

**SOCRATES, THE SUN AND THE MOON.**  
**(Plat. *Ap.* 26b8-e5)**

When challenging Meletus to clarify the meaning of his accusation that Socrates «does not recognize the gods the city recognizes», but recognizes something else instead<sup>1</sup>, Socrates refers to an essential feature of his own personality (*Ap.* 26b8 ff.). Does Meletus mean that Socrates denies the existence of some given divinities, namely those which the Athenian community traditionally believes to exist, while asserting that other and so far unknown divinities exist instead, or does he mean that Socrates denies the existence of divine beings as such<sup>2</sup>? Meletus endorses the latter interpretation. He holds Socrates to be an ‘integral atheist’<sup>3</sup>, not just a blasphemous innovator replacing old and authentic divinities with new and spurious ones, like the comic character of Aristophanes’ *Clouds*<sup>4</sup>.

Socrates’ reaction, ὦ θαυμάσιε Μέλῃτη (26d1), denotes utter surprise: the reader might expect an immediate, straightforward denial of such an absurd charge. But Socrates, instead, asks two more questions. The first, «with what aim are you saying that?», is merely pragmatic: it suggests that the specification given by Meletus is (again) some kind of nonsense<sup>5</sup>; the second, «[you mean that] I consider not even the sun and the moon to be gods, as all other men do?» (Οὐδὲ ἥλιον οὐδὲ σελήνην ἄρα νομίζω θεοὺς εἶναι, ὥσπερ οἱ ἄλλοι ἄνθρωποι; 26d1-2), while also implying that Meletus has no idea of what he is asserting, apparently points to some obvious contrary evidence, without however producing it.

By itself, the interrogation immediately affects the meaning of θεοὺς νομίζειν, so as to suit Socrates’ defence. Meletus’ accusation apparently targeted the (real or declared) circumstance that Socrates’ personal religious attitudes, including both acts of worship and beliefs, did not conform to accepted Athenian standards<sup>6</sup>. Socra-

<sup>1</sup> Σωκράτη φησὶν ἀδικεῖν... θεοὺς οὐκ ἢ πόλις νομίζει οὐ νομίζοντα, ἕτερα δὲ δαιμόνια καινά: 24b7-c1.

<sup>2</sup> ... λέγεις διδάσκειν με νομίζειν εἶναι τινὰ θεοῦς ... οὐ μέντοι ὅσπερ γε ἡ πόλις ἀλλὰ ἐτέρους ... ἢ παντάπασιν με φῆς οὔτε αὐτὸν νομίζειν θεοῦς κτλ.: 26c1-6. On the possible difference between «licit» and «illicit» religious innovation, see Parker 1996, 155-56.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. τὸ παράπαν ἄθεος, 26c3; τὸ παράπαν οὐ νομίζεις θεοῦς, 26c7. Meletus repeats his accusation in the same terms at 26e5: οὐ μέντοι [scil. νομίζεις θεόν] μὰ Δία οὐδὲ ὀπωστιοῦν. On the difference between the ancient and modern meanings of ‘atheist’, see n. 7 infra.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Ar. Nub.* 380-81, 423-6, 828, 1472-3. On Socrates’ ‘kainotheism’ in the *Clouds*, see Parker 1996, 149; Giordano-Zecharya 2003, 333-37.

<sup>5</sup> Socrates has just concluded, when countering the accusation of corrupting youth, that in fact Meletus never gave a serious thought to such matters: Μελήτῳ τούτων οὔτε μέγα οὔτε μικρὸν πώποτε ἐμέλησεν (26b1-2).

<sup>6</sup> The accusation, instrumentally or not, assumes that such standards would have been universally known and accepted: it is therefore opaque on their content. The much-quoted words of Dover 1975, 41 still provide the best comment: «To be the victim of a *graphe* at Athens it was not necessary to have committed an act which was forbidden in so many words». For an updated discussion

tes shifts the focus exclusively onto his own opinions, and specifically onto his own recognition, or lack of it, of the status of two entities commonly held to be divine by «all other men» (not only by his fellow-citizens). The accusation of impiety, which would target the rejection of the accepted forms of θεοὺς νομίζειν, in worship and in belief, which are proper to the Athenians, is so transformed into the accusation of negating a universally recognized truth, the existence of the gods as such, what Socrates calls the θεοὺς νομίζειν εἶναι. In this way, and notwithstanding any connotation that the shorter expression might have currently implied at the time when Plato was writing the *Apology*, the longer expression clearly restricts (or extends) the meaning of the accusation to one very specific dimension<sup>7</sup>: Socrates, vulgarly held to speculate about «the things in heaven and under the earth» (18b7-8; 23d5-6), has already denied that he ever undertook «scientific», that is «atheistic», investigations (19c); the question that the judges (and the readers) are from now on asked to consider is no longer whether or not Socrates, by word or deed, has denied that some of the traditional gods exist, and introduced some ‘impostors’ in their place, but whether or not Socrates holds, and has been spreading, the idea that there is no such thing as a divine entity.

As the *Apology* represents the scene, Meletus intends his quick and emphatic reply to be decisive; he is so sure of it that he does not even answer the question and addresses the jurors instead: it is obvious<sup>8</sup> that Socrates is such an ‘integral atheist’, since to him «the sun is a stone and the moon [made of] earth!» (26d3-4). Socrates then strikes a devastating blow: these are Anaxagoras’ ideas, not his own, as anybody who is no complete illiterate can confirm (26d5-e2). Once again, the defendant’s questions have highlighted the accuser’s utter lack of credibility: the accusation is so worded that it must be either a lie or a joke<sup>9</sup>. Drawing on this unfortunate reply, Socrates soon qualifies Meletus as ἄπιστος, ὑβριστῆς καὶ ἀκόλαστος, a maker of riddles, an amuser (χαριεντιζόμενος) producing nothing else than jokes

of that much debated question - whether Socrates was charged for his *ideas* or for his *behaviour* in regard of religion - see Giordano-Zecharya 2005, 328-30.

