The Νόσος of Declaring that Gods do not Exist in Plato's *Laws*. Isolated Cases or Groups of Ἄθεοι?

La νόσος de declarar que los dioses no existen en las *Leyes* de Platón. ¿Casos aislados o grupos de ἄθεοι?

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Abstract

Denying the existence of God or gods is a common modern phenomenon in different places and religious contexts. This paper explores the possibility of its applicability in antiquity. The last decades have witnessed considerable growth in the study of atheism in antiquity. Analysis of atheistic positions

Resumen

La negación de la existencia de Dios o de los dioses es un fenómeno moderno presente en diferentes lugares y contextos religiosos. En las últimas décadas, hemos podido observar como el estudio del ateísmo en la antigüedad ha crecido enormemente ampliando los límites históricos de las posiciones irreli-

in ancient societies, especially in Classical Athens, has foregrounded new development in the study of unbelief. The term "unbelief" has been defined as a broad category to study the diverse irreligious positions not merely as the opposite of religion but as part of the religious field. This conceptualisation allows us to understand religion and unbelief as two intermingled phenomena. In recent studies on Plato's *Laws*, scholars have identified atheistic groups within Athenian society. This paper aims to apply recent analytical frameworks on religious "individuation" in ancient religions to understand the role of unbelief in religious individualisation in Athens during the last decades of the 5th cent. and the first half of the 4th cent. BCE.

giosas. Los trabajos sobre las ideas ateas en las sociedades pretéritas, especialmente en la Atenas clásica, han consolidado el estudio de la increencia como fenómeno histórico. El término "increencia" ha sido definido como una categoría amplia para estudiar las posiciones irreligiosas no únicamente como opuestas a la religión sino como parte del campo religioso. Esta conceptualización del término permite entender la religión y la increencia como dos fenómenos entremezclados. Estudios recientes sobre las *Leyes* de Platón han propuesto la existencia de grupos de ateos en la Atenas clásica. Debido al incremento en el interés del estudio del ateísmo en la sociedad ateniense, el presente trabajo propone la aplicación de los estudios teóricos sobre la "individuación" religiosa en las religiones antiguas con el fin de analizar el papel de la increencia en los procesos de individualización religiosa en Atenas durante la segunda mitad del siglo V y las primeras décadas del siglo IV a.C.

KEYWORDS

Atheism; *Laws*; Self-World Relation; Plato; Unbelief.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Ateísmo; increencia; *Leyes*; Platón; relación yo-mundo.

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1. Introduction

The study of "atheism" has become a central debate within the field of religious studies. The analysis of the diverse forms of criticising the idea of the gods or divinities has produced important research in the last several decades. One of the reasons for the development of new studies about the doubt or the denial of the existence of deities is the complexity of atheistic positions. Recent studies have attempted to classify atheistic ideas by employing different subcategories. Examples of that sort include the distinction between broad and narrow atheism;[1] negative and positive atheism;[2] pilgrim and tourist atheism;[3] and global and local atheism,[4] among several others.[5] This huge variety of atheistic positions and subcategories that appear to be far from clear has generated a desire for a new analytic category, which would allow for a deep understanding of the different behaviours and philosophical arguments involved in criticising religious ideas and practices.

The term "unbelief" is one of the most recent proposals.[6] Unbelief is not conceptualised as the opposite of religious belief since such opposition would not embrace the complexity of the term. The concept must be comprehended as a category

1. Rowe, 1979.
2. Martin, 1990, pp. 463-464; 2007, pp. 1-3.
3. Hashemi, 2016.
4. Diller, 2016.
5. On the historical and philosophical uses of the term "atheism", see Bullivant, 2013, pp. 11-21 and Alexander, 2020.
6. Conrad, 2018.

that includes different irreligious positions. For instance, atheism, agnosticism, deconversion, blasphemy or heterodoxy are amongst the irreligious positions from which the concept can be understood. These thoughts and behaviours can be religious, non-religious or, even, anti-religious depending on the historical and religious context in which they are developed. The broad analytical scope of the term allows us to fully comprehend a plethora of atheistic positions as part of religious ideas such as "religious atheism" (also known as "spiritualities without God")[7] or "atheistic religions".[8] Unbelief as an "umbrella term" allows for broader "conceptual flexibility"[9] and does not predetermine the religious background of the targeted individual or group. Lastly, unbelief must be historically contextualised. If terms such as "belief", "religion", "faith", or "God" have a specific historical development,[10] all the behaviours and arguments concerning the critique of religious ideas or practices depend on the historical context in which they develop. Therefore, being an atheist in Britain during the 19th cent.[11] is highly different from being an atheist in Baghdad during the 9th cent..[12]

The term "unbelief" has been applied in the study of modern phenomena related to the theory of secularism and non-religious positions, especially in sociology. In *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor uses unbelief not as the opposite of religious beliefs, but as a category used to understand how people developed their own "ways of living" depending on their religious beliefs or lack thereof. In other words, the analysis of unbelief as an open-ended and lived condition rather than a closed system of ideas in order to understand the "lived experience" of the individuals involved.[13] The openness of "unbelief" has been recently proven in the field surveys. The research programme *Understanding Unbelief* at the University of Kent goes into the lived experience of unbelievers in different religious contexts. The results obtained show not only the variety of atheisms but also the strong connections between the

7. Billington, 2002; Schellenberg, 2017; Heehs, 2018.

8. Martin, 2007, pp. 221-229.

9. Conrad, 2018, p. 1.

10. There is massive literature about the methodologies and definitions of the different religious elements. However, I would like to highlight the problematics mentioned in Asad, 1993; Fitzgerald, 2000; McCutcheon, 2003; Díez de Velasco Abellán, 2005; Jensen, 2014; Nongbri, 2015; Stausberg and Engler, 2017. Concerning the notion of "religion" in antiquity, see Barton and Boyarin, 2016, pp. 1-10 and Roubekas, 2019.

11. Rectenwald, 2016.

12. Stroumsa, 1999.

13. Taylor, 2007, pp. 4-20.

religious sphere and the irreligious positions.[14] Both believers and unbelievers design a connection with the world, a self-world relation, that differs in how each person emphasises the "religious sphere" of their lived experience.[15] The diverse relation of the individuals to the religious sphere must be comprehended as a dialectic between unbelief and religious beliefs. The "religious field" (*champ religieux*)[16] is shaped in relation not only to the institution that holds "religious capital", but also to transgressive movements such as "heresies" or "intellectual criticism". Therefore, the "habitus" of believers and unbelievers is formed by the gradual tensions between religious ideas and the criticism of them.

At this point, the next questions are mandatory: Are these conceptualisations of unbelief and the methodology of studying atheism useful to analyse atheistic positions in antiquity? Did this relation between unbelief and religious ideas exist in the ancient world? To answer these questions, this paper proposes to apply the term "unbelief" to comprehend the development of "atheism" in Classical Athens.[17] Recent studies from different scholars have shown the existence of atheistic positions in antiquity.[18] However, this paper is not only focused on examining the atheistic positions in Classical Athens but also on reflecting on the socio-political ramifications of these arguments from the perspective of a "methodological individualism".[19] Moreover, the idea is to include the critique of traditional religious ideas (*de-traditionalisation*)[20] in the formation of worldviews and the relations of individuals to the world. Looking at ancient socio-religious practices through the prism of "Lived Religion"[21] allows us to see religion and unbelief as two sides of the same coin, two intermingled phenomena.

The aim of this paper is thus to apply the aforementioned theoretical framework on Classical Athens, and to reflect on the possible existence of groups of ἄθεοι then. Recent scholarly work on the topic of ancient atheism has focused on Plato's *Laws* in their assessment of how popular analysis of atheistic ideas really was in the Athenian

14. I would like to point out here one of the last publications of the programme *Understanding Unbelief: Atheists and agnostics around the world* (Bullivant *et al.*, 2019).

