Battling the gods

TIM WHITMARSH

Tim Whitmarsh became A. G. Leventis Professor of Greek Culture at the University of Cambridge in October 2014. He held a British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship in 2012.

Conflicts between atheism and religion are often assumed to be a feature of the post-Enlightenment West alone. That assumption suits the religious, who would like to see western modernity as a blip in an otherwise uniformly devotional pattern across time and space. It also suits many of the so-called New Atheists, who like to see the rejection of the supernatural as the result of modern science's hard-won domination over outmoded religious beliefs.

Figure 1
Socrates and Alcibiades, by Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, *c.*1813-16. Image: Wikimedia Commons.

Yet even a moment's intuitive reflection should tell us that this is not the case. Atheists are not confined to the West, as public executions in many states (among them Afghanistan, Iran, Mauritania, Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan) clearly show. Nor are they limited to modernity. One does not need western science to question the power of prayer, to deny the divinity of the sun, to reject belief in the afterlife, to believe that one's priests are charlatans: this kind of scepticism has been widely documented by 20th- and 21st-century anthropologists: Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard's account of the Azande in the Congo region provides but one example of a 'tribal' people who treat their religious authorities with great scepticism.

How far back can we push the history of atheism? By far our best documented ancient societies are those of ancient Greece and Rome, and it is here that any search for the deep roots of atheism should begin. In 2012, the British Academy awarded me a year-long Mid-Career Fellowship to research atheism in ancient Greece and Rome. I unearthed an enormous amount of evidence for ancient atheism: some of it well known, much of it new. What emerged was, I hope, an unprecedentedly detailed picture of just how far atheism percolated into mainstream Greco-Roman society. This research resulted in a book, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*, which will be published in November 2015 in the USA by Knopf, and in February 2016 in the UK by Faber and Faber.

Classical arguments

All of the arguments used today against the existence of gods were first raised by the philosophers of ancient Greece: from the problem of evil (how can a just god permit suffering?), through the omnipotence paradox (could an all-powerful god create an unliftable stone?), to the idea of religion as a human social construct designed to repress dissent.

The Greeks had some more idiosyncratic arguments too. One of my favourites is a version of the *sorites* paradox, which in its original form was designed to prove that our linguistic categories are inexact by focusing on the idea of a 'heap' (which is what the Greek *sorites* means). One grain does not constitute a 'heap' of grains. Nor do two grains, nor three; and in fact there is no point at which adding one more grain to a pile turns it into a 'heap'. Therefore the concept is an insecure one. A philosopher called Carneades applied this paradox to gods. The Greeks had, of course, many different types of deity, including river gods and nymphs of springs. How much liquid, Carneades wondered, do you need for a god? A trickle or a splash will not do. Nor will a pond or a rivulet … so when do you reach the cut-off point that distinguishes regular water from divine? The conclusion we must draw is that the concept of divinity is insecure.

Another line of argument attacked the kinds of assertions usually made about deities. For example, it seems to stand to reason that gods are by definition perfectly virtuous: insurpassably just, brave, wise and so forth. But virtue necessarily involves decision-making. Bravery, for instance, can be displayed only when you choose the courageous decision ahead of the cowardly one. If, however, gods are perfect in every respect, then cowardly decisions will simply not present themselves as possibilities. A perfect god has no opportunity to take wrong decisions. Therefore the gods cannot be virtuous.It is an ingenious argument, and in fact quite hard to refute!

Socrates

Our modern word 'atheist' comes from the Greek *atheos*, meaning 'without god'; and with the word comes our entire sense of what it is to be independently-minded, critical, questioning of religious dogma. Take the most famous Greek philosopher of all, Socrates, who was executed in 399 BCE for 'not believing in the gods of the city' and 'corrupting the young' (Figure 1). Socrates, however, wrote nothing himself; to reconstruct his own beliefs we are dependent on his contemporary, the comic poet Aristophanes, and his immediate successors, the philosophers Plato and Xenophon. Aristophanes has him as an atheist mocking belief in the traditional gods. Plato and Xenophon, by contrast, writing after his trial and execution and desperate to defend their teacher, protest (perhaps too forcefully) that he was pious and devout, in part on the fragile grounds that he claimed to hear voices from the god in his head. Which picture do we believe? In a sense it does not matter: what was more important was the example he set for those who followed, his commitment to the principle – which is a fundamentally humanist one – that all beliefs must be rationally justifiable. His motto was that 'the unexamined life is not worth living', and he insisted that all society's values, ideologies and beliefs needed to be scrutinised; if they couldn't be, then they were not worth following.

