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Greek Philosophy and Religion

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When one considers the relationship between philosophy and religion in antiquity, what springs into one's mind most readily is probably the trial and execution of Socrates. Socrates, who in many ways represents the paradigmatic figure of the philosopher, was tried on charges of impiety, found guilty, and executed by the Athenians. We could then continue by enumerating similar cases – the trials of Anaxagoras, Protagoras, and Diagoras, all three on charges of impiety. These infamous stories might very well suggest that the relationship between philosophy and religion was that of vehement and violent clashes: the philosopher, the free-thinking intellectual, did not respect the religious dogmas and institutions imposed by tradition, whereas the religious powers of the city brutally penalized all such transgressions.

On closer inspection it turns out however that, apart from the trial of Socrates, it is outstandingly difficult to establish even the most basic historical facts about these cases. It remains open to debate whether Anaxagoras and Protagoras were actually brought to trial, or whether the lyric poet Diagoras had anything to do with philosophy. But even if we take at face value everything that we can gather from later, mainly Hellenistic, sources, we have to realize that all these cases are concentrated in the very specific political and intellectual climate of Athens around the end of the fifth century BCE. When one broadens the perspective and examines the whole period from the sixth century BCE to the sixth century CE, from Ionia to Italy, one starts to realize, on the contrary, how exceptional these Athenian trials were, and in general how relaxed the relationship between religion and philosophy was. It turns out that all through antiquity, from Xenophanes to the late Neoplatonists, philosophers kept formulating their views about the nature of the divine, and these views always meant a vast departure from the traditional representations of the gods, and often incorporated a criticism of traditional religious attitudes. These views and criticisms were no less radical than the ones pronounced by Socrates, yet they did not result in open hostility. It starts to appear, then, that the trial of Socrates is not at all characteristic; what needs explanation is rather why in this particular case and in those specific historical circumstances the community reacted in such an extreme form.[1]

It is no less remarkable that, by and large, the philosophers' attitude towards traditional religiosity was a mixture of innovation, criticism, and conservativism. They were openly critical of many forms of traditional beliefs and certain forms of religious

1. On the case of Socrates, see the papers in Smith and Woodruff (2000), and especially Parker (2000); in this volume see Morrison, SOCRATES.

practice, but they were convinced (with some very rare exceptions) that the religious institutions sanctioned by tradition should be preserved. In a way, philosophers did exactly what the indictment against Socrates states – "they did not believe in the gods of the city and introduced new gods" – in so far as they propounded radically novel views about the nature and role of the divine. The philosophers themselves, however, most often presented their radical views as mere amendments, conceptual clarifications, or even as a return to a more ancient tradition. They conceived of their novel ideas as corrections that can render existing forms of religious worship genuinely meaningful.

Ancient lists of those who denied the existence of gods include Prodicus of Ceos, Theodorus of Cyrene, Critias of Athens and Euhemerus. As far as we can reconstruct it on the basis of the rather scanty evidence, the common strategy of these people was to explain the origin of the worship of the gods without reference to higher, divine powers. Prodicus, for example, said that early man deified "the fruits of earth and virtually everything that contributed to his subsistence." Some human beings were also deified because of their outstanding contribution to human culture: Demeter because she introduced corn, Dionysus because he introduced wine (Philod. *De Piet.* PHerc. 1428 fr. 19 trans. Henrichs and PHerc. 1428 col. 3.12–13 Henrichs (= DK 84B5)). So it is not the case that there is nothing corresponding to the recipients of traditional cults, but rather that they do not belong to a different, divine sphere of reality. Critias, on the other hand, was included in the lists of atheists on account of a theory expounded by a character in one of his plays. According to this theory a clever man introduced the idea of god in order to make people fear divine retribution for wrong-doing and thereby make them more law-abiding (S.E. *M* 9.54).[2]

Even if these views were not sustained by philosophical arguments, they could make the question "Whether the gods exist?" a legitimate philosophical topic (cf. e.g., Arist. *APo.* II.1, 89b33; Cic. *ND* 2.4; S.E. *M* 9.49; Aët. *Placit.* 1.7). As a reaction, all major philosophers from the time of Plato developed proofs *for* the existence of god(s), but no one *against* it. It seems that philosophical atheism in antiquity was a straw-man. It remains true, of course, that philosophers could still call one another "godless" on account of their contrasting characterizations of gods. Moreover, besides producing arguments for the existence of gods, philosophers were also keen to explain that their tenets were perfectly compatible with traditional forms of religiosity and could sustain institutional forms of religious practice – and these arguments, it seems, were not simple cover-ups to avoid charges of impiety. Thus, philosophers conceived their innovations and criticisms not as a rupture with traditional religiosity or a devastating attack from the outside, but as internal reforms grounded on a genuine understanding of the nature of the divine. The norm, as it turns out, was that the community and the religious authorities tolerated the philosophers' speculations, whereas the philosophers formulated their respective tenets within the traditional framework.

