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Recognizing the Gods of Socrates

Mark L. McPherran

Readers of Plato's *Apology* are often puzzled by Socrates' defense against the formal charge that he does not recognize the civic gods of Athens (26b-8a): why does he interrogate Meletus instead of addressing the charge directly? Meletus' response to this move is even more puzzling, for instead of pursuing Socrates on the seemingly more straightforward and plausible reading of the charge as one of heterodoxy, Meletus appears to allow himself to be diverted into interpreting it to be a less-plausible one of global atheism. Why does he make this switch, and how might Socrates have defended himself against the straightforward reading if Meletus had not allowed himself to be 'diverted'? That is to say: might Meletus have plausibly cited any of Socrates' beliefs or behaviors in order to obtain a conviction that was true — or truer — to the facts? My aim in this necessarily brief paper is to sketch out an answer to only this last question, asking — in essence — whether Socrates was guilty in some sense of the nonrecognition charge.

To investigate this issue is not simply an exercise in imaginary forensics: irrespective of how Meletus might have reformulated the initial charge under Socratic examination, the accusation of nonrecognition would stand in the minds of some jurors as still requiring rebuttal. Recall, then, the first charge, which reads: (1) 'The gods the state recognizes, [Socrates] does not recognize (οὐς μὲν ἡ πόλις νομίζει θεοὺς οὐ νομίζων).' There is controversy over the meaning of this phrase in part because of the unclarity of the crucial term 'θεοὺς νομίζειν'.¹ Does Socrates' alleged

¹ See, e.g., Brickhouse and Smith (1989 [30-4]); Fahr; and Yunis (63-6).

failure 'to recognize' (νομίζειν) the gods of Athens mean he is charged with *nonconformance* to the expected religious *practices* of the Athenian *polis* or with *not believing* that the gods of the civic cult exist?² The best gloss on 'νομίζειν' is, arguably, one that captures its essential link to 'νόμος'. Assuming that linkage, 'νομίζειν' bears the broad meaning 'to accept or practice as normal',³ and so 'θεοὺς νομίζειν' should be understood to mean 'to accept the gods in the normal fashion', indicating that both customary religious behavior *and* the set of attitudes that are conventionally taken to underlie such behavior may be implied. However, since Socrates never addresses the question of his cult-practice during his defense but focuses on the identity and nature of his *beliefs* and what he purportedly *teaches*, it seems that the primary aspect of 'θεοὺς νομίζειν' at issue in the case of Socrates is its attitudinal, cognitive component (*Ap* 26b8-d5, 29a1-4, 35d2-5).⁴

So, then, what does it mean to believe in the existence of the civic gods of Athens? What are the core beliefs one must have in order to conform to the everyday 'belief-demands' of Athenian *polis*-religion? At a minimum, it is clear that one must believe (1) that there exist gods denoted by the names of those gods who enjoy publicly funded cults — for example, Zeus Polieus and Athena Polias; (2) that these gods pay attention to the affairs of humans (e.g., taking notice of oath breaking, etc.), and (3) that there exist relationships of reciprocal exchange between humans and these gods such that these gods recognize an obligation (in some sense) to respond to prayers accompanied by sacrificial offerings, that is, are gods with a *do ut des* cult.⁵ Where, then, does Socrates stand in respect of these three commitments and the gods they imply?

It is likely that Socrates satisfied condition (1), believing that in some genuine sense the civic gods of Athens *exist* (e.g., that there exists a supernatural being denoted by 'Athena Polias'). For first, the rhetorical effect left in place by Socrates' invocation at *Apology* 26b8-9 — 'before the gods about whom we now speak' — and his many positive references

2 See, e.g., Burnet (184).

3 Yunis (65); Dover (203); Fahr (15-17, 107, 138-9)

4 See also Yunis (39, 63-6); Fahr (153-7); Brickhouse and Smith (1989 [31]); Connor (50, n. 10); Versnel (125); Derenne (217-23), and Reeve (78).

