

The evidence for atheism in Ancient Greece and why it did not become more prominent.

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‘I certify that this dissertation is my own work, and that any use of other persons
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Abstract

Atheism has become an accepted part of the modern-day world nowadays, and in countries where it is practiced freely there is little thought towards it. However, this essay seeks to find atheism not in the present but in the world of Ancient Greece. By focusing on the philosophy, literature and politics during Ancient Greece that mentions and discusses atheism, not only can evidence be found to support that it existed but also to show why it did not become a prominent factor in their lives. Looking at ancient sources such as Plato's *Laws* and Aristophanes' plays, evidence of its existence as well as the response towards it will be examined. Each source will aid in exploring the thoughts and actions of those living in Ancient Greece that were labelled atheist. However, it cannot be ignored that the definition regarding atheism has changed over time and as such could affect the findings if not carefully considered throughout. As well as this being an issue, most ancient texts were written sometime after the events sometimes by a person who had not even been present. Either that or the texts have been lost in time, making it difficult to piece together the facts. Nevertheless, modern day scholars who have explored atheism such as Tim Whitmarsh, Jonathon Miller, Natalie Hayne and Hugh H. Benson will help piece together the puzzle that is atheism and prove most of the evidence discovered.

At the end of this dissertation it should be shown whether atheism had existed in Ancient Greece and if it had, why it did not become a prominent factor in the lives of Ancient Greeks.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my thanks and gratitude towards the Classics staff at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, for their aid the last three years leading me to this moment. I have learnt a lot from them. I would like to give special thanks towards Julie Davis and Lyndsy Annang who have also helped me in completing this project and many like it. Finally, I would like to give me thanks to my friends and mostly my family who helped me not only in finalizing this project but sending me down the path that led towards it.

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Introduction

The Ancient Greeks are well known for their philosophy, literature and democracy. They were also well known for their religion as well, worshipping Gods such as Zeus, Hades, Poseidon and other such higher beings. According to Sofia Souli ‘They were deeply concerned with the beginning and the end and all the supernatural forces that could not be mastered’¹. Due to these concerns, they sought to find answers which led to new questions, questions that eventually led to a form of atheism. When one thinks of the Ancient Greeks one would not usually suspect that atheism existed in Ancient Greece and to a point this assumption would be correct. Although there were philosophers who began to question the gods’ existence, to call them atheists would be wrong just as much as it would be wrong to say they were not. Nickolas P. Roubekas puts it aptly: ‘Atheism, like religion, has a history’² and this history is just as rich and thought provoking as any other, leading to a varied amount of new questions for modern scholars to look into.

Atheism, like most things in history, has changed. Its meaning has not remained the same as it once was, and most periods of history have a different outlook on the term. For this project however, there are only two forms of atheism that will be referred to: The Ancient Greeks’ and the modern-day definition. The definition of modern day atheism is simple enough to understand: it is simply the

¹ Souli 1998: 6

² Roubekas 2014: 229

disbelief in anything supernatural, 'disbelief in the existence of God or gods'³. The Ancient Greeks' definition was a bit more complicated however. The term Atheist (ἄ-Θεός) meant 'without a god' and is therefore a person who does not believe in a god⁴. The key part of the phrase being *a god*. It did not mean that the atheist in question disbelieved in other gods or life after death, it simply meant that the person did not believe in a particular god, for example Zeus. So therefore, to look at the term atheist and automatically view it as meaning exactly the same thing as modern-day atheism, would be a mistake. At the same time however, the word itself must still be approached with caution as 'their meanings vary according to contexts and framework in which they appear as well as their writers motives'⁵. Jan Bremmer has argued that the term atheism should be used in a loose way to avoid using or looking at it in a modern way⁶. However, the term should not be discarded, for although the meanings are different it was still atheism to the Ancient Greeks even though they may have had a different definition for the word.

Keeping in mind the two different definitions of the term atheism, this essay will explore Ancient Greece and whether atheism did exist during this period of time, and if so why did it not become a more prominent factor in their lives? Although there appears to be evidence for its presence simply from the

³ Stevenson 2010: 99

⁴ Roubekas 2014: 228

⁵ Roubekas 2014: 231

⁶ Bremmer 2007: 12

existence of a definition for it, atheism is hardly discussed or explored by scholars, highlighting that perhaps it was not as much a part of Greek lives as it is for modern day people. To answer these questions the following themes will have to be explored: Literature, Philosophy and Democracy. By looking at what remains of Ancient texts from writers like Plato, Diagoras, Socrates and looking at modern day scholars such as Whitmarsh, Natalie Hayne and Michael Scott, evidence should be found that will aid in proving and answering the questions. Unfortunately, it cannot be ignored that the difference in definition for atheism, the loss of ancient sources, the fact most of the works available are secondary sources and not many explore atheism even to this day makes it difficult to obtain information on the matter itself. Despite this however, I hope by the end of this project to demonstrate that a type of atheism existed in the ancient world and that the reasons it may not have become prominent were due to the uncertainty of the unknown and poor response it received from the religious at the time. As Jonathan Miller states ‘In looking backwards we will not find people who are the counterparts of those of us today who enjoy the luxury of thoughtless disbelief’⁷ but those that were shunned and prosecuted for their views.

⁷ Atheism; a rough history of disbelief 2004: 2.22 -2.31.

Chapter One

Atheism in Ancient Greek Philosophy

Philosophy is defined as ‘the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence’⁸ especially when considered as an academic discipline. The very core of philosophy has those who study it question the world around them and that does not exclude the divine. The Ancient Greeks explored philosophy to try and explain the world they lived in and how it came about. According to scholar Whitmarsh:

A striking number of them were centrally interested in explaining the material nature of the world around us, in replacing the traditional, epic conceptions of a cosmos dominated by anthropoid deities with newer, “Scientific” models based on the properties of material substances.⁹

These Ancient philosophers stretched from Anaxagoras, Socrates, Protagoras, Thucydides, Theodorus of Cyrne, Epicurus and more. Although these names may not be as well-known as those such as Plato or Aristotle, their work in philosophy are some of the first signs of atheism existing and according to Jonathan Miller ‘it’s with the philosophy of the Ancient Greeks that we finally get to what you might call, the deep end in our examination of the history of disbelief.’¹⁰ By looking at these ancient scholars it will be shown whether atheism did or did not exist in the ancient world of philosophy and to understand why it is difficult to ascertain the

⁸ Naseer 2012: 48

⁹ Whitmarsh 2016: 53

¹⁰ Atheism; a rough history of disbelief 2004: 49.21 – 49.30.

type of atheism that existed, whether it was the modern concept of atheism as it is known today, or the ancient.