2. Protagoras of Abdera is also a standard item on the ancient lists of atheists, although he apparently never said that "the gods do not exist." The famous opening sentence of his *On Gods* is agnostic also in this respect: "As to the gods, I cannot know either that they exist or that they do not exist, or what their form is; for there are many obstacles to knowing it: both the obscurity of the question and the shortness of life" (D.L. 9.51). On Protagoras, see Barney, THE SOPHISTIC MOVEMENT, in this volume.

The Framework of Greek Religion

Although the Greeks did not have a word corresponding to the English word "religion," religious phenomena were ubiquitous, organizing every moment of a Greek's life. There was a god supervising or protecting every human action, public or private, from morning to evening, from birth to death, and beyond death. Rivers, forests, seas, mountains, and the heavenly bodies were also identified as divinities or seen as inhabited by gods. It was Zeus who rained, and the sea stormed because Poseidon was angry. Although we are not sure how exactly Thales meant it, his dictum that "everything is full of gods" (DK 11A22) seems a fair representation of the Greek experience.[3]

The relationship between humans and gods was established and maintained through ritual. As all major and minor activities were put under the auspices of the gods, it was imperative to obtain the sanction of the relevant god for the successful performance of any action. It meant in practice that everyday private and public life was organized around sacrifices, ritual actions with the aim of gaining divine approval and cooperation. Large-scale public festivals also created and sustained social and political bonds between individuals as well as cities, and they offered spiritual comfort and distraction from everyday life with processions, sport, dramatic, and other competitions.

This emphasis on ritual can be contrasted with the absence of dogma. Each Greek city had "sacred laws," carved in stone or bronze and displayed at public places, to regulate ritual behavior and to fix the calendar of public festivals. The performative side of the cult was fixed and regulated, but not its interpretation. There was no attempt to constitute and codify a creed, a corpus of indisputable beliefs about the divine and its relation to humans. In the absence of a regulatory dogma, contrasting conceptions and representations of the gods co-existed without any feeling of antagonism. The poems of Homer and Hesiod certainly created a general frame of reference and a standard way of thinking about the gods, but later authors, epic poets, and tragic writers, had no qualms formulating alternative accounts and were not reproached for doing so. The idea of heresy is entirely alien to Greek religion. *Eusebeia*, commendable religious attitude, consisted not in fidelity to a code of belief but in the correct performance of ritual obligations and regularly honoring the gods with generous, though not excessive, offerings.

Another, related, feature of Greek religion is that it had no separate priestly caste. There were of course role distinctions in the performance of public rituals and in the maintenance of places of cult. Yet the leading roles were in principle open to everyone and were in practice attributed on the basis of social, political and economic power family membership, or in certain cases by lot. Cultic offices were not connected to special claims of authoritative knowledge about the gods and did not confer special powers on the priests to control and repress alternative views. In most cases, the political community retained the ultimate control over religious matters. Not a priest but a group of ordinary citizens raised the charges against Socrates, and not a clerical body but the assembly of the Athenians decided his case.

3. Cf. Hussey, THE BEGINNINGS OF SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY IN ARCHAIC GREECE, in this volume

Greek religion is also characterized by the co-existence of local variants. The "sacred laws" varied a great deal from one polis to another. Most of the festivals and cult places were also local. The mythical narratives about the gods were often connected to local cults and showed a considerable degree of variation. On the other hand, from the eighth century BCE onwards, some sanctuaries had attained a wider importance and were developed into Pan-Hellenic cult centers. Such cult centers, together with the poems of Homer and Hesiod, constituted shared points of reference and created a sense of identity. The recognition of the underlying unity did not however demand standardization: differences and variety were acknowledged as a fact.

The above characterization is formulated with constant reference to the polis as the framework of political and social life. It shows the resilience of the institutions of Greek religion that they could survive practically intact through the political and social changes of the Hellenistic age. It remains true, on the other hand, that the disruption of the polis brought with it the growing importance of mystery cults, which focused more on the individual and his or her spiritual needs.

This general framework opened up the possibilities and set the limits for the philosopher in matters of religion. The lack of a fixed corpus of beliefs made it possible for the philosopher to formulate radical views about the gods and still feel himself part of the tradition. The same can explain that the community could accept the philosopher's speculations provided that these did not undermine the belief in the social and spiritual importance of the established institutions of worship. The absence of a priestly caste meant that the philosopher did not need to compete in claims of knowledge with members of a fixed social group endowed with special authority and power. The rivals were the traditional poets, Homer above all, but there was no clergy to challenge and no high priest to control the philosopher's teachings. Remarkably, Socrates does not cross-question a priest but the religious fanatic Euthyphro in order to destroy unfounded claims of knowledge about "piety." Finally, the recognition of co-existing variants made the community more tolerant towards the alternative ideas offered by the philosopher, as long as these views were not felt to threaten the social cohesion and moral order created by shared institutions of cult.