<sup>7</sup> Some readings of this passage assume θεοὺς νομίζειν and θεοὺς νομίζειν εἶναι to be substantially equivalent (e.g. Reeve 2000, 28); but this is the effect of Plato’s deliberate innovation: his Socrates is collapsing the two notions together, and thus melting down any reference or implication brought in the charge about his religious behaviour into the *délit d’opinion* of denying the existence of divine beings (cf. Giordano-Zecharya 2003, 338-40). By the same token, this Socrates is made to take the term ἄθεος (26c3) in the *new* meaning of «denier of the existence of the gods» (it meant «most impious» previously), and to use the formula ἠγγεῖσθαι εἶναι (27d10, e2-3; 35d4) as a synonym of νομίζειν εἶναι: Fahr 1969, 131-57.

<sup>8</sup> Meletus tries to stress such presumed obviousness by directly addressing the jurors and interjecting μὰ Δί’ (26d4-5).

<sup>9</sup> At this moment, Meletus’ credibility as an ‘expert’ in the moral education of youth, and therefore as the appropriate accuser of Socrates on such matters, has already been destroyed (24c9-26b2).

(παίζων) (see 26c5-27a7). Hitting at the opponent's personality is fair game in Athenian law-courts<sup>10</sup>; in the *Apology*, it also paves the way to exposing the accusation as ridiculously inconsistent: if Socrates is an 'integral atheist', the last thing he will do is calling new deities into existence (27a5-28a1).

When choosing to argue that the charge is logically flawed, the defendant might possibly feel dispensed with proving that it is factually unsupported as well. Indeed, as is well known, the Platonic *Apology* omits any reference to Socrates' conformity to the current practices of worshipping. And, surprisingly, it also excludes any explicit answer to the very question preparing Socrates' master-stroke: «Do I believe sun and moon to be gods, or not?».

Is the answer omitted simply because the reader should feel that it literally goes without saying that Socrates, like all other men, believes sun and moon to be divine? Meletus is certainly depicted as foolish when denying that Socrates holds such a belief; however, the text puts him in the wrong in a wholly indirect way: it shows him crediting Socrates with some 'scientific' speculation of sorts (making mere physical objects of the two celestial bodies) which truly belongs to Anaxagoras. What cannot be inferred from this passage is that Meletus is denying something absolutely undeniable: that Socrates *does* conceive of sun and moon as deities. Neither here nor anywhere else in the *Apology* is Socrates uttering any explicit, positive assertion to that effect. It has been rightly noted that Socrates «heaps ridicule and rhetorical question on Meletus' suggestion that he disbelieves in the divinity of sun and moon without specifically denying that suggestion»<sup>11</sup>.

This is why Socrates' rhetorical strategy risks appearing somewhat puzzling here, if not indeed disingenuous. The emotional intensity of the whole exchange makes no surprise, since it bears on a fundamental aspect of Socrates' personality<sup>12</sup>; but logical cogency, and even narrative clarity, seem to lag behind, since the discussion develops as follows (26d1-e4):

a) Socrates and Meletus, by respectively asking and accepting to answer an *ad hoc* question, tacitly agree on the premise that the acts of acknowledging, or denying, the divine status of the sun and the moon imply acknowledgement, or denial, that any divine being exists at all (the premise is totally unexplained) (26c7-d2);

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. Lavery 1964, 82.

<sup>11</sup> Stokes 1997, 138.

<sup>12</sup> Socrates' tone is strongly emotional: from 26d1 to 26e4, the seven successive sentences he utters are all in the form of direct interrogation; he repeatedly addresses his accuser by name (at 26d1 and d5, and later on at 26e6); when opening his argument, he calls to those very gods whose existence, according to the charge, he negates; when closing it, he explicitly calls to Zeus: Πρὸς αὐτῶν τοίνυν, ὦ Μέλιητε, τούτων τῶν θεῶν ὧν νῦν ὁ λόγος ἐστίν, 26 b 8-9; ὦ πρὸς Διός, 26e3. Meletus also interjects μὲν Δί' and calls on the jurors (26d4-5).

b) Meletus claims that Socrates usually declares the two entities to be material objects (he quotes no factual instance in support): he implies therefore that the defendant must practice and spread 'integral atheism' (26d4-5);

c) Socrates replies by pointing out that the author of the kind of assertion brought forward by Meletus is Anaxagoras, not Socrates<sup>13</sup>: he implies therefore, without saying it explicitly, that he does not practice nor spread 'integral atheism' (26d6-e2).

Socrates denial does not even exclude that he might still hold some other, different view that could possibly qualify him in public opinion as an «atheist» of sorts<sup>14</sup>. At this stage, therefore, the reader may feel entitled to a twofold clarification. The first would render explicit the premise to the whole discussion: he who does not think of sun and moon as deities must also think that there are no deities at all. The belief in the divinity of sun and moon works like a synecdoche: to deny that detail is to deny the whole. A second clarification might be wished about the true Socratic beliefs implied here: would Socrates specify that he personally abhors the impious theories fathered by Anaxagoras, and thinks of the sun and the moon as gods? This is precisely what Socrates will not do: he swiftly moves onto requiring his opponent to confirm the accusation of 'integral atheism' (26e3-4), and then proceeds to annihilate Meletus' personal credibility (26e6 - 28a1). From now on, sun and moon disappear: retrospectively, the passage mentioning them (26d1-26e2) almost looks like a digression, especially since it is also framed by two substantially (though not formally) similar interrogations<sup>15</sup>. Any positive and explicit assertion that Socrates believes in the divinity of sun and moon remains buried under the repeated challenges put to Meletus and the rather unexpected mention of Anaxagoras' literary output. Thus, the flashing reference to the divinity of sun and moon, while certainly allowing to start destruction of Meletus' credibility as an accuser in religious matters, also seems to produce a paradoxical consequence: to shift the focus of the narrative away from any factual discussion of Socrates' real religious beliefs. The reader's attention is quickly reoriented towards Anaxagoras and the Athenian book trade, the ridiculing of Meletus, and the widening horizons of the Socratic self-defense; the omission of any precise Socratic answer can be quickly forgotten.

