

Natural (A)theology

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A significant development of late fifth century thought, I argue in the paper, is the idea that the existence and workings of the gods can be understood from observation of natural phenomena, which is accompanied by the development of modes of causal reasoning from the visible to the invisible. I claim that both the underlying assumption – that one can extrapolate from nature (including human life) to divinity – and the ways this is brought to bear on observation – through counterfactual reasoning concerning the involvement or existence of the gods – are novel, or at least newly important in late fifth century intellectual culture. Recognizing this shift in thinking about divinity allows us to better grasp both the rise of atheistic or “atheological” arguments and the emergence of ideas of providentialism and natural teleology. The two strands, I argue, are dialectically related, and although we cannot securely reconstruct them in historical terms, by attending to their relation we can see the persistence and transformation of traditional concerns about divine justice. This broad movement in thinking about divinity, though, ultimately turns out to be motivated less by theological factors than by epistemological ones: a new relation to the evidence of the senses and to the sources of authoritative knowledge.

As far back as we can trace, Greek culture had broadly believed that the gods were present and active in nature and human life; the assumption pervades early Greek ritual, myth, and literature. In the fifth century, Greek tragedy became a central locus for thinking about the role of the gods, with characters frequently reflecting on divine involvement in the action, and individual gods appearing on stage. These gods could be inscrutable (think of the *Agamemnon* chorus’ “Hymn to Zeus”)¹ and they could be capricious (Aphrodite destroying Phaedra in order to get revenge on Hippolytus),² but there is no question that they are in control.³ There are occasions when their

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¹ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 160-66: “Zeus, whoever he may be, if this is dear to him to be called, I call on him by this name. For I cannot compare anything, weighing all things in balance, except with Zeus, if I must truly cast out the vain burden from my heart.”

² Euripides, *Hippolytus* 47-50: “Phaedra, though well-reputed, is destroyed nevertheless. For I do not value *her* suffering over not inflicting on my enemies such penalty as appears right to me.”

³ On gods in tragedy see Mikalson 1991; Parker 1997; Goldhill 2016.

guiding hand appears absent or unjust, to be sure, but this becomes grounds for questioning human worship, as when the chorus of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, fearing that wrongdoers are not being punished and oracles are not being fulfilled, famously asks "if such practices as these are held in honor, why should I dance?" (895-96: εἰ γὰρ αἱ τοιαῖδε πράξεις τίμιαί / τί δεῖ με χορεύειν;). Importantly, they do not question the existence or power of the gods, but rather the value of worshipping them – manifesting another important, and widespread expectation: that the gods are, or should be, just.⁴

While the human world was broadly taken to reflect the controlling hand of the gods, it is only in the late fifth century, I argue, that observation of nature and human events becomes the basis for fundamental statements about divinity. By "fundamental" I mean statements that relate to the nature of divinity, rather than to the particulars of a given situation. Greek culture had often reasoned, on the basis of oracles or portents, from natural phenomena to workings of the divine, but such extrapolations touch only incidental features of the divine world (the gods are angry, or they advise a particular course of action) rather than its basic constitution. Unlike the philosophical reasoning I will discuss, traditional modes of extrapolating about divinity from observation do not address or place into question fundamental assumptions about the gods: that they exist, are concerned with justice, and are involved in human existence. The philosophical reasoning I will discuss is distinct, moreover, in its secular quality, by which I mean simply that it is not the province of religious authorities like seers, but can be engaged in by all.⁵ The human world furnishes *any* observer with evidence for making reasoned statements concerning fundamental aspects of divinity. I argue that this is indicative not just of a new attitude toward the gods and ritual practice, but reflects a new epistemological orientation, which understands observation of natural phenomena as adequate grounds for human knowledge of the unseen.

The idea that we can understand the divine through observation of the human world is the basis of what will come to be called "natural theology" in Christianity, which argues for the existence of god on the basis of observation of nature.⁶ This mode of reasoning is associated in

⁴ Lloyd-Jones 1983 (first published 1971) is the classic statement of this point, arguing against developmental models of the idea of divine justice. See further, on early ideas of divine justice, Allan 2006. Both tend to elide the second part of my formulation, which is essential: the gods may or may not *be* just – different audiences may judge differently – but it is expected that they *should* be, and considered significant when they do not appear to be.

⁵ Kotwick forthcoming discusses the possibilities of human knowledge of the gods in Protagoras and the Derveni author.

⁶ Chignell and Pereboom 2020

modern thought with the European Enlightenment, and is given particularly influential form in William Paley's 1802 *Natural Theology*, which gives the famous example of finding a watch and reasoning, on the basis of its complexity, to the necessary or likely existence of a watchmaker. We know this argument today as the "intelligent design" hypothesis. Within ancient philosophy, David Sedley has traced the topic of "creationism," the idea that "the world's structure and contents can be adequately explained only by postulating ...a creator god," and shown this to be an important topic of discussion and debate from Anaxagoras onwards.⁷ Sedley locates a radical step in Socrates, who, he argues, introduces the idea of divine teleology, the notion that we can infer the existence of a creative divine intelligence from evidence in the natural world, elaborating the earliest extant "Argument from Design."⁸

I will return to the role of Socrates and Sedley's story later, but want to point out right now that this argument from design is based on the assumption I set out above, that the workings of divinity can be understood by induction from natural phenomena. And this opens the possibility – which Sedley does not explore – that the same kind reasoning can be used to disprove or dispute ideas of divinity, that there is a natural "atheology" to complement natural theology. And this is precisely what we find in the late fifth century. Indeed, I think there is good reason to see arguments from design as responses to atheistic and anti-providentialist claims, which employ the same mode of reasoning from observation of human culture to statements about divine existence. If this is right, then a somewhat different picture of late fifth century theology emerges from the one suggested by Sedley's narrative, less motivated by the novel ideas of Presocratic philosophy (and indeed, by natural scientific developments in general) than by the questions of justice and morality that had long preoccupied Greek thought about the gods.⁹ At the same time, I argue that there *is* genuine novelty in the way of reasoning concerning the gods on the basis of observation, and that this reflects a significantly new epistemological orientation that underpins both "scientific" and "religious" thought in the late fifth century. We see in this period an old theological discussion taken up under new epistemological premises.

⁷ Sedley 2007, xvii

⁸ Sedley 2007, 75–92; cf McPherran 1994

⁹ Guthrie 1971, 226 recognizes both strands present in sophistic thought about the gods, but I think understates the degree of continuity between the sophists and earlier thought. Kerferd 1981, 184 on the other hand, writes that the "sophists were doing no more than continuing the discussion along very much the same lines," which is not adequate to the novelty of the claims made.