In the absence of a separate clerical class philosophers were confident that it was *their* special competence to inquire into the nature of the divine and to define the correct human attitude towards the gods. Before philosophy emerged as a professionalized intellectual activity roughly in the generation of Socrates, the pre-Socratic "sage" could both be a religious teacher and engage in speculations that are philosophically interesting. Pythagoras and Empedocles are examples of this type. But theology remained a primarily philosophical discipline even later. So Aristotle could claim that theology is first philosophy (*Met.* E.1), and Chrysippus could say that theology is the "fulfillment" (*teletai*) of philosophy (*SVF* 2.42).

Paradoxically, the very features that made the philosopher's enterprise possible became also his main targets. As we shall see in the last section of this chapter, the main thrust of the philosophical critique of religion concerns its ritualistic behavioral character. Furthermore, philosophical conceptions of the divine had universalistic claims, leaving very little room for local or individual variation. Because the philosopher had strong views about the nature of the divine, he thought he knew what others should consider true. The religious *beliefs* of the citizen in Plato's *Laws* are under much

stricter control than in any existing Greek polis.[4] In a way, philosophers tried to fix what was left fluid by traditional forms of representation and seize the role left open by traditional religious institutions.

The Conceptualization of the Divine

As we have seen, the presence of gods was felt in every sphere of the world, and ritualized forms of honoring the gods created the fiber of public and private life. But who are, after all, these gods who permeate the world and are worshiped in cult? Of course, stories are told and poems are composed about their births, marriages, dealings, and fights with each other, as well as their involvement in human affairs. Their images are displayed in cult statues and on paintings. But what is the ground for these pictorial representations and how much can we accept of these often contradictory stories? After all, who or what is a god? What does its characteristic activity consist in and what is its role in our world? And, on the whole, can we find answers to these questions, and if so, where shall we start? This approach to the gods and their traditional representations is characterized by critical reason, demands of coherence, and some form of reductionism; a way of thinking that we may call philosophical.[5]

The first author whose work prominently displays this attitude is Xenophanes of Colophon (ca. 570–475 BCE). His reflections on the nature of the divine already contain in germ many of the major tenets that later philosophers will work out in more detail and argue for with a more sophisticated conceptual apparatus. Xenophanes' theology comprises a critical and a constructive aspect. The critical aspect consists in an attempt to isolate and discard traits which popular belief commonly but mistakenly attributes to the gods. He shows that the origin of such attributions is that people tend to picture the gods in their own image: "Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black; / Thracians that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired" (DK 21B16, trans. Lesher, 1992). Clearly, such bodily traits are accidental and their differences do not affect a shared core notion of the gods. Xenophanes in a remarkable thought experiment carries the argument to the extreme and shows that practically all anthropomorphic features belong in this class:

> But if horses or oxen, or lions had hands
> or could draw with their hands and accomplish such works as men,
> horses would draw the figures of the gods as similar to horses, and the oxen as similar
> to oxen,
> and they would make the bodies
> of the sort which each of them had. (DK 21B15)

4. On the theology in Plato's *Laws*, see Lane, PLATO'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY, section on the *Laws*, in this volume.

5. I shall treat the notion of philosophical theology restrictively and shall not discuss cases in which an entity (the *archē* of the pre-Socratics or Plato's Forms) is called "divine" on account of some of its characteristics. For a defense of such a restriction, see Broadie (1999).

But how far can we go in stripping off non-essential features? What will remain as a shared, fundamental notion of the divine? Then again, this argument from "local variations" cannot prove that none of these contrasting accounts is correct, but only that we cannot rely on any of them in separating true from false. The outcome is two-fold. On the one hand, we come to understand that the basis of traditional representations is very shaky. On the other hand, the argument also shows that we are bound to the human perspective, and the human perspective has serious limitations, especially when it comes to understanding the gods (see e.g. DK 21B34).

The non-anthropomorphism of gods becomes a commonplace for later philosophers. But, remarkably, Plato still feels the need to emphasize that the cosmic god "needed no eyes, since there was nothing visible left outside it; nor did it need ears, since there was nothing audible there, either" and, for similar reasons, it did not need organs for breathing and eating, nor hands or feet (*Ti.* 33c–34a, trans. Zeyl 2000). Only the atomists continued to maintain, somewhat provocatively, that the gods have human shapes (Democritus: S.E. *M* 9.42; Epicurus: scholium to *KD* 1).[6]