5 Yunis (42-5, 50-8)

to 'the god' who speaks through the Pythia at Delphi (viz., Delphic Apollo) who has ordered him to philosophize with the Athenians — disobedience to whom he thinks *would* convict him of religious nonconformity (29a) — provide good prima facie evidence that Socrates would acknowledge an intellectual commitment to the existence of the gods of Athens. Next, at *Apology* 28a2-4 Socrates declares that he is 'not unjust after the substance of Meletus' indictment.' This is tantamount to an assertion that he is innocent not only of the interpretation of the first formal charge as one of global atheism, but also of its straightforward reading as a charge of nonrecognition of the gods of Athens. Finally, Socrates would have taken any number of civic oaths during the course of his life, all of which call the civic gods as witnesses: the ephebic oath, those taken as a juror, as a member of the Boulê (*Mem* 1 1 18) and as a litigant at the ἀνάκρισις of his own trial.⁶ These observations and others all testify to a Socratic belief in the existence of the civic gods. The above also give good support to his holding the view that (2) the gods pay attention in some way to human conduct.

It is with the final core belief concerning reciprocity (3) that we encounter real difficulties. Besides popular recognition of the view that the gods provided moral reciprocity by visiting retribution on those who violate divinely sanctioned norms of behavior, this reciprocity was seen to be exemplified by the sort of human and divine 'commerce' that involves the sacrifice of goods with the hope or expectation of maintaining or obtaining divine favor.⁷ But such hopes and expectations may appear to conflict with Socratic morality, since there is ample evidence that for Socrates the gods are perfectly wise, hence, in harmony with one another and perfectly moral, and so do the right thing in a fashion uninfluenced by sacrifice. For clearly, although such scrupulous gods can serve as moral enforcers, it seems a live issue whether they can also be squared with the popular portrait of the gods as capricious rule breakers who can be influenced to 'help friends and harm enemies' by means of material sacrifice. Gregory Vlastos, for example, holds that Socrates' blanket-moralizing of the gods amounts to a complete rejection of the old myths, something that would outrage almost all Athenian

6 JACT (185); Mikalson (85, 94); Rhodes (36); Yunis (26, 43, 52); Watson (8). However, see Kraut (1983 [152, n. 1]).

7 Lloyd-Jones (156-64)

citizens.⁸ Opposed to this, however, is the view championed by Tom Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith, who join John Burnet, A.E. Taylor, and others in holding that Socrates' confession of skepticism concerning the traditional tales of conflict contains 'nothing to shock Athenian sentiment.'⁹

To begin to resolve this conflict it first needs to be emphasized that in view of Athenian legal procedures, Socrates' practical, legal guilt before the court on the nonrecognition charge would be very much a matter of the meaning each juror placed on the phrase 'gods of the state'. If Socrates believes nothing that contradicts a belief in the existence of the gods of Athens *under the description placed on them by these individuals* then he ought to be found innocent, but if he disbelieves key attributes taken *by them* to be referentially essential, he is guilty of the charge (so construed). On the other hand, we also need to remember that most Greeks were more tolerant of what we would call heterodoxy than many later, belief-focused religionists, having no revealed texts with the status of a Bible and no systematic doctrines enforced by a trained, organized clergy.¹⁰ A Pindar could speak plainly of 'Homer's lies,' (*Nem* 7 23) without incurring legal sanctions, and we have no evidence of anyone being prosecuted for disbelieving the stories of Homer or Hesiod.¹¹ For most Athenians of the end of the fifth century, anyway, it would have been no great shock to hear expressions of doubt or outright denial concerning the poets' tales of divine capriciousness or immorality. They had been exposed to such criticisms for years by thinkers such as Solon, Xenophanes, Heraclitus, and Euripides, none of whom appear to have suffered from religiously based persecution.¹²

Given these considerations, Socrates initially appears to be in the clear. However, turning from his theology to his moral theory one must note that his insistence that — contrary to the traditional *lex talionis*