This omission is also rhetorically justified. Socrates challenges his opponent to define exactly the alleged Socratic misdeed, and by so doing he shifts the burden of

<sup>13</sup> Anaxagoras' theory of the Sun as a flaming stone is reported by Xen. *Mem.* 4.7.7, together with Socrates' explicit rejection; see also Anaxag. *Testt.* A 2, 3, 19 20 a Diels-Kranz.

<sup>14</sup> Stokes 1997, 138.

<sup>15</sup> The content of Socrates' initial question (26c5-6: παντάπασι με φης οὔτε αὐτὸν νομίζειν θεοὺς κτλ.,:) is reproduced in his final one (26e3-4: ἀλλ' ὃ πρὸς Διός, οὐτωσί σοι δοκῶ; οὐδένα νομίζω θεὸν εἶναι;). Possibly, the emphasis might shift from the objective content of the charge («do you say that I recognize no god...?») to the subjective status of the defendant («for Zeus' sake, you really see me like that? I assert that there are no gods at all?»).

the proof on him. This is also consistent with the defensive line followed in the Platonic *Apology*, which makes the most of the lack of logical cohesion, and therefore of truthfulness, of the accusations. Moreover, this attitude tallies within the rhetorical strategy of the *elenchus*, which usually achieves entrapping Socrates' interlocutors into the conceptual inconsistency of their own utterances.

But questions remain. Why should the touchstone for 'integral atheism' be provided by the denial of the divine nature precisely of the sun and the moon? One answer might be that this is the focal point from which any late fifth century Athenian might see 'science' coming to contradict 'religion' head on; any denial of the divine status of these two celestial bodies would necessarily produce the vision of a world driven by 'material' and 'impersonal' forces, utterly irresponsive to those prayers and sacrifices through which men at least try to influence their gods<sup>16</sup>. But Socrates has already been described as sharing some of the most basic contemporary religious beliefs: after denying he had ever be a 'scientist', he has produced a fully-fledged statement of faith in the Delphic god (20c4-23c1). In order to reiterate that he is no «integral atheist», he is apparently made once more to play a rather risky game: raising the thorny issue of the relationship between 'faith' and 'science' by singling out those two, moreover relatively minor, deities<sup>17</sup>, whose divine nature he formally does not even acknowledge in the end. He is also, unexpectedly, made to refer to what «all other men believe», so raising the stakes even higher: from the typically Athenian religious νομίζειν, which he has allegedly broken, to universal religious feelings, which he purports to share.

One first clue is given by the mention of Anaxagoras, called into play as the 'non-Socrates'. In the late 390s (assuming the *Apology* to have been written around that period) one of Plato's intents could have been to dispel misperceptions still lingering in the Athenian public, or possibly even fostered by other products of the quickly developing Socratic literature. To that aim, Socrates' own *sophia* needed to be differentiated from whatever could be found in Anaxagoras' accessible «books» (or, more generally, from the *sophia* of any other *sophos*, whether *physiologos* or not)<sup>18</sup>. The reader is thus duly informed that Socrates did not share Anaxagoras' view on the sun and the moon as mere material objects.

But the mention of «books» is not meant as a touch of realism: it is essential to the whole argument<sup>19</sup>. Whatever the ideas Socrates might have conceived or expres-

<sup>16</sup> Heitsch 2002, 110 gives no reason for his comment that such disbelief represents an extreme form of denial of the gods.

<sup>17</sup> For the role of sun and moon in Athenian (and in general Greek and Ancient) religion, see de Strycker-Slings 1994, 121-23; Olson 1998, 157-58; Heitsch 2002, 110-11.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. 19a8-20c3.

<sup>19</sup> For the present purposes, there is no need to discuss the physical appearance that 'books' might have taken at the time.

sed about the sun, the moon or the like, he never circulated them in writing, contrarily to Anaxagoras. This specification is decisive: to hold the personal opinion that «the sun and the moon are no gods» could by itself produce no crime; a crime may materialize if any such opinion were deliberately and systematically diffused all around. This is exactly what Meletus asserts of Socrates, in his oversimplified words: «he *keeps* saying»<sup>20</sup>; but it is also what any accessible «book» potentially achieves by its sheer existence. The point is reinforced by the humorous detail that Anaxagoras' «books» are «overburdened» (γέμει: 26d9) with the author's «atheistic» assertions: they will almost deliver anyway. The context of the *Apology* makes plain that Socrates always uses face-to-face oral confrontation, a practice requiring that the interlocutor, a real-life character, will engage in dialectical exchange, remaining free at any moment to break off the *exetasis* exerted upon him. Nothing could be more different from making one's ideas available for indiscriminate communication by having them fixed in writing, thus addressing the unknown and passive interlocutors able to buy the «books» on offer in the *orchestra*. Since Socrates does not write «books», he can express his opinions about sun and moon only within the circle of his followers<sup>21</sup>. With two consequences: firstly, irrespectively of whatever he might say, Socrates would not introduce any new idea into the community at large<sup>22</sup>; secondly, what Meletus must ignore is precisely the content of any such idea, since he is an outsider to the Socratic circle. The defensive implication is already known: Meletus does not know what he is talking about; his accusation of 'atheism', as deliberate propagation of subversive beliefs in the public arena, does not make sense.

