his characters, considered illegitimate forms of para-religious belief and behaviour, he found very concerning. It was partly through opposition to these illegitimate beliefs and behaviours that different Greeks constructed their individual religious identities, some of which, by virtue of the prominence of the texts in which they were recorded, must have come to form more common and collective perspectives, as did the theological conceptions of Homer and Hesiod.¹³⁶ This construction involved destruction: the critiques and caricatures of religious alterity were a way of challenging alternate types of religiosity as well as reinforcing their own.¹³⁷ Through caricaturing and delineating the extremes of belief – superstition and atheism – individual Greeks established for themselves the moderate and reasonable position. There was no need for doctrine.

The approaches towards apparently illegitimate attitudes to religiosity underline how important the use of oppositional definition was in reinforcing religious beliefs, and perhaps more importantly, of making the case for the legitimacy of one’s own personal religious position. Those who criticised magic almost always ostensibly did so from a platform of defending religion. This is precisely because there was no neat division between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ in real life practices and beliefs. While unbelief in things other than the gods, e.g. magic, or curses, is not strictly atheism, beliefs from theism to curses rested on shared theoretical and philosophical foundations. Criticisms of magicians who prophesied on the street, or diviners knocking on people’s doors, could be equally applied to ‘legitimate’

¹³⁶ Harrison 2007a: 383 argues sensibly that Homer and Hesiod are not doctrine, but nonetheless become imbued with a ‘special authority’ and ‘provide, rather, one way, out of many – oral, written, and non-verbal, i.e., through imitation and participation in ritual: Burkert 1985: 95 – of reinforcing continuity, and disguising change, in ideology and practice’. See also Bremmer 1995.

¹³⁷ Bowden 2008: 64-6.

religion which shared these practices, or more importantly the beliefs on which these practices rested. Most critics of ‘superstition’ were careful to assure their readers or audience that they did believe in the gods, and often these individuals were using this criticism to reinforce and trace their own religious identities. These ancient critics used religion as a foil for other beliefs they were determined to label as illegitimate. Authors discussing illegitimate religious beliefs and practices were usually doing so to demonstrate, work through, and legitimate certain other beliefs (or unbeliefs) in contrast to their own, correct, beliefs.

The normative nature of this evidence is key: individuals inevitably emphasise their own religiosity. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this was partly to avoid accusations of atheism of the sort that Plato’s Socrates said he suffered for his own over-criticism of other people’s positions on religion.¹³⁸ Each person – whatever their individual collection of beliefs – shared some assumptions about the gods and ways of imagining the supernatural with others, but also held individual beliefs that competed with those of others. The collection of these comprised the individual’s worldview. Atheism never become a competing *worldview*, though heavy criticism of magic and reliance on naturalism might have been perceived as an atheistic worldview by some, and in some cases (like that of Thucydides) it certainly came close. Over the centuries, magic, and other para-religious types of beliefs and practices, became grouped alongside atheism as representative of illegitimate attitudes towards religion. Both reflected unbalanced and dangerous attitudes towards accepted ideas about the gods (or God, as the tradition was adapted by Christians). Just as de Certeau’s Christians expunged their doubts about Christianity through the creation and cathartic persecution of witchcraft, so the Greeks used ‘the other’ – illegitimate beliefs like atheism and superstition – as symbols of alterity, in opposition to which their religious beliefs were explored, protested, and reinforced.

¹³⁸ Pl. *Ap.* 24a, 30e on his role as ‘gadfly’.

Conclusion: belief in unbelief, a reassessment

This thesis set out to investigate the role and consequences of atheism in Greek society. Each chapter has offered a different conclusion on its dedicated theme that answers this question in a different way. The need to combat scepticism and atheism pre-emptively led the Greeks to embed religious learning in their training and schooling systems to ensure that children grew up to be good citizens and individuals. Atheism was associated with immorality in the earliest literature that survives, but it was not inextricably so. Greek religion had a complex relationship with morality, which even allowed for the development of some complex humanistic moral systems. Punishments for, and prejudice against, atheism reinforced the limits of acceptable scepticism, but also represent the acceptance of a certain degree and type of critique of religion and theism. The complex philosophical and theological ideas proposed by the thinkers of the archaic and classical period show a lively evolving discourse that included many forms of acceptable scepticism. Constant atheistic critique galvanised the development of Greek ideas about the gods, which is particularly revealed through the most persistent feature of Greek theology: unknowability. Through opposition to the ‘other’, the ‘spectre of atheism’ allowed the reinforcement of appropriate religious practice and identity, in spite of lack of doctrine. Each of these thematic studies has enhanced our understanding of the crucial roles that atheism played and the significant consequences it had in Greek society.

