

Greek Philosophers
as Theologians
The Divine Arche

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ASHGATE

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Chapter 9

Rationalization of Religion

The mid-fifth century BC marks the beginning of a new type of philosophy in Athens. The old philosophy of nature was of tangential interest only. The primary philosophical interest of the times was in practical matters, in social issues with a relativistic bent. Grand metaphysical issues were set aside. The expansion of Athenian democracy required skills that would prepare the young for participation in public life. The role of teachers was fulfilled by the Sophists although the Sophists did not form a uniform school. They disagreed among themselves about curriculum (see, for instance, Protagoras' criticism of other Sophists voiced in Plato's *Protagoras* 318de). They charged a fee for their educational services and concentrated on higher learning.¹ They taught rhetoric and the intricacies of political life. However, an important novelty was the idea that virtue can be taught. The source of knowledge of virtue, however, was not traditional religion, among other things, but the experience and knowledge of sages and teachers. With Xenophanes, they criticized traditional religion, but did not propose any other religious system in its place. Religion was considered a human invention, socially desirable and useful but of little metaphysical significance.

Protagoras

It is reported that Protagoras began one of his works, *On the gods*, with a strong, even provocative statement: "About the gods, I am not able to know whether they exist or do not exist, nor what they are like in form; for the things preventing knowledge are many: the obscurity [of the subject] and the brevity of human life" (DL 9.51 + Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 14.3.7 = B4).² The statement appeared so controversial to his contemporaries that Protagoras was accused of atheism and his book was publicly burned. Regrettably, only this one sentence survived from the work, and it is difficult to say how the argument developed afterwards. But judging just from this fragment, the accusation of atheism is far too strong. In it, Protagoras does not make an ontological but an epistemological statement. He does not *know* whether the gods exist or not, which does not mean that he denies their existence. He pronounces his inability to have definite knowledge concerning this theological issue, but he leaves open a possibility that some positive pronouncements about the gods can be made. However, these pronouncements would not qualify as knowledge. Not knowing how it is with

¹ On the role of the Sophists in Greek education, see William Boyd and Edmund J. King, *The History of Western Education* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973), pp. 17, 21–24; Frederick A.G. Beck, *Greek Education* (London: Methuen, 1964), pp. 147–150.

² Adam Drozdek, 'Protagoras and instrumentality of religion', *L'Antiquité Classique* 74 (2005), pp. 41–50.

the existence of the gods, Protagoras does not know what they look like, either. It is obvious that in making this statement Protagoras relies on the popular concept of the gods, in particular, their immortality. This basic fact about the gods seems to be reflected in the reason Protagoras gives for his lack of knowledge about the gods, which is brevity of human life.³ Had humans lived longer, would they have been able to acquire some knowledge about the gods? How long would be long enough? Any finite length of human existence would be vanishingly small in comparison with the infinity of the existence of the gods. On the other hand, why this would be an issue?⁴ Protagoras probably would agree that the sky and the sea are incomparably older than any of the humans and yet humans accumulated a great deal of positive knowledge about meteorology, astronomy, navigation, and the like to be able to use this knowledge in everyday life. Would it be possible to acquire at least partial knowledge about the gods through generations of theological investigations? Presumably, problems like this are addressed by Protagoras later in his book.

Besides *On the gods*, Protagoras wrote at least one other treatise that discussed religious matters, *On those in Hades*. This means that Protagoras was seriously interested in the problem of religion and addressed the obvious fact that religion exists and is a potent psychological and social force. Because none of these works survived, his views on religion may be gleaned from Plato's account of Protagoras' speech presented in the *Protagoras*. Protagoras' speech in the *Protagoras* has two parts, a myth and an argument. In a mythical account of the genesis of man, Protagoras states that gods existed first and they molded living beings from physical materials and then Epimetheus and Prometheus were put in charge of giving each of these beings proper abilities (swiftness, hides, claws, and so on). Epimetheus did the job at first by himself, but he ran out of abilities so nothing was left for men. Therefore, Prometheus stole wisdom from Athena and fire from Hephaestus. So it appears that absentmindedness of Epimetheus, "who was not very wise" (321b), was beneficial for humans since, otherwise, they would be just as other animals, made fit to live and survive through natural endowment only. Through Prometheus' sense of responsibility, the job is completed by giving men the divine attribute of wisdom and the no less divine gift of fire. Prometheus steals what is divine and gives it to men, thereby elevating them above the animal level. From the perspective of the gods, the lack of scruples in resorting to a rather nondivine stratagem was not wise, either, for which Prometheus had to pay dearly. It is just ironic – the irony probably intended by Protagoras – that through unwise handling by a god of the distribution of abilities and unwise handling by another god of the acquirement of the gifts, divine wisdom becomes man's endowment. Humans will later be able to justly prosecute theft and other crimes because of the gift of wisdom that was stolen and handed to them.

³ Mirella Carbonara Naddei, 'L'agnosticismo religioso di Protagora', *Sophia* 37 (1969), pp. 94–95, proposed a somewhat strained interpretation of brevity (of human life) as the limitation of human cognitive abilities, "intrinsic limitation of human rationality."

⁴ It may very well be that the reference to short life simply means that "it does not make sense to wait for a confirming personal experience," as proposed by Jaap Mansfeld, 'Protagoras on epistemological obstacles and persons', in G.B. Kerferd (ed.), *The Sophists and Their Legacy* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1981), p. 42.

An ironic treatment of the gods in Protagoras' myth indicates that the myth is just a myth, a story not to be treated in all seriousness when it comes to the matter of the divine.⁵ If the story is considered nonmythically, it seems that Protagoras conveys a view that humans are just a lucky accident of some unspecified natural development. They are not simply animals because of the wisdom they possess and the ability – an art – of handling fire. Other animals are truly unreasoning beings (ἀλογόνα, 321c), but humans, as much as they are rational, are divine – they have “kinship with the god” (322a). Humans recognized that kinship from the very beginning, and the first act of the human race was to worship the gods by erecting altars and making images of the gods. Humans, rational beings, are thus naturally religious beings, endowed with a religious instinct that needs to be exercised properly. Whether the universal existence of this instinct can be considered a proof for the existence of the divine is another matter. Protagoras' agnosticism would not be irreconcilable with using it as a weak proof. Others used it as a strong proof, to mention only the Stoics.

The fact that religious instinct is primary in humans can be seen from the order in which other manifestations of wisdom appeared. Protagoras says that *after* worship of the gods, humans developed language, building houses, making cloths, and processing foods.⁶ The first acts of wisdom in humans are very specific to humans: religion and language.

With wisdom and fire and the skills developed through them, humans were at a disadvantage. To enable their survival, the intervention of Zeus himself was required to endow them with a gift that would lead to the development of civilization: the gift of justice and respect/shame (δίκη and αἰσχύνη). These two gifts were a glue of sorts that transformed scattered groups and families into *polis* societies so that, through coordinated group activity, humans were able to screen themselves from the danger of the animal world. Natural human gifts were insufficient to help small groups blend into societies. The divine on the level of an individual had to be supplemented by the divine on the societal level.

Rationality, if only practical, makes humans human. However, rationality by itself is insufficient for human survival. There is the next level, namely morality. Rational dimension is historically followed by the moral dimension, and the latter is what makes humans fully human. Through the development of full humanity, through the development of moral sense, scattered human groups can coalesce and form lasting groups powerful enough to repel outside dangers. Morality and moral behavior are the source of strength. Humans are human only partially through

⁵ There is an opinion that Protagoras' myth is really an expression of true piety, M. Louis, *Doctrines religieuses des philosophes grecs* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1909), p. 47.

⁶ It is not at all obvious that Protagoras meant here not temporal succession, but an indication of importance, as suggested by Carl W. Müller, 'Protagoras über die Götter', *Hermes* 95 (1967), p. 143 note 2; Hermann Sauppe, Commentaries, in Plato, *Protagoras* (Boston: Ginn, 1889), p. 67. But even if such interpretation of the “first-then” clause is accepted, the pre-eminence of religion remains uncontested, cf. C.C.W. Taylor, Commentaries, in Plato, *Protagoras* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 84. Olof Gigon, 'Studien zu Platons *Protagoras*', in *Phyllobolia* (Basel: Schwabe, 1946), p. 127, says that religion and language constitute a “fixed pair” as exemplified in Lucretius 5.71–75. However, Lucretius clearly considers development of religion to follow emergence of language, so Protagoras' pair is not too fixed for Lucretius.

rationality.⁷ Rationality is a necessary prerequisite of morality, a vehicle through which morality can be developed.⁸

In the argument that follows the myth, Protagoras says that “the virtue of a man” (ἀ δὲ ἀρετή) must be common to all citizens and that the virtue encompasses justice, moderation (σωφροσύνη), and holiness (ἁγιότης, 325a). Holiness, understood as “showing the proper attitude (sc. in thought, word, and action) towards the gods,”⁹ is an indispensable element that assures the proper functioning of society. *Andros aretē* is not immutable and not equally strong in all humans and thus has to be nurtured, particularly by the educational process (325d). It is obvious for Protagoras that all citizens ought to be religious and moral, hopefully, in their inner disposition, but at least in their outward behavior. Religion is considered in the argument purely as part of social engineering. There is no interest in, no discussion of the validity of the religious claims. The city functions properly due in large part to the exercise of religious practices.