15. Rosa, 2016.

16. Bourdieu, 1971.

17. About the applicability of "atheism" as a historical concept, see Soneira Martínez, 2018a, pp. 34-35 and Roubekas, 2014.

18. Bremmer, 2007; Whitmarsh, 2015. Here we can add other works such as Fahr, 1969; Drachmann, 1977; Winiarczyk, 1976; 1984; 1990; 1992a-b; 1994; 2016; Zeppi, 1988a-b; 1989a-c; Grau Guijarro, 2010; Bénatouïl *et al.*, 2018; Gourinat, 2019.

19. Rüpke, 2014, p. 11.

20. Rüpke, 2013, p. 9; Bremmer, 2020b, p. 67.

21. Rüpke, 2011; 2014; Lichterman *et al.*, 2017; Albrecht *et al.*, 2018; Gasparini *et al.*, 2020.

society.[22] These authors have defined these ideas as subversive and persecuted during the last years of the 5th cent. BCE. However, if we consider atheistic ideas as part of the religious individualisation rather than the opposite to religion as the modern notion of atheism does, the critique of the traditional image of the gods in Classical Athens appears as an embodied phenomenon in the development of Greek religiosity.

In order to elaborate on this argument, the article is divided into three parts. The first part deals with Plato's *Laws* and philosophical ideas about divinity in this dialogue. The second part focuses on the possible application of these ideas within Classical Athenian society. To conclude, the third part of the paper poses the following question: Were these atheistic positions described by Plato defended only by isolated individuals or were there "groups of ἄθεοι" in Classical Athens?[23]

2. *Laws*, Tradition and Religion

The *Laws*, Plato's last and longest work, is one of the most controversial texts.[24] The dialogue deals with the political vision of an ideal constitution. The main idea is that power lies in the law. The authority of the law is reinforced by tradition, specifically, the religious tradition.[25] Religion and politics are interconnected, showing the central role of religious customs, especially in education, ethics and art. The laws that regulate the religious behaviour are the backbone of the whole legislation of the city.[26] Due to the importance of religion in the organisation of the *polis*, there is a need for a concrete idea of divinity. The laws of the city guide every citizen to embrace this idea. The elaboration of a legislative corpus based on a particular religious worldview is developed mainly in the tenth book of the *Laws*. In this part of the work, Plato

22. Sedley, 2013; Whitmarsh, 2017.

23. Plato uses the term ἄθεοι in *Laws*, 885b and 967b.

24. There are several publications concerning this dialogue, see among others Bobonich, 1991; 2010; Clark, 2003; Zuckert, 2004; Schofield, 2006; Pangle (L.S.), 2009; Recco and Sanday, 2012; Moore, 2016. It is interesting to look at the similarities and divergences between the *Republic* and the *Laws* and how the *kallipolis* described in both dialogues differ from each other. On that purpose, see Laks, 1990; Barceló and Hernández de la Fuente, 2014, p. 288. The differences between both works were the reasons why the last dialogue of Plato was considered spurious during the first decades of the 20th cent. (Isnardi Parente, 1974).

25. Some authors have considered the *Laws* as the model of a "theocratic" society. See Burkert, 2011, p. 493.

26. There are several works since the mid-twentieth century about this connection between religion and law in the latest dialogue of Plato. Some of them are Reverdin, 1945; Goldschmidt, 1949; Pangle (T.L.), 1980; Fine, 1999; Kraut, 2010; Van Riel, 2013.

describes the "impious" (ἀσεβής) crimes related to the religious sphere emphasising the misconducts against the gods provoked by a false "notion" (δόξα) of the divinities. It is here that Plato exposes these wrong ideas about the gods as a threat to the society that must be punished, among them, the atheistic worldview. The distinction between those who describe or think about the gods in the wrong way and those who deny the gods' existence because they do not believe in them is summarised in a specific passage of this book. In 888a-d, Plato lays emphasis on the distinction between correct and incorrect ideas of the divine:

> "My child, you are still young, and time as it advances will cause you to reverse many of the opinions you now hold: so wait till then before pronouncing judgment on matters of most grave importance; and of these the gravest of all – though at present you regard it as naught – is the question of holding a right view about the gods and so living well, or the opposite. Now in the first place, I should be saying what is irrefutably true if I pointed out to you this signal fact, that neither you by yourself nor yet your friends are the first and foremost to adopt this opinion about the gods; rather is it true that people who suffer from this disease are always springing up, in greater or lesser numbers. But I, who have met with many of these people, would declare this to you, that not a single man who from his youth has adopted this opinion, that the gods have no existence, has ever yet continued till old age constant in the same view; but the other two false notions about the gods do remain – not, indeed, with many, but still with some, – the notion, namely, that the gods exist, but pay no heed to human affairs, and the other notion that they do pay heed, but are easily won over by prayers and offerings. For a doctrine about them that is to prove the truest you can possibly form you will, if you take my advice, wait, considering the while whether the truth stands thus or otherwise, and making enquiries not only from all other men, but especially from the lawgiver; and in the meantime do not dare to be guilty of any impiety in respect of the gods. For it must be the endeavour of him who is legislating for you both now and hereafter to instruct you in the truth of these matters".[27]

27. "ὦ παῖ, νέος εἶ, προϊὼν δέ σε ὁ χρόνος ποιήσει πολλὰ ὧν νῦν δοξάζεις μεταβαλόντα ἐπὶ τἀναντία τίθεσθαι: περίμεινον οὖν εἰς τότε κριτὴς περὶ τῶν μεγίστων γίγνεσθαι, μέγιστον δέ, ὃ νῦν οὐδὲν ἡγῇ σύ, τὸ περὶ τοὺς θεοὺς ὀρθῶς διανοηθέντα ζῆν καλῶς ἢ μή. πρῶτον δὲ περὶ αὐτῶν ἕν τι μέγα σοι μηνύων οὐκ ἄν ποτε φανείην ψευδής, τὸ τοιόνδε. οὐ σὺ μόνος οὐδὲ οἱ σοὶ φίλοι πρῶτοι καὶ πρῶτον ταύτην δόξαν περὶ θεῶν ἔσχετε, γίγνονται δὲ ἀεὶ πλείους ἢ ἐλάττους ταύτην τὴν νόσον ἔχοντες: τόδε τοίνυν σοι, παραγεγονὼς αὐτῶν πολλοῖσι, φράζοιμ᾽ ἄν, τὸ μηδένα πώποτε λαβόντα ἐκ νέου ταύτην τὴν δόξαν περὶ θεῶν, ὡς οὐκ εἰσίν, διατελέσαι πρὸς γῆρας μείναντα ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ διανοήσει, τὰ δύο μέντοι πάθη περὶ θεοὺς μεῖναι, πολλοῖσι μὲν οὔ, μεῖναι δὲ οὖν τισιν, τὸ τοὺς θεοὺς εἶναι μέν, φροντίζειν δὲ οὐδὲν τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων, καὶ τὸ μετὰ τοῦτο, ὡς φροντίζουσι μέν, εὐπαραμύθητοι δ᾽ εἰσὶν θύμασιν καὶ εὐχαῖς. τὸ δὴ σαφὲς ἂν γενόμενόν σοι περὶ αὐτῶν κατὰ δύναμιν δόγμα, ἂν ἐμοὶ πείθῃ, περιμενεῖς, ἀνασκοπῶν εἴτε οὕτως εἴτε ἄλλως ἔχει, πυνθανόμενος παρά τε τῶν ἄλλων καὶ δὴ καὶ μάλιστα καὶ παρὰ τοῦ νομοθέτου:

The three main notions about the gods that constitute the atheistic worldview are condemned by Plato. The denial of the existence of the gods is compared to a "disease" (νόσος) related to young people. A special link is drawn between a specific social group, the young people, and their atheistic opinions about the gods. The passage, thus, showcases the potential political and social implications of this sort for the Classical Athenian society. Sedley has proposed the term "underground" to understand the atheistic ideas developed in Athens during the second half of the 5th cent. BCE.[28] Was then this atheistic view of the world socially more relevant than has been claimed before?