Another crucial element in Xenophanes' criticism of popular representations of gods is ethical. He reproaches Homer and Hesiod for having attributed to the gods all kinds of immoral acts: "theft, adultery, and mutual deceit" (DK 21B11, B12). It is impossible to decide on the basis of the existing fragments whether Xenophanes considered the attribution of illicit actions as yet another aspect of ascribing anthropomorphic features to the gods, or whether instead he thought that immoral acts are incompatible with divine perfection. Probably both. This type of criticism has become especially emphatic in the dialogues of Plato. For Plato, and probably already for Socrates, the unquestionable major premise of all speculation about the gods is that: "A god really is good, and should be spoken of accordingly" (*Rep.* II, 379b1). Goodness conceived as the essential feature of the godhead entails that a god cannot do anything harmful either to other gods or to human beings.[7] Two conclusions follow necessarily. First, the view expressed by Homer and shared by most people that in human affairs the gods are the causes of good and bad alike, must be false. The gods can only be made responsible for what is good and beneficial for us; we ourselves are to be praised or blamed for the rest. The argument has crucial ramifications for ethical thinking as a whole, because it shifts the center of responsibility from divine to human agents. Second, the traditional stories in which gods are shown to hate and fight with each other, do injustices, and inflict punishments, must also be false. What is at issue here is not only the truth-value of the poetic representations of gods, but also their pragmatic role in forming the character of human beings. As Plato emphasizes, children grow up listening to these stories, and the divine beings presented there become powerful role models for them. So even when people commit such horrendous acts as inflicting harsh punishments on their fathers, they can simply point to Zeus and say that he did

6. On the Epicurean treatment of the gods, see Morel, EPICUREANISM, in this volume.

7. Empedocles is quite exceptional in this respect. He creates a dualistic scheme by positing two divine principles, Love and Strife, who, in addition to their respective physical functions, also represent opposite moral values. An enigmatic reference in Plato's *Laws* X (896e) has sometimes been interpreted as suggesting a comparable dualistic scheme. On the atomists' gods being harmful, see below.

the same to his father Kronos. Thus we have to condemn Homer and the other poets for speaking untruly about the gods and thereby corrupting the youth. Or – and this was the main line of defense both before and after the time of Plato – we have to say that, truly understood, Homer was speaking about something completely different and should be interpreted allegorically. So, for example, when Homer pictures the gods in fierce combat against each other in *Iliad* 20, in reality he is speaking about the interplay of physical elements in the cosmos.[8]

We can criticize the poetic accounts of the gods as being false, or we can declare that they speak about something else – either way we end up claiming that such stories are not directly informative about the gods. Along what lines could the philosopher then establish a substantive notion of divinity? The most common strategy was to isolate some traits of the gods from popular belief and set them as criteria for attributing further properties and functions. This method was there from the start but became explicit in the methodology of the Hellenistic schools when they took the "preconception" (*prolēpsis*) of god as the starting-point for theological inquiries. But we have already seen, for example, how Plato posits goodness as the core attribute of divinity and then discards what is incompatible with it.

Another aspect of this strategy consists in amplifying the core feature (or features) and then identifying the divinity as that which shows the relevant feature at the highest degree. We find an early version of this reasoning in Xenophanes, who argues that the very notion of god entails that there is nothing greater (DK 21A28, A31 and C1). The same argument type appeared in many forms. Simplicius, for example, attributes the following argument to Aristotle:

> In general, where there is a better there is also a best. Since, then, among existing things one is better than another, there is also something that is best, which will be the divine. (Simpl. *In Cael.* 289.2–4 = Arist. *On Philosophy*, fr. 16 Rose)

Later authors, most prominently the Stoics, used this type of argument also with the aim of proving the existence of god:

> But that which is perfect and best will be better than man and fulfilled with all the virtues and not receptive of any evil; and this animal will not differ from god. God, therefore, exists. (S.E. *M* 9.88; cf. Cic. *ND* 2.33–39)

If we identify god as that which is the ultimate being in the relevant respect (goodness, greatness, power, etc.), will it not follow that there is only one god? Xenophanes' conclusion is inherently ambiguous: "There is one god greatest among gods and men" (DK 21B23.1). This wavering remains characteristic of later philosophers, too. Conceptual analysis, a theory of causes, reductionism, and requirements of theoretical parsimony in most cases drive the philosopher to the concept of a unique ultimate divinity. This one divine being, which is the first causal principle of the world and which stands in a fundamental relationship with the totality of things, is the god the

8. For the different apologetic readings of this episode, see the scholium *Venetus B* to *Il.* 20. which probably goes back to Porphyry.

ultimately interests the philosopher. This tendency is manifest already in the pre-Socratic practice of calling the underlying principle of the world "divine." Aristotle explicitly claims that theology is the theoretical study of the first causes and first principles (see esp. *Met.* A.2, 982b28–983a10 and E.1, 1026a17–32). Then, in *Metaphysics* Λ, which contains his most elaborate discussion of the divine, he argues that there should be *one* ultimate divine substance on which the order of the whole world ultimately depends (Λ.7–8; see also *On Philosophy* fr. 17 Rose; *Phys.* VIII.6; *GC* II.10, 337a15–24).[9] Then he ends *Metaphysics* Λ with a quotation from Homer: "The rule of the many is not good; let there be one ruler" (10, 1076a4 quoting *Il.* 2.204).