The discussed views on religion have to be confronted with the *homo mensura* statement with which the name of Protagoras is identified much more closely than with the agnosticism of fr. B4. Protagoras says that “man is a measure of all things, of those that are that they are, and of those that are not that they are not” (Plato, *Theaet.* 152a = B1). As expressed by Socrates, the statement means, “as each thing appears to me so it is to me, and as it appears to you, so it is to you” (152a, *Crat.* 385e). However, this does not lead to complete epistemological anarchy. The Sophist goal is to be useful to the city and the city’s opinion prevails over the view of an individual citizen. For “whatever seems just and right to a city is really just and right to it so long as it believes to be so” (*Theaet.* 177d, 167c). When individuals are taken separately, their opinions and views are on a par. There is democracy in holding opinions. But when common good and common interest is taken into account, there are erroneous opinions if they are in conflict with the views that may assure the preservation of the city. Therefore, religious underpinnings of the laws and morals of the city are considered to be true according to how much they assure the stability of the city. Religion is thus relative, but not totally arbitrary. There is an element of objectivity in justifying the validity of religious views, or any views, for that matter. Utilitarianism on the social level must involve some objectivity because seldom, if ever, can views dominant in a society be maintained, at least, in the long run, on the whim of an individual – be it a charismatic leader or tyrannical dictator. Historical situation, sociological conditions, political situation, environmental setting, and other factors are, most of the time, beyond the control of single individuals, and these conditions determine what ideology will be dominant

⁷ A similar view can be detected in the statement that the relation between the rulers and the ruled is determined by “reasonableness directed by ἡσυχία and εὐνομία, embodied in morals and laws,” D. Loenen, *Protagoras and the Greek Community* (Amsterdam, 1942), pp. 18–19.

⁸ It is, therefore, true that *sophia* is “an obvious prerequisite” of political expertise, although not mentioned explicitly by Protagoras, but it does not seem correct to see society as merely a result of “a long process of trial and error,” as proposed by Taylor, *Commentaries*, pp. 81, 82. Also, as stressed by Dietz, for the first time in the European history of ideas, knowledge is explicitly distinguished from ethics and social behavior, Karl-Martin Dietz, *Protagoras von Abdera* (Bonn: Habelt, 1976), p. 126.

⁹ Taylor, *Commentaries*, p. 96; Loenen, *Protagoras and the Greek Community*, p. 29.

in the city. In this way, “man” from the *homo mensura* statement can be understood as referring to humanity or society as a whole.¹⁰

The theological problems are rejected outright from any discussion by Protagoras (*Theaet.* 162e). As mentioned, it may be a token of humble admission of the limitation of human cognitive abilities. However, in view of the fact that Protagoras is a teacher, and a paid teacher at that, it is rather curious that he does not want to discuss and teach problems that are so very important for many, and probably most if not all, citizens. He was not uninterested in ontological problems when he discussed the problem of the unity of being (Porphyry, *ap. Eusebius, Praep. ev.* 10.3.25 = B2), but his view on theology seems to indicate that ontology was treated in the positivistic spirit as something to be left aside, and the thrust of his intellectual activity was devoted to the problems of politics, ethics, and pedagogy, in which theology was treated purely instrumentally. Because we cannot reach the essence of the divine, religious issues should be resolved in the *homo mensura* fashion with the group interest as a primary objective in mind. If a city judges that veneration of Athena is a cohesive social element, Athena should be revered. If Dionysian revelries are such an element, citizens should give themselves to the excesses of the cult because, presumably, this is in the best interest of the city. If familial bonds are strengthened by having wives accompany their dead husbands on their afterlife voyage (as in the Indian rite of *sati*), this should be done. It would thus be difficult to disagree with the somewhat harsh statement that “Protagoras’ man-measure principle, then, commits him to the view that any action can be just if a person or community thinks so, even if it involves blatant disregard for the rights of others.”¹¹

Prodicus

Prodicus, a younger contemporary of Protagoras, does not have epistemological scruples in stating something about the gods, namely that they do not exist, and he brings the phenomenon of religion much closer to earth, in fact, quite literally. Prodicus “derived all of mankind’s sacrifices and mysteries and cults from the fair works of tillage since, in his opinion ... the idea of the gods comes to men in this way” (Themistius, *Or.* 30 = B5). The key to the emergence of religion is usefulness.¹²

Prodicus is said to have distinguished two stages in the development of religion.¹³ In the first stage, “the things that nourish and benefit us were first acknowledged and honored as gods.” The beneficial things included “the sun, the moon, and rivers and springs and in general anything that is beneficial to our life because of the benefit

¹⁰ It is essential that the *homo mensura* statement include “a sociological concept of cognition and its value,” says Eugène Dupréel, *Les Sophistes* (Neuchâtel: Éditions du Griffon, 1948), pp. 19, 25.

¹¹ Michael Nill, *Morality and Self-interest in Protagoras, Antiphon and Democritus* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), p. 31.

¹² Adam Drozdek, ‘Prodicus: deification of usefulness’, *Myrtia* 21 (2006), 57–63.

¹³ The two-stage theory of religious development was first claimed for Prodicus by Wilhelm Nestle, ‘Bemerkungen zu den Vorsokratikern und Sophisten’, *Philologus* 67 (1908), pp. 556–558.

derived from them, just as the Egyptians [deify] the Nile” (SE 9.18 = B5). In the second phase, people who benefited others – “discoverers of foods and shelter and other skills” – were elevated to divine status (Persaeus, *ap.* Philodemus, *De pietate* col. 9 = B5). That is, in the first phase, anything beneficial would be a subject of divinization, in the second phase, the discoverers of beneficial inventions would be proclaimed divine. The second phase places the emphasis of human impact on the development of human civilization – particularly in the area of agriculture; the first phase treats on a par natural entities and entities created by men. This would reflect the Sophist view of the evolution of human society from simple and disorganized to more developed and civilized as reflected in the myth of Protagoras.

Prodicus uses ethnographic data from different parts of the world and, to some extent, performs research in comparative religion. As to the second phase in the development of religion, it is enough to notice that popular religion presented the gods as givers of particular goods. What was new in Prodicus’ theory was reducing the gods to human status. They were givers of goods, but human givers, not divine. They were proclaimed to be gods by grateful men, and so, in reality, they are gods only in name, not in essence.

As interesting as the problem of the existence of two phases in Prodicus’ theory may be, it is of secondary importance. The primary innovation of the theory lies in the motive for an introduction of divinities. For his contemporary, Democritus, when he said that popular religion attributed divinity to various natural phenomena such as lightning, conjunction of stars, or eclipses of the sun, the motive was fear because people were afraid of them (SE 9.24 = 68A75).¹⁴ For Prodicus, it was appreciation:¹⁵ what is appreciated can be divinized whether part of nature or something invented by men. The sun or water in general or a particular body of water is greatly appreciated as something that enables the very life of any living being and thus is divinized. Bread and wine, appreciated as maintaining and enhancing human life, are divinized as well.

It is interesting to observe that, for Socrates and for the Stoics, the existence of useful things was a testimony of the beneficence of the gods, of divine providence, and of the existence of the gods. For Prodicus, it is the other way around: the existence of useful and beneficial things led to the creation of the gods by man. He could say that the existence of the gods is a proof of the existence of beneficial things in nature.

Does this make Prodicus an atheist? Sextus includes him on a short list of those who are called ἄθεοι, that is, those who say that God does not exist (SE 9.51 = B5), which means that it was not just Sextus’ opinion that Prodicus was an atheist. Sextus is the only source in which Prodicus is explicitly called *atheos*. However, Prodicus’ religious nonconformity is mentioned more than once. Therefore, because there is no trace of Prodicus’ positive theology, considering Prodicus as an atheist seems to be rather well founded.

¹⁴ For Democritus, fear was also a source of various ideas concerning the afterlife (Stobaeus 4.52.40 = 68B297).

¹⁵ According to Prodicus, “the sense of gratitude based on the assessment of value is the source of religion,” Andrzej Ba kowski, ‘Prodikos z Keos i jego teoria religii’, *Euhemer* 6 (1962), no. 3, p. 17.

The origin of religion according to Protagoras hardly lends itself to a rational explanation. Religion emerges first and then emerge language and different practical skills. The role of religion is also unclear if a sociological explanation is attempted. Prodicus removes any unclarity. By claiming that “the idea of the gods” is derived from “the fair works of the tillage,” Prodicus closes the door on the possibility that maybe the divine sphere exists – at least the sphere of traditional divinities – but is inaccessible for human cognition. The otherworldly sphere is removed from Prodicus’ universe. Religion is purely the invention of men who elevate to the divine status what and who is useful: useful things and human benefactors. Prodicus is original in this because he is the only Sophist to deify human inventors.