8 Vlastos (1991), 165-7; Tate (3-5), Nilsson (275); Beckman (41)

9 Brickhouse and Smith (1989 [125-6, and n. 23]), (1994 [Ch. 6.2]); Burnet (115); A.E. Taylor (158-9); Reeve (84, n. 14)

10 Burkert (8); Dodds (1973), 140-4; Lloyd-Jones (134); Taylor (1911), 15-16

11 Lloyd-Jones (134); Burnet (114); Dodds (1973), 141-3; Kerferd (167); Momigliano (566); Taylor (1926), 147; Yunis (39)

12 Lloyd-Jones (130)

conception of justice — it is never just to inflict evil on another or to aid the cause of injustice, means that the negative side of retributive justice ('evil for evil') and the use of barter of favors (*do ut des*) contrary to justice must be rejected as coherent features of true justice.¹³ Thus, and since Socrates' principles of justice extend universally to even the gods, his 'socratized' gods are not simply just in a traditionally recognizable way, but are also forbidden from exacting *lex talionis* retribution against one another and humans, and cannot respond to *do ut des* petitionary sacrifice *irrespective of the demands of Socratic justice*. So, then, although there are no reasons to think that Socrates' disbelief in divine enmity per se would put him at risk of disbelief in the civic gods even as popularly understood, I want to argue that with his rejection of the negative side of the *lex talionis* and some of the propitiatory *do ut des* motivations underlying traditional cult, Socrates' doctrine of divine justice presents a genuine threat to the civic religion of Athens.

Vlastos, again, provides the extreme version of this threat by portraying Socrates' conceptions of piety and justice as demanding *only* that we serve the gods though the improvement of our souls, gods who are by their very nature 'relentlessly beneficent' since completely good.¹⁴ As he sees it, this thoroughly undermined the bulk of popular Greek religion, founded as it was on the notion that the gods can be 'bribed' with a gift of sacrifice to do some 'good which without that gift their own will for good would not have prompted them to do.'¹⁵ To determine the extent to which this accurately captures Socrates' relation to traditional religious practice we need to ask, then, the extent to which its core presupposition of divine reciprocity included the notion that the gods can be influenced — and reliably influenced — to do our wills for both good and ill.

As with so much of Greek religion, the evidence seems contradictory, suggesting that the Greeks were of two minds concerning the susceptibility of the gods to petitionary sacrifice. On the one hand there are pieces of text that support the idea that the gods can simply be counted on to respond to material, sacrificial requests, even irrespective of the justice

13 See Vlastos (1991 [Ch. 7]).

14 Vlastos (1991), 176

15 *Ibid.*

of the *talio*. At *Iliad* IX 497-501, for example, Phoenix assures Achilles that the gods' wrath *can* be diverted by means of sacrifice. Likewise, Medea feels confident that she can exact 'just repayment with God's help,' (*E Med* 803) against Jason, even though that means his just 'repayment' for infidelity is three innocent lives taken 'impiously' (796). Next, at *Republic* 364b-c we learn that there were wandering priests who promised to expiate past wrongdoing or to harm enemies — justly or not — by means of sacrifice; and the following section (364e-6b) indicates that there are some who might believe those poets who hold that the gods can even be 'swerved' from punishing wrong-doers by getting a 'cut of their ill-gotten take'. Along the same lines there is the mention at *Laws* 885b-e of those many people who require proof that the gods are 'too good to be diverted from the path of justice' by gifts (cf. 888a-d, 908e-9d), which strongly suggests that such requests were common.¹⁶ At 948b-e Plato's Athenian even claims that the creed of the *majority* is that

if they pay the gods a trifle in the way of sacrifice and flattery, they [the gods] will lend their help in vast frauds and deliver the sinner from all sorts of heavy penalties. (948c4-7)

Against this view, however, one must also set the tradition dating from at least Hesiod which emphasized that the size and splendor of a sacrifice is only of use in displaying and advancing one's social status and is thoroughly *irrelevant* to the gods.¹⁷ It is also important to note that a good deal of sacrificial activity was not aimed so much at obtaining specific goods or evils as it was for simply maintaining an ordered relationship with the gods and ensuring their general good will, a will that — it was often agreed — could not be *reliably* influenced by such activity.¹⁸

So what emerges from this too-brief consideration is a sense that there existed side-by-side with the more amoral, mercantile aspects of Greek religion another strand that emphasized the worshiper's inner motiva-

16 Note also the prayer cited in Parker (258).

17 Burkert (274); Mikalson (100-102); Parker (259); Yunis (51); Hes *Erga* 336; quoted in *Mem* 1 3 3; cf. *Alcibiades II* 149b; *EN* 1164b5ff.