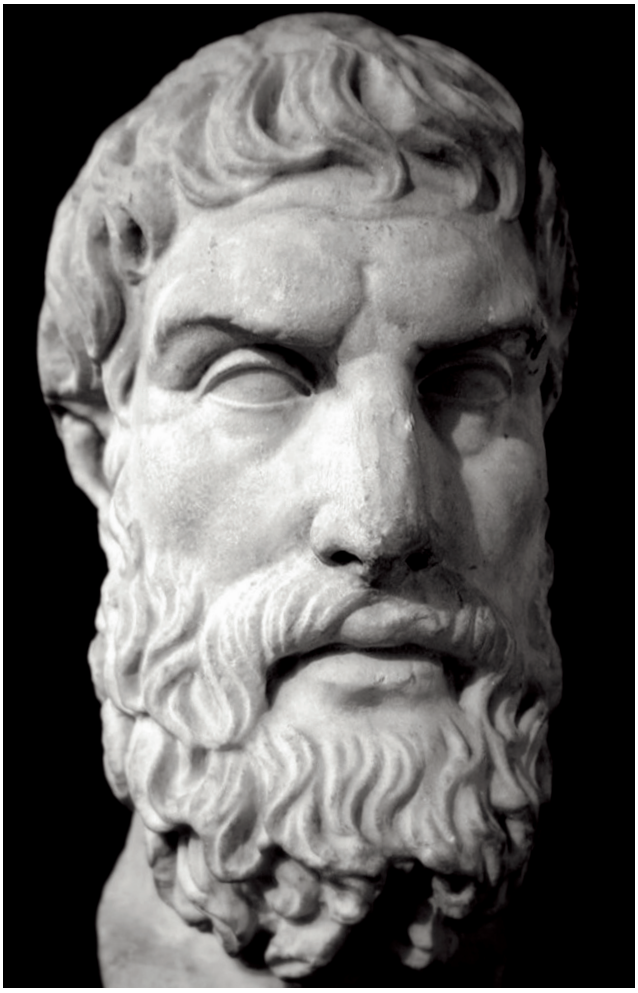

Figure 2
Epicurus. Image: Wikimedia Commons.

Epicurus

The Greeks also came up with the idea of the material, atomic basis for human life. The word 'atom' is Greek in origin (it means 'indivisible'), and was apparently coined during the scientific revolutions of the 5th century BCE by Leucippus and Democritus (Nietzsche's favourite ancient philosopher). It was Epicurus, however, who popularised the idea of the atomic basis of all existence. Epicureans did believe in gods, but they thought of these figures as powerless, insubstantial beings who lived in the gaps between worlds; and they too were made of atoms and voids. For this reason the Epicureans were considered *de facto* atheists by most; the modern Hebrew word for 'atheist', *apikoros*, testifies to the longevity of this association. The Roman poet Lucretius adapted Epicurus' doctrines into Latin verse; and according to Stephen Greenblatt's Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Swerve*, the rediscovery of Lucretius in the Renaissance was a foundational event in the making of modernity.

It is, I think, no exaggeration to say that we owe our modern sense of atheism to the Greeks and the Romans: it was the rediscovery of the ancient secular-humanist tradition in the renaissance and the enlightenment that was instrumental in the making of modern humanism. When Voltaire wanted to criticise Frederick the Great's religious policy, he sent him a single line of Lucretius' poem about Epicurean thought: *tantum religio potuit suadere malorum*, 'that's how much damage religion can do'. Greco-Roman philosophy is modernity's humanist heritage, as much as the Bible is for Jews and Christians and the Qur'an is for Muslims.

Uncontroversial

Certainly, atheism was not always uncontroversial in antiquity. The execution of Socrates for not believing in the city's gods is proof enough of that, although that might be said to be an isolated case in extreme circumstances (Athens had just got rid of a brutal military dictatorship, and Socrates had been closely associated with some of its leading lights). Even so, for most of the time in Greco-Roman antiquity up until the time when the Roman Empire converted Christianity, atheism simply was not problematic. To be sceptical about the existence of gods was, for many, part and parcel of being an enquiring human being.