The reason for choosing usefulness in his explanation of the phenomenon of religion may also be quite prosaic. Prodicus appears to have been touched by megalomania: it is hardly possible that any shy and modest teacher would charge the exorbitant fee of 50 drachmas for his lessons so that only a few could afford them.¹⁶ To be sure, such prices need to be justified somehow, and the usefulness would be certainly a top reason to pay for the lessons. All religions witness to the veneration of the benefactors of people. Such benefactors are discoverers in civic engineering, cooking, and various “useful skills.” Prodicus himself was renowned for his linguistic studies, in particular, the problem of synonymy. For him, this certainly was a useful skill and worthy of charging high fees. Therefore, a claim can be made that among the ones elevated to divine status are also the Sophists of old.¹⁷ The honor paid to them sufficiently justifies the usefulness of the Sophists. Furthermore, it is not impossible that Prodicus saw himself as a candidate for such an elevation by his contemporaries if only because he saw himself as a discoverer of the skill of discourse (Plato, *Phaedr.* 267b = A20). And, to some extent, he got his wish when Plato, probably tongue in cheek,¹⁸ called him divine (ἴ , *Prot.* 316a = A2; , *Theaet.* 151b = A3a).

The *Sisyphus*

In a long, 42-line fragment preserved from the lost play *Sisyphus*, the protagonist describes the beginnings of human life as rampant anarchy and brutality. To remedy the problem, men devised law and justice with which crimes could be kept in check. The law prevented crimes that could be detected. To also prevent crimes committed in secret, some clever and wise man invented the gods so “that the wicked might

¹⁶ Plato, *Crat.* 384b = A11; Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1415b15–17 = A12. Cf. the opinion that he was fond of making money, Philostratus, *Soph.* 1.12 = A1.

¹⁷ Protagoras says that the Sophist’s art is ancient (Plato, *Prot.* 316d), an opinion which Prodicus very well may have shared. A possibility of divinizing philosophers is mockingly mentioned by Sextus 9.41 and immediately dismissed as ludicrous. It may not have been so ludicrous to Prodicus.

¹⁸ Zeller’s claim that Plato mentions Prodicus in his dialogues only mockingly is documented by Richard Heinze, ‘Über Prodikos aus Keos’, *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Königlich Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philologisch-historische Classe* 36 (1884), pp. 315–335.

experience fear, even if they act or say or think in secret,” and thus the secret crimes could be stopped by the fear of divine retribution. Only then, when men were convinced about the existence of the divine that “will hear all that is said among mortals and will be able to see all that is done” was the law able to fight lawlessness successfully (SE 9.54 = 88B25).

The first problem with this fragment is the uncertainty of its authorship. The ancients attributed it to Critias (SE 9.54; SE, *PH* 3.218) and to Euripides.¹⁹ However, even if the authorship were known, it would be impossible to conclude from this fragment alone the beliefs of its author. It is possible that the views put in the mouth of Sisyphus were intended to agree with the character of a crafty criminal and to indicate the danger of such notions if not their absurdity. At the very least, the author “may have found it amusing to equip a mythological rascal with such anachronistically modern views.”²⁰ The views are similar to those expressed by the Sophists because the gods are considered as an imaginative construct introduced for social and political purposes. In their explanations, the Sophists did not use the fear factor as the reason for the introduction of the gods, but Democritus did, who also did not deny their existence.

The important problem for the author of the *Sisyphus* was that of undetected crimes. This problem was commonly discussed in the late fifth century, not from a religious standpoint, but from a political and sociological point of view.²¹ The existence of a society and a state depends on social stability which can be permanently disrupted by antisocial behavior, such as rampant theft, sedition, and murder. Laws are established to prevent that from happening, but laws need to be enforced in all cases whether crimes are detected or undetected. Undetected crimes can be suppressed if they are pronounced detectable, if not by human authorities, then by higher powers, by the gods. Knowing everything, they know the crimes committed in secret and can punish them if human authorities cannot. That much was also claimed by Plato (*Laws* 899d–905c). In the eyes of the author of the *Sisyphus*, the problem was as important in his times as at the dawn of humanity and, according to him, the gods were invented to address the problem. The inventor of the gods was just a rationalist of the age of the *Sisyphus* author translated into the past to deal with the problem of social stability. It is taken for granted that the gods are only a useful fiction and that there is no ontological reality behind them. They are but an invention – superhuman guards of human social order, superhuman prosecutors of human crimes. The fiction of the superhuman sphere thus guarantees the existence of the reality of the human realm, the continuation of the existence of society seems to require an underlying lie, a real order seems to require a fictitious order to endure.

¹⁹ Pseudo-Plutarch, *Plac.* 1.6.7, 880ef; Aetius 1.7.2, Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 14.16.1; Galen, *Hist. philos.* 8, 19.250, 35; they all say that Euripides put the statement in the mouth of Sisyphus to avoid the charge of impiety.

²⁰ Dana Sutton, ‘Critias and atheism’, *Classical Quarterly* 31 (1981), p. 37.

²¹ Michael Nill, *Morality and Self-interest in Protagoras, Antiphon and Democritus* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), pp. 54–58; Harvey E. Yunis, ‘The debate on undetected crime and an undetected fragment from Euripides’ *Sisyphus*’, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 75 (1988), pp. 40–41.

The reality has to be based on fiction, truth has to be based on a lie. The work of an Athenian intellectual would lie by stripping the religious background of its apparent reality, by showing that the gods are introduced in the service of the societal stasis. It would be interesting to know how far he would like to go with this. By revealing the fictitious foundation of social stability, the intellectual apparently endangers this stability, unless it is assumed that the society is ready for such news and the fictitious foundation of the society can be jettisoned altogether. This can be done when there is a strong belief in social and psychological progress, otherwise, removing the gods can be satisfying in the eyes of the intellectual, but if everyone begins to think in this way, the existence of society may be exposed to a serious danger. This may be the reason why such a noble lie is exposed in the form of a play, a fiction. Fiction is exposed by a fictitious figure (unless, Sisyphus is considered to have existed) in a fictitious speech that reveals the truth. In this way, the truth of the reality of the gods (as understood by the intellectual) is revealed, but in such a fashion that it should not be taken too seriously because of potentially harmful social consequences. This, by the way, could be an argument in favor of Critias' authorship of the *Sisyphus*. As a politician, he was concerned about the social order, and so he disguised his views about the noble lie in the form of a play, and the view is never found in his non-literary fragments. He showed what the origin of social order is, but in no wise did he want to abolish this order. Religion, fictitious or otherwise, is all too important for social stability to be abolished. But at least intellectuals should know its true nature and showing this truth through fiction should reach them.

The progression from Protagoras' agnosticism and utilitarianism to rationalization of religion by Prodicus and the author of the *Sisyphus* is radicalized in the form of atheism.

Atheism

The problem of atheism has already been mentioned several times in the preceding sections. ἄθεος, in the sense of denying the gods' existence, is first used by Plato along with the phrase ἄθεος μὴ (Apol. 26c); the latter expression was used to express an actual atheism.²² The expression did not mean "not honoring the gods," but "not believing in the existence of the gods" and, consequently, not being afraid of their vengeance in the case of a misdeed.²³ Being an atheist could be dangerous because of the possibility of the process of impiety.

Impiety (ἀσέβεια) was punishable by law, but its definition is unclear. It appears that it was neglect in the area of cultic practices (cf. pseudo-Aristotle, *De virt. et vit.* 1251a31–33; Polybius 36.9.15). The *Euthyphron* includes an inconclusive discussion of the concept of piety; the official understanding of piety is expressed by Euthyphron: proper handling of the gods (12c), giving to the gods what is appropriate, in particular, offerings and prayers (14b). In Xenophon, the essence of piety lies in the knowledge of established norms of revering gods (*Mem.* 4.6.2–4). Pseudo-Aristotle

²² Wilhelm Fahr, ἄθεος μὴ. *Zum problem der Anfänge des Atheismus bei den Griechen* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1969), p. 168.

²³ Jean Rudhardt, 'La définition du délit d'impiété d'après la législation attique', *Museum Helveticum* 17 (1960), 91.

in the same breath includes in *asebeia* wrong-doing against the gods, deified spirits, the departed, parents, and fatherland (*De virt. et vit.* 1251a31–33). By neglecting religious observance, citizens endanger their city by inciting the wrath of the gods. Therefore, *asebeia* is not as much a crime against religion as against the city.²⁴ Each act of disrespect of, and thus an assault on, the cultic practices is an assault on the *polis* and the existing social and political order, therefore, impiety in that sense is tantamount to political treason. This is reinforced in the atmosphere of political and social uncertainty, and certainly the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC), as any war, created such an atmosphere as also did the political upheavals of the seizure of political power by the Thirty Tyrants (404 BC) and the subsequent regaining of power by democratic forces (403 BC). However, it is too strong to state that in the case of impiety processes “above all the motivation was political opposition” to Pericles and his admirers.²⁵ This can be proven only for Aristotle. For Anaxagoras, political motive could be present, but a real reason was his denial of mantic. For Diagoras, any political motive is missing, and so it is for Protagoras.²⁶ In most cases, such a motivation simply cannot be found.