18 Mikalson (89); Parker (259)

tion, his or her determination to carry out the traditional rites in a timely and scrupulous manner, and so a reciprocity based on one's inner propriety and justice, not on one's pocketbook.¹⁹ In view of the human (and surely Greek) propensity toward self-assertion in almost everything, however, this nonmercantile attitude was in all likelihood an intermittent, minority phenomenon. For most Athenians, most of the time, gods who exist but who do not eventually and in some concrete fashion *respond* 'to sacrifices fulfilled or oaths forsworn' — and sometimes without a strict regard for justice (especially when conceived of Socratically) are 'no gods at all.'²⁰ To what extent, then, do Socrates' views support or undermine the notion of reciprocity in both mercantile and non-mercantile senses?

It seems to me that the evidence indicates that Socrates is committed to a rejection of the *purely* mercantile senses of sacrificial cult: his gods cannot care about any material sacrifice per se, and Socratically-unjust imprecations are clearly ineffective on his account. He is, however, able to retain the internal, non-mercantile dimension of the tradition, emphasizing the petitioner's intentionality over his or her particular requests or material gift-offering. Thus, Socrates can admit of reciprocity between gods and humans, sanctioning our requesting of the gods that our and others' good be furthered, demanding that we *honor* these gods in *some* fashion, and with a divine response quite possible (see, e.g., *Mem* 4 3 13), while not making it a strict *requirement* of piety that the honoring involve a material sacrifice. He also revolutionizes the traditional notions of piety and 'honoring', recasting them in terms that emphasize the priority of acting justly and engaging in philosophical 'soul therapy' over petitionary prayer and sacrifice.²¹ Socrates is thus not — contra Vlastos — a *wholesale* threat to the actual *practice* of cult, but to the inner, narrow self-aggrandizing motivations of many of its practitioners: those who give priority to *material* sacrifice in the cause of particular external-good gain and neglect the form of 'belief-sacrifice' — self-examination — mandated by Apollo. For certain jurors then — jurors who could not embrace a religious life informed by motivations quite beyond their

19 Yunis (54-5)

20 Yunis (43; 54, n. 35); cf. Vlastos (1991 [166]); Connor (56).

21 See McPherran (1985).

usual ones — Socrates could have been recognized (by those with eyes to see) as a genuine threat to cult *as they conceived of it*. Let me elaborate on these claims.

According to Socrates, from perfectly good gods we have nothing to fear (*Mem* 4 3 5-7) and many goods they will simply give to us at the right moment, actively requested for or not (*Ap* 41c8-d2; *Euthphr* 15b1-2; *Mem* 1 4 5-18, 4 3 3-17). Moreover, and when it is consistent with the demands of Socratic justice, they may reward and aid us *in response* to our development of justice in our souls, something that can be fostered by engaging in honorific and virtue-requesting prayer and sacrifice. Socrates' gods, of course, *need* nothing from us (see, e.g., *Euthphr* 13c), and since they cannot be at odds with one another *or* with justice, they cannot be magically influenced to serve as vengeful *lex talionis* helpers, especially when our plans involve the commission of Socratic injustices (cf. *Rep* 364a-c; *Laws* 905e).²² It should be clear, then, that with the deities of Socrates we have few specific or *materially rewarding* deals to strike: for beyond the sincere, general imprecation that one be aided in pursuing virtue, there are few requests — accompanied by sacrifices or not — that all-wise deities can be expected to respond to, since *we* can never know if a particular request would be virtue-aiding and since the gods have no use for and no need of material things (see, e.g., *Mem* 1 3 2). Surely *this* implication of Socrates' moral theory cuts straight at the root of some of the popular traditional motivations underlying many cult practices. To expand on this worry, consider the Socratic assessment of that central feature of Greek religion, curse imprecation.