The overall picture that has been presented in this thesis is that atheism was crucial to the vitality, evolution, and survival of religion in Greek society. It is, in a sense, as much a part of Greek religion as theism is, but one that is, by its very nature, hidden, and largely undetectable through the ‘spectre of atheism’; that is, the interaction of atheism with religion, or caricatures of atheism. There are a number of related threads that have run through this thesis that deserve bringing together into a broader picture. The first is the question of the viability of the concept of atheism for scholarship on the ancient world. The discussion of this has been particularly framed around the importance of individual (un)beliefs, versus the idea of belief and unbelief as ‘phenomena’. The contextuality of Greek religion and atheism was another key theme. This thesis embraced the embeddedness of religion (without accepting that this precluded atheism), and the consequent importance of deterrents and incentives for impacting expression of beliefs. The final major theme that has been argued in this thesis is that it is necessary to understand Greek atheism and scepticism in order to more fully understand Greek religion. There was a thriving shared dialogue between atheism and theism,

with many overlaps and ideas that could be marshalled for either type of argument, rather than opposing traditions with some vague mid-ground. This thesis has posited the central importance of atheism in helping define, by opposition, what it was to be a good citizen and individual, which ties into the impact of factors other than theology (like morality, civic duty, or politics) on perceptions of atheism.

Atheism as ‘scarcely imaginable’¹

Though research on scepticism, criticism, and other forms of dissidence has not been that uncommon over the past century, the final comment of scholars has begun to seem inevitable: that atheism did not exist in the Greek world. In reality, beyond the marginalisation of atheism, there has been very little consensus about anything of substance. This marginalisation has been present even among scholars who do perceive atheism in some form in the ancient world. For instance, some scholars of the ancient world, like P. A. Meijer in his ‘Philosophers, intellectuals and religion in Hellas’, accepted that the ‘type’ of atheism that involved unbelief but not rejection of practice was common in the Greek world:

That type of atheism which was not actively provocative in practice but which limited itself to words and did not infringe upon the external forms of religion, appears, from Plato's *Apologia* (26 D E) to have been of considerable significance among younger men in Socrates' time. Atheism was certainly widespread even in Plato's own days²

But Meijer also argued that atheism had ‘no success’ among philosophers, and that ‘[e]ven Anaxagoras did not teach any atheistic precepts’.³ As discussed in the Introduction, the marginalisation of atheism is at least partly due to faulty definitions. The position assumed in this thesis is that atheism is not only the ‘extreme’ form of disbelief in the gods, it is anything spanning from unbelief to disbelief in the gods. It is pointless to search for the golden fleece of public, explicit, ‘radical’ atheism. If it existed in the ancient world (which it probably did), then it was a fringe phenomenon, and a minuscule part of the broader phenomenon of atheism, for which very little evidence has (unsurprisingly) survived.

‘Wholesale’ atheists – people who publicly identified as atheists, opted out of religious practice, and chose to challenge religion from a consistently atheistic perspective –

¹ Harrison 2000: 22.

² Meijer 1981: 217.

³ Meijer 1981: 218.

are not recorded in our evidence for several reasons: because of the nature of the source materials, and the nature and terms of Greek society, which incentivised a different sort of behaviour and thought. The evidence that remains for atheism in the Greek world is structured statements of various types – philosophy, poetry, legal texts, numismatics, or epigraphy – and not informal discussion, and these are generated in contexts that permit and mitigate against the expression of certain ideas. Aside from the transmission of ideas, atheists were subject to tremendous social and cultural pressure from religion, but they were also subject to intellectual pressures. The first reason for this is the inherent predisposition that humans have to theism, observed through aspects of psychology like the hyperactive agency detection device (discussed in Chapter One). In his *Battling the Gods*, Tim Whitmarsh argues against ‘religious universalism’, the idea that religion is natural to the human brain.⁴ The cognitive literature that Whitmarsh is attacking is more nuanced than this: predisposition does not mean belief is predetermined. It is possible to accept that the Greeks were predisposed towards belief in gods, as all humans are, without it making atheism unthinkable; at least, not any more unthinkable than it is today.⁵ Natural urges and biological incentives impact our cognition in numerous ways, but these ‘intuitions’ provide a base to which it is possible to respond in a variety of ways, from belief to unbelief or disbelief. Susan Reynolds remarked:

None of this is intended to deny that most people probably accepted the Church's teachings without agonizing over them. The Church was in every sense established. Its teachings, however misunderstood or adapted to secular moralities, permeated life. To judge from the doubts some of them expressed, peasants and poor townspeople sometimes knew a fair amount about Christianity.⁶

Reynolds recognised that teachings, ideas, and shared concepts of theology, were not uncomplicatedly transmitted and accepted by individuals: they provided a platform for discussion and disagreement. In ancient Greece, not only were sceptical ideas peddled by the philosophers like Antiphon, Protagoras, and Democritus, but they were presented on the dramatic stage by tragic and comic playwrights like Euripides and Aristophanes; debated in the law-courts; and as far as it is possible to know, they were the common talk of the *agora*,

⁴ Whitmarsh 2016: 5.

⁵ See pg.47.

⁶ Reynolds 1991: 38.

where Socrates taught and citizens mingled.⁷ Atheism and atheistic ideas were far from ‘unthinkable’ in ancient Greece, though the form of Greek atheistic ideas certainly reflected that of Greek religion at the time. The second key reason that atheists were subject to tremendous pressures is the religious environment. The impact of ideas should not be underestimated. The shared intellectual battlegrounds for criticism, like unknowability, tended to sanitise and bundle potentially critical ideas into forms that reinforced rather than undermined Greek religion. There were more practical societal pressures exerted on the atheist or potential atheist as well, that incentivised outward conformity and keeping unbelief private, like the possibility of being prosecuted for impiety as an atheist.

The shared dialogue between theism and atheism

This thesis has been a discussion of Greek religion as much as it has been of Greek atheism, as all discussions of atheism in societies inevitably are. Our examination of atheism has further confirmed the fundamentally flexible nature of Greek religion. This continued beyond the bounds of this thesis: with the rise of new political structures, it adapted. In response to the great monarchies of the Hellenistic periods, the traditional hero worship, already tailored to many monarchical areas of the Greek world, was reformed into a new ruler cult. It was reactive, fluid, and mobile, and it was also highly contextual. In the democracy of Athens, classical Greek religion manifested through democratic and *polis*-structures. Just as the city became a focus for adoration, so Athena did: the wealth of Athens was manifested in her temples, filled with dedications.

So it is not surprising at all, then, that the flexibility of Greek religion also manifests through its responses to criticism, scepticism, and even atheism, which sometimes involved the reconfiguring of what might otherwise be considered ‘core tenets’ of Greek religion. These ‘core tenets’ were, in fact, nothing of the sort: they were general, contextual, temporary, and preliminary truths that might face modification at any time. It is not surprising that Greek religion reacted and adapted to criticism and atheism. However, it does prove that atheism not only existed in ancient Greek society in a variety of forms, but that understanding atheism is absolutely indispensable for understanding Greek religion. The form and lines of Greek scepticism and atheism were drawn along the same lines as Greek religion. It is

⁷ Pl. *Ap.* 26d: Anaxagoras’ books were cheaply sold in the *agora*. Socrates taught in the *agora*: Pl. *Ap.* 17c; the *stoa Basileus*: Pl. *Tht.* 210d; *Eleutherios*: *Theag.* 121a; and in general ‘where the young men were’ esp. in *Laches* 180c, but also *Lysis* 204a.

marked by the basic flexibility and dynamism of thought that marked Greek religious thinking, the same expression through the key structures of Greek communities (the *oikos*, *polis*, and Hellenic whole); and the focus on justice and injustice, human powerlessness, and the unpredictability of the natural world.