I will begin by discussing this natural atheology (or negative natural theology), which is widely attested, and seems to be associated with the sophists broadly; then, I will turn to the strand of positive natural theology, which, at least in our extant sources, presents itself as a response to anti-providential reasoning concerning the gods. On this basis, we can plausibly, if speculatively, reconstruct some of the contours of the debate, even if it is probably impossible to attach secure names to the disputants. What I take to be most significant is not any one argument, but the persistence of questions of justice and the mode of reasoning about divinity on the basis of natural phenomena. This reflects, I argue, an important shift in the way that observation is thought to furnish evidence for knowledge of the gods. Protagoras' famous statement of agnosticism encapsulates this shift, explaining that "many things prevent me from knowing this [whether the gods exist or what form they have], its obscurity and the brevity of human life."¹⁰ Phenomena observable to humans, he asserts, do not furnish adequate grounds for reasoning about divinity.¹¹ Maybe even more scandalous than the statement's agnosticism is its implicit rejection of traditional methods of accessing truth about the gods, and its substitution of individual human capacities as the only means of knowledge (or measure?).¹²

Protagoras' statement assumes that individual capacities *should* dictate views on the gods and on the whole realm of the unseen. This assumption is very clearly not present in the great Presocratic cosmologies of Parmenides and Empedocles, who distinguish sharply between the deceptive evidence of the senses and the greater truth of being or the roots.¹³ It is arguably not even present in Anaxagoras, who, though pursuing a materialist astronomy based apparently on observation, nevertheless posits a non-observable *nous* as the creative force of the world – on unclear grounds, but (at least as far as our sources suggest) probably not reasoning from observable phenomena.¹⁴ Plato's Socrates famously criticizes Anaxagoras for leaving the way that *nous* orders the natural world obscure (*Phaedo* 97b-98c), which might locate this tension in Anaxagoras' thought between a speculative cosmology and a material account of phenomena (a tension, of

¹⁰ *περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι, οὐθ' ὡς εἰσὶν οὐθ' ὡς οὐκ εἰσὶν οὐθ' ὅποιοί τινες ἰδέαν· πολλὰ γὰρ τὰ κωλύοντά με εἰδέναι, ἢ τε ἀδηλόγητος καὶ βραχύς ὢν ὁ βίος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.* (B4 DK; D10 LM)

¹¹ Diogenes Laertius' list of Protagoras' books includes one intriguingly titled "On the things in Hades" (D1 LM; A1 DK: *Περὶ τῶν ἐν Ἅιδου*). Was the unseen (*α-εἶδον*) more broadly of interest?

¹² I am not yet sure how this comports with readings of the "man measure" fragment (B1 DK; D9 LM), but hope our discussion can help.

¹³ See in particular Parmenides B8 DK 50-52/D8 LM 55-57 and Empedocles B23 DK/D60 LM. This is not to deny that both also worked from observation – cf Graham 2013 – but there is at least a tension between their "scientific" investigations and their more speculative ones.

¹⁴ My formulations here are cautious because I don't feel confident of even this very approximate reconstruction.

course, that is present in Parmenides and Empedocles as well). In any case, Anaxagoras seems to have left a gap between “top-down” explanations of an ordering intellect and “bottom-up” material inductions. Atomism will be the first school of thought to decisively privilege the latter, material approach to an account of divinity, but it is hard to know where this fits historically, and the fifth-century evidence does not obviously reflect its influence.¹⁵ What we do find in late fifth-century texts are forms of natural theology, both in positive and negative formulations, which reason from the bottom up concerning divinity, drawing conclusions on the basis of observation of nature and the human world.

The naturalizing aspects of Anaxagoras’ thought on the gods clearly fed into a moral panic in Athens, and led to his prosecution for impiety in the 430s.¹⁶ But Anaxagoras’ naturalizing outlook could not have been the only aspect of this panic. Late fifth-century sources suggest that a moral atheism was at least as much a factor in novel ideas about the gods as such “scientific” atheism. This moral atheism confronts the failure of the gods to punish injustice by denying the existence of the gods, their involvement in human life, or their providential creation of the human world. Both of these strands, the scientific and moral, rely on observation in order to draw conclusions about the non-existence of the gods, and both appear to have expressed their conclusions in more or less indirect ways: we have no evidence that any of the “scientific” thinkers explicitly argued *against* belief in divinity, and the evidence for strong moral atheism is limited to drama.¹⁷ However, the challenge and danger of both these outlooks were clearly felt by the 420s. The Socrates of Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (originally performed in 423, though our extant version seems to be later) combines the two, naturalizing phenomena thought to be divine while presenting moral arguments against the existence of the conventional Olympians. The danger of his teachings, though, is presented primarily as a moral one, with broad implications for the family and civic community. In its concern with the justice of the gods, the moral strand of theology is broadly continuous with discussions of divinity reaching far back into the history of Greek culture, but it

¹⁵ Sedley 2007, 86, 90 speculates that natural theology may have developed as a response to atomism, but my argument below will suggest there are much readier opponents.

¹⁶ See Janko 2020 for a recent reevaluation of the evidence.

¹⁷ Prodicus’ approach addresses both strands, offering an account that naturalizes and historicizes belief in the existence of the gods and in their essential goodness. This probably also characterizes Democritus’ views: Vassallo 2018, 108–17 brings to bear new papyrus evidence on the point. Whether either actually drew explicitly atheistic conclusions is unclear.

becomes turbo-charged by the increasing prevalence of bottom-up modes of reasoning from observation, and specifically by an explosion of counterfactual argumentation.

Clouds portrays a Socrates whose eccentric theology (along with his broader philosophy) presents a danger to civic order. The work closes with the *phrontistêrion* on fire and its denizens fleeing in terror while Strepsiades urges, “pursue them, hit them, pelt them, for many things, but especially keeping in mind that they wronged the gods! [τοὺς θεοὺς ὡς ἠδίκουν]” (1508-9). “Wronging the gods” in *Clouds* is connected to Socrates’ denial that Zeus exists (367) and his installation of clouds in the central place of the pantheon. Socrates expresses his belief by a form of causal reasoning from the apparent to the unseen, using a form of argumentation, the *modus tollens*, that will be broadly significant in arguments for natural theology and atheology.¹⁸ The bare form of such arguments posits and rejects a thesis because one of its consequents is false (formally: “if A, then B; but not B, so not A”). In the late fifth century, these arguments often work by positing a divine cause for a given phenomenon and then observing that an expected effect is not observed, thus denying that the divine is a cause. They tend to isolate an aspect of conventional belief (in Socrates’ case, that Zeus punishes perjurers by the lightning bolt) and, by claiming that its consequences are not consistently observed (not all perjurers are struck by lightning, while trees and temples are), conclude that the belief is faulty. Here is an example from *Clouds*:

ΣΤ τοῦτον γὰρ δὴ φανερῶς ὁ Ζεὺς ἴησ’ ἐπὶ τοὺς ἐπιόρκους.
ΣΟ καὶ πῶς, ὦ μῶρε σὺ καὶ Κρονίων ὄζων καὶ βεκκεσέληνε,
εἴπερ βάλλει τοὺς ἐπιόρκους, δῆτ’ οὐχὶ Σίμων’ ἐνέπρησεν
οὐδὲ Κλεώνυμον οὐδὲ Θεώρον; καίτοι σφόδρα γ’ εἶσ’ ἐπιόρκοι.
ἀλλὰ τὸν αὐτοῦ γε νεῶν βάλλει καὶ Σούνιον, ἄκρον Ἀθηνέων,
καὶ τὰς δρυῖς τὰς μεγάλας, τί μαθῶν; οὐ γὰρ δὴ δρυῖς γ’ ἐπιόρκεϊ. (397-402)

Strepsiades. Clearly Zeus throws this [his thunderbolt] at perjurers.

Socrates. How could it be, you fool, reeking of the Cronia, you dotard, that if he really does hit perjurers, he hasn’t incinerated Simon or Cleonymus or Theorus? For they’re seriously perjurers! But then he hits his own temple and Sounion, the cape of Athens, and the great oaks – with what in mind? For an oak doesn’t commit perjury!

¹⁸ On early argumentative methods see Lloyd 1979, 66–98. Lloyd presents evidence for such argumentation as early as Anaximander, but shows a marked increase in Parmenides and his followers.