In order to answer this question, we need to analyse first how Plato establishes in the *Laws* the differentiation between the right and the false opinion about the gods. The misunderstanding of the world by these false ideas concerning the gods is according to Plato three types of ἄθεοι: a) those who do not believe in the existence of the gods; b) those who believe in the gods but think the gods are not interested in human beings; and c) those who believe in the gods but think that the gods can be bribed. It is necessary to analyse the Platonic distinction between the correct and the false notion of the gods in order to understand the three philosophical ideas about the gods ascribed by Plato to the ἄθεοι.

3. The "False Notion of the Gods" in *Laws*

The first issue we need to approach is how Plato defines the correct notion of the gods in front of the false one represented by the three atheistic positions. In *Laws*, Plato explains the characteristics of the divinity and its relationship with the traditional gods. As observed in 888a-d, there is a correct view of the gods connected to the right way to live in a society stressing the connection between religious ideas and ethics. The right view of the gods is based on the traditional Platonic elements of goodness, beauty and justice. Morality and religion are, thus, intrinsically connected; being just implies correct religious behaviour (885b). However, to be good and just, one must follow a correct vision of the gods whose central element is that they exist and that they are good being part of a particular cosmology (885d). Therefore, if the gods'

ἐν δὲ δὴ τούτῳ τῷ χρόνῳ μὴ τολμήσῃς περὶ θεοὺς μηδὲν ἀσεβῆσαι. πειρατέον γὰρ τῷ τοὺς νόμους σοι τιθέντι νῦν καὶ εἰς αὖθις διδάσκειν περὶ αὐτῶν τούτων ὡς ἔχει". Cf. Burnet, 1903 (transl. Bury, 1967).

28. Sedley, 2013.

existence is denied, it is not possible to lead a morally correct life. This philosophical argument explains the connection between being atheist and being immoral.[29]

However, the most crucial element to understand how the Athenian philosopher conceives the gods is the idea of the "soul" (ψυχή). Although the definition of the soul in the *Laws* shows some similarities with previous works,[30] there are some differences. The important element on the concept of soul in the last and longest Platonic dialogue lies in its nature. The soul is described as a divine part of every living being that explains movement and change in the world. Everything that moves by itself has an eternal and immortal soul (894a-896e). If every being with movement has a soul, the gods have souls as well. As Van Riel states, Plato conceives the gods as "immortal living beings, constituted as a combination of body and soul, which will never be dissolved". Only the Demiurge, the creator, can destroy that combination.[31] This dualism of soul and body is essential to comprehend the worldview established by Plato. He defends the existence of the gods using the notions described in the conceptualisation of the soul which is highly influenced by Pythagorean and Orphic ideas about the afterlife.[32] The soul cannot be seen, but it can be thought of since it is intelligible. The philosopher uses this argument to criticise the false view of the world by those who deny the existence of the gods. Plato explains his argument with an example. Everyone can see the celestial body of the sun. Nevertheless, they cannot see what causes it to move, its soul, just as we cannot appreciate by our senses the soul of the person who dies (898d). Therefore, the perception of the gods is similar to the perception of the soul; we can only see the changes produced by them, how they affect the world and the individuals. This correlation between the gods and the souls leads the philosopher to claim that "everything is full of gods".[33] Denying the existence of the gods, as the first type of atheist does, is according to Plato a misunderstanding of the cosmic order, a "false" worldview.

29. Van Riel, 2013, pp. 14-19.

30. See especially Pl., *Phdr*. 245c-246a and Pl., *Tim*. 34c-35a.

31. The nature of the gods and their creation by the Demiurge is explained in Pl., *Tim*. 41a-b. For further explanations, see Van Riel, 2013, 47.

32. Casadesús Bordoy, 2001; Barceló and Hernández de la Fuente, 2014, pp. 298-299.

33. Pl., *Leg*. 899b. This idea of the world full of gods is attributed to Thales by Aristotle (*de An*. I 5, 411a). The fact that Plato cites Thales determines the influence of the Presocratics' natural philosophy on the Platonic worldview. On the other hand, this sentence relates to the idea that the divinity is the "measure of all the things" (Pl., *Leg*. 716c). It is interesting to consider the relation of this sentence with the opposed idea attributed to Protagoras (*DK* 80, B1: "A person is the measure of all things – of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not").

On the other hand, a second important idea in the Platonic notion of the gods in *Laws* lies in the distinction between mortal living beings (humans) and immortal living beings (gods) according to their soul. The soul of the gods is perfect rather than corrupted. The explanation of this idea lies in the *Phaedrus*. While the mortal living beings own a corrupted soul due to their fall from heaven, the gods have a perfect and immaculate soul because they are still up there; they still have their "wings" (πτερά).[34] In *Laws* (900c-d), this idea goes further since the philosopher elaborates more the analysis of the gods' ethical behaviour. If they are perfect, they cannot be evil. The gods cannot rape, kill or steal as the traditional poets claim, but they take care of the human affairs following the divine principles of goodness, beauty and justice. The Athenian philosopher establishes with this argument the right notion of the gods. Plato uses this idea to criticise the second type of ἄθεοι – those who believe that the gods do not care about human affairs – and the third one – those who believe in the existence of the gods but think they can be bribed. Both arguments attribute to the gods human behaviours based on laziness, idleness or cowardice (901e).

These two arguments about the soul are the main ideas applied by Plato to refute the false idea of the gods. The philosopher explains in *Laws* that the three atheistic ideas follow two false conceptualisations of the divinities. The first is the idea of the gods described by the theologians, those who describe the genealogy of the gods and the traditional myths. Although these poets are ancient, their claims are not true (886c) since they are describing the gods with wrong behaviours. This idea confronts the ethical problem of the gods. If the gods are perfect and their actions are good and just, the divinities cannot behave as described in the traditional theology. They cannot kill or fight each other. Therefore, according to Plato, the traditional idea of the gods described by the poets is a wrong notion of the divinities.

The second false conceptualisation of the gods is the one defended by the natural philosophers, who are "modern" (νέος) and "wise" (σοφός). Plato states that they deny the divine nature of the heavenly bodies claiming that they are "simply earth and stone" (886d). Plato describes a cosmological theory based on a lack of divine intervention. These natural philosophers define the origin of elements in the world using two concepts: "nature" (φύσις) and "chance/fortune" (τύχη). They assert that the primary elements of fire, water, earth, and air have their origin in nature and by "chance/fortune" (τύχη) they join each other to create the natural world. This process of creation is not caused by a "deity" (θεός), by an "intelligence" (νοῦς) or by "craft" (τέχνη). Everything is a consequence of nature and chance.

34. Pl., *Phdr*. 246b-247c.

On the other hand, this cosmology defines human activities as natural and fictive crafts. Among the first, we can find medicine, gymnastics, farming and some political ideas. However, legislation is a fictive craft on which the idea of justice and the idea of gods depend. In other words, the idea of gods, as the laws, are made by humans, and they are entirely fictive.[35] Therefore, as Plato says, this kind of individual thinks that gods are different in each place (889e).