Most of the processes of impiety are related to the cult: robbing a temple, desecrating graves, polluting mysteries, damaging olive trees, a deviation by a priest from accepted rituals, the misuse of the cult for witchcraft, unacceptable behavior in the places of cult, and mocking the gods of the city. Revering foreign gods is not against the law if the new cult has nothing immoral. And so, the priestess Ninon is accused when she not only made offerings to the foreign god Sabazius but also mixed love potions. Phryne was accused because she both introduced the Thracian god Isodaetes, and organized immoral meetings in her house. Theoris, a priestess of a foreign god, was also accused of mixing poison. Aeschylus was accused of profanation of mysteries in one scene, but he got off by stating that he knew nothing about it. Euripides was in danger of accusation because of some pronouncement about *ides*. Aristophanes was never charged although he caricatured the gods in his plays.²⁷

In the second half of the fifth century, when freethinking became a threat to the religion of the city, *asebeia* also included “theoretical denial of the gods” so that the *asebie* processes are in fact atheism processes. The processes concentrated on the denial of the traditional gods rather than on the exponents of philosophical theology such as Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Parmenides, or Democritus. Theoretical atheism is not punished, only an attack on the religion of the state, and mocking the gods and the cult. No poet or thinker was sentenced to death with the exception of Socrates.

Processes of impiety had social and political reasons, but the agnostic and outright atheistic tendencies had theological and scientific reasons. The emergence of Greek

²⁴ Adolf Menzel, ‘Untersuchungen zum Sokratesprozeß’ [1902], in his *Hellenika*, p. 22; Ernst Sandvoss, ‘Asebie und Atheismus im klassischen Zeitalter der griechischen Polis’, *Saeculum* 19 (1968), p. 314.

²⁵ G.B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 165; Leopold Schmidt, *Die Ethik der alten Griechen* (Berlin: Hertz, 1882; reprinted Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1964), vol. 2, p. 25, says more generally that in accusation of philosophers, religion was but a pretext and the real motive was of a political nature.

²⁶ Menzel, ‘Untersuchungen zum Sokratesprozeß’, p. 25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

theology, particularly in the form of Anaximander's *Apeiron*, had a religious root; it was a desire to purify the concept of God by including infinity and the source of moral order as primary attributes of God. God was also considered a source of natural order, but this order was accessible to human investigation, that is, science was possible. The trend that is pronounced in the Sophists is taking less and less interest in the theological aspect of reality by seeing it as inaccessible to human reason and senses and finally by abolishing it altogether. Theological developments in the Presocratics made nature orderly and analyzable by removing from it the fickleness of the actions of the traditional gods, but, particularly with the atomists and the Sophists, that led to purging reality from the supranatural realm. Traditional divinities had very strong earthly grounding by exhibiting features resembling human character and behavior. The gods of philosophers (*Apeiron*, Logos of Heraclitus, One God of Xenophanes, or *Nous* of Anaxagoras) were so detached from the realities of everyday life, so distant from the laws of common experience, that it was easy to dismiss their reality. Also, when the division between the natural and the supranatural is made, it becomes easy to ignore the latter to the point of abolishing it altogether. Only the natural remains, only what is visible counts, and man becomes the measure of all things.²⁸

The problem of atheism was real enough that Plato distinguished several kinds of atheism (*Laws* 908bc). At least nine fifth-century people were considered *atheoi*.²⁹ However, some of them certainly were not atheists, at least, in the modern sense of the word, that is, they did not deny the existence of all gods (Anaxagoras, Socrates, Diogenes of Apollonia). Protagoras was an agnostic, but hardly an atheist. Hippon, Prodicus, and Critias may have been, but it cannot be stated in all certainty. One quintessential atheist was supposed to have been Diagoras of Melos, but even that is not beyond doubt. He is known only for his supposed atheism and not much else. Only one fact about him is known with certainty, namely an attack on Eleusinian mysteries is included in his book.³⁰ But such an attack is not tantamount to the complete denial of any divinity. Some late sources list him as one who claims that there are no gods, but it is still possible that only traditional gods were meant. It is thus far from certain that his views exemplify "atheism – radical, extreme, and uncompromising."³¹ Already Philodemus attempted to show that there is an evidence of piety in Diagoras' book and that his atheism was but a joke.³²

²⁸ It is said that atheism did not develop from philosophy (or theology); it came "from the historiography founded by Hecataeus of Miletus which had an enormous influence on Sophistry," P.A. Meijer, 'Philosophers, intellectuals and religion in Hellas', in H.S. Versnel (ed.), *Faith, Hope and Worship* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), p. 228. However, it seems that there would not be any Sophism if there were no Milesians, Xenophanes, or Anaxagoras. Anti-theological tendencies are enabled by theological developments and so is the progress of science; hence, the progress of science, including historiography, had only secondary influence on the emergence atheistic tendencies.

²⁹ Fahr, *ὁ μ*, p. 180.

³⁰ Felix Jacoby, *Diagoras ὁ* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1959), pp. 16, 24, 27.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 31.

³² Leonard Woodbury, 'The date and atheism of Diagoras of Melos', *Phoenix* 19 (1965), p. 199; on other doubts, see pp. 198, 200. A case against Diagoras' authorship of the atheistic book is made by Marek Winiarczyk, 'Diagoras von Melos – Wahrheit und Legende', *Eos* 68 (1980), pp. 51–75.

Although it may now be difficult to decide what was the degree of atheism in a particular author, it remains undeniable that there were very strong atheistic, and certainly deistic, tendencies in the fifth-century Greek intellectual atmosphere. Thinkers, particularly the Sophists, were preoccupied with the here and now, expressing their agnosticism with respect to the realm of the divine and explaining religion as a social phenomenon that emerges because of social and political necessities. This certainly encouraged rejection of what exceeds the sphere of the divine and by suspending judgment about it, led to practical if not theoretical rejection of this sphere. Therefore, ideas attributed to Diagoras are “some of the symptoms of general breakdown of cultural piety that spread at the end of the fifth century.”³³ Because religion was so strongly connected with the well-being of the *polis*, the situation led to a legal backlash in the form of impiety processes. It also led to a philosophical backlash in attempts to restore the grandeur of Greek theology made by Socrates (as reported by Xenophon), Plato, and the Stoics. But agnosticism and deism did not die out. They continued in the views of the Cynics – beginning with Diogenes of Sinope, the Sceptics – particularly, Carneades and Sextus Empiricus,³⁴ and also in the Lyceum (Strato).

³³ Fritz Wehrli, review of Jacoby’s book, *Gnomon* 23 (1961), p. 126; Winiarczyk, ‘Diagoras von Melos – Wahrheit und Legende’, p. 75.

³⁴ See Adam Drozdek, ‘Sceptics and a religious instinct’, *Minerva* 18 (2005), pp. 93–108.

Chapter 10

Socrates

It is interesting and ominous that the *Euthyphro*, the dialogue considered to be the first in the Platonic corpus, is devoted to the problem of piety. The problem is posed in the context of an impending trial of Socrates, but it also sets the tone for Socratic philosophy (not to mention Plato's own philosophical system). Although the problem of piety is not altogether resolved in this dialogue, the *Euthyphro* points to what is associated with its resolution, namely human behavior toward the divine, and thereby the nature of the divine and its relation to the world as a whole and to men in particular. Piety stands between theology and ethics; piety is treating theology seriously, so seriously, in fact, that ethical claims are based on the nature of divinity. Although Socrates is thought to concentrate on ethics, his ethical claims are hardly intelligible, even void, if his theology is not taken into account. Theology constitutes the foundation of the Socratic system. In his trial speeches, Socrates is vague about his theological claims, even purposely ambiguous. He does not specify his concept of the divine, letting the jurors think that he takes the gods to be as the popular religion presents them. After all, this is his defense speech of which the primary purpose is to present himself as free of charges, not to lecture the jurors about his innermost theological convictions. He refers to the celebrated *daimonion* and shows how in line with traditional belief this presumed theological novelty of his is, but, in fact, the *daimonion* occupies only a secondary position in his theology. In conversations with his friends and pupils – as preserved by Xenophon – he presents his theological views rather clearly.

Argument from design

In one conversation, Socrates wants to convince his interlocutor, Aristodemus, that piety is necessary for happiness. Aristodemus does not sacrifice, pray, or use divination and mocks those who do so (*Mem.* 1.4.2). This gives the impression of an atheistic leaning; only later during conversation does he state that he does not deny the existence of the gods but believes that the gods are very remote and have no interest in human affairs (1.4.10–11). At first, Socrates is prompted to convince him of the existence of the gods. The proof is not only used to strengthen Aristodemus' feeble belief in the existence of the gods, but also to serve as an argument that something more is required than just the acknowledgment of this existence, namely paying respect to them.