Socrates' argument against Zeus' existence is transparently bad logic, but it takes the form of more serious challenges to accepted beliefs about the gods that we find throughout sophistic culture. Observing that one expected aspect of divinity does not obtain, these arguments generalize to deny the existence or essential qualities of the gods.

There's reason, I think, to see *modus tollens* argumentation as associated with new intellectual trends in the late fifth century. A similar argument had appeared just before the above passage in *Clouds*, when Socrates explains that since rain is always accompanied by clouds, it must be that clouds – and not Zeus – make rain, since otherwise one would expect rain on a clear day (369-71). This would be an example of naturalizing or “scientific” atheism, which points to physical processes rather than the gods (or at least the conventional gods) as causal for observed phenomena.¹⁹ We witness another use of moral *modus tollens* argumentation in the Worse Argument's speech, this time to deny the existence of justice: if justice existed, Zeus would have been punished for imprisoning his father; but he was not; therefore, justice does not exist (904-6).²⁰ In all three cases, the arguments deny the role of conventional divinity by pointing to accepted or observable phenomena. Though we can only speculate on the major exponents of such *modus tollens* arguments (Zeno and Melissus seem likely candidates), they seem likely to have been used by philosophers in Athens to deny conventional beliefs – and specifically, beliefs about the gods.²¹

Modus tollens arguments about the gods are found in a range of late fifth-century contexts. The Aristophanic Socrates' argument against the existence of Zeus is formally similar to a speech in Euripides' *Bellerophon*, which denies the existence of all divinity on the grounds that there is no justice on earth:²²

φησὶν τις εἶναι δῆτ' ἐν οὐρανῷ θεός;
οὐκ εἰσὶν, οὐκ εἶσ', εἴ τις ἀνθρώπων θέλει
μὴ τῷ παλαιῷ μῶρος ὄν χρησθαι λόγῳ.
σκέψασθε δ' αὐτοί, μὴ ἐπὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖς λόγοις

¹⁹ Similarly, Socrates goes on to explain that thunder is not caused by Zeus but rather by the clouds crashing into one another, illustrating the process by analogy to the human belly thundering at any agitation when full of soup (386-93).

²⁰ Zeus' binding of his father seems to have been an acknowledged scandal and something of a *topos* for rhetoric: *Eumenides* 640-2, *Euthyphro* 5e., *Heracles* 1341-6, *Republic* 387b-c. cf. *Laws* 886c-d, where treatment of one's parents is the only aspect of ancient stories about the gods that the Athenian Stranger singles out for censure. There is probably an interesting story to be told about the persistence of this worry.

²¹ Lloyd 1979, 73–78 showing how both used *modus tollens* arguments to defend monism.

²² We cannot date *Bellerophon* precisely, but Aristophanes' *Acharnians* 426-9 mentions it, so we can set a *terminus ante quem* of the comedy's performance in 425.

γνώμην ἔχοντες, φήμ' ἐγὼ τυραννίδα
κτείνειν τε πλείστους κτημάτων τ' ἀποστερεῖν
ὄρκους τε παραβαίνοντας ἐκπορθεῖν πόλεις·
καὶ ταῦτα δρῶντες μᾶλλον εἰς' εὐδαίμονες
τῶν εὐσεβούντων ἡσυχῇ καθ' ἡμέραν. (F 286)

Does anyone say then that there are gods in heaven? They do not exist, they do not exist, if anyone wishes not to be a fool and believe an ancient story. Consider, you yourselves, not forming an opinion on the basis of my words. I say that tyranny kills very many and takes away possession and sacks cities in transgression of oaths. And doing these things they are happy more than those acting piously in quiet every day.

As in *Clouds*, the non-existence of justice on earth – taken to be the province of divinity – ostensibly debunks belief in the existence of the gods. An essential function of the gods is assumed to be the maintenance of justice among humans, so the lack of apparent justice on earth appears to undermine belief in divine existence and causality. This is of course not the only attitude one can take toward the problem of injustice going unpunished: the chorus of the *Oedipus Tyrannos* had doubted whether they should engage in ritual worship; another answer comes from the notion of ancestral fault as we see it in Herodotus, which claims that the punishment of the gods arrives generations after the offense.²³ The problem of divine injustice (or lack of divine justice) is not new, but the form of argument and the conclusions reached by Aristophanes' Socrates and Euripides' Bellerophon demonstrate the new way that questions of human justice could be taken as evidence for divine existence.

The fundamental link between justice and the existence of the gods is present in the Sisyphus fragment as well, which explains the idea of divinity as the creation of a “wise and shrewd” man, who sought to stop people from committing crimes in secret: the fear of divine punishment ensures that humans will act justly.²⁴ The speech describes how, by lodging the gods in the skies, “whence he knew came the fears for mortals and the benefits for their wretched life,” the clever inventor played on existing human fears about the inscrutability of the heavens.²⁵ The idea of the gods grows stronger from its apparent demonstrability: the violence of the skies testifies

²³ See Gagné 2013 on the notion of ancestral fault.

²⁴ Critias F19 Snell; B 25 DK 12

²⁵ Critias F19 Snell; B 25 DK 29-30

to divine existence, and to their concern for justice in human action.²⁶ Though the Sisyphus fragment takes the nonexistence of the gods as a premise rather than a conclusion, it shares with the Aristophanic Socrates and the Euripidean Bellerophon the belief that the gods, if they existed, would ensure justice – and so sits neatly next to these two other expressions of moral atheism. The gods are not just considered able to punish injustice among humans, but *expected* to do so – and expected so strongly that their evident failure leads to doubts about their existence. That is, there is a strong background assumption that the gods *must* be fundamentally just, if they are to be recognized as gods. If much previous thought about the gods had been top-down, based on myth and ritual that saw human life as dependent on divine actions, fifth-century theology is notably bottom-up, establishing views about the gods on the basis of views of human life. Theology is dependent on anthropology.

It can be no accident that these three atheistic statements – in *Clouds*, *Bellerophon*, and the Sisyphus fragment – are found in dramatic texts. Dramatic authors were evidently granted a license to portray atheistic sentiments that would have been dangerous to express in other discourses. Well before the trial and execution of Socrates, Athens could be intensely hostile to theological questioning, and the example of Anaxagoras' prosecution for impiety in the 430s must have been present in all the authors' minds. Though the evidence is disputed, there are reports of Protagoras also being prosecuted and forced to flee, probably around 420; and the same would happen to Diagoras of Melos in 415.²⁷ Beginning in antiquity, it has often been thought that Bellerophon and Sisyphus represent something like mouthpieces for taboo beliefs of the author, who would not have dared to express such scandalous ideas *in propria persona*.²⁸ However, as the example of *Clouds* makes glaringly obvious, this overlooks the crucial distinction between character and author; no one has ever, as far as I'm aware, tried to attribute the views of Aristophanes' Socrates to the poet. A better way to understand these utterances is to see them as explorations of topics and modes of reasoning that circulated more broadly in intellectual culture. We would not be glimpsing Euripides' or Critias' veiled declarations of atheism, but their on-stage experimentation with novel ways of thinking about the gods.

²⁶ Similarly, Democritus D207 LM claims that the violence of the skies caused humans to believe in divinity as the cause of celestial happenings.

²⁷ There are also less reliable reports of Prodicus being forced to flee. On persecution of intellectuals in Athens see Rubel 2000; Janko 2020

²⁸ Sedley 2013, 335–37 11/20/2021 12:53:00 PMdiscusses anonymity, I think overlooking the degree of license afforded dramatists.