The ideas ascribed by Plato to the natural philosophers have a clear reminiscence in Socrates and his defence in the trial when he refuses to be confused with Anaxagoras.[36] Anaxagoras, like Democritus and other philosophers of that period, defended a materialistic point of view of the cosmos that seems to collide head-on with the Platonic worldview, especially concerning the idea of divinity.[37] Reading these thinkers, one could claim that there is a clear allusion in the *Laws* to specific philosophical ideas about the world developing in Athens at the end of the 5th cent. and the first decades of the 4th cent. BCE. Sedley has argued that these philosophical ideas described by Plato were the elements of an "atheist theory".[38] Unlike previous works on the atheistic ideas in the *Laws*, Sedley refuses to observe in Plato's argumentation an "eclectic pastiche" of contemporary ideas to the philosopher.[39] Traditionally, the "atheist theory" that we can read in *Laws* has been described as a combination of diverse philosophical ideas brought together by Plato to refuse all the ideas at once.[40] However, Sedley prefers to analyse it as a "coherent, lucid, philosophically sophisticated, and in places original" atheistic theory of the world's origin that was developed in Athens during the second half of the 5th cent.. The author defends this conclusion by looking at some sources dated in Classical Athens like the *Sisyphus* fragment[41] and the influence of this text in authors like Aristotle.[42] For Sedley, this fragment is one example of the literary corpus of atheistic arguments that we can observe in the Athenian society of this period.

Nevertheless, a question remains. Why is there no direct mention in *Laws* to these individuals who defended an atheistic worldview? The author claims that the

35. For an analysis of this theory in *Laws*, see Sedley, 2013.

36. Pl., *Ap*. 26d. Regarding Anaxagoras' statement about the heavenly bodies, see *D.L.* II 8.

37. *D.L.* II 8; *DK* 68, A75.

38. Sedley, 2013.

39. Sedley, 2013, p. 334.

40. Kahn, 1997, p. 254.

41. *DK* 88, B25. Concerning the analysis of the atheistic ideas in this fragment, see Soneira Martínez, 2018b. There is massive literature about this text. Some of the most important studies are Sutton, 1981; Davies, 1989; Santoro, 1994; 1997; Kahn, 1997; Whitmarsh, 2014.

42. Sedley, 2013, pp. 338-339.

lack of evidence of groups or names is explained by a process of "anonymity".[43] He states that this absence of names is due to the negative connotation that the atheistic opinion had in Athens at the end of the 5th cent. BCE emphasising the trials related to "impiety" (ἀσέβεια).[44] His conclusion is based on the existence of the decree of Diopeithes in 430 BCE to prove the persecution for impiety of thinkers that defended atheistic positions.[45] These prosecutions were the reason why the atheist positions were "underground". The atheist individuals organised themselves in "private spaces" like the κακοδαιμονισταί (Bad Luck Clubs) to avoid being put on trial. These organisations were private clubs in which gods and laws could have been criticised with a strong relation to violence.[46] However, the historicity of the decree and some of the trials concerning impiety have been highly questioned.[47] Were these atheistic ideas pursued in Athens during the 5th and the 4th cent. BCE? What was the social relevance of these "false notions of the gods" in Classical Athens? Although this question is very difficult to answer, it is interesting to observe the relations between the atheistic ideas in *Laws* and other Classical Athenian sources.

4. Atheistic Ideas within Classical Athenian Society

In order to discuss the possible existence of "groups of atheists", we need to examine how ideas about the "false opinion of the gods" resonated with other authors of the second half of the 5th and the first half of the 4th cent. in Athens. As we have seen, Plato

43. Sedley, 2013, pp. 335-337.

44. The notion of impiety is traditionally related to the Greek word ἀσέβεια. However, there were other terms regarding transgression of religious norms like ἀδικία (Bowden, 2015, pp. 327-328; Whitmarsh, 2015, p. 116), ἀνομία (Filonik, 2013, p. 14), ἀνόσιον (Delli Pizzi, 2011, p. 61), ἀτιμία (Leão, 2004, p. 224; Bowden, 2015, p. 330), ἱεροσυλία (Cohen, 1988, p. 697; Filonik, 2013, p. 83; Bowden, 2015, p. 328), μίασμα (Naiden, 2016, p. 71), or ὕβρις (Osborne, 2010, p. 227) and ἄθεος among others. Concerning the term ἀσέβεια and its significance in Greek society, see Cohen, 1988 and Bowden, 2015.

45. The decree of Diopeithes is only mentioned during the late 1st and early 2nd cent. CE by Plutarch (*Per*. 32.2): "And Diopeithes brought in a bill providing for the public impeachment of such as did not believe in gods, or who taught doctrines regarding the heavens, directing suspicion against Pericles by means of Anaxagoras".

46. Sedley, 2013, p. 336 cites Lysias (*ap*. Athenaeus XII 76, 15-29) to prove the link between these groups and violent behaviours.

47. Some authors like Rubel, 2014, p. 35 and Whitmarsh, 2017, p. 53 defend its historicity. They claim that Plutarch's style and language are similar to the official decrees of the mid-5th cent. BCE in Athens. On the other hand, Filonik, 2013, p. 33 asserts that the historicity of the decree must be denied. Concerning the historical analysis of the trials related to ἀσέβεια, see Derenne, 1930; Momigliano, 1971; Marasco, 1976; Leão, 2004; Baslez, 2007; Delli Pizzi, 2011; Filonik, 2013; 2016.

states that the natural theory of the world and the traditional description of the gods are two of the main arguments behind the ideas defended by the ἄθεοι. As Sedley has rightly pointed out, we can observe in the Classical Athenian sources some of the ideas that may have influenced the atheistic worldview described in *Laws*. However, it seems more fruitful to analyse the first "false notion of the gods", the one based on the traditional image of the divinities.

The critique of the traditional idea of the gods allows us to observe the whole range of the atheistic opinions in Classical Athens. During the last decades of the 5th cent., a "rationalisation" of the ideas about the divine developed, concerning, *inter alia*, the comprehension of the gods. The sophistic ideas about human beings, coupled with a proto-scientific worldview, led to a critique of the traditional view of the gods.[48] The ideas concerning the ethical behaviour in the polis were projected onto the behaviour of the gods. The historical events during this historical period, notably the Plague and the consequences of the Peloponnesian War, influenced considerably the individual's relationship with the world and their perception of "being-in-the-world" (*In-die-Welt-Gestelltsein*).[49] In other words, the relation between the gods and human beings became a crucial element in the formation of "self-world relations". As we can read in Thucydides about the Plague, "it was settled that present enjoyment (…) was both honourable and useful" for the people.[50] Not even the fear of gods or the law of humans stopped them. The communication with the gods through the ritual practices became secondary since people died, even when they performed rituals and worshipped the gods.[51] With this evidence from Thucydides, we can affirm that the relationship between the gods and the mortals changed, became "silent" or even "repulsive". Death, as a consequence of the Plague and the war, increased a collective reflection on the justice of the gods and how they treated mortals, which we can observe in the Athenian sources of this period.[52] This modification did not cause a lack of religiosity. On the contrary, the reaction to this modification in the relationship

48. There are several publications concerning the "rationalisation" of the myths in Classical Athens especially related to the study of the Sophists. See, for instance, Romilly, 2002; Durán López, 2011; Mogyoródi, 2019. However, the questioning of the idea of the gods started before the Classical period. Presocratic philosophers such as Xenophanes or Heraclitus are examples of this first step of reflecting on the gods. As we will observe, the influence of these authors is evident in the Athenian intellectual *milieux* including the Socratic circle and Plato in particular, on this, see Brancacci, 1985-1986, p. 224.