<sup>20</sup> ἥλιον λίθον φησὶν εἶναι, τὴν δὲ σελήνην γῆν: 26d4-5. Here, the present tense obviously denotes an habitual action, not a present utterance, of Socrates. As for the paradox (if authentic) that Anaxagoras' reputation for impiety did not prevent his books from being freely on sale in Athens, the absence of anything like state censorship might be recalled (even the accusation of impiety against Socrates was introduced by a private judicial action, a *graphe*). In this case, Socrates' reference to the relatively wide availability of such books might produce some additional irony, of the kind: «I do *not* spread my "religious" ideas, and yet I am taken to court for them; Anaxagoras is still spreading his strange "scientific" ideas by having his books on sale, and *that* is allowed». However, the factual content of the detail given in the *Apology* is at least open to question, if one takes seriously the later assertion by Plutarch that Anaxagoras' theories were (at least around 415 B.C.) known and discussed only by a selected few (*Vita Nic.* 23.3, quoted and discussed by Babut 1978, 59 n. 46 and 72 n. 100).

<sup>21</sup> According to the *Apology*, this is the only possibility for Socrates to discuss 'scientific' questions at all, since in his elenctic exchanges he never deals with this kind of problems: at 19d1-7, he has confidently challenged the members of the jury to contradict him on this subject; this move might well be «a trick of the [defendant's] trade» (Burnet 1926, 83), but Plato represents it as fully successful. There is nothing here to imply that Socrates would be wont to «eagerly debate the current ['scientific'] theories with a few chosen friends», as Guthrie 1971, 103 has it. By contrast, Plato has no doubt that Anaxagoras' ideas circulate in writing: *Ap.* 26d6-e2 and *Phaed.* 97b8.

<sup>22</sup> The fundamental difference between developing unconventional ideas and *propagating* them is clearly stated in Plat. *Euthyphr.* 3c7-d2; cf. Vlastos 1991, 293-97.

What is it that Socrates really νομίζει, then, about the divinity of sun and moon? And can he indeed νομίζειν anything specific at all on this subject<sup>23</sup>?

As already said, the reference to the celestial bodies further differentiates the Socratic *sophia* from past or current speculations about «the upper and lower things» (the differentiation had already been stressed when countering the «first accusations»: 19b4-d7). How easily, and improperly, ‘atheism’ and the «science of the upper (and lower) things» might be put into one same basket is attested by such different sources as Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, whose comic Socrates reshuffles cosmic functions and supremacies, notably between Zeus and Vortex<sup>24</sup>, and the Diopieithes Decree, and is confirmed by the wording of the legal charges against Socrates as reproduced in the *Apology*<sup>25</sup>. But when the *Apology* makes clear, once and for all, that the ‘real’ Socrates has nothing to do with such activities, it gives a very specific reason: Socrates does not consider them to be productive of anything which he could be interested in, that is ‘knowledge’<sup>26</sup>.

Now, differentiation must not imply unconditional opposition. When this Platonic Socrates declares to be totally uninvolved in ‘physical’ investigations, he means that he is neither concerned by nor hostile to them. He patently ignores the bigoted idea that to study astronomy is to enter a theoretical zone put off limits by divinity, as Xenophon has it<sup>27</sup>; on the contrary, he remains at pains to avoid negative overtones about what he still considers a (*possible* though certainly not an actual) form of knowledge, an ἐπιστήμη<sup>28</sup>. Indeed, Vth Century ‘scientists’ did not unconditionally remove divinity away from the *kosmos*, although they might appear as ‘religious innovators’ when asking whether it was necessary to qualify as divine those phenomena for which an alternative, mundane interpretation could be designed, and

<sup>23</sup> In the present context, the notion of νομίζειν may be taken in its widest extension, connecting the meanings of «holding an opinion» and of «considering something as rightful»: it does not merely designate the fact of «holding a given belief», but also of «estimating that a given belief is a legitimate or dutiful one». As already said, Socrates’ question invests his intellectual and moral personality at the deepest.

<sup>24</sup> See note 4. At vv. 423-26, Chaos, the Clouds and the Tongue displace all other deities.

<sup>25</sup> Whether or not the Diopieithes Decree is authentic (see notably Dover 1975, 27-32), its text, as reproduced by Plut. *Vita Per.* 32, calls into play the act of νομίζειν, which appears in this context as the kind of (ideological and ritual) attitude that is due in respect of the gods: εἰσαγγέλεσθαι τοὺς τὰ θεία μὴ νομίζοντας ἢ λόγους περὶ τῶν μεταρσίων διδάσκοντας. In the *Apology* (19b5), to investigate τὰ τε ὑπὸ γῆς καὶ οὐράνια is considered a criminal act by popular opinion (by so doing, Σωκράτης ἀδικεῖ: 19b4); at 23d5-6, the same opinion links the investigation of τὰ μετέωρα καὶ τὰ ὑπὸ γῆς and the θεοὺς μὴ νομίζειν. By itself, of course, the Diopieithes Decree is irrelevant to Socrates’ trial: see de Strycker-Slings 1994, 86-89, 121 n.130.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Pl. *Ap.* 19c5-8.

<sup>27</sup> Xen. *Mem.* 4.7.6: οὔτε χαρίζεσθαι θεοῖς ἂν ἠγάγετο τὸν ζητοῦντα ἅ ἐκείνοι σαφηνίσαι οὐκ ἐβουλήθησαν.