It is unfortunate that most of the work of philosophers holding atheist views have been lost. For example, although it is known Protagoras was an atheist, or at the very least an atheist in the eyes of the Ancient Greeks, much of his work is said to have been burnt in Ancient Greece due to its explicit nature of questioning the gods 'Later generations would claim that the Athenians exiled him for On the Gods and publicly burned his books'¹¹. Although it cannot be known completely if this is indeed what occurred to Protagoras' books, many scholars such as Richard D Mckirahan,¹² Ugo Zilioli ¹³and Dr Adam Drozdek¹⁴ believe this to be the case. Cicero has given some evidence to support the claim of the book burnings by stating:

As for Protagoras of Abdera, whom you have just mentioned and who was quite the most important sophist of his day he prefaced his book with the words 'I cannot say whether gods exist or not,' and by order of the Athenians he was banished from their city and territory, and had his books publicly burnt¹⁵

¹¹ Whitmarsh 2016: 90

¹² McKirahan 2011: 364

¹³ Zilioli 2016: 19

¹⁴ Drozdek 2016: 109

¹⁵ Cic The Nature of the Gods: 63

Due to the fact Cicero is one of the closest scholars to Protagoras' time the evidence is more accepted as his facts are likely to have been closer to the truth. However, a period of time had gone past and much of what was heard or written would have been from secondary sources. As such even Cicero's statement cannot be simply accepted since there is no physical evidence to support the claim. If such a vast burning occurred or even a trial for Protagoras it is unlikely that it would not have been written down in a similar way to Anaxagoras' or Socrates' trial. Scholars Michelle Ballif and Michael G. Moran believe that

Such accounts are probably later fabrications, however, since the alleged trial and sentence are never mentioned by any fifth- or fourth-century author, and there is no mention at all of any book burnings of any sort. Given Protagoras's prominence, it is hard to imagine that no author would mention such a fate...¹⁶.

Therefore, it is reasonable for scholars to conclude that the books were not burnt, as like many pieces of texts over time they simply could have been lost. However, there is no way to discover what the fate was for the book he wrote. All that can be learned about Protagoras is through what little information was gathered from other sources and from the small fragment still in existence from his book *On the Gods*, such as:

Concerning the gods, I cannot know either that they exist or that they do not exist, or what they are like in form. Many things prevent knowing, the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of human life¹⁷

¹⁶ Ballif, Moran 2005: 309

¹⁷ Dunn 2010: 48

which demonstrates at the very least he had begun to question their existence and therefore it would not be so far-fetched to believe that he was, in the eyes of the Ancient Greeks, an atheist.

Of course, there are other examples in the Ancient World of atheism existing in philosophy. One of the better-known philosophers accused of atheism was Socrates. It is largely debated whether Socrates was an atheist or not, ‘after all we have not the slightest evidence that Socrates failed to observe the established Athenian religious rituals, yet the Socrates of Plato’s *Apology* makes no effort to document this fact...’¹⁸. In fact, all of Socrates’ work and thoughts are from a secondary source as Socrates refused to write anything down. Hayne states: ‘There can be few individuals who have had such a considerable and lasting effect on human thought, without writing a single word’¹⁹. Although Socrates did not write anything down himself, Hayne is correct to state this as Socrates’ lessons have shaped the Western thought for two and half a millennium, a fact agreed with by scholars Cornelius T. Leondes²⁰ and Craig A. Lockard²¹. Unfortunately, as Socrates’ written works are not from his own hand, what is read about Socrates cannot be interpreted as his own word. Benson writes

¹⁸ Benson 1992: 19

¹⁹ Haynes 2010: 66

²⁰ Leondes 2001: 2

²¹ Lockard 2007: 148

Hence, although I do not doubt the historicity of the figure of Socrates as presented in the dialogues, I do indeed doubt the historicity of the dialogues themselves as reports of philosophical conversations in the fifth century.²².

It could be true that what is written in Plato's *Apology* are in fact Socrates' own words, yet it is impossible to verify that, after all as his pupil Plato may have shown Socrates in a better light than was true. Hayne asks the much-needed question: 'Is he slavishly accurate, therefore, or does he edit Socrates to seem a bit more likeable, consistent or dazzling?'²³. Although the question cannot be answered, what is written cannot be discounted, as: 'our ignorance in no way detracts from the quality of the texts we have.'²⁴ All texts written about Socrates, despite perhaps not coming from his own mouth, help our understanding of the philosopher and by comparing the texts written by Plato and Aristophanes scholars can come closer to understanding Socrates' view on the divine.

Plato writes that Socrates viewed wisdom as recognizing one's ignorance and that ignorance could stem from religious belief:

For to fear death, gentlemen, is nothing else than to think one is wise when one is not; for it is thinking one knows what one does not know.

For no one knows whether death be not even the greatest of all blessings to man, but they fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest

²² Benson 1992: 47

²³ Haynes 2010: 67

²⁴ Haynes 2010: 67

of evils. [29b] And is not this the most reprehensible form of ignorance, that of thinking one knows what one does not know? .²⁵

By recognizing one's own ignorance and questioning the world, it is not so far-fetched that through this viewpoint Socrates could have easily been an atheist, at least in Ancient Greek terms. The fact he is said to have stated 'an Unexamined life is not worth living'²⁶ demonstrates that he would have questioned the gods at some point, although whether this questioning led to an overall disbelief in the divine (as is a modern-day atheist) is unlikely, since it is noted Socrates still believed in other gods as he goes on to say in his trial;

'I can't work out whether you're saying that I teach people to recognize (nomizein) the existence of certain gods—in which case I **do** recognize the existence of gods, **am** by **no** means an atheist (**atheos**), and **am not** guilty on that score—but that these are different gods from the ones the city recognizes, so that this is your charge against me, that I recognize different gods'²⁷.