What Socrates offers is the proof from design. Aristodemus expresses his admiration to the five great Greek artists. However, their creations are merely motionless and inanimate entities, and Aristodemus readily agrees that the creators of living and animate beings are far superior to the five artists, provided that living

beings are created by design, not by chance (1.4.4). Aristodemus agrees that life and motion are superior to their absence, but, still, they may be accidental. Artistic creations are admirable because they are done by design. Living beings are superior to such inanimate creations because they are living, which does not have to mean that they are designed. Therefore, Socrates' argumentation must not stop at pointing out this superiority. He has to show that living beings are also designed. The way is expressed by Aristodemus: "what came to be for a purpose (ἐπ' ὠφελείᾳ) is the work of design (νόμη)" (1.4.4); that is, a teleological reasoning is in order.

It is clear from the makeup of the human organism that it was designed. Socrates names eyes, ears, nose, and tongue as sensory organs and describes briefly the makeup of the eye and the ear. Also, he describes the configuration of the teeth and mouth as meaningfully designed for eating. There are also innate drives that point to a meaningful design of humans. Socrates also mentions a father's "natural desire to beget children" and a mother's desire to take care of a child as the manifestation of design (1.4.7). These desires of the two sexes of course presume the existence of the sexes so that they may join "into fellowship for the greatest advantage to themselves" (*Oec.* 7.18). There is also a child's will to live and a fear of death (1.4.7), which imply the existence of the self-preservation instinct found in all living creatures.

Another line of argument points to the material makeup of human beings. There is no doubt that man possesses some wisdom (*phronimon*). This wisdom is associated with the body that contains "a tiny measure of earth ... and a small drop of water"¹ and other elements (1.4.9). The mind (*nous*) is the seat, we may presume, of this wisdom, and the seat of intelligence and design, cannot itself be a work of accident. The seat of making designs must itself have been designed. Socrates takes it for granted that the universe in its infinity is ordered (εὐ ἅκ ως). This was a common assumption at least since Anaximander (12B1). A conclusion may be drawn that there must be a mind that is to the whole of the universe as the human mind is to the human body. Socrates draws later a similar conclusion when he says that the mind directs the body according to its will, and similarly, "the thought (φρόνησις) [that is] in everything directs all according to its pleasure" because just as one's soul can think (φρον ἵζειν) about different things, so god's thought can pay attention to everything at once (1.4.17).

Socrates asks an apparently rhetorical question, whether or not the order of the universe is due to an accident. Aristodemus says yes since he cannot see the maker of this order. To which Socrates responds that the soul that directs the human body is invisible, too, and yet it would be difficult to say that everything we do is due to an accident (1.4.9). Because this statement is made in the context of discussing the human mind and the cosmic mind, it appears that Socrates is equating the mind and the soul, or at least he would consider the mind to be the soul's faculty. This context also encourages the view that Socrates' God is a world soul² that is to the cosmos as

¹ Water and earth as the only elements in the human body are mentioned by Hesiod, *Op.* 61 (Hephaestus mixed earth and water to make the body of Pandora) and Xenophanes 23B33 ("we were all born from earth and water").

² Olof Gigon, *Kommentar zum ersten Buch von Xenophons Memorabilien* (Basel: Reinhardt, 1953), p. 133; Émile Callot, *La Doctrine de Socrate* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1970), p. 125.

the human soul is to the human body. This is also confirmed by the statement that thought is only in the soul (1.2.53).

Aristodemus refers in the conversation to the divine, *to daimonion*, whose existence he does not deny, but to him, the divine is too magnificent, too great to serve (1.4.10). In fact, the divine is infinitely great and magnificent because the cosmos is filled with infinite masses. The assumption is that human service can in no wise benefit the divinity; the smallness of this service adds nothing to the infinity of the divinity. Socrates uses as an argument the statement that “the more magnificent is the power that finds fit to serve you, the more one must honor it” (1.4.10). However, does this power really serve man? Is it true that the gods have any regard for people? According to Socrates, thanks to the gods, humans are the only creatures that have upright posture which gives them many advantages over animals. Humans have hands through the use of which humans are happier creatures than animals. The shape and the position of the tongue allows humans to use articulate language. In other words, the possession of language, and the ability to produce and to create, are distinctive marks of humanity which cannot be dismissed as simple accidents. They are endowments given to the mortals by the gods. Other indications of divine care are visible in the human mind. Only man has “the noblest soul” (1.4.13) because only man knows about the existence of the gods and only man worships them. Moreover, the human soul can make provisions for the needs of the body; it can acquire knowledge and retain it. The human body and the human soul are harmoniously fit for one another. If a rational soul had been located in an animal body, then nothing could have been accomplished and such an arrangement would be witness to the accidental workings of nature rather than divine care.

The entire arrangement of the cosmos is a proof of divine care. Night and day (the sun and the moon), kinds of available foods, kinds of plants to grow and animals to domesticate, changes of seasons, the rate of change of natural phenomena, and “the multitude of beautiful and useful things” all witness gods’ love for men and that they were done “for the sake of men” (4.3.8,11). The existing universal order is a proof that God is “wise and loving” (1.4.7). We are not only designed, but designed to our greatest advantage. We are best fit to our environment (1.4.11–14, 4.3.11). The rest of the universe is also designed with the needs of humans in mind. Everything in the universe is “fair and good” (4.3.13, 1.4.13).

Divine care is also visible in the divine presence in lives of humans. The gods are not silent; they give signs and speak through diviners and oracles to warn people and give them advice. When people fail to discern the future, the gods “send portents for warning to the Greeks . . . and to all people” (1.4.15–16, 4.3.12). The gods should be consulted in matters small and big. For example, when a person wants to befriend someone, he must first “seek guidance from the gods, whether they counsel [us] to make a friend of him” (2.6.8). The belief of the gods’ ability “to help and to harm” is inborn, and it would be truly remarkable if the falsehood of this belief were not detected throughout the ages (1.4.16). That is, common opinion concerning the gods’ care is used by Socrates as an argument for the reality of this claim.

As expounded above, the existence of God and the gods is founded, by Socrates, on an argument from design. It was the first time in Western thought that the argument was used, and, for that matter, the first time any argument for the existence of God

was proposed. The use of such an argument is natural in a discussion with someone who doubts the existence of gods. A need for such an argument is a novelty of fifth-century Greek philosophy and theology, times of much more liberal thinking about religion than before. However, the argument is based on teleological thinking which is prominent in traditional mythology. The *Theogony* is a long teleological poem about the way things were brought into existence. The world is not a result of an accident, but its emergence is due to the actions of the gods. Teleological thinking is also clearly present in Homer, although more on the level of human history than cosmogony. Also, philosophy is saturated with teleological thinking long before Socrates.³

Teleology was explicitly introduced in philosophical speculation by Anaxagoras (59B13) and Diogenes of Apollonia (64B5), and it was used later by Plato (*Phil.* 28d; *Laws* 886a, 897c, 899d, 966de; *Epin.* 982a), Aristotle (*De gen. et corr.* 336b27; *De part. an.* 658b14, fr. 12), Euripides (*Suppl.* 201–213), and the Stoics. However, teleology in philosophy can be traced back to Anaximander. Every time, in creating or molding the world, a design of a deity is present, we have a teleological view of the world. And Anaximander's divine *Apeiron* was guiding the world and had control not only over physical processes in the world but also over moral dimension. Such rational guidance is strongly present in the Heraclitean universe where the universal Logos is in control of natural and social phenomena. Anaximander and Heraclitus, however, assumed that the universe is imbued with rationality and forethought through the *Apeiron* and Logos. They did not undertake to prove the existence of God from the existence of design. They began with the rational divinity and went on to show how the divinity holds command over the universe. The argument from design did not originate, then, with Anaximander, but teleological thinking in philosophy did. Socrates only continues the way of viewing the cosmos as an ordered entity, but he uses this order as an indication of an intelligent cause that stands behind it. God is this cause, and because God is not only rational but also benevolent toward his creation, Socrates sides with Diogenes of Apollonia who expressed a strong Leibnizian statement that everything was ordered in the most beautiful manner (64B3), which is also Socrates' conviction (1.4.13).

Teleological thinking is not limited to theology only. Socrates, probably more than any other thinker before him, extends it to any area of human life, in particular, to the way scientific research should be exercised.