49. Rosa, 2016.

50. Th., II 53, 3.

51. Th., II 53, 4.

52. For a description of the historical events during this period and their impact in Athenian society, see Rubel, 2014.

between the gods and the Athenians covered a broad spectrum from the discussion of the gods' nature to the introduction of new divinities such as Asclepius or Bendis.[53]

This kind of reflections can be observed in the Platonic dialogues, too. Plato depicts Socrates as an individual who is critical of the traditional view of the gods and of some elements of the myths. This attitude can be observed in the discussion between Socrates and Euthyphro in the eponymous dialogue. When the latter asked Socrates about the difference between the pious and the impious, Euthyphro compared his father to Cronus.[54] Euthyphro was put on trial for accusing his own father, an act deemed to be impious (ἀσέβεια).[55] However, he defends himself by saying that even the gods behave like this. Some people believe (νομίζοντες) in the mutilation and imprisonment of Cronus by his son Zeus, the most just and best of the gods.[56] Socrates reacts to this statement by questioning the veracity of the myth and relating this doubt of the traditional mythology as the main cause of Meletus' accusation.[57] The philosopher cannot avoid asking Euthyphro if he really believes in these narratives of the poets that describe the struggles between the gods (σὺ ὡς ἡγῇ ταῦτα οὕτως γεγονέναι;).[58]

There is a similar scene in the dialogue between Phaedrus and Socrates.[59] After finding an ideal place for the conversation, Phaedrus asks Socrates if it is the same place where the wind Boreas abducted Orithyia. Socrates denies it, saying that the location is different, a few stadiums from where they are located. At this point, Phaedrus asks Socrates if he believes in the veracity of this myth (229c: ὦ Σώκρατες, σὺ τοῦτο τὸ μυθολόγημα πείθῃ ἀληθὲς εἶναι;). The philosopher answers: "If I disbelieved, as the wise men do, I should not be extraordinary" (ἀλλ᾽ εἰ ἀπιστοίην, ὥσπερ οἱ σοφοί, οὐκ ἂν ἄτοπος εἴην). Then, the philosopher gives a rational interpretation of the myth. However, Socrates also criticises this rational explanation as he calls it a "rustic sort" (ἄγροικος) of wisdom. For Socrates, this is a waste of time, since the main thing is to "know oneself", as the Delphic inscription states, a feat he has not

53. Rubel, 2014, pp. 99-110.

54. Pl., *Euthphr*. 5d-6a.

55. It is interesting how the notion of "impiety" is connected to a "filial piety" in Classical Athens. Different thinkers describe this relation between impiety and the respect for parents. See, for instance, Aristotle (*VV*. 1251a), Plato (*Lg*. 854e; *R*. 615c) or Xenophon (*Hunt*. 13.15-17). There are also some references in the tragedies, for example in Aeschylus (*Eum*. 270).

56. Pl., *Euthphr*. 5e-6a.

57. Pl., *Euthphr*. 6a.

58. Pl., *Euthphr*. 6b.

59. Pl., *Phdr*. 229b-230a.

yet achieved. So, on the one hand, the philosopher normalises the rationalisation of the myth ("as the wise men do"); while, on the other hand, he is indifferent to such a process of rationalisation, since he finds it too simple. The correct idea of the world is beyond the simple rationalisation of mythology.

This reflection of the traditional mythology and especially the image of the gods described by the poets are discussed even more in the *Republic*. The discussion about the behaviour of the gods is framed in a debate between the just and the unjust in the second book. After the discussion between Socrates and Glaucon, Adeimantus completes his brother's argument by adding the different relationships that unjust and just individuals have with the gods. In other words, a problem of theodicy arises: how does divine retribution occur depending on the type of ethical behaviour of the human being? Adeimantus quotes some passages of Homer, Hesiod and Musaeus to explain the retribution from the gods.[60] Plato's brother uses these passages to prove how these poets praise the unjust and negatively value the just, especially when they talk about the gods and their relationship with human beings. He points out how the traditional poets describe the possibility of people persuading the gods.[61] This argument seems quite close to the third notion of the ἄθεοι that we find in *Laws*: those who believe in the gods but think that they can be bribed. After the discourse of both brothers of Plato, Socrates concludes with one of the most famous arguments of the *Republic*, the censorship of the "greater myths" (μεγάλοι μῦθοι), those stories narrated by traditional poets such as Homer and Hesiod (377c-e). Interestingly, Socrates includes in these "greater myths" the same myth discussed in the *Euthyphro*, the conflict between Cronus and his son Zeus. Nevertheless, we are still in Plato's point of view. The question remains unanswered: did this criticism of traditional mythology resonate with the citizens of Classical Athenian society or was it restricted to Plato's thoughts?

To answer this question, it is necessary to analyse some of the reflections that we find in other sources. In Greek dramatic texts from the Classical period, we can observe some of the ideas that question the traditional image of the gods. In different plays, especially in tragedies, there is a reflection on the relation between the gods and human beings close to the debate on justice that we have seen in *Republic*. There are some examples of characters questioning the nature of the gods through their behaviour and actions. The divine action is a common topic in Euripides' tragedies since the gods are responsible for the misfortunes that befall the protagonists of the

60. Pl., *R.* 363a-e.
61. Pl., *R.* 364c-365a.

drama.[62] One example of that is the *Heracles* whose performance took place in Athens between 423 and 420 BCE.[63] In this tragedy, the action of the gods is questioned throughout the play. One example can be observed when Amphitryon reproaches Zeus for his behaviour.[64] Amphitryon asks the divinity if the god is "ignorant" or "naturally unjust" (ἀμαθής τις εἶ θεός, ἢ δίκαιος οὐκ ἔφυς). The character of Amphitryon describes a relationship with the gods through suffering (1180), which explains the questioning of the cult of Hera and the act of worshipping her: "who would pray to such a goddess?" (1255-1310). The question that lies at the bottom of this criticism is why the gods make people suffer. However, the most interesting part of the text lies in the last conversation between Theseus and Heracles (1314-1357). Theseus tries to explain to Zeus' son that the cause of the gods' behaviour is chance/fortune (τύχη), which neither humans nor gods can escape, "if what poets sing is true" (ἀοιδῶν εἴπερ οὐ ψευδεῖς λόγοι). Theseus equates the gods' wrong behaviour with the marital relations between them. Hercules replies to Theseus that he does not believe (νομίζω) in those stories that the poets tell about the gods. According to his vision of the divinities, the gods have no desires. However, he is convinced by the idea that his misfortunes are due to chance/fortune, "I must be fortune's (τύχη) slave" (1357).

The same reflections appear in the play *Iphigenia in Tauris* performed in Athens between 414 and 412 BCE.[65] Iphigenia blames Artemis using ideas similar to the ones we have observed in the *Heracles*. In this case, Agamemnon's daughter claims that "it is not possible that Leto, the wife of Zeus, gave birth to such folly (ἀμαθία)" (Eur., *IT*. 380-391).[66] Iphigenia continues her reasoning by criticising the human sacrifices made by the people of Tauris. In her speech, she defines the myth of Tantalus and his son as a story that cannot be believed (ἄπιστος).[67] For her, the act of the gods eating Tantalus' child is not possible since she believes that "no divinity is evil" (οὐδένα γὰρ οἶμαι δαιμόνων εἶναι κακόν)". Again, there is an ethical reproach to the traditional idea of the gods and their behaviour, a topic that

62. We can observe the role of the gods in the misfortunes of the characters in different Euripides' tragedies (*Andr*. 1204; *Alc*. 295-298; *Cyc*. 283-312; *Heracl*. 989-995; *Med*. 1282-1289; *Tr*. 1042-1043; *Her*. 1180 among others).

63. Calvo Martínez, 1985, p. 75.

64. Eur., *Her*. 339-347.

65. Calvo Martínez, 1985, p. 341.

66. We can observe here the same term used by Amphitryon in the *Heracles* to address Zeus: ἀμαθία.

67. The meaning of the word ἄπιστος as unbelievable is interesting here. The relation between ἄπιστος and the difficulties to believe some myths can be found in the paradoxography (Pajón Leyra, 2011). For example, in the work of Palaephatus (Περὶ ἀπίστων). Although some scholars date the life of this author in the second half of the 4th cent. BCE, the issue remains unclear (Torres Guerra, 2009, p. 13).

we have already observed in the Platonic dialogues. In the Euripidean tragedies, we can ascertain the development of some reflections on the relation between the gods and human beings based on human ignorance of the gods' wills. Doubting the intentionality of the gods as well as their acts is the *Leitmotiv* of many tragedies, not only in Euripides but also in previous tragedians like Sophocles and Aeschylus.[68] As Lefkowitz states,[69] if the gods were understood as benefactors and protectors of human beings, there would be no reason to write tragedies. Human ignorance of the motivation for the gods' behaviour and how this affects mortals is a question intrinsic to the religiosity developed in the Greek drama. This idea configures a "self-world relation" based on a specific worldview in which the communication with the gods and the relation between gods and human beings are its core.