It was only due to these gods not being the “correct” gods for the Greeks that made him become called an atheist 'And while one hesitates to decide for others what constitutes a livable life, perhaps he was right'²⁸ to question life and all its meaning. After all it can be argued it was lessons and questions such as this that inspired others to enquire about the divine, questions that are still asked today.

²⁵ Plato. Apology. 29a

²⁶ Plato. Apology. 39a

²⁷ Plato. Apology. 26c

²⁸ Haynes 2010: 63

Though it is stated by scholar Whitmarsh that a man named Theodorus of Cyrene was one of the last atheists of ancient Greece²⁹ there was one other philosopher that questioned the supernatural in a way that would conceivably be a modern version of atheism. This philosopher was a man named Epicurus. According to Miller he was ‘The first Greek philosopher to address himself explicitly to the question of the existence of God, or of the Gods’. However, this can be argued against. Epicurus was born in 341 BC and before him came many other philosophers as stated above, who are known to have had limited belief in the gods, although whether that was explicitly only the Greek gods or against any form of divine being is to be discussed. However, they cannot be ignored. Many of the Epicureans’ beliefs stemmed from Democritus and alongside him were philosophers such as Protagoras whose limited fragments demonstrate a questioning of the gods, and Socrates whose position on the gods brought him to trial. These philosophers are known to have questioned the existence of the gods just as Epicurus later does, in fact it is more than likely it was due to these philosophers that his own questioning of the gods came about, and perhaps the reason he was not an outright atheist since the fear of a similar punishment was no doubt still present.

From what remains of Epicurus’ written works it can be agreed that his opinion on the existence of the divine was likely to be disbelief although that depends on how modern scholars interpret his work and what he meant by his

²⁹ Whitmarsh 2016: 122

comments. Whitmarsh believes otherwise, stating that ‘Epicurus was insistent that gods do exist and was fiercely critical of atheists’³⁰. Nevertheless, the main point that stands out within Epicurus’ texts is that the arguments he used are the same in many aspects to the modern-day arguments used to try and disprove the existence of a god:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is God both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?³¹

This alone would not only confirm that an atheist existed in Ancient Greece but an Atheist in the modern definition as well. However, he then goes on to state ‘The gods live remote from our lives and take no interest in them,’³² backtracking on scholars first thoughts’ about him being an atheist and instead showing him to be a believer.

Epicurus did not simply discuss the Gods of Ancient Greece such as Zeus, Hades, Poseidon etc. but the entire premise of supernatural beings as well as the concept of life-after death: ‘Why should I fear death? If I am then death is not. If death is, I am not. Why should I fear that which cannot exist when I do?’³³. This demonstrates that in some regards at the very least he was a type of atheist as he

³⁰ Whitmarsh 2016: 174

³¹ Bakker 2013: 13

³² Whitmarsh 2016: 174

³³ Atheism; a rough history of disbelief 2004: 54.28-54.43.

demonstrates a disbelief in the afterlife something that is more based on a modern-day atheist definition than ancient. It could be argued that it is through Epicurus' questions that the way atheism is defined nowadays originated from him, as his argument is 'as vivid and powerful today as it was when it was first expressed 2,300 years ago'³⁴. This brings into question why he wasn't seen as an atheist when his theories of reality not only meant that the gods were not needed but also disproved their existence. Whitmarsh believes that it is due to

‘...having seen the theological implications of his materialist model of the universe, Epicurus realized that he had better arm himself against the counterblast that had swept away earlier thinkers like Diagoras of Melos and Socrates.’³⁵

So, it therefore stands to reason that he was an atheist, although perhaps not as openly as those that came before him, more than likely out of fear of what would happen to him if he was. Still, there is little doubt that if Epicurus was of the modern era he would be labelled an atheist.

Although it is clear philosophy was mainly the reason that atheism came about in the ancient world, scholars and historians of the modern-day world would not have known about it if not for the written texts. Miller believes that thoughts can become subjects of discussion, a fact proven in day to day life as people debate over matters such as the supernatural, however he believes that 'it's not until they're written down that they become stable enough to bear examination in the same way

³⁴ Atheism; a rough history of disbelief 2004: 53.46-53.54.

³⁵ Whitmarsh 2016: 117

that physical objects themselves bear examination'³⁶. His opinion is that without literacy philosophy cannot emerge properly, and by examining texts and re-reading the thoughts or even plots of others a deeper analysis can occur. Whether what is found is what the original author intended is a completely different matter. In any case literature opens a diverse set of possibilities and discussions, furthermore it can also be used to spread ideas across the world

³⁶ Atheism; a rough history of disbelief 2004: 48.57-49.07.

Chapter Two

Ancient Greek Atheism demonstrated in Literature

For most of history the key to the past has come in different forms, one example being the Archaeological findings. However most of what we know from the Ancient Greeks is found in their literature, ranging from books to theatre. Like most texts, plays can give an insight to the thoughts and opinions of Ancient Greece, especially when these theatrical productions were used to mock another. The books that have been both referenced in ancient texts and what remains of the text itself also gives similar insight to the ancient world. It is texts wrote by Aristophanes, Diagoras, Protagoras and Plato that aid in answering the question whether atheism did in fact exist in Ancient Greece. Unfortunately, most of the evidence comes from either a biased opinion, a secondary source, and what is stated cannot be fully proven, as most of the texts written about Atheism during Ancient Greece have either been lost or destroyed.

One of the most prominent figures of literature that demonstrated atheism in his work was Diagoras of Melos. His impious views resulted in him gaining the nickname “the Atheist”. Not much is known of Diagoras himself, however his impious nature is well documented in ancient sources: ‘Diagoras was a dithyrambic poet from Melos, who divulged the Eleusinian Mysteries in dance and word and was judged to be a most impious man. That is why they make fun of the Melians for impiety’³⁷. Like most Ancient Greeks, Diagoras was not

³⁷ Bac, Greek Lyric. IV: 335

originally an atheist. For most of his life he was as god-fearing as any Greek, stating that ‘It is in accordance with God and fortune that all deeds are performed’³⁸. It is uncertain when his opinion of the gods changed so dramatically, however it is well documented why he went from being a believer to an atheist so suddenly. Diagoras was a writer although his work is now unattainable, and he may not be as well-known as those such as Aristophanes or Euripides. Evidence suggest that he wrote a few pieces of work in his time, at the very least two particular pieces. The first major piece of work that resulted in Diagoras becoming an atheist is unknown, however it is suggested in ancient texts that it had been stolen by another playwright and as the gods did not punish the thief for his plagiarism Diagoras lost all faith:

He was called ‘the atheist’, since this was his belief from the day when a fellow-poet, accused by him of stealing a paeon which he had composed, denied the theft, but soon after produced the paeon successfully as his own work³⁹.