Aristotle said that Socrates "occupied himself with ethical matters and neglected nature as a whole but he sought the universal in these ethical matters" (*Met.* 987b1–3; Eusebius, *PE* 15.62.7–9). This may be taken to mean that natural philosophy was unimportant to him, not ontology and theology. Socrates did discuss the issues related to astronomy, physiology, geology, and the like, as we can find in Anaximander, Heraclitus, or Diogenes of Apollonia, but that does not mean that he was uninterested in relating ethical issues to natural philosophy. The latter was only important as a background for ethical issues. Ethics was intimately connected to theology, and theology can hardly be divorced from cosmological and cosmogonic issues. The latter

³ If we consider these words as original, then Socrates himself recognizes the fact of the presence of teleological reasoning in "our forebears" and the "thinkers of old" (*Philebus* 28de, 30d).

were the background and justification for the validity of ethical claims. He can then state that he has no expertise and no share in natural science (*Ap.* 19a–d, 18b–23e; *Phaedo* 96a–99d). He is not interested in, nor does he discuss, the workings and the laws of the universe and considered such interests to be folly (*Mem.* 1.1.11). His primary interest is in self-knowledge, and he considers commonly accepted views on the natural mechanisms tentatively satisfactory (*Phaedrus* 230a). He is disinterested in pure science, that is, in knowledge of the universe for the sake of knowledge. If one cannot create winds or cause the change of seasons from a presumed knowledge of natural laws, then time and effort devoted to acquire this knowledge is simply wasted (1.1.15). It is of little value to know natural laws if knowledge of the self is abandoned (1.1.8).⁴ This time and effort should rather be channeled into more practical pursuits, such as the study of theology, ethics, and statesmanship (1.1.16). Moreover, there is a limit that human research can reach and any attempts to have a complete natural explanation to cross these limits are futile at best and can lead to impiety at worst (1.1.14). A certain level of explanation is forever inaccessible to the human condition and is known only to the gods (4.7.6). It is thus in the best interest of men to abandon such type of studies to devote themselves to what is accessible, practical, and important.

Socrates himself credits Anaxagoras with opening his mind to the right direction and giving him an impulse to think in teleological terms (*Phaedo* 97c) so that he should seek for “true causes” (98d) such as the mind that is behind all natural causes. It is true that without bones and sinews we could not walk anywhere, but to say that bones and sinews are the causes of what we do, not our will or intention, “is to speak lazily and carelessly”; we must distinguish “the real cause from that without which the cause would not be able to act as a cause” (99b). The intention to move is primary – physiology and anatomy are the necessary preconditions to realizing the goal, but, in a sense, they are secondary. Teleology takes precedence over mechanistic explanation; efficient causes are merely tools of final causes, not only on the individual level, but on the cosmic level as well.⁵

However, study of nature is not rejected wholesale. As a young man, Socrates was an avid student of natural sciences (*Phaedo* 96ab). Therefore, he saw some merit in scientific research, but later he became disenchanted with the results since he frequently changed his mind about what causes what (“do we think with our blood, or air, or fire,” and so on) and found explanations offered by science unsatisfactory. Moreover, some natural studies are actually encouraged by Socrates. For example, the study of astronomy is beneficial as far as it enables men to properly determine

⁴ Socrates’ “disavowal applies strictly to the sort of theorizing that terminates in accounts invoking naturally necessary, nonteleological, physicalistic causes of things,” Mark L. McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), p. 281. “Socrates’ criticism is directed solely at the sort of detailed enquiry into physical causes that is so prevalent in pre-Socratic thought,” Joseph G. DeFilippo and Phillip T. Mitsis, ‘Socrates and Stoic natural law’, in P.A. Vander Waerd (ed.), *The Socratic Movement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 259. Later, for similar reasons, Epicurus, who is considered to have been well trained in geometry, discourages the study of this science, Norman W. DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), pp. 45–46, 108.

⁵ “The true cause is the end to accomplish and efficient causes are only secondary conditions of its realization,” Callot, *La Doctrine de Socrate*, p. 48.

time (*Mem.* 4.7.4). Also a measure of geometry and arithmetic is indispensable (4.7.3,8) because counting, measuring, and weighing are skills which everyone needs and everyone can learn without a recourse to divine help (1.1.9).⁶ However, the scope of geometry and astronomy is so vast that it can “occupy lifetime of man to the exclusion of many useful studies” (4.7.3,5). A pure scientist is a sad figure who abandons what is important to pursue the useless and ultimately inaccessible goal of knowing the workings of the universe.

Although Socrates does not raise this issue, the study of nature can be defensible on one more count – namely, establishing the rationality of the world and, thus, the existence of a rational divinity to whom this order is due.

God

Socrates is certain that an argument from design proved the existence of God who is the source of order in the universe. God’s eye can see the entire universe all at once; God’s thought can ponder everything at once, too. This is as though God’s thought was present everywhere at once. This omniscience allows God to have full control over the universe. God is present everywhere. Because the material substrate is clearly distinguished from the mind and invisible soul (1.4.8–9), this omnipresence is not of the pantheistic kind espoused later by the Stoics. Also, God is caring about everything. He only wants to be served and repays through counseling concerning things “unknown to men” (1.4.18).

Socrates sometimes appears to use “God” and “gods” interchangeably. For example:

1. He indicates that the gods care for men by shaping the body in a particular way, and before indicating that the human soul is also a proof of divine care, he says that “it was not enough to the God to take care of the body” (1.4.13).
2. From God’s knowledge and God’s care, he passes to the need to serve the gods and then to a summary statement that the divinity (*to theion*) is omniscient and caring about everything (1.4.17–18).
3. The same attributes and actions are ascribed to the gods and to God. Socrates proclaims the omniscience and omnipresence of the divine (1.4.17–18) and the omniscience and omnipresence of the gods (1.1.19).
4. The universal unwritten laws⁷ are attributed to the gods and to God (4.4.19–20).
5. Socrates ascribes to God the creation of humans and the gods, too (1.4.10–11, 13–14, 18), but also says that God fulfills all the function of the gods.

On the other hand, Socrates distinguishes God from other gods as the one who “coordinates and holds together the entire universe” (4.3.13). This apparent

⁶ “Within man’s competence is what mathematically can be exactly established,” Gigon, *Kommentar zum ersten Buch von Xenophons Memorabilien*, pp. 9, 13.

⁷ As one commentator observed, such laws are “the voice of the deity speaking to the inner sense of every man,” Rensselaer D.C. Robbins, notes in Xenophon, *Memorabilia of Socrates* (Andover: Wardwell, 1848), p. 372.

inconsistency can be resolved by considering the gods to be manifestations of God.⁸ In this way, each mention of the gods is really a reference to God. Because of the many different ways God may manifest himself to people, an impression may arise that these are multiple deities that speak and act. In reality, the attributes of the gods are God's attributes; the gods are omniscient, omnipresent, and, in particular, caring for men because God is.

The gods can also be considered creations of God. Plato later presents in the *Timaeus* an image of the Demiurge who created the world and the gods, after which he retracted from the world and left the completion of the creation process and the care of the world to the gods. In this way, Plato's description would build on the Socratic idea of God who brought the world and the gods into being.⁹

Socrates makes numerous references to God (ὁ θεός) in his court speeches. He mentions God for the first time as "God of Delphi" (*Ap.* 20e), which certainly is assumed by all the listeners to be a reference to Apollo. However, Apollo is never mentioned by name. On the other hand, other gods' names are mentioned, most frequently in insignificant phases, such as "by Hera" (24e) or "by Zeus" (*Eu.* 4e; *Ap.* 25c, 26d, 35d; *Xen., Sym.* 4.1,3,5,6,8,49,55,60,61), "Aphrodite passion" (*Xen., Sym.* 3.3). This way of mentioning traditional gods is rather significant considering the fact that one of the three indictments was that Socrates does not recognize the gods of the state. The thrust of Socrates' argument is to show that he is not an atheist and that he believes in the gods, but he leaves it to the jury to guess that he also believes in the gods of the state, the gods as recognized by popular religion. He is evasive in the speech about the gods themselves – how he understands them, which gods he means – and the way he recognizes them.¹⁰ He very generally says, "I believe in them [gods] as none of my accusers do" (35d). It may mean that he is more pious than the accusers, but it may also mean that his gods are not exactly the same as theirs. It is, in fact, both. He is more pious, or at least, his piety is different than that of the accusers, and also, his concept of divinity differs from theirs, the two things being interconnected: he recognizes the gods in a particular fashion because of his understanding of the nature of the divine.¹¹

This unorthodox (although not novel) understanding of the divine can be detected in the *Euthyphro*. The dialog strives for a definition of piety and begins

⁸ William K.C. Guthrie, *Socrates* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 156; Louise B. Zaidman and Pauline S. Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 176; or as symbols of God's benevolence, as phrased by C.M. Rechenberg, *Entwicklung des Gottesbegriffes in der griechischen Philosophie* (Leipzig: Rossberg, 1872), p. 44.

⁹ Cf. guarded statements made by J.C. Classen, 'The creator in Greek thought from Homer to Plato', *Classica et Mediaevalia* 23 (1962), p. 22.

¹⁰ "There is little or nothing to show that the gods ... the city believes in mean anything to Socrates at all," which substantiates a guarded statement that "he might almost be a monotheist," Myles F. Burnyeat, 'The impiety of Socrates', *Ancient Philosophy* 17 (1997), p. 4.