<sup>28</sup> *Loc. cit.*, and particularly 19c5-6: καὶ οὐχ ὡς ἀτιμάζων λέγω τὴν τοιαύτην ἐπιστήμην, κτλ..

whether it was not possible to endow ‘new’ entities with the possession of a divine status (divinity being redefined as the structure supporting that very world whose inner nature one was intent at deciphering)<sup>29</sup>. Anaxagoras, who did not term his ordering Mind as ‘god’, might have been the exception, and this might be the reason why Plato has Socrates in the *Apology* casting him into the apparent role of an «integral atheist»<sup>30</sup>. But not even against such theories, whose content at any rate is not specified at this place, does Socrates utter an outright rejection (26d6-e2). In order to damn Anaxagoras’ views as positively lacking truth, the text would call them ψεύδεα, «false», while it merely calls them «utterly strange», ἄτοπα<sup>31</sup>. The latter term refers to open problems, not to open lies; especially in Plato’s “earlier” dialogues, it is frequently used by Socrates himself when referring to some highly problematic fact, or even some statement of his, which demands clarification<sup>32</sup>; or to denote how Socrates, or his very utterances, surprise and puzzle the interlocutors<sup>33</sup>. With this term, therefore, Socrates is also made to avoid a formal evaluation about the truthfulness of Anaxagoras’ theories, either ‘physical’ or ‘theological’; however, he is certainly made to show that he is informed about their content<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Vlastos 1991, 159-60; Janko 1997, 90-91. See also note 2.

<sup>30</sup> Vlastos 1991, 159 points out that Anaxagoras is the only one among the *physiologoi* who might have excluded a divine ordering from his *kosmos*. See also Parker 1996, 211: the denial of Zeus’ sovereignty performed by Anaxagoras «was too fundamental to admit of compromise» in the view of the Athenians; and Janko 2002-2003, 10.

<sup>31</sup> The Platonic Socrates’ differentiation from Anaxagoras does not lack respect; it is Xenophon who describes it as disparagement and condemnation: cf. *Mem.* 4.7.4-7, where Anaxagoras’ speculations are rudely called a form of παραφρονῆσαι (cf. also 1.1.11-12: τοὺς φροντίζοντας τὰ τοιαῦτα μωραίνοντας ἀπεδείκνυε). This is perfectly coherent with the description of the Socratic piety according to Xenophon: Socrates is most conspicuous in paying the established honors to the gods (*Mem.* 1.2.64), and defines piety as the punctilious implementation of the traditional religious customs (τὰ νόμιμα: *Mem.* 4.6.4). The Platonic *Apology* never asserts the like.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. e.g. *Charm.* 167c4, 168a10, 172e5; *Phaed.* 60b3.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. e.g. *Gorg.* 480e1, 494d1; *Charm.* 172e3. *Gorg.* 480e1-2 clearly shows that a given argument can look *atopos* and yet prove to be logically sound in the end.

<sup>34</sup> This is not inconsistent with the way Socrates refers to Anaxagoras and his theories in the *Phaedo* (97b8-99d2). Here, this later Socrates, on the whole a rather different one from the main character of the *Apology*, declares openly what he had just been hinting there: that he had indeed gathered information about (and therefore must have taken an interest in) ‘physical science’ at some stage of his life. The conclusion that he was no good at this exercise (*Phaed.* 96c1-2) does not contradict his statement in the *Apology* (19a8-d7) that he has nothing to do with it. In both instances, Anaxagoras is partly missing from the picture: in the *Apology* he is not listed among the so-called *sophoi* (cf. 191e1-20c3); in the *Phaedo* he is mentioned only at 97b8 and ff. Moreover, in the *Phaedo* Socrates also a) repeats that access to Anaxagoras’ theories is made through books; b) denotes such theories not as *pseudea* but as *atopa* (cf. 97c2, 99a5), although the notion takes a more negative inflection here; c) *omits any statement that the sun and the moon are divine when mentioning them*: on the contrary, he consistently puts them on the same level as «the other stars» (98a2-4; 109c6-7; 111c1-2). However, the *Phaedo* does not label Anaxagoras as an «atheist», while the *Apology* suggests he might have been *considered* as one: see also Babut 1978, 58-76.

This is fully coherent with one of Socrates' ideological strongholds in the *Apology*, his refusal to be involved in 'science', a refusal which also means that he must have already reached some fairly definite evaluation about the uselessness of this sort of research. Correspondingly, this attitude also implies an undeclared, but nonetheless effective, lack of commitment to the 'theological' doubts or problems or denials raised by 'scientific' speculations<sup>35</sup>. Epistemic caution should also inform Socrates' personal opinions about the sun and the moon: irrespective of its specific content, any Socratic belief on any such issue must remain a matter of, precisely, *belief*, unable ever to produce a reasoned judgment. The reader can thus feel free to muse whether in the *Apology* Socrates thinks of the sun and the moon as divine persons, or just as agglomerations of stone and earth: for he will nowhere read that this Socrates *knows* - that is, that he holds for demonstrably true - whatever the author might decide to let him νομίζειν on this matter<sup>36</sup>.

What should the reader understand, then? That Socrates sticks to the traditional belief that the sun and the moon are divine? Some support might even be drawn from the episode related in Plato's *Symposium*: after having spent the whole night in an almost superhuman trance, by daybreak Socrates comes back to normality, and, as his first act, addresses a short prayer to the sun (unfortunately, since the *Symposium* appears to be a later work, no Athenian might have been able to perform this act of intertextual reading before some time at least)<sup>37</sup>. And would the assumption that Socrates is mentioning them as individual deities require an initial capital for ἥλιον and σελήνην at *Apol.* 26d1-2 ? In the *Apology*, Socrates calls only two

<sup>35</sup> Socrates' posture towards «current science» can only be connected to his posture towards «current religion» and vice versa. Therefore, in the *Apology* he can look like a man who «had [he] encountered someone who produced an argument for thinking that the sun is stone, ... would have examined the argument with an open mind and not rejected it out of hand»: Kraut 2000, 14. The «lack of intellectual interest in critical enquiry regarding religion», seen as proper of Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, is caused by a parallel lack of interest in 'scientific' research: Brickhouse-Smith 2000, 81, who refer to Pl. *Phaedr.* 229e2-230a3. Indeed, Plato's Socrates seems to reject «both sides of the fifth-century dispute between reason and religion»: Woodruff 2000, 130.