It is through his lack of belief that he became an Ancient Greek atheist however due to the significant extent of his atheist views he could also be classed as a modern-day atheist.

Not content with simply becoming an atheist, Diagoras went on to write a well-known book called *Apopyrgizontes logoi*. *Logoi* refers to things such as speeches or arguments whereas the combined word *apopyrgizein* splits into two

³⁸ Bac, Greek Lyric. IV: 347

³⁹ Bac, Greek Lyric. IV: 335

separate words, *apo* which meant “away from” and *pyrgos* meaning “tower”⁴⁰. As such it is believed the title of his work was simply *Arguments That Knock Down Towers*. The book was possibly filled with claims against the gods, as they were usually pictured by the Greeks atop “a tower”. Therefore to “knock over” the tower would suggest to questioning and criticizing the gods’ existence. Although it cannot be certain what was within the book itself, scholars such as Whitmarsh agree that it no doubt ‘...had an immediate impact on Athenian society’⁴¹. As such, whatever was held within, it is doubtful that it praised the gods and instead highlighted Diagoras’ atheist views. In a translation by David A Campbell a fragment gives aid to this opinion ‘Diagoras, pained, wrote the so-called Tower-Wrecking Discourses which told of his apostasy and defection from his belief in God.’⁴². Of course, Diagoras did not play the only prominent part in atheism being shown in Ancient Greece. One did not have to be impious to spread the idea of atheism. Homer and Hesiod were as god-fearing as many Ancient Greeks; however, their texts were not as loved as is believed as they were criticized for spreading atheism⁴³.

During Ancient Greece, writing was not considered a high skill set as such, as there was nothing that could compare to sacred scripture. Nevertheless, according to Whitmarsh ‘what they did have were Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey,

⁴⁰ Whitmarsh 2016: 113

⁴¹ Whitmarsh 2016: 113

⁴² Bac, Greek Lyric. IV:335

⁴³ Whitmarsh 2016: 109 Xen. Eleg. 1.10.2

and Hesiod's *Theogony*'⁴⁴ although whether this was a good thing is debatable. According to scholars, these three texts were all the Ancient Greeks had. This meant that how the gods were shown within would become the Greeks' primary view of how the gods behave and act, which in turn could end up causing the public to begin to question the gods. Although religion has changed in time, the principle of what a God should represent has not, and that view is that a higher being is usually one that is better than a mortal. Within the two author's texts however, this is not how the gods are shown to be. The Euripidean play *Bellerophon* sums it up well, if 'any gods who exist preside over justice in the world and injustice is not rectified then there can be no gods'⁴⁵. Simply put, it means if the gods are meant to preside over a world of justice, how can they be portrayed the way they are in the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Theogony*, since:

*Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all deeds
Which among men are a reproach and a disgrace:
Thieving, adultery, and deceiving one another*⁴⁶

These are acts that many would view, even in a modern sense, as those that the Gods should rectify or at least condemn, not do themselves. Although modern readers may not analyze or see the three texts in such a way it was certainly a view that writers such as Plato and Xenophanes had. They saw the two authors as a danger to religion. Whitmarsh states that Plato thought the texts were problematic:

⁴⁴ Whitmarsh 2016: 29

⁴⁵ Whitmarsh 2016: 109

⁴⁶ Xen. Eleg. 1.10.2

Homer, Hesiod and the other poets, in his view (or at least that of Socrates, whom he reports), were dangerous peddlers of untruth whose misrepresentations of the gods and heroes as immoral would infect the populace, particularly the young, with dangerous ideas⁴⁷

Plato condemned the two authors for their work even though the three texts were not attempting to demonstrate or even cause atheism. However, if Whitmarsh is correct in his assessment that Plato viewed the books as such, it is likely that they could have still caused problems with atheism by raising unwanted questions amongst the people of Ancient Greece. These unwanted questions were not only present through books but through myths as well.

Salmoneus is one clear example of the idea of atheism in myth and the dangerous questions it can pose to believers; a man whose myth was likely meant to dissuade the ancient Greeks from dangerous ideas and instead could have only posed questions to the philosophers of the ancient world. Although usually much of the Ancients' writings are lost to us, in the case of Salmoneus a full papyrus fragment detailing his misdeed exists; the following is a summarizing of the quote:

And being arrogant and wishing to put himself on an equality with Zeus, he was punished for his impiety; for he said that he was himself Zeus and took away the sacrifices of the god and ordered them to be

⁴⁷ Whitmarsh 2016: 33

offered to himself; and by dragging dried hides, with bronze kettles, behind his chariot, he said that he was making thunder, and by flinging lighted torches at the sky he said that he was making lightning. But Zeus struck him with a thunderbolt and wiped out the city he had founded with all its inhabitants.⁴⁸

Although at first glance Salmoneus seems to be comic, something to laugh at and make fun of with its preposterous idea of using cooking equipment to be equal to a God, there is much more to the piece. The impressive powers of the Gods is part of what makes them divine to a human, the ability to replicate those powers would mean that a human can achieve the same as a God. If that is the case than what would the point be in having these Gods? Whitmarsh says ‘It is possible, then, that the original version of Salmoneus myth was a parable about the dangers that lurked in humans’ capacity to fabricate gods through ritual, drama, and statuary...’⁴⁹. Something the Ancient Greeks were becoming all too aware of: ‘If gods can be fashioned by mortal imitation, how real can they be?’⁵⁰. The story of Salmoneus may have meant to have been only a myth to warn others from atheism, but it certainly linked to the rational argument that was and has continued to be that the gods do not exist. Its implications towards theatre would have been present as well.

⁴⁸ Apoll, Lib 1.9.7.