¹¹ In particular, it is true that "when Socrates talks about Apollo, then he means something other than someone who lives by tradition," Romano Guardini, *Der Tod des Sokrates: eine Interpretation der Platonischen Schriften Euthyphron, Apologie, Kriton und Phaidon* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1956), p. 52.

with a tentative definition that states that piety is what is dear to the gods (7a). The definition is discarded on the ground that the same thing can be dear to some gods and unacceptable to others “if indeed the gods disagree” (8e). Interestingly, through some attempted improvements, the discussion ends up at the starting point (15b). One way of looking at this circularity is that the proposed definition is not so bad, after all. How is this possible? A definition of piety should convey its essence, distinctive marks, criteria by which particular instances of piety can be recognized. Such a definition should convey a standard (παράδειγμα), an idea (εἶδος, even αὐτὸ ὁ εἶδος, idea itself), a characteristic feature (ἰδέα) that enables identification of pious acts (5d, 6de).¹² But this is a requirement that any definition should meet, not only a definition of piety. Although the question is not posed in the dialogue, one can ask what is God, what is the essence of divinity. It is clear that for Socrates the gods he recognizes are not the same as the traditional gods of mythology. Socrates expresses his disbelief that Euthyphro can take the traditional mythology at its face value. Socrates finds “hard to accept” the view that Zeus, “the best and most just of the gods,” bound and castrated his father, Cronus, for eating his own children, which in the popular view makes Socrates wrong (6ab). There is certainly a problem with the definition of piety Euthyphro proposed if gods are the gods of mythology. However, it appears that Socrates wanted to call Euthyphro’s attention to the fact that the concept of the divine should be purged of attributes unworthy of gods, even of men, that the concept should include only lofty, spiritual characteristics that befit God. There will be thus one essence of divinity to which all the gods are subsumed, the gods are dissolved not only ontologically by being manifestations of God, but also conceptually by being manifestations of one concept, of one definition of divinity. What is unpalatable and anthropomorphic is absent from such a definition and remains only a unity in the gods’ plurality.

Notwithstanding the constant reference to the gods, Socrates’ theology clearly expressed a monotheistic tendency.¹³ The refined understanding of the divine makes it easier to see in the gods only a manifestation of one God. The question now is, what is the role of the *daimonion* in this theological and ethical context?

¹² We can see here an adumbration of Plato’s theory of ideas as maintained, for example, by Reginald E. Allen, *Plato’s Euthyphro and the Earlier Theory of Forms* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), pp. 67–68, although he distinguishes between the early and the middle dialog theory of ideas, pp. 130–132, 154–157. Burnet states that “the developed doctrine [of ideas] is assumed by Socrates,” John Burnet, notes in Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates and Crito* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 31; but see Laszlo Versényi, *Holiness and Justice: an interpretation of Plato’s Euthyphro* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982), pp. 45–46.

¹³ In this way all differences “between gods become insignificant,” and in such an approach “Socrates has the philosophical basis of monotheism,” M.D. Henry, ‘Socratic piety and the power of reason’, in E. Kelly (ed.), *New Essays on Socrates* (Lanham: University Press of America 1984), p. 104. See also Burnyeat, ‘The impiety of Socrates’, p. 9. Phillipson detects in Socrates only “a certain progressive movement towards monotheism,” Coleman Phillipson, *The Trial of Socrates* (London: Stevens, 1928), p. 423; for Wenley, Socrates’ progress toward monotheism is conspicuous, Robert M. Wenley, *Socrates and Christ: a study in the philosophy of religion* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1889), p. 248.

Daimonion

The *daimonion* is a sign and voice (*Ap.* 31cd, 40bc; *Mem.* 1.1.3–5) that restrains Socrates from doing something, but it also may prescribe some action (*Ap.* 12; *Ap.* 31cd; *Mem.* 1.1.4, 4.3.12, 4.8.1). The *daimonion* gives primarily personal and practical counsel (*Ap.* 40a, 41cd; *Mem.* 1.1.4–5). The voice is heard since childhood (*Ap.* 31d; *Theages* 128d) and warns about harm and falsehood (*Ap.* 31d, 40a–c). It is also meaningful when the voice is silent. For example, its silence during the trial is a great proof (40c) that the outcome, a death sentence, is good.

The advice of the *daimonion* is useful (*Ap.* 31d) and good (40cd), and Socrates' experience shows that the voice is reliable (*Ap.* 13; *Ap.* 40a–c). Reason may be sufficient to make correct predictions but is not completely reliable (*Mem.* 4.3.12). Therefore, it is rational to put trust in *daimonion*'s voice. It is even unreasonable to do otherwise (1.1.8–9) because if the voice is ignored, a tragedy results (*Theages* 128d–131a).

Socrates does not ascribe to the *daimonion* any separate individuality and does not consider it an independent divinity; he does not establish any cult of the *daimonion* and makes no offerings or prayers on *daimonion*'s account. It is really not a new divinity added to the Pantheon. It is “some personal way in which God lets himself to be heard, which is analogous to other revelations recognized by tradition.”¹⁴ The source of this sign is the same as other signs. A new thing is that this sign does not have to be mediated through oracles and interpreted by priests. God can speak directly to individuals. The *daimonion* can be explained as conscience¹⁵ or merely a hunch,¹⁶ but to Socrates it was a real link between him and his creator. He was one of a chosen few who was endowed with this prophetic voice (*Rep.* 496c) and suffered a prophet's fate. The existence of God was not a theoretical construct, a deistic assumption, but a reality which can be experienced by everyone, directly or indirectly. Being closer and more obedient to the divine is not always an easy task, but Socrates was ready to be consistent in his views to the end and attest the reality of his theological conviction by taking the cup of hemlock.

¹⁴ Callot, *La Doctrine de Socrate*, p. 135.

¹⁵ Sigurd Ribbing, *Über Socrates' Daimonion* (Upsala: Edquist & Berglund, 1870), p. 32.

¹⁶ Intuition, Adam Krokiewicz, *Sokrates* (Warsaw: Pax 1958), pp. 63–63; “vague and peculiar feelings,” Richard Kraut, ‘Socrates, politics, and religion’, in N.D. Smith and P.B. Woodruff (eds), *Reason and Religion in Socratic Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 16; Socrates “ascribed to the action of the *daemonion* much that was undoubtedly the normal activity of his own intellectual and moral state,” Henry Edward [Manning], ‘The *daemon* of Socrates’, in his *Miscellanies* (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1877), p. 349. The ability to recognize the signs of the times presented through naïve supernaturalism, Wenley, *Socrates and Christ*, pp. 38, 206. It is also claimed that from “irresistible impulse, a profound conviction” became externalized as the *daimonion* which eventually lead to hallucinations and madness, François Lélut, *Du Démon de Socrate, spécimen d'une application de la science psychologique à celle de l'histoire* (Paris: Trinquart, 1836), pp. 149, 177–179.

Soul

Socrates' primary goal is to care for the soul (*Mem.* 1.2.4–5; *Ap.* 29e) “to make it as good as possible” (*Ap.* 29de, 30ab). To care for the soul means to cultivate virtue and protect it from vice (*Cr.* 47c–49b). Virtue is more valuable than physical health (*Cr.* 48b; *Ap.* 28de, 30ab) and the soul is more valuable than the body (*Cr.* 47e–48a).

The soul is the grandest token of divine care (*Mem.* 1.4.13–14, 4.3.11–12, 14) and the soul more than anything else in the universe “partakes of the divine” (4.3.14, 1.4.13–14; *Alc. I* 133c; *Phaedo* 80a). Also, the soul is the ruling part of a human being; it not only is of a different nature than the body (*Mem.* 1.4.8–10), but it also “has the mastery of the body” (1.4.9; *Phaedo* 94b). For this reason, men should themselves take greatest care of their own souls because caring for the soul is caring for what is divine in man, and, thus, caring for one's own soul is a religious service.

Socrates does not commit himself to the view of immortality; he is almost evasive on the issue. He mentions two possible fates of the soul after death: complete annihilation or, “according to what is said,” a migration of the soul from the earthly body to another place (*Ap.* 40c, *Phaedo* 107c). Annihilation does not have gradations; it has only one mode. But the statement that the soul goes to another place after death is an incomplete eschatological description. Where does the soul go exactly? What can it expect there? According to Socrates, the soul goes to Hades where it can expect a state of bliss in the company of the greatest of men of old. It is not the fate depicted by Homer or the Attic orators of a half-conscious shadow that exists in Hades.¹⁷

Annihilation and survival after death are the alternative options for the soul. However, Socrates is uncertain which is true. His parting words in the *Apology* are: “I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except God” (42a), although a moment before he expresses readiness to “die many times if that [the second option] is true” (41a). He himself is quite certain that death is good for him because the *daimonion* was silent during the proceedings, which, as already mentioned, Socrates took to mean that this was a divine, tacit indication that it is better for Socrates to die than to live (41d). However, there are many evidences that Socrates strongly leaned toward the second eschatological option, immortal existence of the soul is a blissful state.