It is relatively clear that Athenians in the time of Socrates took it for granted that curses were an effective means of causing others harm — harms such as the infliction of pain, illness, and death, and the loss of material goods — and that a good number had few qualms about employing them.²³ Now causing others these kinds of harms might be acceptable in at least *some* instances for a true Socratic. Athenian law formally recognized curses as a way of promoting justice, Socrates seems

22 Otherwise, piety would be the rejected *ἐμπορία* of *Euthphr* 14e6-7, and the gods mere 'evil moneylenders,' (*Alc II* 149e4-5); cf. Reeve (68).

23 See Watson (Ch. 1, esp. 1 7), who notes that it was a piece of conventional wisdom that curses were inevitably fulfilled; cf., e.g., *A Ch* 692, *Th* 655, *Pr* 910-11; *Hes Erga* 242 ff. See also Burkert (75).

to accept Athenian law and the idea that wrong-doers should 'pay the penalty,' (*Euthphr* 8d-e), and we never see Socrates explicitly object to *polis*-authorized punishments per se, even though they were often characterized as cases of legal 'harm to enemies' and even though he ends up facing punishment himself.²⁴ In fact, many curses seem *prima facie* Socratically acceptable in this way, since such maledictions were commonly thought to work by informing a god of some *injustice*, enrolling the god in one's cause; e.g., the curse of Amyntor at *Il* IX 444-61.²⁵ Although there was, apparently, a preference for seeking the help of the gods of the Underworld when making maledictions (e.g., Hades, Hecate, Persephone, and [esp.] the Erinyes) even Olympians with civic cult were thought to be involved in the centrally-important task of fulfilling curse-imprecations: Zeus (*S Ph* 1183), Demeter (*Ar Th* 295-305), or all the gods (*S OT* 269) could be called upon to fulfill one's retaliatory aims.²⁶ But here, clearly, is a first incompatibility: Socrates' gods (esp. Zeus Polieus) have no need to be made aware of injustices since they already know everything (see, e.g., *Mem* 1 1 19) and — being perfectly just — have no need to be 'enrolled' in any just cause. Secondly, the justice most commonly appealed to is that of the negative, particularized *talio*; for example, 'may those who killed me meet a like fate, O Zeus, god of guests,'²⁷ and Socrates rejects this kind of 'evil-for-evil' payback (preferring education to physical harms) and sanctions the use of physical harms only when it is clear that this is not evil itself, but beneficially just. Moreover, it seems clear that the *talio* invoked in many curses is of that particularly objectionable sort which confuses personal revenge motivated by a desire to humiliate with justice conceived of as a rectification of debt, and where the retribution envisaged includes harms, often gratuitous harms, to innocents (e.g., an enemy's children or an opponent's chariot

24 See Watson (Ch. 1, esp. 1 7, 1 11), who notes, e.g., the provisional curse at the start of the Assembly against potential deceivers (8) and Plato's mention of 'curses in accordance with the laws' at *Laws* 871b (21). On legal 'harm to enemies', see Blundell (Ch. 2, esp. 53-7).

25 Watson (Ch. 1)

26 See Watson (Ch. 1, esp. 1 14); Zaidman and Pantel (41-5).

27 Watson (44); see her Ch. 1 12 for further exposition on the prominence of the *lex talionis* connection with cursing.

driver).²⁸ Socrates, then, seems bound to take at least a skeptical if not an outraged view of many conventionally 'just' curses. The final incompatibility is more obvious: many curses were considered by even their makers to be cases of seeking an unfair advantage over an opponent, some aiming to procure Socratic harms (causing someone to be worse off in their soul by depriving them of their reason), and might be altogether unprovoked. Surely Socrates — for whom unjust actions pose harms for both agent and object (e.g., *Ap* 30c-d) — must reject the collaboration of the gods in such imprecations.²⁹ Altogether, then, this central practice of Greek religion seems extremely hard to square with Socratic moral theology.