Yet philosophers very often leave open the possibility that there are further, causally less relevant entities corresponding to traditional polytheistic conceptions. So Aristotle maintains that there are other, lesser celestial divinities of a fixed number. Indeed, he claims that, with due distinctions made, his conception of the eternal celestial substances corresponds to the intuition of primeval thinkers who spoke about a multitude of gods. The original insight subsequently got corrupted and this is how the mythical narratives about anthropomorphic gods were formulated "with a view to the persuasion of the multitude and to [their] legal and utilitarian expediency" (Λ.8, 1074b1–14). Similarly, Plato in the *Timaeus* draws the image of a first god, the divine craftsman, who is causally responsible for the entire visible universe. Yet he insists that there are also other, "younger" gods – the cosmos itself, celestial divinities, and even the gods of the traditional theogonies – who are situated at lower levels of the ontological hierarchy and who have more limited causal roles. According to Xenophon's testimony, Socrates made a comparable distinction between lesser gods and a unique first god who is causally responsible for the providential organization, structure, and maintenance of the whole world (*Mem.* 4.3.13).

The Stoics go even further. The Stoic god is the active principle that permeates and gives form to the other metaphysical principle, the completely passive and formless matter. This wholly immanent god is directly causally responsible for everything that exists and happens in the world, and can hence also be called "the common nature of things" or "the world itself."[10] Clearly, if god is defined as *the* active causal principle (or the world itself), it must be unique. The Stoics readily identified their god with Zeus, the one most powerful god of the tradition. On the other hand, they had no problem in speaking about gods in the plural. They considered the celestial bodies to be gods, and they also accommodated the traditional gods in their system via elaborate allegorical identifications.[11] What we find here is an attempt to mediate between a causal theory, positing one ultimate causal principle, on the one hand, and the traditional polytheistic pantheon, on the other.

A comparable effort is characteristic of the Neoplatonists. Following the Aristotelian conception, they considered theology as the study of the first causes, while in their highly speculative metaphysics they developed a complex hierarchy of causes. Yet, they,

9. See Bodnár and Pellegrin, ARISTOTLE'S PHYSICS AND COSMOLOGY, in this volume.

10. On the historical and philosophical connections between the Stoic god and Plato's *Timaeus*, see Sedley (2002).

11. See, e.g., D.L. 8.147; Cic. *ND* 2.63–69; Philod. *De Piet.* 1428 coll. 4.12–8.13 = coll. 356–360 (Obbink).

and especially the late Neoplatonists, also claimed that after the very first principle, the different levels of this hierarchy are identical with the different gods mentioned by Greek and non-Greek "theologians." The outcome, just to mention one example, is that the Neoplatonic "all-one," the second level in the triad of the so-called henadic principles, gets identified with the Chaos of Hesiod and the *Orphic Rhapsodies*, the Gaia of another Orphic theogony, the Night of Acusilaus and Epimenides, the Chthonia of Pherecydes of Syrus, the Thaute of the Babylonian myth, the Areimanios of the Persian magi and the Sand of the Egyptian mythology, not to mention the Mist of the Sidonians and the Air of the Phoenicians (Damascius, *De Principiis* 3.159.17ff.).[12] In part, this was clearly an attempt to show the unity of the pagan tradition in the face of the growing influence of Christianity. But, as we have just seen, this reconciliatory attitude had been characteristic of philosophical theologies from the start.

The contrast between the severely limited and always fallible human knowledge and the vast and secure divine knowledge was a commonplace of epic and lyric poets. Zeus, and sometimes lesser gods, was even described as having a comprehensive knowledge of everything (see e.g., *Od.* 20.75 "knows well all things"). On this traditional basis, but with significant reshaping, cognition, and rationality became the most essential functions of the philosophers' god. As Heraclitus puts it "The wise is one alone, unwilling and willing to be called by the name of Zeus" (DK 22B32). Then in the wake of Anaxagoras, it became customary for philosophers to call the divine causal principle of the world Mind or Intellect (*nous*). This is what we find, among others, in Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and with some restrictions, the Neoplatonists.

The doctrine of the intelligent divinity is a more refined form of anthropomorphism: we describe the god(s) by enlarging and extending our most noble capacities. The most valuable human capacity is thinking, to which philosophers add that it is also the most pleasant human activity. If so, the blessed divine being must show this capacity in the highest and purest form (e.g., S.E. *M* 9.23). Already Xenophanes claims about the greatest god that "whole he sees, whole he thinks, and whole he hears" (DK 21B24). What is more, this god can govern the world by mere thinking: "but completely without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind" (DK 21B25). The life of the divine is nothing but cognition. In their search for the best human life, Plato and Aristotle claimed later that a life of pure intellectual activity, and nothing but intellectual activity, is not a possibility for a human being – but it is the only life worthy of god (*Phlb.* 22c; *EN* X.7, *Met.* Λ.9).