In this respect, this thesis can offer some reflection on the Polis Religion model for understanding Greek religion. In a substantial sense, Polis Religion has been useful in a number of areas, and it is clear that the model captures an essential truth: Greek religion and irreligion were drawn along the lines of the essential structure of the Greek world, which was the *polis*. The courts were the final punishment and deterrent against dangerous forms of atheism, but they were also a place in which theology and theodicy was articulated and fought over, and a place in which humanistic moral precepts were explored and developed. The socialisation of children in being good citizens took place mainly in the *oikos*, and religious rites of passage were linked to key structures like the *demes* and connected with moments of advancement as citizens. Even atheistic criticisms of religion like the Sisyphus fragment draw criticisms along the lines of the *polis*: that religion was drawn up only in order to exist alongside the laws and government, as insurance of good citizen behaviour. Being appropriately religious was inextricably connected with being a good citizen of the *polis*, and interacting with its structures in an expected way. On the other hand, this thesis has also explored beliefs and ideas beyond the *polis*. This model was, in some ways, found to be lacking. The identity generation explored in the final chapter, for instance, was clearly a subjective and fundamentally individual process, in spite of there being broad agreement on some essential religious ideas, some of which were drawn along the lines of the *polis*. In general, Polis Religion was not very helpful in understanding the exchange of thought and ideas discussed in Chapter Three: the focus on mechanics and behaviour that the model has engendered, has to some extent obscured this thriving intellectual milieu.

Atheistic thought permeated Greek society as much as religion did. Just as the same person might engage in ‘legitimate’ or ‘official’ religion one day, and then use a witch-doctor the next, so the same person might celebrate in a festival one day, and then raise the immorality of the gods as a topic of discussion in a *symposium* the next day. Humans are vehicles for ideas. Those ideas are, to some extent, free floating in an open intellectual society. To demand that a person be consistently and perceptibly ‘religious’, ‘superstitious’, or ‘irreligious’ in order to serve as a vehicle for one of those ideas is to unnecessarily and artificially restrict any enquiry. Likewise, criticism of magic, ghosts, and other ‘supernatural

things' (*daimonia*) was not, philosophically, the same as criticism of the gods, as Plato and his philosophical colleagues were eager to point out. But the eagerness of critics to affirm their belief reveals two things: first, that religious and magical ideas were overlapping, and disbelieving in one might impact belief in the other; and secondly, that the critic of magic might have been viewed as the same as the critic of the gods.

The history of atheism is textured, in this sense: different times and areas saw different levels of openness about, types, and treatment, of atheism and atheistic ideas. The spirit of open and free enquiry clearly flourished in the second half of the fifth century in Athens, more than it did in other periods and places. But atheism was nonetheless omnipresent across Greek history, in different forms, subdued or diverted. Likewise, anxieties about and scapegoating of atheism seem to be strongly associated with periods of difficulty: war, plague, and other apparent injustices. Attitudes changed towards figures with a reputation (deserved or not) for atheism: they could be perceived as harmless eccentrics or dangerous radicals. But the prosecutions and trials for atheism were only the tip of a much broader conflict and dialogue between sceptical ideas that sometimes, though rarely, resulted in explosions of legal action, like the trials, or violent action, like the mutilation of the *Hermes*. Atheistic ideas were mainstream and normal, at least in Athens in the fifth century: they were aired in the courts, on the dramatic stage, at dinner parties, in older and newer literature, and on the streets of the *polis*, even if they were not part of a wider atheistic worldview, and even if individuals rarely self-identified as atheists.

In fact, Greek religion is 'scarcely imaginable' without atheism. Hornblower has observed that '[t]he intellectual advances made in archaic Ionia (which affected Athens in turn) would not have been possible had the Greeks there been "priest-ridden"'.⁸ Hornblower is right to stress the importance of the lack of dogmatism or exegetical authority in the archaic and classical Greek world for the development of Greek intellectualism. On the other hand, it is clear that these intellectual advances, on behalf of the gods and critical of them, would not have been possible without a thriving religious theology. The prominence of scepticism and criticism is not a sign of weakness or a part of the 'decline' of Greek religion. It reflects the nature and conditions of Greek religion that made it particularly predisposed to thrive in the face of criticism. Scepticism of the gods was the chisel that sculpted Greek religion from its earliest conception, and developed and toughened it over more than a

⁸ Hornblower 1987: 74.

thousand years of history through to its eventual eclipse by Christianity, in what was a long, messy, and exacting process, and not the easy enlightenment as has sometimes been suggested.⁹ Scepticism was the driver behind the dynamism, flexibility, and malleability of Greek religious ideas. It is scepticism that explains the prominence of many ideas Greeks had about their gods, like unknowability, through a process that weeded out the weakest defences and hardened the strongest ideas.

⁹ On the willingness of elites to pretend Christianity: De Ste Croix 2006a: 136-7. On the persecution of pagans see Athanassiadi 1993: 1-29. On the survival of Greek paganism until at least the 9th century: Gregory 1986.

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