Similar ideas occur in comedy. In Aristophanes' plays, the same ideas on the relationship between gods and mortals can be observed. A good example can be found in the conversation between the slaves Nicias and Demosthenes in *Knights*[70] performed in the Lenaia during the archonship of Stratocles in 424 BCE.[71] Nicias knows that the gods exist because they hate him. The proof of their existence is the "evil" behaviour of the gods against the slave. The audience should have easily understood this idea. The response of the gods was not always good and pleasant. Mortals worshipped them but did not always get a response in return, or not always a good one. The gods received but they did not give in return, as we can read in the *Assembly of Women* performed after the Peloponnesian War.[72] Looking at the statues of the gods, one of the men reflects on this idea of retribution. The statues always have their hands turned palm up to receive, but never the other way around.[73]

As we can observe, the critique of the traditional image of the gods was part of the shared reflections in Athenian society, not only in the intellectual and "private spaces" but also in public events like the theatre. Furthermore, the questioning of the traditional gods can be found in other sources during the Classical period in Athens like Herodotus or Isocrates.[74] During the last decades of the 5th and the first

68. Lefkowitz, 2016, p. xiii.
69. Lefkowitz, 2016, p. 201.
70. Ar., *Eq*. 30-35.
71. Gil Fernández, 1995, p. 199.
72. Macía Aparicio, 2007, p. 319.
73. Ar., *Ec*. 777-783.
74. Her., II 53; Isoc., XI 40. The same ideas are found in the Hippocratic texts. In *De morbo sacro*, the "author" criticises those who explain epilepsy as a disease caused by a god rather than natural (and divine) elements such as the sun or the winds. There is, therefore, two different but compatible ideas of the divine. As Jouanna, 2012, p. 109 points out, the "author" of *De morbo sacro* "as a doctor, believes in

decades of the 4th cent., there was an increase in the criticism of the mythological tradition that must be understood as part of the religiosity of the Athenian society. This process of reflecting on the behaviour of the gods that can be designated as a "meta-ethical reduction"[75] was not born in this historical context since it can be observed in previous authors, too.[76] Nonetheless, the increase of these reflections in Classical Athens does not mean that the Athenians, or some of them, lost belief in the gods in the modern sense of the term. The modern notion of "religion" and its application in Greek society leads to a misunderstanding of the criticism of some religious aspects such as the image of the gods.

In order to contextualise the reflections on the behaviour of the gods, it is necessary, on the one hand, to eliminate the modern connotations not only of the term "religion" but also of "atheism" as a contrary phenomenon. As Bremmer claims in a recent publication,[77] we need to avoid a "high-intensity" content of the term "belief" associated with a modern and Christian notion that we cannot find in Greek sources.[78] However, this consideration does not deny the religious ideas behind rituals and cults.[79] In the case of ancient Greece and especially the Athenian context, we can observe a plurality of religious ideas and beliefs concerning the gods and the communication with them due to the "open belief system" characteristic of Greek religiosity. Hence, the critics of the traditional image of the gods must be understood as part of a plurality of religious ideas in which there was a "spectrum running from unbelief or indifference about the gods to atheism".[80] Unbelief, thus, can be understood as part of the religiosity within Athenian society. The modern notion of atheism as a phenomenon outside of the religious sphere – or opposite to it – cannot be applied in Ancient Greece, nor can a romanticised view of it as a subversive phenomenon.[81]

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one single order of causality for all diseases, whatever they are, an order that is both divine and natural; as a citizen, he participates in the traditional cult of the sanctuaries, even though he questions some ritual practices that do not correspond to the pure idea he has of divinity". This conjunction of different worldviews can be observed in some Athenian intellectuals during the Classical period, Plato included.

75. Benitez, 2016, p. 306.

76. Apart from the tragedians such as Aeschylus and Sophocles, we can observe the critique of traditional religious elements in Xenophanes (*DK* 21, B11; B12; B15; B16), Heraclitus (*DK* 22, B5) or Solon (Fr. 29 West; cf. Burkert, 2011, pp. 371 and 497).

77. Bremmer, 2020b, p. 58.

78. Regarding the notion of "belief/believe", its Christian bias, and its application in the Ancient World, see Harrison, 2001; Parker, 2011, pp. 31-34; Versnel, 2011, pp. 539-559; Bontempi, 2013; Davies, 2019.

79. Harrison, 2015, p. 27.

80. Bremmer, 2020b, p. 58.

81. We can observe this point of view in, among others, Thrower, 1980; Gaskin, 1989; Puente Ojea, 1997; Minois, 1999.

Due to the lack of an organised group of religious experts and sacred texts, the polis of Athens allowed the developments of individualised views of the world, including those that denied the traditional nature of the gods, or even their existence. The Athenians selected or rejected different religious ideas present in the wide range of Greek religiosity.[82] On the other hand, the selection and rejection of religious ideas were limited by the diverse notions of "impiety".[83] These terms were used to restrict the transgressions of the religious norms. Nevertheless, these notions were flexible, and their definitions and applications changed during Athenian history.[84]

Considering the "Lived Ancient Religion" (LAR) approach,[85] we can look at the "individual's usage" of the religious elements in this period. The LAR framework establishes a selection ("appropriation") of different religious practices and ideas by the individuals that constituted everyday religiosity. Applying this "methodological individualism" to Classical Athens, the development of unbelief can be understood as part of a process of "individuation" in which the subjects adopt the religious tradition as part of their religiosity.[86] Precisely, Kindt reintroduces the concept of "personal religion" to understand the huge diversity of ideas and practices developed in Ancient Greek "religion".[87] For this author, "the category of 'personal religion' helps us to consider philosophical views both by themselves and in interaction with mainstream Greek religion".[88] Therefore, both Plato's worldview and the "atheist theory" based on the critique of religious tradition and the "new" natural philosophy were part of a regular discussion in the individual construction of the Athenian religiosity.[89]

In the Classical period, especially in the aftermath of the Plague and the Peloponnesian War, an increase of "de-traditionalisation" was developed.[90] This process must be understood as part of a religious "individuation". As Rüpke states,

82. The flexibility of religious ideas characteristic of an "open belief system" can be observed in the formation of identities during the Classical period in Athens. See Cardete del Olmo, 2017.

83. See *supra* n. 44.

84. Bremmer, 2020a, p. 1025.

85. On this approach see Rüpke, 2011 and 2014; Lichterman *et al*., 2017; Albrecht *et al*., 2018; Gasparini *et al*., 2020.

86. The concept of "individuation" and its application in Ancient religions is defined by Rüpke, 2013, pp. 3-38.

87. Kindt, 2015. For the application of the concept "personal religion" in Ancient Greece, see already Festugière, 1954.

88. Kindt, 2015, p. 40.

89. It is also interesting to look at the participation in the mystery cults as an important element embodied in the formation of individual religiosity in Ancient Greece. Concerning this issue, see Waldner, 2013.

90. Rüpke, 2013, p. 9; Bremmer, 2020b, p. 67.

"the clash of rationality and spirituality is not an invention of postmodernity".[91] "Employing rationality"[92] is, therefore, one important element in the rejection and appropriation of religious traditions. With all these ideas in mind, we can look back at the central question of this paper. Were there groups of atheists in Athens or just isolated cases? Is it possible to think in an "atheism underground" defended by some associations during Classical Athens?