The only extant sophistic text that explicitly takes up the issue of divine morality is a fragment of Thrasymachus: “the gods do not notice human affairs; for they would not have failed to take account of the greatest thing of all for humans, justice [δικαιοσύνην]. For we see that humans do not practice this.”²⁹ The conclusion is not atheistic, but it is certainly contrary to the conventional belief that the gods are involved in human affairs and, especially, that they care for justice. The form of demonstration is the same as that employed by Socrates and Bellerophon: since justice is not observable in human affairs, the gods must not be involved. Though in a sense less extreme than outright atheism, denying that the gods are involved in human life breaks the causal link between divinity and natural phenomena, and renders questions about the gods unanswerable – much as Protagoras had done. Whether Thrasymachus actually believed this is hard to say: it is possible that the claim appeared in an antilogistic text and so may not represent Thrasymachus’ own views. It is, though, intriguing to connect the claim to the Platonic Thrasymachus’ apothegm that justice is the “advantage of the stronger” (*Republic* 338c) – an argument that tacitly assumes the non-involvement of divinity in questions of human justice (which presumably would have been one of the conventional grounds for upholding just action).³⁰ With the gods out of the picture, might would seem to make right.

Skepticism about the gods’ involvement in human affairs could take the form also of denying divine providence (πρόνοια), the idea that the gods shaped or oversee the human world with care.³¹ A late report describes Antiphon “abolishing providence [τὴν πρόνοιαν ἀναιρῶν] in his writings entitled *On Truth*.”³² In light of the evidence presented above, the most likely grounds

²⁹ D17 LM; B8 DK.

³⁰ The two statements seem on the face of it opposed: justice as “the advantage of the stronger” deflates any idea that justice is “the greatest thing for humans,” but the argument may have two stages: we believe that justice is a good thing, but the gods evidently don’t care about it, so justice is really just the advantage of the stronger. This would certainly qualify as one of Thrasymachus’ “overpowering” (ὑπερβάλλοντες) arguments (D5 LM; B7 DK).

³¹ The word most frequently means simply “forethought,” but seems to develop a more specialized meaning in the late fifth century to describe the divine’s benevolent ordering of the human world; the relevant passages from Herodotus (3.108) and Xenophon (1.4.6) are discussed below. There is evidence for a text of Democritus *Περὶ εἰδώλων ἢ περὶ προνοίας* (D2B LM; the second work of the 6th tetralogy of Thrasyllus), though the topic may have been more foreknowledge than divine providence (which would be consistent with a broadly positive view of divination: D211-12 LM). But since divination is taken to be one of the important signs of providence, the two notions could easily coincide – as I suspect they would in Antiphon.

³² D37 L-M; B12 DK; Pendrick 2002, 260–61 is skeptical of the validity of the claim and of reconstructions that connect the denial of providence to the suggestion that divinity is “unlacking” ἀδέητος (D9 LM; B10 DK). But this seems to me quite a plausible reconstruction of both fragments and may connect to Antiphon’s practice of divination (discussed below).

for arguing against providence would have been the non-observation of justice on earth.³³ This would be consistent with the discussion of justice in fragments of *On Truth*, which argue that one should adhere to *nomos* (custom or law) in the presence of witnesses, while disregarding it and following *phusis* (nature) when alone: “a man would use justice [δικαιοσύνη] most advantageously to himself if, when witnesses are present, he considered customs/laws [νόμοι] great, but in the absence of witnesses, the dictates of nature [φύσις].”³⁴ Justice is considered only in so far as it conduces to individual benefit, implicitly assuming that there is no divine punishment for wickedness.³⁵ Like the Sisyphus fragment, the text presents secrecy as a precondition for law-breaking, but endorses exploiting secrecy for personal gain. Such a view is only possible if the gods, the traditional guarantors of justice, are not watching over human actions.

All the arguments I’ve discussed are broadly anti-providential, since they claim that the human world is not governed in accord with a divine intelligence. Scholarship has largely overlooked this anti-providential dimension – and not unreasonably, given that providence itself is only at issue explicitly in the Antiphon testimony (which itself comes from a much later, and somewhat unreliable source). But the examples of Thrasymachus and Antiphon help us to see the possible link between discussions of providence and moral concerns. The lack of justice observed on earth constituted a major challenge to conventional notions of the gods’ care for human beings. The natural theologians I discuss below will seek to recuperate the idea of providence by pointing to other grounds for believing that the gods care for human beings, using the observational method of the anti-providentialists to make claims for divine involvement and benevolence toward humans. As we will see, moreover, they present their providential arguments as positions within an ongoing debate – motivated, I suggest, by skeptical moral arguments like those above.

Before moving on to arguments for divine providence, it is worth considering the Hippocratic corpus, which occupies an interesting position between skeptical and pious natural theology. In a few instances, it employs the atheological method of debunking beliefs about divine causality by reference to demonstrable phenomena, but does so in the service of a positive moral view of the gods’ involvement in human affairs.³⁶ *On the Sacred Disease* attacks the idea that

³³ A number of words attributed to Antiphon by later lexicographers suggest that the relation between the apparent and the unseen was of particular interest to him: D2-4 LM; B4-6 DK.

³⁴ D38 L-M; B44aDK col 1

³⁵ Gagarin 2002, 73–78 argues that *Truth* presented an aporetic view of justice.

³⁶ The argumentative methods employed have often been considered “sophistic.” Laskaris 2002, 108–10

epilepsy has a divine cause with another *modus tollens* argument: if seizures did come from the gods, they should affect those with varied constitutions – but, since they only affect the phlegmatic, they must not be divine in origin (5). Accordingly, the author argues, the disease should be considered no more and no less sacred than any other disease, a naturalizing explanation that nevertheless preserves the idea that all diseases are brought on equally by divinity. A similar point is made in *Airs, Waters, Places*, where the impotence of certain Scythians is attributed to their riding horses: if the symptom had a divine cause, it would affect all Scythians equally, but since it only affects the wealthy, it must have a natural cause (22). While debunking one idea of divine causality, the treatises support another, even broader, view of the role of divinity in human life, claiming the high ground of enlightened piety against superstitious opposing views.³⁷ Indeed, *On the Sacred Disease* goes even further in its claim that “one is more likely to be purified and sanctified by the god than polluted” (4), demonstrating a theological optimism similar to that attributed to Socrates.³⁸ The Hippocratic corpus, then, shows how skeptical argumentative strategies concerning divine causality need not in themselves be atheistic or anti-providential; in fact, they can be placed in service of traditional piety as much as they can be opposed to it.

I’ve argued that there is strong evidence that fifth-century thinkers drew provocative negative conclusions about divine existence and involvement in human affairs from their observations of human life – what we might call “natural atheology.” These arguments sought to puncture traditional, and in many cases probably unreflective, assumptions concerning the justice of the gods and their role in human life. In the latter part of this paper, I turn to evidence for the dialectical opposite: positive conclusions about the nature of divinity, reasoned from observation. These arguments for the most part only implicitly counter the moral atheism of Bellerophon and Sisyphus, but expressly address the issue of providence. They make providential claims by shifting the terrain of argument away from divine punishment for injustice (since presumably, this would be hard to argue for based on observation of human society), to the benevolent creation of the human world, which the human constitution, environment, and the process of divination are thought to demonstrate. Like the atheological arguments, they generalize about the gods on the basis of observed aspects of human life, but they focus on different aspects. As I’ll explain, I think

³⁷ Jouanna 2012, 97–118

³⁸ Kotwick forthcoming emphasizes the importance of the idea of divine goodness in Socrates’ thought.

there are formal as well as substantive reasons to see these arguments for providence as responses to the skeptical arguments I've just sketched, and to see this strand of thought as more widespread than one would expect from Sedley's claim that Socrates is the watershed figure in thinking about divine teleology.