⁴⁹ Whitmarsh 2016: 50

⁵⁰ Whitmarsh 2016: 50

Theatre has been part of the lives of humans for many years and has been loved by many. The Ancient Greeks particularly had a fondness for theatre and it intertwined with much of what they are known for: philosophy, art and most importantly democracy. Though there is no evidence to suggest that Salmoneus was ever performed in theatre, there is certainly evidence that other plays were, and in some of these plays it was necessary to play the role of the gods and to even have ‘special effects’ in the background. It is known that a device existed called the *Keraunoskopeion*, which generated the effect of lighting⁵¹, something that is not too different to Salmoneus’ myth. What is then the difference between the myth and the theatre? Unless that was the point of Salmoneus’ story, that ‘it was meditation on the metaphysical implications of a culture that was beginning to manufacture divinity in the human realm, through sculpture, painting, and theatre.’⁵², Whitmarsh believes this to be the case. It is certainly plausible; however, it cannot be forgotten that the fear of the gods was still present. To ward off the wrath of the Gods the “actors” would wear masks and in doing so their true identities would be hidden and protected whilst they performed their roles. It is still reasonable to think that through creating these “wonders”, the people of Ancient Greece may begin to question whether the gods existed or not. However, it must be remembered that at the time the myth was not trying to question the Gods or bring more atheism but to ‘lay down the law about the way in which Greek culture should operate’⁵³ a purpose that is seen repeatedly even to this day

⁵¹ Whitmarsh 2016: 50

⁵² Whitmarsh 2016: 50

⁵³ Whitmarsh 2016: 51

in myth, legends, or even folktales. Of course, there is more to theatre than the tools used to create the scenes.

There were three types of plays, and two of them are still used in the modern world: comedy and tragedy. Of course, how these two forms are used now are very different from how they were used in Ancient Greece. Tragedy as a modern concept is simply ‘a play dealing with tragic events and having an unhappy ending, especially one concerning the downfall of the main character’⁵⁴. However, for the ancient Greeks tragedy was something not only to watch but to learn from to make the audience face a tough choice:

...because no real ancient tragedy ends conclusively - siding with one course of action or another - what it does is face the audience with a problem. What would THEY do if they were in the same situation?⁵⁵.

If Dr Michael Scott is correct in his assessment on tragedy than the idea that atheism was considered in the theatre is a high possibility. However, there are more examples of atheism being brought up in comedy than tragedy. According to Scott this has not changed in its role⁵⁶ from Ancient to modern day viewers which is a play characterized by its humorous or satirical tone and its depiction of amusing people or incidents, in which the characters ultimately triumph over adversity⁵⁷. However, given that a comedy may have a similar plot line to a

⁵⁴ Stevenson, 2011: 1529

⁵⁵ Ancient Greece: The Greatest show on Earth 2013: 0.08.22-0.08.35

⁵⁶ Ancient Greece: The Greatest show on Earth 2013: 0.09.32-0.09.34.

⁵⁷ Oxford University Press 2002: 277

tragedy, the difference only being in the emotion presented, it can be argued that perhaps comedy had a similar objective as tragedy did, to make the viewers think (however slightly), as why else pose questions within the drama and why else speak directly to the audience still⁵⁸? It was certainly the Chorus' job to do so however for a comedy to still withhold lessons within demonstrates an attempt to teach a lesson to those watching, to make them think about the audiences opinion and views on the matter.

Whether or not comedy had the same intention as tragedy had in the ancient world, it still discussed the matter that is atheism, and it is perhaps through theatre that scholars have one of the main sources of showing atheism's existence, and discussions on the matter as well. Tim Whitmarsh states that 'Already, in the 420s in the glow of the sophistic movement, tragedies and comedies began to explore the question of whether gods exist'⁵⁹, however, this exploration could have simply been a mockery of those who did not believe in the divine. What is certain about Whitmarsh's statement though is that atheism was being discussed in the plays presented, in fact it can be argued that it was due to theatre that views on Atheism were reaching a broader audience: 'The ideas canvassed by Protagoras, Democritus, and Prodicus reached a broad audience thanks to theatre'⁶⁰. Of course, whether the playwright intended to spread atheist beliefs is something to question. Comedy in Ancient Greece was meant to poke

⁵⁸ Ancient Greece: The Greatest show on Earth 2013: 0.09.34-0.09.40

⁵⁹ Whitmarsh 2016; 100

⁶⁰ Whitmarsh 2016: 100

fun at contemporary Athens, and usually targeted beliefs or a person of that time.

Aristophanes' *Clouds* for example targets Socrates and his views about the Gods:

Strepsiades: So, you see what a blessing learning is? There is no Zeus,

Pheidippides

Pheidippides: Then who is there?

Str: Vortex is King, having expelled Zeus

Ph.: Ugh! What is this nonsense?

Str.: I assure you it's the truth

Ph.: Who says all that?

Str.: Socrates the Melian and Chaerephon, who knows about fleas' footprints.⁶¹

Although it is known that Socrates was not a Melian it is believed that this is referring to Diagoras who was⁶². As such Aristophanes is not only accusing Socrates of being an atheist he is also grouping him with Diagoras in such a way that casts him out as an Athenian, almost as if the idea of an atheist being an Athenian is too much to bear. Of course, this is not the only play that demonstrates atheism in theatre, there was also Aristophanes' *Birds* in which Diagoras was mentioned⁶³, *Frogs*, and the Euripidean play *Bellerophon* where the story 'of the misfortunes of the upright Bellerophon(tes) and his attempt to challenge the gods for their treatment of him by riding the winged horse Pegasus

⁶¹ Bacc. Greek Lyric. 339

⁶² Bacc. Greek Lyric. 339

⁶³ Bacc. Greek Lyric. 7

up to Olympus'⁶⁴ is written, exploring yet again another type of mythological atheism.

The fact that atheism was becoming a worthwhile topic to mention in myths such as Salmoneus Ceyxes and Alcyones demonstrates that it was becoming current enough in contemporary culture to make a significant impact on Ancient Greece society. The authors in literature helped spread philosophers' views to a broader audience and theatre had a similar result: 'From tragedy making our most important beliefs uncomfortable, to comedy questioning and policing citizenship, and keeping people in check.'⁶⁵. In conclusion, regarding both philosophy and literature it is proven that a form of atheism existed, at the very least by the Ancient Greek definition. This being the case, why wasn't it more widespread amongst the public? These philosophers, and the theatre that makes a mockery of these philosophers, would have certainly spread an atheist viewpoint, so why didn't more Ancient Greeks become atheist? The answer lies in democracy, a concept so great it still is in effect in the modern-day world and linked very closely to theatre itself.