5. Groups of Ἄθεοι?

Considering Greek religiosity as "lived religion" allows us to observe differently the study of atheistic groups in Classical Athenian society. Returning to the *Laws*, the sentence in 888a-d, "neither you by yourself nor yet your friends are the first and foremost to adopt this opinion about the gods", allows us to think that the atheistic ideas were widespread in Athenian society. Moreover, the sentence continues claiming that this "disease" (νόσος) is always "springing up" with an increased number of people who deny the existence of the gods.[93] On the other hand, Plato attributes this opinion to young people alone, by saying that "not a single man who from his youth has adopted this opinion, that the gods have no existence, has ever yet continued till old age constant in the same view".[94]

All these elements have led some authors to theorise about the possible existence of "atheistic groups". We have already seen one example of that à *propos* of the chapter "The atheist underground" written by Sedley.[95] This publication opened a debate on the possibility of atheist groups in Classical Athens which was continued by Whitmarsh.[96] Whitmarsh points out the lack of evidence enabling us to observe the existence of atheist groups in the sources: no "spaces", no "names", no "philosophical schools", no people called themselves as ἄθεος can be found in Athens at the end of the 5th cent.. However, he agrees with Sedley that the main reason for the "anonymity" were the persecutions of the atheistic worldviews during this period. According to

91. Rüpke, 2013, p. 23.

92. Rüpke, 2013, p. 23.

93. This argument relates to the idea mentioned in Pl., *Leg*. 908d. People can be "converted" by those who defended atheistic ideas.

94. It is interesting how this connection between youth and atheistic ideas is established in other sources apart from Plato. For instance, Aeschylus (*Eu*. 149-154), Aristophanes (*Nu*. 927; *Pax*. 39-80; *Ra*. 1069-1073), Euripides (*Hipp*. 91-120; *Supp*. 195-238) or Xenophon (*Hunt*. 13.15-17). Regarding this issue, see Bremmer, 2020b.

95. Sedley, 2013.

96. Whitmarsh, 2017.

Whitmarsh,[97] it would not be until the end of the 4th cent. BCE when we can observe a "positive" view of atheism in the school of Theodorus of Cyrene. Consequently, the conclusion to be drawn is that "the word *atheos* was not consistently adopted as an in-group label, but it was nevertheless the best available term when one was needed" – as we can observe in Plato's *Laws*.

The main problem of these conclusions lies in how they analyse the critique of religious elements within the religious context of Classical Athens. As we have observed, the critique of the traditional image of the gods and the introduction of new notions like τύχη to understand the world was a process well integrated in Athenian religiosity. That is the reason why we can find in the sources meetings where the ideas of natural philosophers and sophists were discussed. We can find one example of this in the *Protagoras* (314a-318). In this Platonic dialogue, Socrates goes to the house of Callias to join a meeting with the "agnostic" Protagoras[98] and other philosophers as Hippias, Critias, Alcibiades, and Prodicus.[99] In these intellectual/philosophical circles, different personalities during the last decades of the 5th cent. in Athens met and discussed natural philosophy, the right of the laws, or religious elements. These philosophical meetings have parallels in other works of that time. One of them is in the expression used by Aristophanes at the end of the *Clouds*.[100] Here, Strepsiades burns "the house of the prating fellows" (τὴν οἰκίαν τῶν ἀδολεσχῶν)[101] where Socrates and his disciples are discussing. Aristophanes does not mock only Socrates; he does the same with Callias in other plays such as the *Frogs* (428-432) or the *Birds* (281-285). Aristophanes' mockery of Euripides is also well known. In the *Frogs* (885-894), the comic playwright depicted the tragedian praying to different gods, his "own private ones". Euripides starts his prayer by mentioning no traditional god, but the "air" (αἰθήρ). On the other hand, Euripides is accused of persuading the audience that there are no gods in the *Thesmophoriazusae* (448-455).

97. Whitmarsh, 2017, p. 58.

98. Although the term "agnostic" is a modern invention developed by Thomas Huxley in the second half of the 19th cent. (Hyman, 2007, pp. 30-31), with no equivalent in the Greek context, the famous statement of Protagoras ("As to the gods, I have no means of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist"; *D.L.* IX 51) has been analyse as an agnostic position. On this issue, see Plácido Suárez, 1988; Lenfant, 2002; Barrionuevo, 2017; Corradi, 2018. In any regard, the *aporia* claimed by Protagoras can be defined as part of the unbelief developed in Classical Athens.

99. Socrates declares himself a disciple of Prodicus several times (Pl., *Chrm*. 163d; *Cra*. 384b; *Men*. 96d; *Prt*. 341a).

100. Ar., *Nu*. 1484-1485.

101. Transl. Hickie, 1853.

Therefore, we can claim correctly that questioning the gods in Classical Athens was more common than one might think. As we have observed in drama, the reflections on the gods' ethical behaviour were widespread and the audience shared a common reaction to the impossibility of knowing the gods' wills. Natural philosophy was present as well in the drama. As Lefkowitz claimed, Euripides showed "the kinds of theorizing that members of his audience had heard about, whether from the sophists themselves, or from references to them in comedy".[102]

Concerning the idea that some individuals, especially the wealthy, were organised in groups is plausible but not clear in the sources.[103] It is true, as Osborne claims, that the "strongly corporate nature" of Athenian society shows the usual way in which people in Athens could meet to discuss philosophy or laws.[104] We can observe some examples of these political groups in different sources of that period. In Thucydides, some organisations and clubs are described as, for example, the συνωμοσία.[105] Even in the *Republic,* Plato describes the same phenomenon in the response from his brother, Adeimantus, to Socrates.[106] In Demosthenes (54.20), this is seen with the "club of Ithyphalli (ἰθύφαλλοι)" related to violent sexual practices and rapes. Hence, there were groups in Athens organised for different reasons like cults or political activity, although some of them "have left no record on stone".[107] However, it is less plausible that the reasons for the lack of evidence about this organisation of atheistic groups are due to a prosecution of these atheistic positions as Sedley and Whitmarsh argue.

There are several publications on the trials of "impiety" which condemned the atheistic ideas in Classical Athens. One of them is a recent publication written by Filonik.[108] In this article, the author reviews the sources in which trials of ἀσέβεια are mentioned. Regarding the trials that took place during the last decades of the 5th and the first decades of the 4th cent. BCE, Filonik states that only the prosecutions about ἀσέβεια in 415 BCE due to the profanation of the mysteries and the mutilation of the herms seem to be historically plausible.[109] Therefore, the trials of Aesch-

102. Lefkowitz, 2016, p. 21.

103. There is a considerable body of literature on the Athenian *hetair*(*e*)*iai* and political clubs. See Calhoun, 1913; Sartori, 1957; Connor, 1971; Pecorella Longo, 1971; McGlew, 1999; Jones, 1999, pp. 221-267; Ismard, 2010; Caciagli, 2018.

104. Osborne, 2010, pp. 31-32.

105. In LSJ συνωμοσία is defined as a "body of men leagued by oath, political union or club".

106. Pl., *R.* 365d-e.

107. Osborne, 2010, p. 49.

108. Filonik, 2013.

109. Filonik, 2013, pp. 82-83. Regarding the judicial process on the mutilation of the herms and the profanation of Eleusinian Mysteries in 415 BCE, see Murray, 1990; Furley, 1996; Graf, 2000; Leão, 2004;

ylus, Anaxagoras, Aspasia, Euripides, Pericles, Pheidias, Prodicus, or Protagoras, among others were an invention of later sources. The misunderstanding of these trials could be the consequence of an image taken from Socrates' trial in which Meletus accused the philosopher of corrupting the young people and not believing in the gods of the polis but in other divinities (δαιμόνια).[110] Indeed, in Socrates' defence, we can find two elements that reinforce the idea of the development of unbelief within Classical Athenian society.