Sedley attributes the creationist view to the historical Socrates on the basis of similarities between arguments in Plato's *Phaedo* and Xenophon's *Memorabilia*.³⁹ These parallels seem broadly convincing to me – as does the claim that Socrates was an important thinker about divine teleology. For the purposes of this paper, however, it is less important that these representations of Socrates accurately portray the historical figure's beliefs than that they accurately portray a live argument within late fifth-century thought. And there is independent evidence that they do. Though Sedley does not address it in detail, there are striking parallels between the Xenophontic passages and a speech in Euripides' *Suppliants*, which likewise argues for divine providence on the basis of observation of human society and the natural world. The similarities between the two were so strong that Willy Theiler's 1924 *Zur Geschichte der teleologischen Naturbetrachtung bis auf Aristoteles* argued that they must have had a common source. This argument, however, has largely been forgotten because the source Theiler suggested, Diogenes of Apollonia, has been comprehensively reexamined and the connection largely refuted by André Laks in his edition.⁴⁰ But I think the continuity between the two texts deserves more scrutiny than it has received since Theiler, and whatever we make of the question of sources – and I'm going to remain agnostic on this point – it points us to a wider discussion of divine providence and teleology than Sedley's argument for Socrates as the major figure would suggest.

I begin with Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, a play dated to the 420s, so roughly contemporary with the first version of *Clouds*. The Athenian king Theseus delivers a speech on divine benevolence to the Argive king Adrastus, who has ignored prophetic warnings and suffered defeat in battle as a result. Theseus is incredulous at Adrastus' decision to go to battle without the “good will” (157: εὐνοία) of the gods, asking “did you so easily turn away from the divine?” (159: οὕτω τὸ θεῖον ῥαδίως ἀπεστράφης;). This concern with the role of divinity in human action will prompt Theseus' response to Adrastus' plea for assistance in burying the bodies of the dead. The speech that follows, an implicit rebuke to Adrastus' heedlessness, has become notorious among

³⁹ Sedley 2007, 78–92

⁴⁰ Laks 2008 (originally 1983)

tragedy scholars for its loose connection to the actual situation at hand and the disappointingly traditional (from Euripides at least) theological argument that it makes.⁴¹ But if we attend more closely to the ideas of the speech, it appears highly topical and quite daring in its claims, addressing both the question of oracular guidance within the play and the broader philosophical question of divine providence. What seems unmotivated to us, moreover, may have been quite timely to a contemporary audience, who would have been familiar with the role of oracles in directing action in the Peloponnesian War, and the challenges to divinity I’ve discussed.⁴² Theseus signals quite explicitly that he is presenting a view that has developed in previous debates:

ἄλλοισι δὴ 'πόνησ' ἀμιλληθεὶς λόγῳ
τοιῶδ'. ἔλεξε γάρ τις ὡς τὰ χεῖρονα
πλείω βροτοῖσιν ἐστὶ τῶν ἀμεινόνων.
ἐγὼ δὲ τούτοις ἀντίαν γνώμην ἔχω,
πλείω τὰ χρηστὰ τῶν κακῶν εἶναι βροτοῖς.
εἰ μὴ γὰρ ἦν τόδ', οὐκ ἂν ἦμεν ἐν φάει. (195-200)

With other men I once labored contending with this kind of speech. For someone said that there are more of bad than of good things for mortals. But I hold an opinion opposed to these, that there are more of good than of bad things for mortals. For if this were not so, we would not be in the light [of day].

Theseus describes what he is about to say as a contribution to an ongoing controversy (the verb ἀμιλλάομαι often signals formal debate contexts) about the nature of human life.⁴³ In response to his interlocutor’s gloomy belief that human life has more bad than good, he claims not just the opposite, that the balance of human life is positive, but that this is almost definitionally so: “if this were not so, we would not be in the light of day.” This is yet another *modus tollens* argument, though highly condensed. A more developed form would go something like: if humans had more of bad than good, then they would not be able to subsist as they do – they would die off. But, since they do exist, the premise that humans have more of bad than good must be false.

⁴¹ Conacher 1981 discusses the speech’s (ir)relevance. Michelini 1991 argues that the speech is “not philosophy but a mimesis of philosophy, designed to evoke a whole world of intellectual ferment and controversy and presenting a sequence of intellectual history in an illogically synchronic perspective” (23). There is a textual problem in the preceding speech, so a lacuna may account for some of the apparent lack of topical motivation.

⁴² See Flower 2008, 153–87 on the role of the seer in wartime (especially 169-71 on generals acting against the advice of seers). Thucydides’ own attitude toward oracles is controversial, but he clearly portrays misinterpretation of (if not outright disregard for) oracular guidance as a cause of failure in war: Marinatos 1981

⁴³ Collard 1975, 132–35) discusses the scene as a rhetorical *agon*.

Like the natural atheologists, Theseus reasons from observation to generalizing statements about existence. As the speech goes on, the central topic of concern will emerge: not simply whether human life is bad or good, but the nature of the human relation to divinity. Theseus goes on to explain how the gods have providentially furnished humans with all they need for survival. The items he enumerates have similarities to other “catalogues of culture” of the later fifth century, of which the first stasimon of the *Antigone* and the “Great Speech” of the *Prometheus Bound* are the most famous instances.⁴⁴ These catalogues all reflect, in one way or another, a view of human culture’s relation to the gods, and Theseus’ speech is distinguished both by its strongly theistic claims and by its inductive method, which reasons from natural and cultural phenomena to the involvement of the divine.⁴⁵ Theseus explains our good fortune by describing, in the central section of the speech, how an unnamed god separated human from animal life, and gave humans the tools they need to survive and thrive:

αἰνῶ δ’ ὃς ἡμῖν βίοντον ἐκ πεφυρμένου
καὶ θηριώδους θεῶν διεσταθμήσατο,
πρῶτον μὲν ἐνθεῖς σύνεσιν, εἶτα δ’ ἄγγελον
γλῶσσαν λόγων δούς, ὥστε γινώσκειν ὄπα,
τροφὴν τε καρποῦ τῆι τροφῆι τ’ ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ 205
σταγόνας ὑδρηλὰς ὡς τὰ τ’ ἐκ γαίας τρέφει
ἄρδηι τε νηδύν· πρὸς δὲ τοῖσι χείματος
προβλήματ’ αἰθόν τ’ ἐξαμύνασθαι θεοῦ,
πόντου τε ναυστολήμαθ’ ὡς διαλλαγὰς
ἔχοιμεν ἀλλήλοισιν ὧν πένοιτο γῆ. 210
ἃ δ’ ἔστ’ ἄσημα κού σαφῶς γινώσκομεν,
ἐς πῦρ βλέποντες καὶ κατὰ σπλάγχνων πτυχὰς
μάντεις προσημαίνουσιν οἰωνῶν τ’ ἄπο. (201-13)

I praise the one of the gods who separated our living from confused and bestial, first implanting intellect, then giving the tongue, messenger of words, so that we understand voice, and the growth of crops and watery drops from the sky for their growing so that he

⁴⁴ I discuss these texts in detail in Billings 2021, 23–90

⁴⁵ Contrast Prometheus’ speech – which is quite similar in the items it mentions – but is written in the voice of divine benefactor rather than the human observer.