<sup>36</sup> The epistemic position taken by the Athenian stranger in the *Laws* is a different one: astronomy is a fully 'scientific' discipline, which is at the same time «well-pleasing to God» (821 a ff.) since it cannot foster 'atheism' by itself (967a ff), and, far from converting the sun and the moon into stone and earth (886d), will foster the proper *nomizein*, both in opinion and in ritual, corresponding to the divine nature of both (821cd). These passages are all quoted by Notopoulos 1942, 269-71, together with Plat. *Resp.* 508a4-509b10 (where the Sun becomes a god and the offspring of gods) to support his view that in the *Apology* Socrates asserts an unambiguous belief in the divinity of the sun, while considering it an appropriate «object of scientific study» at the same time; the very accurate discussion of the same passages by Babut 1978, 67-74 allows no such inference.

<sup>37</sup> Plat. *Symp.* 220d4-5. Socrates' prayer to the sun could easily fit into the traditional recognition of Helios as a paramount god, both for his 'physical' and his ethical role, as expressed not only by the poets but also by contemporary religious practice: see Notopoulos 1942, 261, 265-69, 271-73. Selene's performances and status as a deity are apparently much less impressive: see *ibid.* 272.

gods by name, and then only in interjections, Zeus and (once) Hera<sup>38</sup>. Not even the Delphic Apollo, who plays a fundamental role in the plot, is ever called by name; this deity is individualized by nothing more than the factual denomination «the god in Delphi» (20e7-8) and is otherwise anonymously designated as ὁ θεός (21b3; 21e5; 22a4; 23a5-6; 23b5, 7; 23c1); besides, the word θεός is employed in order to refer to an unnamed divinity which might, but by no means always need to, be identified with Apollo<sup>39</sup>. Why does Plato avoid mentioning the name of Apollo in the *Apology*, for this is precisely what he does? And why does he also call other unspecified θεοί into play (26b9; 42a5)? On the whole, Socrates is described as having established a personal relationship with a θεός who is nameless and thus faceless, as well as with θεοί who, being collectively designated, are wholly impersonal. Both entities (the θεός and the θεοί) also act as providential beings caring for Socrates' plight<sup>40</sup>. On the whole, the reference of Socrates' religious discourse is *abstract*, not personal, divinity. For what other reason should Plato systematically erase Apollo's proper name from his text, even on occasions when there is no obvious stylistic necessity for doing so?

This raises another question: *can* the protagonist of the *Apology* believe in individual gods taking an imagined or actual physical shape, like the two which appear every day and night, the Sun and the Moon? Socrates dedicates his whole life to «serving» a divinity prevented by *themis* from lying<sup>41</sup>; he thus asserts that only truth,

<sup>38</sup> Zeus: 17b8, 25c4, 26e3, 35d1, 39c5. Hera: 24e 9, concerning Meletus' assertion that everybody gives the right education to young men, except Socrates. Cf. Dodds 1959, 195 (with reference to the same exclamation in Plat. *Gorg.* 449d5): to swear by Hera is something done both by Xenophon's and Plato's Socrates; however, «this seems to have been normally a woman's oath»: irony could be implied in such cases, and especially in the instance of the *Apology*. Moreover, it is difficult to consider such utterances more than figures of speech: Socrates can as easily swear «by the dog», who also makes one of his first apparitions here: νῆ τὸν κύνα, 22a1.

<sup>39</sup> Reeve 2000, 37-38 gives a whole list of such occurrences; however, he believes that *all* of them must refer to Apollo. That might not always be the case: see e.g., the very final mention: «[whether it is better to live the Athenians' life or to die Socrates' death is] ἄδηλον παντὶ πλὴν ἢ τῷ θεῷ» (42a5): here, θεός could plainly mean «Divinity» as such. The interplay between the action of «a single god» and of «the many gods» should also be considered: to give another example, de Strycker-Slings 1994, 166 emphasize the remarkable switch from the plural ὡς θεοὺς οὐ νομίζω (35d5) to the singular form in the words which follow immediately: καὶ τῷ θεῷ κρῖναι περὶ ἐμοῦ ὅπῃ μέλλει ἐμοί τε ἄριστα εἶναι καὶ ὑμῖν (35d7-8).

<sup>40</sup> De Strycker-Slings 1994, 364-65 aptly note that towards the end of the *Apology* Socrates' discourse increasingly gives the collective and impersonal θεοί the role of providential beings towards whom he has established a personal relationship of sorts.

<sup>41</sup> οὐ γὰρ δῆπου [scil. ὁ θεός] ψεύδεται γέ· οὐ γὰρ θέμις αὐτῷ: 21b6-7. The notion of *themis* has of course one restricted, technical meaning (it defines what is proper to practice or belief in respect of a given cult or a given divinity: cf. e.g. the meaning of θεμιτόν at *Gorg.* 497c4); but it can also be taken here at its widest, as the idea of a normative entity necessarily underlying the way of existence of all things, and thus also effective on the behavior of any divine being. Incidentally, the idea of a normative value exerting authority on the gods themselves is connected to the idea of

and therefore authentic moral values, provide the necessary foundation to whatever divine and human order could be thought of, and by the same token assign its ultimate goals to human action<sup>42</sup>. These are Socrates' fundamental beliefs: he «knows» them for sure<sup>43</sup>. Professing the divine nature of some entities merely because anyone can see them revolving in the sky could add nothing to what is most important to him, his moral principles and his unrelenting philosophical search. None of those two entities could be imagined to detain that authentic *sophia* which Socrates has conclusively come to recognize as the divinity's own property<sup>44</sup>. It would verge on absurdity to think that they might share the divine status of the abstract, and *therefore* real and effective, deities to which Socrates vows his most sincere allegiance.