The divine, then, is both the ultimate causal principle and is essentially rational; this can explain that there is order, goodness, and beauty in the cosmos. Embryonic forms of this reasoning were present already in Heraclitus, but the subject became prominent in the generation of Socrates.[13] According to the Socrates of Plato's *Phaedo*, the

12. The issue is of course more complicated. Plotinus put all the gods in the second hypostas (*Enn.* V.1 [10], 4) and used the tool of allegorical identifications very loosely. The introductic of the henads in the first hypostasis together with their identification with the gods, is probab due to Syrianus (Dodds, 1963, p. 257f.), and opened the gate for large-scale systematic allegor

13. Diogenes of Apollonia seems to mark an important step in this development (DK 64B B5). The eye, Paley's favourite example for teleological design in biology, was described as th artifact of a creative and intelligent divinity already by Empedocles (DK 31B84 and B86). Th

central task of the philosopher is to explain the cosmos as the work of a divine Mind. Roughly at the same time, the author of the Derveni papyrus, probably an Orphic initiation priest, tried to do the same in a religious context: he interpreted the traditional divine characters of the Orphic theogony as different cosmogonic functions of a divine Mind.

On the assumption that lasting regularity means order and the presence of a mathematically expressible pattern means rationality, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics concluded that the presence of the divine is particularly conspicuous in the motion of the heavenly bodies. In a way, this reasoning provided a philosophical underpinning for the traditional view that the heavenly bodies are divine beings. The Platonist author of the *Epinomis* went even further and proposed institutionalized forms of worship of the celestial divinities (988a).

The argument based on purposiveness and regularity in nature was also used as a proof for the existence of god. From the observable rational functioning of the cosmos, the purposefulness of its parts, and most importantly, the teleological structure of animals, one has to conclude that there must be an ultimate rational divine principle responsible for all this beauty and rationality. This argument, known as the argument from design, was used by Socrates (Xen. *Mem.* 1.4.2–19), developed further by Plato (*Laws* X and *Timaeus*), and gave occasion to the Stoics to list endless examples of providentiality in nature (S.E. *M* 9.75–123).

It nevertheless remained a formidable task for Plato, his followers, and interpreters, to explain how exactly the divine Mind and the order in the cosmos are related. The *Timaeus*, which can be read as a response to the task set by Socrates in the *Phaedo*, contains a narrative about the divine Mind-craftsman fashioning the cosmos from a previous chaotic state according to rational principles. Yet even Plato's immediate disciples disagreed whether or not we should take this story at face value. Aristotle read the *Timaeus* as a cosmogony (*Cael.* I.11, 280a30), and criticized it on the ground that the cosmos is eternal. Moreover, if the life of Aristotle's god is pure thinking, this also means that it cannot actively intervene in the functioning of the cosmos. But then how can it still function as a cause of the order in the world? Aristotle's solution is truly original. The divinity is the cause of order and goodness in the cosmos by being the object of desire. The subordinate components of the world desire the divinity and try to emulate its eternal perfection, and thereby their behavioral patterns become regulated.[14] The Stoics, as we have seen, espoused the opposite solution by affirming that the god actively and purposefully informs matter and thus creates temporally distinct cosmic orders. In this function, the Stoic god can genuinely be called a "divine craftsman" (Cic. *ND* 2.58).

The atomists took a distinct position also on this issue by holding that all that is regular and seemingly purposeful in the world is ultimately explicable by sheer mechanical causation. They did not deny that there are gods, or that the gods are intelligent, or even (as we shall see in the next section) that the gods have a crucial

is all the more significant as Empedocles is sometimes also quoted as an early Darwinist. The watch, the other stock example of later arguments from design, appears already in Cicero *ND* 2.87–88.

14. See *Met.* Λ.7; *GC* II.10, 336b25–337a8. The details are problematic and are hotly debated.

function in the life of individuals and societies. On the other hand, they firmly believed that the gods, whom they explained in physical terms as large living atomic images, have no role in the formation and functioning of the physical world.[15] Epicurus rejected the cosmological role of gods on the grounds that the toils of creating a cosmos and attending to its maintenance are simply incompatible with our preconception of gods as supremely happy beings.[16] As a later source formulates it "for otherwise [the god] would be wretched in the manner of a workman and a builder, burdened with care and fretting about the construction of the cosmos" (Aët. *Placit.* 1.7.7 trans. Runia).

The differences in attributing causal roles to the god(s) are reflected also in the divergent positions on the question whether the gods care for living beings, and above all, for humans. Socrates in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 4.3 enlists numerous examples to demonstrate the godhead's providential love of mankind (*philanthropia*). For Plato, denying divine providence was a serious form of godlessness. The main character of the *Laws* presents a long argument to the effect that the god supervises not only the cosmos at large, but is mindful of the smallest of human matters (*Laws* X, 900d–903a). Similarly, the Stoics claimed that one either denies the existence of the gods, or must accept that the god (or gods) governs the world in a providential way. They argued that providentiality necessarily follows from superior power and perfect rationality; denying either of these attributes is a breach of our "preconception" of god. The Stoic can henceforth claim that Democritus and Epicurus – and one might add, Aristotle – in fact deny the existence of gods (Cic. *ND* 2.76–77; for lumping Aristotle with the atomists, see e.g., the Platonist Atticus fr. 3.52–57 des Places, quoted by Sharples, 2002).