[the god] grows things from the earth and gives drink to our belly. And in addition to these, defenses against the winter and means of warding off the heat of the god, and expeditions on the sea, so that we have exchanges with others for things the land lacks. And what is unseen and we do not know clearly, prophets foretell by looking into the fire and at the folds of entrails and from the flight of birds.

The speech, on my reading, consists of three rings: the outermost is introductory and concluding (195-200 discussed earlier; 214-18, discussed below); the inner two (201-13, quoted directly above) describe human capacities and the human environment respectively: in the middle ring, Theseus describes, first, how humans were separated from animals and given intellect and speech (201-4), and then, how prophecy enhances deficits in human knowledge (211-13). The innermost ring (205-10) focuses on the human environment: the god gave food and water for sustenance (205-7), shelter against heat and cold (207-8), and sea-faring to acquire what the immediate environment lacks (209-10). The two rings are bisected (at the caesura of line 207) by a shift in framing, from positive benefactions to what I will call compensatory ones. Beginning with the mention of defense against heat and cold, the latter items of the passage (shelter, sea-faring, and prophecy) are all framed as remedying shortcomings in the human environment and mind. Such compensatory logic will turn out to be highly significant for other arguments for providence. It claims that the gods do not just heap gifts on humans out of kindness (as Prometheus, for example, claims to do), but in a way that is carefully calibrated to ensure their survival – that is, there is a teleology present in nature by divine design.

The gifts Theseus mentions are all familiar from other catalogues; the *Prometheus Bound* speech includes approximate parallels for each.⁴⁶ The compensatory logic I've mentioned, however, has no parallel in the *Prometheus* or *Antigone*. Where we do find parallels are in other discussions of providence or divine teleology: Plato's Protagoras describes in his Prometheus myth how Epimetheus distributed qualities to animals in order to balance their natural shortcomings:

καὶ τᾶλλα οὕτως ἐπανισῶν ἔνεμεν. ταῦτα δὲ ἐμηχανᾶτο εὐλάβειαν ἔχων μή τι γένος
ἀἴστωθει· ἐπειδὴ δὲ αὐτοῖς ἀλληλοφθοριῶν διαφυγὰς ἐπήρκεσε, πρὸς τὰς ἐκ Διὸς ὄρας

⁴⁶ For intellect, compare 444; for speech, 459-61 (the invention of number and writing); for nourishment, 454-58 (astronomy) and 462-65 (beasts of burden); for shelter, 450-53; for sea-faring, 467-8; for divination, 484-99. The similarities are too approximate, I think, to go back to a common source, but point rather to a minor genre of speeches on early humanity.

εὐμάρειαν ἐμηχανᾶτο ἀμφιεννὺς αὐτὰ πυκναῖς τε θριξίν καὶ στερεοῖς δέρμασιν, ἱκανοῖς μὲν ἀμῶναι χειμῶνα, δυνατοῖς δὲ καὶ καύματα. (321a)

And thus he [Epimetheus] distributed the other [qualities] balancing them. He devised these things taking care lest any race be destroyed. When he had supplied them with means of escape from mutual slaughter, he devised protection against the seasons of Zeus by dressing them in thick hairs and tough skins, suitable to protect from winter but able also to protect from heats.

Just as Theseus' god gave humans "defenses against the winter and means of warding off the heat of the god," Epimetheus gives animals "protection against the seasons of Zeus... suitable to protect from winter but able also to protect from heats." Whether or not we attribute any of the myth to Protagoras himself, this is evidence at least that the idea of divine design for survival could be imagined in a philosophical context roughly contemporary to the dramas I discuss.⁴⁷ And there is a further contemporary parallel with the idea that Epimetheus created animals' diets in close connection to their breeding habits (321b). Herodotus ascribes the same fact to divine providence:

καὶ κως τοῦ θεοῦ ἢ προνοίῃ, ὥσπερ καὶ οἰκός ἐστι, ἐοῦσα σοφῆ, ὅσα μὲν ψυχὴν τε δειλὰ καὶ ἐδώδιμα, ταῦτα μὲν πάντα πολύγονα πεποίηκε, ἵνα μὴ ἐπιλίπη κατεσθιόμενα, ὅσα δὲ σκέτλια καὶ ἀνηρά, ὀλιγόγονα. (3.108)

And thus the providence of the divine, as is likely, being wise, has created as many creatures as are tame and edible in spirit, these ones all have many offspring, so that they not go extinct from being eaten, and as many creatures as are hardy and bothersome have few offspring.

The idea of providential compensation is strong in all these texts, and thus must have been a familiar feature of theological discourse in the later fifth century. Yet both the *Protagoras* myth and Herodotus' arguments reflect more traditional, top-down modes of reasoning about the divine. They take it for granted that the gods exist and act providentially, and explain natural phenomena by reference to this belief; Theseus, by contrast (like the negative theologians I've discussed), takes observation of nature as *evidence* for divine providence.

⁴⁷ Sedley 2007, 56–57 discusses the passage in comparison with Empedocles (who does not, as far as I can tell, include the same compensatory logic) but denigrates it as a contribution to theology because "the entire divine drama belongs to its [the myth's] fabulous content, invoked by Protagoras for merely expository purposes." Aristophanes' myth in Plato's *Symposium* similarly invokes a compensatory logic, narrating how human beings were granted the ability to reproduce sexually in order that the race not die out. Even if the particular claims about the gods are made lightly, the idea of divine design for survival obviously has important currency.

Theseus' speech closes by returning to the question of the goodness of human life, which is now linked explicitly to his views on the relation of humans to the gods:

ἄρ' οὐ τρυφῶμεν, θεοῦ κατασκευὴν βίῳ
δόντος τοιαύτην, οἷσιν οὐκ ἄρκεῖ τάδε;
ἀλλ' ἢ φρόνησις τοῦ θεοῦ μείζον σθένειν
ζητεῖ, τὸ γαῦρον δ' ἐν φρεσὶν κεκτημένοι
δοκοῦμεν εἶναι δαμόνων σοφώτεροι. (214-18)

Are we not luxuriant, when the god has given such provision for life, if these things are not sufficient? But thought seeks to be stronger than the god, and having acquired arrogance in our minds we think that we are wiser than divinities.

The inductive logic of the speech – which was only implicit in the catalogue of divine benefactions – becomes clear in Theseus' rhetorical question: once we observe all that the gods have given, we cannot doubt the goodness of human life. Theseus strongly emphasizes the cognitive superiority of the divine (ἢ φρόνησις... σοφώτεροι), suggesting that the goodness of human life is guaranteed by careful planning. The argument of Theseus' past interlocutor might be imagined to run something like: “the miseries of human life are evidence that the gods do not take an interest in humanity,” to which he responds, “the very existence of human life is evidence of their care.” Adrastus' failure to heed an oracle would appear likewise to presume the absence of a divine hand shaping events, and thus prompts Theseus to launch into his catalogue of divine design, which appropriately closes with the way that the gods communicate through prophecy. To doubt the gods' guidance through prophecy is to believe oneself “wiser than divinities.” This description might even fit our evidence for Antiphon, who was famed as a prophet and dream-interpreter, and is reported to have claimed that divination is “the conjecture (εἰκασμός) of an intelligent human.”⁴⁸ Naturalizing perspectives on divination would have been consistent with the view that the gods do not take a providential interest in human life.⁴⁹ I think we have good reason to believe that such

⁴⁸ D75B LM; A9 DK. Compare a fragment of Euripides, “the best seer is one who conjectures (or “guesses,” εἰκάζει) well” – probably spoken by a character who, like Adrastus, is dismissive of prophecy. On such skepticism, see Flower 2008, 132–52. Gagarin 2002, 99–101 argues that Antiphon's dream-interpretations were meant primarily as a demonstration of his cleverness and do not reflect a genuine belief in the truth of dreams – and are thus consistent with skeptical views toward providence.