⁶⁴ Kearns 2010: 11

⁶⁵ Ancient Greece: The Greatest show on Earth 2013: 0.57.56-0.58.06

Chapter Three

Atheists and Politics

Theatre and Democracy were closely entwined, and according to Michael Scott

Both comedy and tragedy sought to have a direct bearing on life in Athens. And most fascinating of all, is how they seamlessly blended together religion and myth with contemporary politics⁶⁶

In the previous chapter it was clear that theatre influenced the Athenians in diverse ways, including causing them to think about their actions, and it was also shown that atheism was a part of ancient Greece. However, to understand how the theatre was part of their politics and how it all affected the movement that was atheism, first one needs to understand the laws that governed the time. As discussed, ancient texts are few and much of what is attained are only fragments. Therefore, it is uncertain what the exact laws were, and how they changed as time went on. What laws that can be gained from the fragments shows how atheism was handled, how much of a real issue it was to the Ancient Greeks and why atheism was not a more prominent aspect of the ancient world.

In the fifth century BC, the word *atheos* first appears⁶⁷. The word itself implies an absence (a-) of a god (theos)⁶⁸ and was used to describe the godless such as Diagoras of Melos. However, another word was invented that was a lot stronger:

⁶⁶ Ancient Greece: The Greatest show on Earth 2013: 0.10.14- 0.10.27.

⁶⁷ Bremmer 2007: 12, Whitmarsh 2016: 116

⁶⁸ Whitmarsh 2016: 116

asebes. This simply meant “impious”. According to Whitmarsh, *sebein* ‘meant to worship the gods in the traditional manner, to pay them their due’⁶⁹ therefore to be *asebeia* referred to the failure of performing the religious rituals, something that was ‘an infringement of the local rules of a temple that would incur sanctions meted out by priesthood.’⁷⁰ However somewhere in the 430s, a man named Diopeithes set a chain of events in motion that changed the term’s meaning.

Diopeithes was a religious fanatic ridiculed by comic playwrights. However, his significance in the fifth century towards atheism lies in a passage written by the historian Plutarch, who wrote that Diopeithes ‘brought in a bill providing for the public impeachment of those who did not recognize the gods, or who taught doctrines regarding the heavens.’⁷¹ Yet interestingly enough Plutarch goes on to say that it was not just to target atheists but to target one person in particular, a man named Pericles who was the most powerful man in Athens⁷². To do this he accused Pericles’ friend Anaxagoras of illicit religious belief. Anaxagoras, born in 510 BC, is perhaps one of the better-known philosophers accused of atheism, in fact according to Whitmarsh his trial could have been ‘the first time in history that an individual was prosecuted for heretical religious beliefs’⁷³. Whether Anaxagoras’

⁶⁹ Whitmarsh 2016: 117

⁷⁰ Whitmarsh 2016: 117

⁷¹ Plut. *Per.* 32.1

⁷² McKirahan 2011: 200

⁷³ Whitmarsh 2016: 64

trial really was an attempt against Pericles is unclear. Certainly, we know that Anaxagoras was subjected to a trial, but for now the interesting part is the bill.

Ancient Athens was supposedly a place that called for intellectuals to come, share their theories and to advance freely⁷⁴. So as Whitmarsh puts it rightly ‘Could it really be the case that the Athenians, otherwise so intellectually curious, approved a bill that banned disbelief in the gods and speculation about the heavens?’⁷⁵ It certainly changes the view of everything Athens stood for, and if this is true it also demonstrates the reasons why atheism did not become a prominent factor in Ancient Greece. If Ancient Athens stopped advances that worked in the general direction of atheism, then not only would it stop the advances they were making in science, but it would also prevent philosophers working in a specific direction and spreading their theories to other areas of Greece: ‘What was even more revolutionary however, was that this was the first time in Greek public life that legislation had sought to govern people’s intellectual beliefs about the nature of the world’⁷⁶. Of course, there is more to it than that. By banning atheism, it meant those that practiced it or even suggested it would have been at risk of punishment, something that would certainly dissuade a person from such a route. This was partly seen through Epicurus as discussed in Chapter One.

The decree itself targeted two types of people considered atheist:

⁷⁴ Bremmer 2007: 4

⁷⁵ Whitmarsh 2016: 117

⁷⁶ Whitmarsh 2016: 118

1. Not recognizing the gods (nomizein)- the word itself can suggest either their ritual worship or belief in the existence of the gods
2. Teaching doctrines regarding the heavens.

The second outlawed activity could be construed as something completely separate to the first, however if one considers the decree as political it makes sense as ‘the decree were political in nature and designed to forge a link between Anaxagoras’s speculative theories and outright rejection of the city’s gods’⁷⁷. Unfortunately, it also meant that those accused of *asebeia* could have simply been accused of the act to sabotage them by their political opponents, so defining the difference between the true atheists through this decree is difficult. Yet Diopeithes was not the only one to discuss the law. Plato was another individual who wrote his thoughts on atheism down, as well as what he thought considered as a fitting punishment for it.

Plato’s Laws is one of the major pieces of literature texts scholars have access to and is Plato’s last dialogue written. Although his *Laws* were not necessary part of the Athenian laws, it does give insight to the time and to the man’s train of thought. For Plato, to be an atheist was a sin, which is interesting considering the debate that his works on Socrates are considered to have been really his own thoughts and teachings. So, was Plato a secret atheist or did his ideas on the matter change with time? It is probably an unanswerable question, however that does not prevent scholars from analyzing the *Laws* and using them to understand atheism in Ancient Greece.

⁷⁷ Whitmarsh 2016: 118

The Book itself was a tale of three men: an Athenian stranger, the ordinary Spartan citizen Megillos and the Cretan Clinias who were making their way to the cave of Zeus, and at the end of the third book Clinias asks the Stranger's assistance with making laws for a new Cretan Colony. Unlike most of his work, Socrates does not appear within the dialogue. Scholars like Catherine H. Zuckert however believe that the Athenian stranger was Socrates⁷⁸. It is uncertain whether this is an accurate assumption. As the book goes on, the Athenian and Clinias begin to discuss atheism stating:

Clin. Why, surely, sir it looks easy enough to speak the truth in saying that gods exist.