Socrates is obviously not described here as an atheistic narrow-minded rationalist. He expressly derives his striving for critical knowledge also from divine incitations, such as the Delphic oracle and the dreams and premonitions occurring to him, all on a level with his «divine sign»<sup>45</sup>. But his ambiguous mentioning of sun and moon is wholly consistent with an idiosyncratic posture on traditional religious matters, which dispenses him both with rejecting and with professing current forms of θεοὺς νομίζειν.

Not that those traditional beliefs have any *real* influence. As the Arginusae process, explicitly recalled in the *Apology* (32b), shows with full evidence, they happily coexist with irrational and unjust forms of collective behavior; according to the representation of Athenian political life made by Socrates, they do nothing to check the constant propensity to injustice, struggle for power and civic conflict notoriously proper to the Athenian *demos*<sup>46</sup>. Faith in the divine nature of sun and moon does not prevent accusers from swearing false oaths, nor deflect defendants from choosing flattery instead of truth, nor deter judges from betraying justice. It is such disregard

piety (ὁσιότης) that Socrates puts forward at Plat. *Euthyphr.* 10a2-11b1: piety is loved by the gods because of its intrinsic nature, which somehow, therefore, *causes* the gods to love it, and not because of a wholly autonomous, and therefore arbitrary, decision taken by the deities to love piety (on the specifically metaphysical implication of this Socratic position, see Irwin 1995, 24-25). The idea that the Delphic Apollo does not utter ψεύδεα antedates the *Apology*; cf. e.g. Pind. *Ol.* 6.66-67: what the *mantis* hears is a φωνὴν ... ψευδέων ἄγνωτον.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. especially 29b6-30b6. For Socrates' ethical notion of divinity, see e.g. Vlastos 1991, 161-65; Brickhouse-Smith 1994, 82.

<sup>43</sup> 29b6-7: τὸ δὲ ἀδικεῖν καὶ ἀπειθεῖν τῷ βελτίονι καὶ θεῷ καὶ ἀνθρώπῳ, ὅτι κακὸν καὶ αἰσχρὸν ἐστὶν οἶδα.

<sup>44</sup> *Ap.* 23a5-7. Superior wisdom as such is a traditional prerogative of divine beings: Reeve 2000, 35 and 39 n. 32, with reff. to Hom. *Od.* 4.379-81, 468-70 (omniscience: see however the note by S. West *ad loc.*, in *Omero. Odissea*, I, Milano 1981, 351, for the limitations inherent to such faculty); 20.75-76; Hes. *Op.* 267.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Pl. *Ap.* 23a5-c1, 31c8-d1, 31d3, 33c4-7, 40a1-c3, 41d6.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. 31e4 (πολλὰ ἄδικα καὶ παράνομα ἐν τῇ πόλει γίγνεσθαι) and 36b7-8, and notably the συνωμοσίαι and στάσεις which constantly keep the πολλοὶ busy.

of the effective existence of divine beings, and therefore of divine order, that Socrates calls ‘atheism’<sup>47</sup>. This is why Socrates, who has nothing to do with that, can end his first speech to the jury by declaring that he believes in the gods as none of his accusers does<sup>48</sup>.

Socrates’ ethical notion of divinity, as expressed in the *Apology*, is simply incompatible with those traditional religious postures that can only be articulated in illogical terms or which are by themselves irrelevant to, or obstructive of, moral action. This is the sort of man who, out of epistemic modesty if nothing else, would not antagonize current beliefs about the divine nature of the moon, and possibly still less of its companion the sun (apparently able to exhibit even stronger credentials as a divine being); who at the same time, since he fully respects the Athenian laws, might feel committed to the prescription of any religious νόμος<sup>49</sup>; but who could feel no consideration for the attached superstitions that his fellow Athenians might consider inherent to their own religious νομίζειν (such as the idea of the moon sending messages to humanity by means of its occasional eclipses)<sup>50</sup>.

The kind of consideration that the Athenians give to their gods is not for Socrates to share: hence his lack of formal profession of faith in the divine nature of sun and moon. But there is no reason why he could not share something different, a far wider attitude common to all human beings. In general, non-philosophical terms, to conceive of sun and moon as divine beings expresses the idea that basic conditions of life, such as transition of day and night, succession of seasons, time itself, must be enacted by entities which, being beyond human control, can only be divine (anybody demoting those cosmic guardians to stone and earth denies that the world guarantees or entails any regularity, or regulation). Later on, by his prayer to the Sun at daybreak in the *Symposium*, the Platonic Socrates resorts to a current devotional pattern in order to express his acknowledgement of the need for a universal structure; and in the *Gorgias* he approvingly quotes the theory that men and gods, as well as sun and

<sup>47</sup> Pl. *Apol.* 35b9-d8, in part. d2-4: σαφῶς γὰρ ἄν, εἰ πείθοιμι ὑμᾶς καὶ τῷ δεῖσθαι βιαζοίμην ὁμωμοκότας, θεοὺς ἄν διδάσκοιμι μὴ ἡγείσθαι ὑμᾶς εἶναι, καὶ ἀτεχνῶς κατηγοροίην ἄν ἐμαυτοῦ ὡς θεοὺς οὐ νομίζω.