⁴⁹ Antiphon, according to Cicero, considered dream-interpretation to be a technical (*artificiosa*) rather than a natural skill: D75A LM; B79 DK. The interpretation of this is disputed, and I am not sure what to make of it. There is abundant evidence that being a seer was not incompatible with novel intellectual interests: Roth 1984

views did circulate in Athens in the late fifth century, and that Theseus would have been responding to them.⁵⁰

Xenophon's *Memorabilia* depicts Socrates responding to similar challenges. The work includes two passages on providence that seem quite closely related to one another – and have close parallels to Theseus' natural theology.⁵¹ Both Xenophon passages have a strongly apologetic cast, and are framed as evidence that Socrates sought to improve his companions, particularly in their attitudes toward the gods – implicitly addressing both of the formal charges against Socrates, of not believing in the city's gods and corrupting youth.⁵² Xenophon portrays Socrates, on the contrary, as a thoroughly, if unconventionally, pious figure, who sought to convince others of his religious views. The first passage finds Socrates in conversation with one Aristodemus, who, Socrates has learned, “was not known to sacrifice to the gods nor to pray nor to use divination, and even mocked those who did these things” (1.4.2). Aristodemus, it turns out, is not an atheist or someone who disdains the gods, but rather believes that “the divinity [τὸ δαιμόνιον] is too great to be in need of my service” (1.4.10), suggesting a view somewhat like that of the Epicureans (and possibly also of Antiphon), which would deny providence on the basis that the divine has no care for humans.⁵³

To convince Aristodemus of the need to worship the gods, Socrates leads him through a dialogue about human nature, pointing out how the human body, senses, and affections are so ideally calibrated that they must be result of providence (πρόνοια...προνοητικῶς: 1.4.6). The argument works by inference to the best explanation: something must account for the calibration of human needs to their capacities, and the readiest explanation is a divine creator. This divinity, Socrates goes on, has implanted in humans a soul that raises them above animals (1.4.14), suggesting a special care for human beings, which they should reward with worship. Yet Aristodemus is still skeptical, awaiting “counsellors” (1.4.15 συμβούλους) from the gods as evidence of their special care – launching Socrates onto the topic of divination, which, he suggests, serves precisely this function of transmitting messages directly from the gods (1.4.15). If

⁵⁰ Does the prominence of divination in the *Prometheus Bound* – it is the gift that Prometheus dwells on the longest and one of his signal capacities (which appears unmotivated mythologically) – also reflect this ongoing debate?

⁵¹ On correspondences between the two passages see Dorion 2011, 2:237–42.

⁵² Powers 2009 discusses the apologetic character of the passages, disputing the idea that they constitute an argument for design.

⁵³ See Dorion 2000, 1:142–43 on correspondences between Aristodemus here and Socrates' own argument in the *Euthyphro*. Euripides' Heracles makes a similar claim in the context of denying that gods act immorally toward one another: “God needs, if he really is rightly god, nothing.” (1345-6).

Aristodemus will heed him and serve the gods, Socrates promises, he will be rewarded with the gods' "counsel concerning matters unseen by humans" (1.4.18: *περὶ τῶν ἀδῆλων ἀνθρώποις συμβουλεύειν*). Divination is seen, as in Theseus' speech, as the crowning evidence of divine providence, cast as a matter of recognizing the superior intelligence of the gods. From Socrates, the notion of divination as a sign of the gods' favor has a special resonance, given the way that Xenophon tends to interpret the divine sign as a form of divination.⁵⁴ Socrates' *daimonion* appears as evidence for the providential interest of the gods in human affairs.

Socrates' exhortation concludes by claiming divine omniscience, that "the divine [τὸ θεῖον] sees all and hears all and is present everywhere and has a care for all things" (1.4.18) – a claim that should remind us of the Sisyphus fragment. The threat is only implicit in Socrates' words, but Xenophon draws it out directly: "saying these things, not only did he cause his companions to refrain from unholy and unjust and shameful things when they were seen by humans, but even when they were in solitude, since they believed that nothing they might do would ever escape notice of the gods" (1.4.19). This is an unexpected close to a section in which nothing had suggested that Aristodemus was particularly given to vice (beyond his impiety), but it is entirely explicable if we assume that a or the central challenge to providence was the idea that the gods did not pay attention to justice in human actions. Socrates' exhortation had concentrated on the converse: that in doing reverence to the gods, Aristodemus would be rewarded, but this is an implicit counterargument to the idea that the gods are not concerned with human piety or justice. Like the speaker of the Sisyphus fragment, Xenophon's narrator seems to believe that divinity is required as a guarantor of just human action.

So far, the similarities between Xenophon's Socrates and Euripides' Theseus are only approximate: both make arguments for divine benevolence and forethought on the basis of observations concerning human life, and admonish their interlocutors to respect divine intelligence, as manifested particularly in prophecy. As Sedley points out in a footnote mentioning and dismissing the Euripidean parallel, though, Socrates has focused on the creation of humanity, while Theseus discusses divinity's "civilizing and environmental gifts."⁵⁵ This is true as far as it goes, but it overlooks the fact that Socrates discusses precisely such gifts in *Memorabilia* 4.3, when he asks a certain Euthydemus, "has it ever occurred to you to consider how carefully the gods have

⁵⁴ Dorion 2003. The connection is made by Socrates' interlocutors here (1.4.15) and in the parallel passage at 4.3.12.

⁵⁵ Sedley 2007, 80n12

furnished [κατεσκευάκασι; cf *Suppliants* 214: κατασκευήν] human beings with what they need?” (4.3.3). The two sections of the *Memorabilia* are guided by the same belief in the providential care of the gods, but they address different manifestations of this care: human creation in the first passage, environmental conditions in the second. Both, however, employ the same mode of reasoning from observation of the human world to assertions about the divine.

Over the course of *Memorabilia* 4.3, Socrates enumerates a range of aspects of the natural environment that address human needs, and manifest divine benevolence and foresight. The first items are astronomical: the gods supply light to see in the day and dark to rest at night (4.3.3); they go even further by providing the stars and moon, which moderate the dark and help us to measure time (4.3.4). Then, the direct parallels with Theseus begin: “since we are need of nourishment [τροφήν], do they give it to us from the land and provide seasons fitted for this?” (4.3.5). Next is water, which, Socrates says, “grows and increases, together with the earth and the seasons, all things that are useful for us, and nourishes [συντρέφειν] us too” (4.3.6). These are all points mentioned in Theseus’ speech, which described “the growth [τροφήν] of crops and watery drops from the sky for their growing [τροφήν] so that he [the god] grows [τρέφει] things from the earth and gives drink to our belly.” Then, also as in Theseus’ speech, comes compensation for the harshness of the seasons: the gods have given us fire, “a defense against the cold and a defense against darkness” (4.3.7) and the course of the sun, which “turns away taking care lest it harm us in any way more than necessary by warming” (4.3.8). All of this has parallels in Theseus’ speech: “defenses against the winter and means of warding off the heat of the god.” These are only parallels in thought – I have pointed out what weak linguistic similarities I notice – but it is particularly striking that the compensatory logic shows up in both speeches.