Ath. And on what grounds?

Clin. Why, to begin with, think of the earth, and planets, and everything! And the wonderful and beautiful order of the seasons, with its distinctions of years and months! Besides, there is the fact that all mankind, Greeks and non-Greeks alike, believe in the existence of gods.⁷⁹

Plato, although highlighting an atheist viewpoint, does it to demonstrate an easy answer to give back, however what it also highlights in the Athenian is that key belief that it may well be Socrates due to Socrates' own nature of asking the question why to any student or fellow philosopher willing to discuss with him. Yet it is later that they begin to discuss the punishment of those who are atheist:

⁷⁸ Zuckert, 1996: 156 Altman 2012: 409

⁷⁹ Plato. Laws. 275

Thus there are numerous types of these atheists, but two which legislation must take into account, the hypocritical, whose crimes deserve more than one death, or even two, and the others, who call for the combination of admonition with confinement.⁸⁰

Given that Socrates himself was labelled as an atheist, it would be odd for him to speak in such a way, so why would Plato depict him doing so? Could it have been an attempt to disprove the theory of Socrates being an atheist or was it simply the case Socrates had nothing to do with the Laws and it was instead a way for Plato to finally reveal his thoughts on the matter? Whatever the case, it is a mystery. What is not is Plato's view on atheism and how it should be punished.

According to Plato's *Laws* there were three types of poisonous belief:

‘(1) simple atheism, the denial that there are gods of any kind, a doctrine which he treats as with the ‘naturalistic’ theory that the world, including the minds in it, is the product of the purposeless movements of corporal elements

(2) the doctrine that there are gods, but that they are wholly indifferent to human conduct- deism, as we might now call it

(3) the doctrine that there are gods and that the impenitent sinner can escape the judgment by prayers and sacrifices⁸¹

Strangely, out of them all the first was morally the least guilty as it was ‘better to believe in no God at all than to believe in careless gods, and better to believe in

⁸⁰ Plato. *Laws*. 302

⁸¹ Plato. *Laws*: 1ii

careless gods than to believe in venal gods'⁸² So for philosophers such as Socrates that created new gods to replace the old, or Homer who wrote about venal gods, their actions would have been a worse thing to do than what Diagoras had done by saying there were no Gods, at least in the eyes of Plato. Of course, this does not mean the rest of Ancient Greece had a similar thought process. What is interesting to note though is that Plato would have condemned Socrates in court if his Laws had been accepted, despite the fact he previously showed a key loyalty to Socrates.

Although Plato's Laws may not have been the general laws of ancient Athens, they were partly based on its laws, and alongside Diopeithes' decree it can be seen that atheism was not to be tolerated in Ancient Greece, at the very least in Ancient Athens, the hub of intellect and progression. If it was not tolerated there, then the ability to expand the knowledge and lessons of atheism would have been lessened and as such others would be less likely to follow. What these laws did was to prevent and prosecute those of atheist inclination, which led to the subsequent trials of many philosophers of that time.

During Ancient Greece atheists were not considered sinful, simply arrogant, however their questioning nature was more than likely still viewed as being a risk towards the communities of Greece. From their books, to the mockery of theatre, it led them to trials, death or exile. Yet despite these things leading to their trials it is actually the trials that give scholars the most evidence for the existence of Ancient

⁸² Plato. Laws: 1ii

Greek atheism and demonstrates why it may not have become a more prominent factor during that time.

What is considered to be the first major atheist trial of Ancient Greece was Anaxagoras, although there are diverse opinions on when the exact trial was. Whitmarsh believes it was in the 430s⁸³ whereas John Burnet believes it to have been 450 BC: ‘the trial of Anaxagoras took place about 450 B.C.’⁸⁴. What can be agreed upon though is that he was put on trial for impiety⁸⁵. There is not any transcripts of the trial that can be found, only second-hand sources who mention the trial. What is known is that a man named Satyros said that the accuser was Thoukydides, son of Melesias⁸⁶, a man whose goal was probably political as it is strongly believed that the trial was in fact targeting Pericles. Plato however is the one who clears up what the charges were based on. According to Plato it was due to the fact Anaxagoras taught the sun was a red-hot stone, and the moon earth⁸⁷. Keeping Plato’s explanation in mind it is certainly backed by Diopeithes’ decree, a decree that is said to have been created in order to condemn Anaxagoras. The likelihood of that being the case is accurate at this point and it can be seen why Anaxagoras was labelled an atheist.

⁸³ Burnet. Blavatsky 2018: 6

⁸⁴ Whitmarsh 2016: 64-65. Burnet Blavatsky 2018: 6

⁸⁵ Whitmarsh, 64/65. John Burnet 6

⁸⁶ Ostwald 1987: 532

⁸⁷ Plato. Apol. 26d

Despite Anaxagoras' subsequent banishment though his books continued to be sold and bought in Athens as Socrates states in the *Apology*;

...do you so despise these gentlemen and think they are so unversed in letters as not to know, that the books of Anaxagoras the Clazomenian are full of such utterances? And forsooth the youth learn these doctrines from me, which they can buy sometimes (if the price is high) for a drachma in the orchestra and laugh at Socrates, if he pretends they are his own, especially when they are so absurd!⁸⁸

Which is strange as Socrates presents Anaxagoras books as if they held atheist views within and yet unlike what occurred to *On the Gods* written by Protagoras, Anaxagoras' books were not burnt. If Anaxagoras was such a threat that banishment was necessary why wouldn't they have also destroyed his books? Unless the trial really was only political and nothing to do with atheism. Or it could have been to do with the fact the Greeks did not find Anaxagoras book as much as a threat as Protagoras' book. Derek Jones states; 'Anaxagoras' exile from Athens both removed the presumed danger of his impiety for the community and meant that his ideas could no longer be heard'⁸⁹. As well as this Derek continues to suggest that Anaxagoras' work may have only been read by certain individuals and otherwise ignored⁹⁰, therefore the danger he posed towards the religion was no longer present and the books no longer a threat. In comparison to Protagoras whose books had a much larger scale effect on the citizens of Athens. Unfortunately just

⁸⁸ Plato. *Apol.* 26d/e

⁸⁹ Jones 2001: 56

⁹⁰ Jones 2001: 56

like the work of Protagoras there are only fragments remaining of Anaxagoras' work and consequently no way to see or compare the amount of atheism present in either books. As for the Diopeithes' decree that condemned him, it was repealed in 403: 'Of course, the decree was annulled, along with all of the others that had been passed in prior years, by the general amnesty of 403/2'⁹¹, yet despite this the trial of Anaxagoras and perhaps even the decree was not fully forgotten, as shown in Socrates' trial.