Philosophical Piety

What is a pious act? Who is a pious individual? According to Euthyphro, the religious fundamentalist pictured in the Platonic dialogue of the same name, pious is the one who is dear to the gods (*theophilēs*, *Euth.* 7a). And when someone asked the Delphic oracle "How am I to make myself agreeable to the gods?" he was told that "By following the laws of the polis" (Xen. *Mem.* 4.3.16). The outcome is that the one who follows the laws of the city is pious. Clearly, such ready answers will not satisfy the philosopher. So Socrates immediately asks Euthyphro whether the pious is dear to the gods because he is pious, or is he pious because he is being loved by the gods? (*Euth.* 10a). Also, even if one accepts the Delphic answer and follows the laws of the polis, one can still wonder why it is dear to the gods if one carries out all the required sacrifices and religious actions required by the law. Do they need it or are they simply pleased by it, and if so, why? The seemingly unproblematic notion of piety becomes complicated in the hands of the philosophers.

We have just seen that the philosophers had something radically novel to say about the nature of the divine. But just as importantly, they had something novel to say

15. For an overview of the ancient evidence concerning the theology of the early atomists, see Taylor (1999, pp. 211–16).

16. Cic. *ND* 1.52; Epic. *Hdt* 76–77.

about the nature of man. Philosophical theology and philosophical anthropology developed hand in hand and the philosopher's conception of the commendable human attitude towards the divine is the outcome of this double process. We have already touched upon some of the crucial elements of this development. First, we have seen that philosophical theology helped to cultivate the notion of human beings as ethically autonomous agents who are responsible for their own fates. Another crucial element consists in emphasizing what is common between gods and humans. Traditional poets often described the human condition by *contrasting* it with the divine: our inevitable death, severely limited cognitive capacities, and incurable wretchedness were set against the immortality, wisdom, and happiness of the gods. Aspiring to more and trying to transgress the strict boundaries of human existence was a serious offense that deserved strict punishment from the gods. By contrast, it was central to the anthropology of many philosophers that even though the human condition is severely limited, there is an element of the divine in man. What is more, many of them taught, with significant individual variations, that the ultimate aim of a human being is to enhance the inner divine element and thereby become like god.[17] What counts as the utmost *hubris* in the traditional conceptions became the normative program of human life in the philosophical doctrines.

The ascent to divine status, based on a non-standard anthropology, was a crucial element in some mystery religions. The Orphic myth about the birth of mankind stressed that there is a portion of the god Dionysus in us. The reward of the proper way of life is that (possibly after a certain number of reincarnations) the divine aspect prevails and the mortal part is left behind. The Orphic initiate can thus tell the gods in the underworld that "I boast myself to be of your blessed race" and be told in response that "Happy and blessed one, you will be a god instead of a mortal" (fr. 488 Bernabé = A1 Zunz). Although the details are dauntingly difficult to interpret, it seems that Empedocles took over the eschatology of mystery religions, but integrated it into the explanatory scheme of his natural philosophy. Also, Aristotle is hesitant about who said first that "Mind (*nous*) is the god in us and mortal life contains a portion of some god," the philosopher Anaxagoras or his townsman Hermotimus, a mystic seer capable of shamanistic soul-journeys and an incarnation of Pythagoras' soul (Arist. *Protr.* fr 61 Rose; cf. *Met.* A.3, 984b15–22; D.L. 8.5). The view that the separation between divine and human is not absolute was apparently an interface between philosophers on the one hand and figures and movements functioning at the fringes of conventional religiosity on the other.

There are, however, a number of fundamental differences between the doctrine of salvation of the Orphics and the philosophical program of "becoming like god." First, philosophers, with the possible exception of Empedocles, preserved the idea that the

17. Some of the central texts are as follows: Plato, *Tht.* 176a–b; *Ti.* 90b–d; with Alcinous, *Handbook* 28; Plotinus, I.2 [19], 5–6; Aristotle, *EN* X.7–8; Seneca, *Ep.* 92.3; Epicurus, *Men.* 135. Arguably, the central assumptions are present already in Heraclitus' doctrine of divine fire coupled with the claim that the fiery (dry) soul is the wisest (DK 22B118). A good case can be made for Empedocles, too (see most recently Broadie, 1999, pp. 219–20). Socrates, on the other hand, apparently followed the more traditional view and emphasized the gap between gods and humans.

difference between god and man cannot ultimately be overcome. Becoming like god is not the same as becoming a god. Second, as in the polis religion, so too in mystery religions, the criterion of felicity was primarily performative: ritual purity and the proper execution of the required sacrifices and initiation rituals. As opposed to this, philosophers put the emphasis on the *nature* of the common trait in god and man. If intellect or mind is the divine element in us, it is by enhancing our rationality that we can become like god. As Plato says in the *Timaeus*:

> [I]f a man has seriously devoted himself to the love of learning and to true wisdom, if he has exercised these aspects of him above all, then there is absolutely no way that his thoughts can fail to be immortal and divine, should truth come within his grasp. (*Tim.* 90c, trans. Zeyl)

Intellectual perfection and the corresponding assimilation to god is also the way t become pious. This is for example the Aristotelian answer to the question set in th *Euthyphro*, "Who is dear to the gods?"