<sup>48</sup> As noted by Stokes 1997, 167. Socrates’ utterance is a speech-act reasserting his *nomizein*: νομίζω τε γάρ [scil.θεοῦς], ὃ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, ὡς οὐδεὶς τῶν ἐμῶν κατηγορῶν (35d6-7). Socrates’ basic idea that it is impossible to be pious without being just is formally stated in the *Euthyphro*, and is explicitly qualified as the main argument that Socrates could oppose to Meletus’ charge of ἄσέβεια (12e1-4).

<sup>49</sup> This specific point is made by Brickhouse-Smith 2000, 99 and 112 (n.78, with additional reff.)

<sup>50</sup> An idea that notoriously contributed to the final destruction of the Athenian army in Sicily in 413 B.C.: Thuc. 7.50.4 (cf. the comments of Vlastos 1991, 160-61 on the episode). On the comic mood, the very conclusion of Aristophanes’ *Clouds* pits a similarly vulgar kind of veneration against Socrates’ asserted atheism: Socrates deserves death because he investigates the «moon’s ass»: v. 1507.

moon, belong to one same *kosmos*, to an order which is both physical and ethical<sup>51</sup>. In the *Apology*, when specifying that the belief in the divinity of sun and moon is shared by all men, Socrates can simply mean that the feeling of the sheer necessity of a cosmic order is common to all human beings. Whether such feelings are by themselves able to produce identification of the authentic ('real') deities is of course another matter (Socrates is not made in the least to assert that sun and moon are full-status deities *because* they are universally thought to be such<sup>52</sup>). But, in such an elliptic form, Socrates' reference to the two most common objects of religious veneration can be read as being fully coherent with his profession of faith in a *themis* which establishes truth as the supreme value for men and gods alike<sup>53</sup>. The synecdoche supporting the assertion that to disbelieve in the divine nature of sun and moon amounts to the ultimate proof of atheism thus appears to have some justification; although, as it will look obvious by now, much more in Socrates' than in Meletus' mind.

At 26b8-e5, the text suggests these implications by means of its very opacity. Omission thus appears as a deliberate authorial choice. It is functional to the plot, since it gives the protagonist a free hand in dealing with the charge of 'integral atheism' by further dismantling his opponent's credibility. It is effective in stressing the exceptional nature of Socratic *sophia* and piety in respect both of current 'learned' and 'popular' ideas, while building precisely on the universal and sincere belief that an orderly *kosmos* is indeed an existential necessity. It points to the opposition between the rationally and ethically worthless religious νομίζειν of Socrates' fellow-citizens and Socrates' own life-long effort to impart consistency to his epistemic, ethical and religious ideas. Far from deliberately opposing current forms of

<sup>51</sup> *Gorg.* 507e6-508a4: φασὶ δ'οἱ σοφοί, ὃ Καλλίκλεις, καὶ οὐρανὸν καὶ γῆν καὶ θεοὺς καὶ ἀνθρώπους τὴν κοινωνίαν συνέχειν καὶ φιλίαν καὶ κοσμιότητα καὶ σωφροσύνην καὶ δικαιοσύνην, καὶ τὸ ὅλον τοῦτο διὰ ταῦτα κόσμον καλοῦσιν, ὃ ἑταίρε, οὐκ ἀκοσμίαν οὐδὲ ἀκολασίαν. Sun and moon, here, are apparently not included within the 'gods' in general (the *sophoi* whose theories Socrates endorses are probably the Pythagoreans: Dodds 1959, 337-38). In the *Apology*, the notion of an orderly *kosmos* is expressed by the subjacent idea of the sovereignty of moral values on gods and men alike, and does not extend to the specification that nature is providentially designed for man's benefit, which belongs to Xenophon's Socrates: see *Xen. Mem.* 1.4.4 ff., 4.3.3 ff.

<sup>52</sup> This might even look ironical to a reader recalling the 'relativist' evaluation of those two 'gods' which is expressed by *Ar. Pax* 406-11: sun and moon are recognized as deities by the Barbarians, but *certainly* not by the Hellenes (*Plat. Crat.* 397c8-d1 confirms that «nowadays» such worship belongs to «many of the Barbarians», after having being originally widespread among the Hellenes)... Is there an allusion here, via the possible echo of Aristophanes' comic utterance, to the idea that no *individual* god is universally recognized as such? If there is one, it would support Socrates' point: what should be recognized (νομιζόμενος, in this case) is the existence, not of God X or Y, but of the rule of divinity as such.

<sup>53</sup> Cf *Gorg.* 508a6-7: one same principle acts as the «great ruler» both in the divine and human sphere: ἡ ἰσότης ἡ γεωμετρικὴ καὶ ἐν θεοῖς καὶ ἐν ἀνθρώποις μέγα δύναται.

authentic piety, the Platonic Socrates is described as building on unarticulated but universal religious feelings in order to elaborate his idiosyncratic religious posture, which recasts authentic piety into the imperative to foster rational and ethical order, and divinity into the source of the search for rational knowledge. In the *Apology*, those complex meanings are also suggested by letting Socrates ask that most direct, although peculiar, question about some of his supposed beliefs, and then omit any direct answer. To say and not to say is one hallmark of Socratic irony; this time it is the reader who could be made wiser by it.

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*Abstract*

When refuting the charge of impiety, Socrates challenges Meletus to specify whether or not he is convinced that Socrates denies the divinity of sun and moon. Meletus' answer gives Socrates the opportunity to distance himself from Anaxagoras' "atheistic" theories, without however formally asserting any explicit belief of his in the divine nature of the two celestial bodies. This apparent omission with its resulting ambiguity can be read as the product of a deliberate choice: Plato's authorial strategy in the *Apology* aims at stressing Socrates' authentic but at the same time unconventional religiosity. At the same time, it also suggests that Socrates' refusal to be involved in "science" implies some fairly definite evaluation about the uselessness of this sort of research.

*Filosofia antica-Socrate-Platone*