Euthydemus then poses a question about human exceptionalism: all animals benefit from these conditions, so what is distinctive to humans? Socrates’ answer eventually comes to the first items of Theseus’ catalogue, capacities of thought and language: “And did they also implant reason [λογισμόν] in us...and did they give expression [ἔρμηνείαν] to us too?” (4.3.11-12). Theseus had described the god granting “intellect [σύνεσιν]...then the tongue, messenger of words [ἄγγελον / γλῶσσαν],” reflecting perhaps a similar understanding of language as a process of imparting messages (Socrates’ ἔρμηνεία is connected to the god Hermes’ function as a messenger). Finally, Socrates comes to the last gift Theseus mentions, divination – here figured again as compensation for the obscurity of the future: “And in so far as we are unable to foresee what is beneficial for the

future, do they assist us through divination by speaking what will turn out to those inquiring and teaching them how it would be best?” (4.3.12).⁵⁶ The idea of divination as compensation for the obscurity of the future is familiar from Theseus: “what is unseen and we do not know clearly, prophets foretell by looking into the fire and at the folds of entrails and from the flight of birds.” Though Socrates’s account of the gifts of the gods includes many more items than Theseus’ (and omits one, seafaring), where the two lists overlap, the similarities in the way they describe the gifts are noteworthy.

Socrates and Theseus share the method of drawing conclusions about the gods’ relation to mortals from observations of the human being and environment. Socrates even draws attention to this mode of induction: “One who considers thoroughly should not disdain things unseen [καταφρονεῖν τῶν ἀοράτων] but, realizing their power from the things that have come to be [ἐκ τῶν γιγνομένων τὴν δύναμιν], honor the divine” (4.3.14). This is as clear an encapsulation of the reasoning of natural theology as we could hope to find: humans can grasp the unseen realm of divinity from their observation of the natural world, which is understood to reflect the power of the gods. Though Socrates’ conclusions, like those of Euripides’ Theseus, are broadly conventional in recommending traditional forms of worship, we can recognize both as novel arguments for religious orthodoxy. These arguments would lack motivation unless they addressed atheistic, agnostic, or anti-providential views, which we know used the same inductive methods to draw opposing conclusions. Theseus and Socrates address skeptics of divine providence and turn challenges to conventional belief on their head, arguing that human life does not reflect an absence of divine involvement, but its continual benevolent presence.

Though I have stressed the similarities between Euripides and Xenophon, I don’t have a hypothesis to account for them. The lack of direct verbal parallels makes it unlikely that Euripides is in any straightforward way a source for Xenophon. Tracing aspects of both back to a common source (either a text or an oral tradition, like that surrounding Socrates) seems more plausible. Still, though, I find it hard to account for the similarity in details of the argument (particularly the deployment of compensatory logic) when the arrangement of items and language are so different. Regardless of what, if any, relationship we postulate between the texts, though, the lessons we can draw from their similarities are significant: not just that Socrates was not a lonely voice in

⁵⁶ Xenophon consistently frames Socrates’ divine sign as a form of divination, and Euthydemus points out this connection, remarking that Socrates

espousing an early form of natural theology, nor that drama could be a venue for some of the fifth century's most daring and novel ideas – though both of these seem important correctives to a tendency to cut the history of early Greek philosophy off from other areas of culture. What the two texts most importantly show, I think, is that the question of providence (broadly speaking) was a major subject of contestation in the late fifth century, with skeptics asserting that the gods, whether or not they exist, take no direct interest in human affairs, and believers seeking to shore up traditional notions of divinity by appealing to strong forms of providentialism. The two camps both argue on moral grounds: the negative side asserts that the lack of justice for wrongdoers is reason to conclude that the gods are inactive in human affairs, while the positive side claims that humans' very existence and their environment offers ample proof of the gods' beneficial involvement.

At the root of this dialectic, I have suggested, is a new mode of theological reasoning, in which observation of nature and human society is taken to be grounds for making fundamental statements about divinity. In its negative manifestation, this tends to take the *modus tollens* form, with observation supplying the negated consequent; when put to positive use, such reasoning takes the form of an argument from design or providence, premised on the idea that human existence is only explicable in terms of divine benevolence.⁵⁷ Although the conclusions are different, these arguments share with Protagoras' agnosticism the belief that one should base beliefs about the gods on reason and the evidence of the senses. I take this to be the most significant aspect of all this thinking: knowledge about the divine does not come from traditional sources of authority (whether poetry, ritual, or religious figures), but from observation and argumentation. This quite radically democratizes theology, and results in the explosion of heterodox religious belief in Athens in the late fifth century.

I have argued elsewhere that changing relationships to knowledge and authority are at the heart of the fifth century's intellectual revolution.⁵⁸ For the issues discussed here, though, it is specifically a change in the conception of authoritative *evidence* that constitutes the greatest shift. Beliefs are no longer to be formed on the basis of tradition or top-down reasoning (such as we find in Parmenides' deduction), but are to be built from empirical observation and bottom-up logic. In

⁵⁷ This may strictly be a form of the *modus ponens* (if A implies B and A is true, then B must be true): the goodness of human life implies a benevolent divinity; human life is good, so a benevolent divinity must exist.

⁵⁸ Billings 2021, 14–22

this sense, there is little separating the sophists from the historical Socrates (at least on Sedley's reconstruction): all begin with what can be seen and draw conclusions about the unseen. If this is correct, it would support and broaden Richard Bett's suggestion that the sophists can best be seen as "social scientists," and that it was their empirical interests that so aggravated Plato. We would also, though, have to recognize this empirical tendency as characteristic of Socrates. The Socrates who emerges from this story appears very much a figure of his intellectual moment, whose views on the gods would have been articulated in substantive dialogue with skeptical theological arguments, and whose methods were shared with other members of an intellectual vanguard. None of this, of course, would surprise a student of Aristophanes' or Xenophon's Socrates.

The interest of this paper has been primarily intellectual-historical: to reconstruct the methods, assumptions, and anxieties of late fifth-century theology. We have seen aspects of strong continuity with previous thought – the centrality of questions of justice – as well as striking discontinuity – the way of approaching these questions through observation. Admittedly, the arguments and positions I've discussed may not be themselves of great philosophical interest, but the reconstruction I've offered does suggest an urgency to questions of the relation of the gods to justice that might otherwise be overlooked, and which could help to gain a fuller picture of aspects of Plato's project. I am thinking in particular of the ways that myths of punishment in the afterlife in the *Gorgias* and *Republic* close arguments for justice that have largely set aside the role of the gods, and the way that *Laws* 10 frames atheism, first and foremost, as a problem of public morality.⁵⁹ The questions of natural (a)theology remain present in the dialogues, even as its methods and conclusions are presented as rather naive.⁶⁰ How Plato's dialogues answer the challenges of fifth-century theologies, though, is a question for philosophers...

⁵⁹ 885b: Θεοὺς ἡγούμενος εἶναι κατὰ νόμους οὐδεὶς πώποτε οὔτε ἔργον ἀσεβῆς ἠργάσατο ἐκὼν οὔτε λόγον ἀφῆκεν ἄνομον. This introduces the extended discussion of atheism and deficient forms of theism (which include the view that the gods do not care for humans). See Mayhew 2008, 55–58

⁶⁰ Adeimantus points to the multitudes' belief in poetic discourses of divine punishment and reward as part of the challenge to justice in *Republic* 2 (363a–366b). Clinias proposes a teleological argument similar to the one made by Xenophon's Socrates at *Laws* 886a, but receives a somewhat dismissive response – though, as Mayhew 2008, 62 notes, this has parallels with the more developed claims of the Athenian Stranger at 899b.

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