> Now he who exercises his intellect (*nous*) and cultivates it seems both in the best state and most dear to the gods (*theophilestatos*). For if the gods have any care for human affairs, as they are thought to have, it would be reasonable both that they should delight in that which was best and most akin to them (i.e. intellect) and that they should reward those who love and honor this most, as caring for the things that are dear to them and acting both rightly and nobly. And that all these attributes belong most of all to the wise man is manifest. He, therefore, is the dearest to the gods. (*EN* X.8, 1179a24–30)

Moreover, because the knower becomes like the known, the best way to think like god is to think about the divine. Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and even the Epicurean agree that the emulation of the divine must be based on a proper theology. When or considers that the primary meaning of the Greek word *teletai* is "the mystic rites initiation," Chrysippus' saying that "theology is the *teletai* of philosophy" receives new signification. Theology, the correct understanding of the nature of the divine, the condition of becoming like god, being dear to the gods, and thereby of having good life, and not the faultless performance of the ritual. Theology is the initiati ritual for a philosopher.

But if the commendable attitude towards the god(s) is the correct use of one's int lect, what function can the rituals prescribed by the laws of the polis still have? M philosophers agreed that "the best first sacrifice to the gods is a pure mind and a s without passions, but it is appropriate to begin the sacrifice with a moderate amount the others [i.e. traditional material sacrifices] as well" (Porphyry, *Abst.* 2.61.1–3, t saying is sometime attributed to Theophrastus). Most philosophers accepted ritualiz forms of worship upheld by tradition as a fact of human societies. This was sufficie basis even for the Skeptics to take part in cults (S. E. *M* 9.49; Cic. *ND* 3.5). The probl for the philosophers was not so much the practices but rather their interpretati This was the real target already of Heraclitus' harsh criticism of popular religion (Adomenas, 1999). As a matter of fact, the cults in Plato's ideal city in the *L*

come very close to the actual Athenian practice. For Plato, the important point is that institutionalized forms of worship should enhance communal identity, so private shrines and cults are prohibited. More importantly, it is the most dangerous form of godlessness to believe that sacrifices and prayers are means to influence or bribe the gods (*Laws* X; cf. *Rep.* II, 365d–366a). Thus, the performance of sacrifice can be either a sign of piety or the worst form of godlessness depending on the interpretation the practitioner assigns to the act. The Stoic Zeno took a more radical stance towards traditional forms of worship when he declared that temples and cult statues should not be erected, because products of human craftsmen are not worth much, and therefore are not sacred either. This, however, could not stop the Stoics from worshipping the gods in the traditional way just as all other Greeks did (Plut. *St. rep.* 1034B). Plotinus apparently cared little for traditional cult activities. But ritual practice, in the form of theurgy, received a new significance for the later Neoplatonists in connection with a more pessimistic anthropology introduced by Iamblichus. According to this conception, the human soul completely descended into matter, and therefore the ritual manipulation of matter was needed for accessing the divine (e.g. Iamblichus, *De myst.* 2.2, with Steel, 1978).

The most interesting position in this respect is probably that of the Epicureans. Epicurus retained the normative concept of the assimilation to the gods. He, however, put the emphasis not so much on divine rationality, but rather on the blessed, tranquil existence of the gods – this undisturbed, joyful state is what the Epicurean sage should emulate. As we have seen above, the Epicurean gods do not intervene in human affairs. Yet they can be beneficial to human beings in so far as people with a correct understanding of the divine nature try to emulate a positive paradigm. A good life, once again, is ultimately dependent on a correct theology. But gods can be harmful as well. When one thinks of the gods as "terrifying tyrants," mainly because of one's own bad conscience, the fear of the gods will make one's life miserable (Philod. *De Piet.* coll. 71–87 Obbink). This view can function also as a philosophical account of divine justice: the gods help the betterment of the good, but harm the bad. What is the function of the rituals, then? Epicurus maintains that it is imperative to participate in public and private rituals, "not because the gods would be hostile if we did not pray," but because:

> [I]t is particularly at festivals that he [i.e. the wise man] progressing to an understanding of it [i.e. the nature of the divine], through having its name the whole time on his lips, embraces it with conviction more seriously. (Philod. *De Piet.* coll. 26–27 Obbink).

In other words, cultic activity puts the sage in the most appropriate psychological state to feel awe and thereby try to emulate the gods. Epicurus had startling views about the constitution and nature of the gods, and he had an original account of how they influence the life of individuals. Nonetheless, these unusual ideas provided the Epicurean with profound reasons to participate in the traditional religious festivals of the city – where he could also meet all the Platonists, Peripatetics, Stoics, and Skeptics, coming for somewhat different reasons based on somewhat different ideas.

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