On the one hand, as Filonik points out, Socrates defends himself not by denying his criticism of the traditional gods of the polis but by claiming that he is accused of something that is not true.[111] How is it possible that he does not believe in the gods if he believes in the δαιμόνια and the god (ὁ θεός)? Without going into the reasons behind Socrates' trial,[112] we observe in his defence the development of Socrates' "personal religion".[113] As we have seen in the Platonic dialogues, Socrates does not believe in the traditional image of the gods described by the poets and chooses different elements of Greek "religion" to establish his own religiosity.[114] This process of religious "individuation" implies a "de-traditionalisation", a rejection of some aspects of religious tradition. The unbelief of Socrates is, therefore, part of the formation of the philosopher's religion. On the other hand, a second idea allows us to observe that unbelief and the ideas of natural philosophers were widespread in Athenian society. In the passage 26d-e of the *Apology*, we can read how Socrates defends his position before Meletus by affirming that young people in the Athenian Agora could buy the texts with atheistic ideas related to natural philosophers such as Anaxagoras for a drachma.[115] Therefore, the argument that these atheistic ideas related to a natural philosophy were persecuted at the beginning of the 4th cent. loses plausibility. As

Gagné, 2009; Rubel, 2014, pp. 74-98; Bowden, 2015, pp. 331-332.

110. Pl., *Ap*. 24b-c. The same accusation of not believing in the gods of the polis is in Xenophon (οὐκ ἐνόμιζεν οὓς ἡ πόλις νομίζει θεούς, X., *Mem*. I 1, 1; 5; 20).

111. Filonik, 2013, p. 54.

112. For a detailed approach on Socrates' trial, see Ferguson, 1913; Bodéüs, 1989; Connor, 1991; Burnyeat, 1997; Brickhouse and Smith, 1989; 2002; 2004; Colaiaco, 2001; Donnay, 2002; Ralkowski, 2013.

113. The religiosity developed by Socrates has been discussed by a great number of authors in literature. See among others McPherran, 1996; 1997; 2011; Smith and Woodruff, 2000; Bussanich, 2013; Jakubiec, 2017.

114. It is interesting to observe how Socrates' beliefs in the immortality of the soul were also difficult to believe. See Pl., *Phd*. 70a-d.

115. Pl., *Ap*. 26d-e. The "standard wage" in Athens at the end of the 5th cent. was one drachma per day (Silver, 2006, p. 257).

Bremmer claims, the books of Protagoras and Prodicus should not have circulated with more difficulty than the tragedies written by Aeschylus or Sophocles.[116]

6. Conclusions

As we have observed, the atheistic arguments exposed by Plato in the *Laws* were common in Classical Athens. When the philosopher enumerates such ideas, he is describing the intellectual context of Athens during his lifetime. Indeed, Plato enumerates all those who defend the ideas of the ἄθεοι, including diviners, magic jugglers, tyrants,[117] demagogues,[118] generals, people that practice mystic rites of their own and sophists (908d), thus showing that the unbelief in the traditional image of the gods was socially widespread. This does not mean that these "atheists" were not religious, or that they were against "religion". In the case of the natural philosophers, they understood the world in a way contrary to Platonic cosmology. In the *Laws*, Plato wants to refute this worldview in his description of the *kallipolis*.

In the same way that Socrates proposes censoring the poets in the *Republic*, the Athenian Stranger establishes a whole legislative system that condemns and punishes people who defend this false notion of the gods in a fictional polis.[119] Both opinions concerning the divinities, the one developed by the traditional poets and the one reflected in the new ideas of the natural philosophers, lead to a misunderstanding of the gods. For Plato, the gods exist, they cannot be bribed, and they do care about human beings even though the traditional "theology" depicts them wrongly. Nevertheless, this critique of the traditional idea of the gods was not only Plato's opinion since we have already seen in Euripides and Aristophanes how the characters in their plays reflect on the nature of the gods and their ethical behaviour. These reflections were shared in public events. The intellectuals like Protagoras, Critias, or Prodicus discussed in their meetings the same ideas that were discussed in the theatre as well as in the Agora or, as Bremmer highlights, in the gymnasium where young rich people met.[120] These thinkers understood the divine, religion and the idea of gods as el-

116. Bremmer, 2018, p. 377.

117. After the government of the Peisistratids, especially after Hippias, a negative view of tyranny had prevailed, as we can observe in Herodotus (Hdt., V 92) and Thucydides (Th., I 17). From that moment on, this concept comes to mean a violent, unjust, and unreasonable way to rule that must be avoided. For more details, see Barceló and Hernández de la Fuente, 2014, pp. 234-235 and Plácido Suarez, 1989.

118. Regarding the demagogues in Athens, see Rhodes, 2016.

119. Pl., *Leg.* 908b-e.

120. Bremmer, 2020b, p. 56.

ements invented by human beings from a relativistic political theory but not outside of the Greek religious frame. Unbelief was thus a common phenomenon in Classical Athens as part of the everyday discussions about the world, the gods, and human beings.

Therefore, it is necessary to avoid the Platonic term of ἄθεοι when we analyse unbelief in Classical Athens since it reflects the subjective worldview of Plato. His ideas were also part of a "de-traditionalisation" of Greek religiosity. In this process, the philosopher rejects some elements of the traditional theology proposing a different worldview in which a divine soul rules the cosmic order. If we apply Plato's concept of ἄθεοι to Athenian society, we make the mistake of considering the traditional theology of the epic poets as "atheism" since, for the philosopher, their reasoning leads to the three atheistic positions cited in the *Laws*. A different term that does not constrain Greek "religion" is therefore needed. The modern notion of "atheism" projects onto Athenian society a distorted view of the role of religious criticism in Greek religion. Atheistic ideas were not subversive or contrary to Greek "religion". They were part of it. This argument explains why "unbelief" seems a better term to use in the Greek context. The concept of unbelief allows us to observe precisely how religious criticism can be part of the religious frame due to its broad spectrum, ranging from doubt to strong "modern" atheism.[121] If we understand the phenomenon of religion as "lived", not only in contemporary but also in ancient times, we can observe how unbelief is part of the development of an individualised religiosity of the subjects. Doubting religious elements, especially the nature of God or the gods and their ethical behaviour, is part of religious individualisation.

Moreover, if we look at other religious contexts, we can see how accounts of doubt become part of the religious discourses. The "arrows of the Almighty" and the questioning of God's justice in the Book of Job or the dialogue that Krishna maintains with Arjuna in the fourth book of the Bhagavad Gita show us that unbelief can be introduced (and refuted) in such narratives to reinforce religiosity.[122] Problems such as theodicy or doubting the nature of the gods are the starting point for generating religious stories that reinforce the belief system. Individuals use these tales or myths to choose or reject the religious elements that most resonate with their interests and desires in a process of "individuation". The notion of unbelief, therefore, helps us comprehend how the worldviews are formed and how they modify the way individuals perceive "being-in-the-world" and their relation to their world

121. Conrad, 2018.
122. Job 6:4; BG IV:40-42.

("self-world relations"). The way to behave and think is influenced by a specific idea of the world developed by the subject. The rejection of religious ideas, like the nature of the gods, shapes a "personal religion" that implies a "personal connection" with the world. In the case of Classical Athenian society, atheistic ideas were part of the elaboration of individual religiosities showing once again that unbelief and religion are intermingled. From a modern point of view, unbelief seems incompatible with the religious framework. However, when we open the category, it allows us to understand the different religious contexts in which the proper notion of religion differs from the modern one. Greek "religion" must be understood as "lived", dynamic, and, most importantly, very distant from our modern notion of "religion". Indeed, this differentiation can be observed in how unbelief and the atheistic worldviews developed in Classical Athens in relation to the religious field.

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