It should be clear by this point, then, that Socrates had in essence proposed important reformations of traditional religion: take away the conflicts of the myths and you defuse their psychological power, take away the expectations of particular *material* rewards and physical protections in cult, and you disconnect the religion of everyday life from its roots. Moreover, and as if that weren't enough of a challenge, Socrates also raised the stakes for living a life of piety considerably by making its final measure the state of one's philosophically purified soul.³⁰ he thus

28 See Blundell (50-1, 54-5), who notes that litigation was often treated as legalized revenge, and that the *talio* was recognized to clash with other moral norms (e.g., wronging others as a favor to friends [*Rhet* 1373a16ff.]); Watson (Ch. 1), notes the effects on innocents, the gratuitous and/or disproportionate infliction of pain some curses called for (e.g., one's entire lineage wiped out for breaking a contract [cf. *Ar Th* 349 ff.; *Laws* 908e-9d]), and the efficacy of even unprovoked curses; see esp. 11-12, 32-6, and 41-2.

29 See, e.g., *Rep* 364b-c, which testifies to the belief that certain 'priests and soothsayers' can use their spells to constrain the gods to help a person harm his enemy unjustly (cf. *Laws* 933c-e); see also the complaint of Hippolytus that he is struck by an unjust curse (*E Hipp* 1347-9). See also Watson (Ch. 1, esp. 1 3-4, 1 11-14), who notes the use of curse-tablets (*defixiones*) by litigants to impair the mental faculties of adversaries (42); cf. Blundell (50); *Pal* 18; and *Rep* 364c. It is, finally, hard to believe that Socrates could endorse the idea — present in most provisional curses (Watson [50]) — that the violation of a condition spelled out in the curse would evoke the *anger* of the gods, since giving way to that emotion is associated by Socrates with lack of wisdom (*Prt* 352a-c; cf. *Ap* 34b-d; *Euthphr* 7b-c; *Phd* 113e-14b) and connected by him with Euthyphro's quarreling, nonsocratic gods (*Euthphr* 7b).

30 Cf. Parker (254), who notes that Greek discouraged individualism, a preoccupation with inner states, and the belief that intentions matter more than actions.

represented a significant challenge to a crucial aspect of traditional Athenian life and a dangerous threat to those unprepared to understand or change.³¹ In a limited sense, then, it is true that the ethical transformation of the old gods wrought by Socrates was 'tantamount to the destruction of the old gods, the creation of new ones,'³² especially in the way he left religious ritual without *all* its former features and warrants.

If this is right, though, how could Socrates have affirmed the existence of the gods of the state? Can Socrates acknowledge *these gods* and at the same time reject the stories of conflict, justice-indifferent cultic 'bribery', and curse-enforcement connected up with them? I think we can answer in the affirmative.

Socrates has the conceptual resources to maintain that such popular allegations do not — contrary to the view of the mistaken many — specify any essential features of the *real* 'gods of the state'. To those who protest that they know full well of what gods they speak, Socrates can hold in typical fashion that they simply do not fully understand themselves and their beliefs (e.g., *Grg* 482a-c). Rather, they harbor commitments (e.g., those affirming the wisdom of the gods) that — if time only allowed — he could use to elicit other beliefs that would elenctically demonstrate that they 'do not agree with themselves', but rather with him, and so in fact do acknowledge the same gods as Socrates.

Philosophical charity motivates this answer, but there is also a piece of text that indicates that this is Socrates' own understanding of his situation. At the very end of his defense speech, just where we *should* expect to see a final affirmation of his innocence, Socrates informs the jury that if he were to say anything irrelevant and/or deceptive that would lead them to acquit him contrary to what the law demands — despite that being the correct thing to do — he would be convicting himself of impiety and unbelief in 'the gods', and would also be guilty of enticing the jurors into impious behaviour as well (34b-5d). He concludes:

31 I therefore agree with Kraut (1995), who observes that Brickhouse and Smith (1994 [Ch. 6 2]), do not acknowledge the way in which Socratic piety put traditional cult-practices into doubt.