Before drinking the cup of hemlock, Socrates says that “one must utter a prayer to the gods that the journey from here to yonder be fortunate” (*Phaedo* 117b) which makes sense only in the view of his belief in immortality of the soul. He assures his friends that after death he will go away, which is not to be considered just a linguistic device to console them, because expressing “oneself badly is not only faulty ... but does some harm to the soul” (115e). That is, he, Socrates, goes away after death although devoid of his earthly body. In a conversation with Crito, Socrates also says that souls are immortal (*Cr.* 54bc). It is true that in his speech, he presents the view of “the laws and the state” (50a). But he explicitly says that these words also express his own view, and Crito cannot convince him otherwise (54d). It should be clear then

¹⁷ Erland Ehnmark, ‘Socrates and the immortality of the soul’, *Eranos* 44 (1946), p. 116.

that for Socrates “soul is evidently immortal” (*Phaedo* 114d),¹⁸ and this is a major reason why he is not afraid of death, and it is he who consoles his friends rather than the opposite.

Socrates clearly distinguishes physical elements that constitute the body but not the mind. He also explicitly states that the bodily elements are just fractions of the elements that constitute the cosmos (1.4.8). From this and from the course of the argument, it may be inferred that the human mind is a fraction of the cosmic mind.¹⁹ Because the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* was alien to the Greeks, the human mind had to come from a pre-existing substance and this – as maintained by Socrates – can only be something other than the four elements. One possibility is that the pre-existing elements were used by the divine creator as the material for the substance suitable for the mind. Another possibility is that God, who is also the cosmic mind, separated portions of his own substance to mold individual minds. Such a view is encouraged by the fact that Anaximander already claimed that the material to create the universe is separated from the divine *Apeiron*.

Ethics

The argument from design points to the divine intelligence that created the harmonious and ordered universe. Such a work, to be sure, requires God’s intelligibility, but it also points to the moral dimension of God. The design of the world is not just any design. The world is the best possible – designed with man’s needs in mind. God cares not just for the survival of his creation, but also for its harmonious and happy life. Such a work requires more than intelligence; it requires goodness, care, and benevolence of the creator. And these are the attributes that characterize God in Socrates’ view. Such a view is important in its own right and has important consequences for practical life. Because man is closest to God among his creation, because man’s soul partakes in the divine, man should – to the best of his abilities – manifest these divine attributes in his life. Life should be characterized by the care for the soul, and this care manifests itself in good life.²⁰

The best pursuit for a man is doing good, and he who does nothing good is neither useful nor dear to the gods (*Mem.* 3.9.14–15). Therefore, everyone should

¹⁸ Also, in view of Socrates’ statements, “death as an annihilation becomes a mere theoretical possibility,” *ibid.*, p. 121. See also arguments in favor of the view of Socrates’ belief in the immortality of the soul in Émile de Strycker, ‘Socrate et l’au-delà d’après l’*Apologie* platonicienne’, *Les Études Classiques* 18 (1950), pp. 269–284.

¹⁹ “It stands to reason that the human intellect is only a tiny part of the intellect that exists,” as phrased by Leo Strauss, *Xenophon’s Socrates* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), p. 23.

²⁰ Burnyeat, ‘The impiety of Socrates’, p. 10, in, by his own admission, a flamboyant statement, says that if the gods had abided by the Socratic requirements, there would not have been the Trojan war, without which, presumably, “Greek culture would have been impossible and, in consequence, Western civilization would not be what it is today,” which is a groundless but impressive-sounding statement. A similar level of historiosophical insight is in Orson Welles’ memorable adage in *The Third Man* about Switzerland’s 500 years of democracy and peace that produced only the cuckoo clock, whereas thirty infamous years under the Borgias produced the Renaissance.

do only what is right (*Ap.* 28b,d, 29b; *Cr.* 48cd, 49b) since everyone wants happiness (*Ap.* 25b; *Cr.* 48b; *Eud.* 281de) which is possible only when right things are done (*Ap.* 28b,d, 30ab; *Cr.* 48cd). However, one must know what is right (*Ap.* 29d–30a), which can be accomplished through philosophy (*Ap.* 29d–30b; *Cr.* 46b–48d) and divination (*Ap.* 33c). Socrates himself “obeys a divine command to philosophize” (*Ap.* 28de, 23b, 29ab, 30ab, 33c, 37e–38a).²¹ Man should philosophize through “oracles and dreams and in every other way in which a divinity (θεία μοῖρα)²² has ever commanded a man to do anything” (33c). He will do it even if death awaits him (29c, 28e, 30ab), even if he can be physically harmed (29d). This task was given Socrates by God through the Pythia (20e), whereby he “helps God” (23b), and his activity is “according to God” (22a, 23b).

As gods do only good (*Eu.* 12e–15a), and never deceive anyone (*Ap.* 21b), so we should not do otherwise. Because not even gods, and especially gods, can repay an injury for an injury, *lex talionis* is abolished. We should do no injustice, no evil, and restrain ourselves from an urge for revenge (*Cr.* 48b–49d, 54c). Athenians would see this as a very strange view. By espousing it, are we not depriving ourselves of the goods that the enemy would like to see us deprived of, asks Crito (45c–46a).

All these lofty goals may not come easily. As a quotation from Hesiod indicates, “Wickedness can be had easily and in abundance; smooth is the road and very close it dwells. But in front of virtue the immortal gods put sweat: long and steep is the path to it and rough at first” (*Mem.* 2.1.20). Moreover, “of all things good and fair the gods give nothing to men without toil and effort. If you want the favor of the gods, you must worship the gods” (2.1.28).

The argument from design has another consequence. The cosmos is the best possible design, and it is designed with man’s happiness in mind. This is an indication of God’s care, and even more, God’s love for his creation. The gods are characterized as man-loving (φιλανθρωπία, 4.3.5,7).²³ God is characterized as an animal-loving (φιλόζωος) creator (1.4.7).²⁴ Anaximander’s divine *Apeiron* and Heraclitus’ divine Logos are divinities because they are immortal, just, and self-sufficient. Socrates – if only tacitly – adds another attribute to God, namely love. To be sure, traditional gods loved mortals, but their love was self-interested and indulgent, leading to the procreation of demigods. Such love was one reason why traditional gods were found unpalatable for many. However, philosophers before Socrates excluded the characteristic of love in their concept of the divine; Socrates, on the other hand, reverts to it.²⁵ But to him, love is for

²¹ The commitment to live life like a philosopher as ordered by God (28e) is believed to be an expression of the view that “the ideal of man should be to search for wisdom and thus inevitably to imitate God,” Robert Joly, ‘Les origines de l’*ὁμοίωσις θεῶ*’, *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’Histoire* 42 (1964), p. 94.

²² For Socrates, θεία μοῖρα becomes synonymous with θεός, Edmund G. Berry, *The Historical Development of the Concept of θεία μοῖρα and θεία ὕχη Down to and Including Plato* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Libraries, 1940), pp. 43, 47.

²³ It is even more significant that Euthydemus derives this conclusion to which Socrates’ discourse leads.

²⁴ Socrates lets Aristodemus derive this conclusion.

²⁵ In this sense, it is true that “Socrates discovers ethical imperatives and absolutes at the core of religious mythology,” Paul W. Gooch, *Reflections on Jesus and Socrates: word and silence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 142.

love's sake, for the sake of the loved, love that radiates and expects little. Needless to say that in the hands of Plato this idea will acquire new heights.

The view of a loving God has a consequence for ethics. The human soul is the greatest good, and one should care for it the most. But this is not a narcissistic, self-directed ethics. Man should care for someone else's soul just as much as for his own. Just as God expresses his love in his creation, man should express his love in his dealings with others. In these dealings, a concern and care for others should be expressed only because this is a good thing to do. For Socrates, the "link between our good and that of others is made non-contingent through devotion to a disinterestedly benevolent God who, being already perfect, does not require from us any contribution to his own well-being but only asks each of us to do for other persons what he would be doing for them himself if he were to change places with us."²⁶ Socrates is ready for any inconvenience, including death, to make it a reality because such behavior has divine sanction, because such life is divinely prescribed. Therefore, he does not shun from saying to the jurors that he will obey God rather than them, which is done for their own benefit, since his task is to exhort all people so that they care for the best possible state of their souls (*Ap.* 28e, 29d–30a, 30e). Obedience to the perfect and benevolent God can be good and thus advantageous to everyone concerned. Socrates' life becomes the life of piety, of realizing what is dear to God and thereby serving others. This ethics and this way of life becomes convincing when it is founded on the Socratic theology of the one perfect God who creates a harmonious universe for which he selflessly cares. Driven by sincere faith in such a God, Socrates uses his intellectual powers to lead in the direction of such theology and the morality that stems from it.²⁷

²⁶ Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: ironist and moral philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 177. It is so because, as loftily phrased, Socrates' God is considered as "the first principle of all beings, as the father and providence present in human life speaking in the conscience of everyone and inspiring in the man of good will a sacred enthusiasm for the good," Charles Waddington, *Pyrrhon et le pyrrhonisme* [1876], in his *La Philosophie ancienne et la critique historique* (Paris: Hachette, 1904), p. 285.

²⁷ If we remove from Socrates "his overwhelming faith in God, Socrates transforms himself into a clever elenchical and dabbling dilettante, comparable to some of our own language philosophers who deal with words, words, and nothing but words," Luis E. Navia, *The Socratic Presence* (New York: Garland, 1993), p. 298.