In 399 BC Socrates was subjected to trial and at the end of it execution for the crimes which would have been defined as *asebia*: 'There are thus three distinct charges: 1. Socrates does not recognize the gods that the state recognizes. 2. Socrates introduced new divinities. 3. Socrates corrupts the youth.'⁹². Although like Anaxagoras it seems that Socrates believed his trial was a farce and that those that were condemning him had no basis to their argument, even going as far as to remind the court he is not Anaxagoras: 'Do you suppose you are accusing Anaxagoras, my dear Meletus?'⁹³. According to Plato, in the *Apology* Socrates himself states 'I certainly do believe in gods - I am not an out-and-out atheos'⁹⁴. Comparing what is known of Socrates' teachings (as discussed in Chapter One) and this quote supposedly said by him, then it can be agreed at the very least that Socrates did have a belief in the gods, but to label himself as not being an atheist

⁹¹ Brickhouse, Smith 1990: 33

⁹² Brickhouse, Smith 1990: 30

⁹³ Plato, Apol. 26

⁹⁴ Whitmarsh 2016: 116-117

by Ancient Greek standards is odd. According to the laws scholars have access to, everything Socrates does leans towards atheism. From what is learned from the trial they were not only basing the accusations from real life but off the theatre as well: ‘you see, even Meletus and his supporters do not believe I am really like the character of my name in the Clouds’⁹⁵. Although theatre therefore may not have spread the views further afield it certainly still impacted those in Athens to affect their view within a trial.

Like most trials that were won by the opposition, a punishment was given. In the case of Anaxagoras, he was banished from Athens, a fate for some that was worse than death; at least this was Socrates’ view, who decided his punishment would be death instead of taking the banishment. They were not the only philosophers who suffered such a fate. However, Whitmarsh states that ‘Pinning down just how many people were tried for atheism under the impiety laws is not straightforward. As ever, the problem is one of sources’⁹⁶. Not only could evidence have been lost, it is impossible to know for certain which was true. For example, there are reports of philosophers being put on trial in the fourth century: Aristotle, Theophrastus and Stiplo of Megara to name some, however scholars are not known to give them much credit. Then there are those such as Protagoras who was sentenced to death but managed to escape, and Diagoras of Melos who self-exiled himself before trial. Though this did not prevent the Athenians from trying to sentence him to death by putting out a price for his head: ‘The Athenians

⁹⁵ Brickhouse. 1990: 122

⁹⁶ Whitmarsh 2016: 120

proclaimed the reward of a talent of silver for his killer'⁹⁷. Whether or not these trials can be proven or disproved however does not negate the fact that there was a real risk associated with being an atheist, and it is perhaps due to this risk that if there were more that were atheist in Ancient Greece they kept silent, as all were at risk of being put on trial for impiety such is shown in Socrates' fate.

⁹⁷ Bacc. Greek Lyric. 337

Conclusion

Atheism in any form can be considered a tricky subject to approach as it is still quite difficult to find any form of text on the matter even in the modern age, a fact Jonathan Miller agrees upon: ‘Oddly enough, it’s quite difficult to find a simple, straightforward history of atheism on the religious shelves of your local bookshop’⁹⁸. No matter the religion, past or present, it is a subject that is very difficult to begin talking about. Despite this however it did not stop atheism becoming a factor in Ancient Greece. Although by no means can we label them as atheists by the modern definition, save a possible few such as Diagoras and Epicurus, we can certainly label those like Anaxagoras, Socrates and Protagoras as Ancient Greek atheists following the Ancient Greek’s definition of the word atheist. The response given to these atheists: burning their books, banishing them or even killing them would have no doubt caused fear for those who followed in similar footsteps, and despite what historians such as Sir Geoffrey Lloyd states, ‘To be an unbeliever in the ancient world was much easier’, by looking at the texts it is clear that this is simply not true. Atheists of the past had it worse than their modern-day counterparts from the simple fact alone that in most parts of the world, those of the modern-day era proclaiming to be atheists do not have to fear for their lives and can speak somewhat freely. Perhaps it was due to this fear that atheists were not as prominent in Ancient Greece, or perhaps the answer is a much simpler one. Although progression was being made in science the Ancient Greeks still lived in a world of uncertainty and for philosophers to have made up

⁹⁸Atheism; a rough history of disbelief 2004 18.18-18.48

new gods to replace the old such as Socrates had, shows a fear of that unknown. The fear that there was not yet any means to understand a particular event, meant that they subverted that fear by creating something else to explain it. For Ancient Greek atheists to do this, not only showed their fear but suggested the worries that other civilians of Ancient Greeks had as well towards things such as earthquakes a natural disaster or event that needed to be explained in some way, and what better way than a God. On top of that, the believers of Ancient Greece also would have wanted to avoid incurring the gods' wrath if they spoke out against them, such as what happened to Salmoneus, to do this not only would they avoid upsetting the gods themselves but more than likely condemn those that also risked bringing the wrath of the gods down upon them. As such it can be concluded that a form of atheism existed in ancient Greece, however it did not become widespread as the fears of the unknown and of the repercussions were still very much present.

Glossary

Modern definitions:

Atheism – disbelief or lack of belief in the supernatural⁹⁹.

Atheist - a person who disbelieves or lacks belief in the existence of God or gods, or anything supernatural¹⁰⁰

Ancient Greek definitions:

Atheist (ἄ-Θεός)- without a god and is therefore a person who does not believe in a god¹⁰¹.

Didaskalos (playwright) – trainer or teacher¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Stevenson 2010 99

¹⁰⁰ Stevenson 2010: 99

¹⁰¹ Roubekas 2014: 228

¹⁰² Ancient Greece: The Greatest show on Earth 2013: 0.23.14-0.23.21

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