32 Vlastos (1991 [166]); cf. Connor (56).

So do not deem that I ... should practice such things before you which I hold to be neither noble nor just nor pious, and certainly, by Zeus, above all not when I am being prosecuted for impiety by Meletus here! For plainly, if I should persuade and force you by begging, after you have sworn an *oath*, I would be teaching you *to hold that there are no gods*, and in making my defense speech I would simply be accusing myself of *not believing in gods*. But that is *far* from being so. For *I do recognize* [νομίζω] *them ... as none of my accusers do.* (35c7-d7; adapted from West and West translation; my emphasis)

In context, all that Socrates needs to offer here to defend himself against Meletus' reformulated charge of atheism is an affirmation that he believes that gods of some sort exist. And this he does, with both the rhetorical effect of his vigorous denial that he teaches atheism and his remark that 'I do recognize them' amounting to an assertion that, in his own view, gods do exist. But such remarks in this context *also* rhetorically imply belief in the existence of the gods 'of whom we've been speaking' (26b8-9) — that is, the gods of the Athenian *polis*. This implication is also reinforced by Socrates' explicit mention of Zeus and the reference to Zeus Horkios (Zeus of Oaths) implicit in Socrates' reminder to the jurors of the connection between oath breaking and atheism. Jurors at the time took an oath to judge according to the *nomoi* of Athens, and Socrates' audience will be fully aware that these sanction and support the civic religion and that it is the *Zeus* of the civic religion who is charged with punishing oath breakers.³³ To encourage someone to break such an oath therefore would be to encourage disbelief in the gods sanctioned by the civic religion, and especially Zeus Horkios and Polieus. So when Socrates says that he is 'far' from attempting to do that, the obvious implication to be drawn by each juror — an implication so clear that Socrates, given his concern to tell only truths, could not allow to stand if he did not hold the implication himself — is that Socrates believes in the existence of Zeus Polieus and the other civic gods.

Notice too that although Socrates has thoroughly accomplished his aim of replying to the atheism charge once he says 'I do recognize them

33 The oath bound the jurors to 'hold no grudges and not be influenced, but ... judge according to the laws,' (see *And Myst* 91); MacDowell (43-4).

[the gods],’ he doesn’t stop there, but goes on to contrast his position with that of the opposition by claiming that he recognizes the gods in a way(s) superior to that of his accusers. Now Socrates cannot mean to assert that his accusers are insincere when they profess belief in the existence of either gods generically understood or the gods of the state as *they* understand that phrase.³⁴ So the most plausible interpretation of Socrates’ remark is to see it as claiming that his accusers do not believe consistently in and by their prosecution do not act consistently in respect of the *real* civic gods, gods that get accurately referred to only when references to their alleged enmities, ignorance, and responses to justice-indifferent material cult are omitted from the meaning one intends by asserting ‘I recognize the gods of the state.’ It is such thoroughly moral gods that Socrates believes in, and all his beliefs and actions concerning them are seemingly consistent with one another; whereas Meletus — as Socrates demonstrates — is prone to entertaining contradictory theological notions, encourages disbelief in the gods by persuading the jurors to judge without regard for the facts of his case, and fails to pursue the truly pious task of doing philosophy. Hence, and in contrast to Socrates, it is Meletus who must be said to not really or adequately believe in the gods of Athens!

Nevertheless, there *was* a threat to the civic cult in Socrates, even if few of the jurors detected it. Hence, Socrates was guilty as charged of nonrecognition in a sense — the popular sense — of what it means to ‘not recognize the gods’ *if* one tunes that charge finely enough so that it concerns the motivations for and expectations surrounding cult. Whether such formulations would have still produced a conviction is, of course, a puzzle for those skilled at the analysis of counterfactuals. What remains, I trust, is the recognition that the conceptual changes Socrates instituted had theological ramifications whose effects not only

34 And surely Socrates is not saying that he sacrifices more scrupulously than his prosecutors.

I thank my commentator at the Arizona Colloquium on Socrates, Asli Gocer, and my fellow conference participants as well, for their comments on an earlier version of this paper. I am also grateful to Nick Smith for his helpful commentary on a pre-Arizona version of the paper, presented to the Workshop on Reason and Religion in Fifth-Century Greece, University of Texas, Austin, September, 1996. A revised version of this paper has, finally, been incorporated into section 3.4 of my book, *The Religion of Socrates*.

impinged on Plato and the other Socratics, but through them, profoundly shaped antiquity and the history of Western religious thought.

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