

# New Sedley Chapter On Ancient Greek Atheism

Post by “Godfrey” of March 20, 2022 at 7:16 PM

I've had a chance to read the paper I attached to post #7. Here are some quotes highlighted from the paper that, to me, give a clearer picture of the intersection of philosophy and religion prior to Epicurus and which would have informed Epicurus' practice:

*\_The position of Plato and Socrates thus accords with the standard naturalistic interpretation of the pre-Socratics—that they believed the world functioned entirely according to natural laws. I agree with this interpretation, but I am nonetheless intrigued by the question of what the early Greek philosophers thought they were doing when they entered a temple to pray, sing hymns, or sacrifice. It is highly unlikely that the early Greek philosophers (before 450 BC) would have even entertained notions that we associate with atheism.\_*

*\_Regardless of whether Alcmaeon thought that the universe had been “consciously” created, as in the Timaeus, or is eternal and unique, as we find in Aristotle (and, on my reading, in the Plato’s arguments for the existence of God in Laws 10), neither option in any way suggests that the gods intervene in human affairs. Indeed, humans are an integral part of the nature of things. The fact that humans like the gods are endowed with consciousness suggests that there must be a telos. The gods must have represented the paradigms of virtue and goodness.\_*

*\_While it seems unequivocally clear that there was no room for the supernatural in Anaximenes’ natural philosophy, it seems equally clear that he saw humans as endowed with consciousness and cognition, which they have in common with the all-pervading cosmic divinity. However, since there is nothing in Anaximenes’ description of the celestial bodies that would suggest that they comprise some kind of model for humans to follow, as we saw in Alcmaeon, the question arises as to what divinities he had in mind as models to emulate and address in prayer. One possibility could be hidden in Hippolytus’ account of Anaximenes theory (DK13A7). Here he lists gods and divine things (theous kai theia) as also products or offspring of the originative living substance. These could be a concession to traditional religion or what the materialist Democritus, a century later, understood as images that appear to humans and sometimes speak to them (DK68B166; 175; 217). These are gods, who are givers of good and not evil, and who love only those who hate injustice (B175, 217). These theoi or theia could thus be inspirational models of virtue for human behaviour and wholly worthy of prayer.\_*

*\_There is no room for atheism, but neither is there a notion of intentionality or providence as we find in theism. Anaximander thus represents what I call one of the first secular theories of everything that is expressed in the form of a natural teleology. But this does not, of course, exclude a religious tendency, which could be thought of as the relation between humans and the cosmic order that he would have characterized as divine. I conjecture that Anaximander tried to understand the secrets of the universe, and at the same time he understood the laws of*

*nature as indicative of caring, but non-interfering, gods who were by nature good. We gain a better insight through historia or secular investigation. I think there is evidence of this in his famous fragment (DK12B1) cited above, which can be interpreted as claiming that human society should model the cosmos, which functions according to rigorous laws exemplified in the seasons, night and day, and the regular movements of the celestial bodies (see Naddaf 2005, 86ff). Praying would be about using our reason, making wise decisions, taking responsibility for our actions, and being able to convince others to follow a similar path.\_*

*\_Xenophanes was also the first of the early philosophers on record to advocate a “higher” form of religious practice—a way of prayer that goes beyond attempts to cajole favors from the gods (DK21B1) The context is how one should behave at a symposium. Xenophanes insists that a sound-minded man (euphronas andras) should first hymn the god (theon humein) with pious words and pure thoughts (euphêmois muthois kai katharoi si logois, 1.14), and then after having poured a libation and prayed for the strength to be able to do what is just (speisantas de kai euxemenous ta dikaia dunasthai prêssein, 1.15), make his request. These include bringing noble deeds to light and striving for aretê or virtue, and, in particular, moderation.\_*

*\_...the accent is on inspirational awareness, not supernatural intervention. With Heraclitus we have the first literary reference to the Delphic maxim “know thyself” (DK22B. 101, 116), and there are also a number of references in Heraclitus to self-knowledge (DK 22B101, 112, 113, 116), the unexamined life (B123), care of the self (B123), and the psuchê as the “true self” (B118, 77). Indeed, there is a considerable affinity with what we find in Socrates. Or better still, Socrates comes across as less of a maverick when we give Heraclitus his due.\_*

*\_Anaxagoras: “Blessed is he who has devoted his life to scientific research (tês historias): he will neither malign nor harm his fellow citizen, but observing the ageless order of immortal nature, will enquire from what source it was composed and in what way. Such men would never take part in shameful deeds” (fragment 910 Nauck). This fragment suggests that the order of nature is the standard of goodness. Indeed, its study (tês historias) will discourage humans from harming one another and doing unjust deeds. This idea seems to be at the core of most of the early Greek philosophers that we have passed in review, and constitutes in large part what can be considered as their religion, that is, living in harmony with nature or the cosmos as they understood it to function.\_*

*\_Socrates didn’t believe in the traditional gods to in the popular sense, for the gods for Socrates were by nature good and perfect, true paradigms of virtue, and thus true models to follow...\_*

*\_It’s unclear when an open hostility toward natural philosophy and thus the religion of the early Greek philosophers originated in Periclean Athens. It is often connected with the Decree of Diopieithes, a seer, around 432. Plutarch, Life of Pericles (32), which is our only source of the Decree, says it attacked “those who fail to respect (nomizein) things divine (ta theia) or teach new doctrines about the heavens.” Its object seemed to be, in particular, the natural philosopher Anaxagoras and ultimately his friend and benefactor Pericles.\_*

*\_Critias of Athens (c. 460–403) claimed that the gods were invented by a clever man in order to frighten those who were surreptitiously evil whether in words or deeds.\_*

*\_Democritus of Abdera, the atomist (c. 460–360), connected the origin of gods with the fear of celestial phenomena (DK68A75, B30), but also considered them living, intelligent, material beings (and thus part of the objective world) that, as images or eidola, are somehow capable of foretelling the future by communicating with humans (68B166). These are all brilliant hypotheses, and in the case of Democritus an acknowledgement that the phenomena of the divine cannot be explained away even for someone for whom in the beginning there were only atoms and the void.\_*

*\_The religious event required the participation of the entire polis when appealing to god's grace. It was unlikely that any philosophers missed the occasion for obvious reasons, but they could remind their fellow citizens of the hubris of making a request of a god that was not backed up with a worthy motive. The Seven Sages were after all at the source of the famous Delphic maxims. And the new "masters of truth" competed opening with the iconic poets.\_*

*\_...in this paper I have attempted to show that all the early Greek philosophers that we passed in review still saw the cosmological order as a model for humans endowed with nous or reason to follow, even if there was no divine intention in the Platonic sense behind it.\_*