Pliny the Elder, for example. was the Roman military and naval commander best known for dying in Naples bay in the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 (his nephew, Pliny the Younger, recorded the event). Pliny was no left-field radical; in fact you couldn't get much more 'establishment' than him. In his *Natural History*, however, he promoted a materialist view of the world as united by a single, all-pervasive cosmic nature. This, he argued, might be called god, but it didn't in fact matter what you called it since it was not a sentient being. 'I think of it as a sign of human imbecility to try to find out the shape and form of a god … Whoever "god" is – if in fact he exists at all – he consists in pure sense, sight, sound, soul, mind: he is purely himself'. The idea of an anthropomorphic deity (that's to say, a god that thinks or acts like a human), Pliny goes on to say, is pure absurdity. We don't need gods to have human morality, he says (this is one of my favourite quotations from antiquity): 'God is one mortal helping another'. We make our own divinity through our behaviour towards others.

By the 2nd century AD, there were – or at least so I argue in the book – numbers of atheists across the Roman Empire, aware of a shared history that stretched back to the 5th century BC. This was an era of high classicism, which saw Greeks writing in the archaic dialect of democratic Athens and Roman Emperors completing ancient temples and fashioning themselves after philosophers. That atheists could likewise point to a history stretching back 700 years to the time of Classical Athens gave them a legitimacy and an identity.

Arrival of Christianity

The arrival, in the 4th century AD, of Christianity as a state religion, however, fundamentally changed the outlook for ancient atheists. Christianity, with its one god, brought about a radical simplification of the belief system: either you believed in the Christian god or you

did not. More specifically, either you believed in the Christian god *in the right way* or you did not. Under the emperor Theodosius, in the late 4th century, laws were passed against non-Christians and Christian heretics alike. One word regularly used by Catholic Christianity to describe all these theological foes was *atheos*. This was a powerful act of linguistic manipulation: an 'atheist' now was no longer one who adopted a philosophical position of disbelief in the supernatural, but anyone who opposed the Catholic Church's teaching, regardless of her or his own religious beliefs.

When Imperial Rome embraced Christianity, that marked an end to serious thought about atheism in the West for over a millennium. It is this historical fact that we tend to misread, when we think of atheism as an exclusively modern, western phenomenon. If we compare the post-enlightenment West to what preceded it, we can very quickly come to the false assumption that societies fall neatly into two groups: the secular-atheist-modernist on the one side and the entirely religious on the other. What pre-Christian antiquity shows, however, is that it is perfectly possible to have a largely religious society that also incorporates and acknowledges numerous atheists with minimal conflict. When we consider the long duration of history, the oddity is not the public visibility of atheism in the last two hundred years of the West, but the Christian-imperialist society that legislated against certain kinds of metaphysical belief.

Fellowship

The British Academy's award of a Mid-Career Fellowship had a substantial impact upon my career, as well as my research. The year of research leave allowed me to write a book in a field to which I, as a scholar primarily of literature and cultural identity, was new. It also gave me the opportunity to write a book for the trade market, which was again a first for me. It gave me a confidence with research grants that led to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) project that I am currently running, on the Greek epic poetry of the Roman imperial period (still shamefully neglected by mainstream classicists). I have spoken about ancient atheism across the world, from British Columbia to New Jersey to Copenhagen to Pretoria. As I write this, I have just addressed the British Humanist Association's annual conference, and I am preparing for the Edinburgh Literary Festival. Finally, while I was not party to the decision-making processes behind the appointment of Cambridge's A. G. Leventis Chair of Greek Culture, it seems highly unlikely that the Mid-Career Fellowship was not noted by the panel. I am immensely grateful to the British Academy for its support; I only hope that the book proves to be a suitable return on their investment.

BRITISH ACADEMY MID-CAREER FELLOWSHIPS

At a showcase event held at the British Academy on 18 March 2015, three recent British Academy Mid-Career Fellows gave presentations on their work, and spoke personally of the value of holding one of these awards.

Dr Paul O'Connell (School of Oriental and African Studies, London) said 'I was in my sixth or seventh year of working in academia, and I had never had a concentrated period to sit down and do research. Even my PhD was done in snatches between teaching new courses and doing all the administrative tasks that we all love so much. The Mid-Career Fellowship enabled me to have a full academic year to go out to Harvard and dedicate myself to nothing but research. It has had a very positive impact on my career.'

This view was shared by **Dr Robert Perrett** (University of Bradford). 'Many university staff face the daily conflict between teaching, administration and research, and it is only getting worse at the moment. Teaching and administrative loads are going up, and it is research that takes the hit. The Fellowship gave me the opportunity to focus solely on research – to get some empirical research done.'

Dr Perrett also emphasised another feature of the scheme – the opportunity to have a wider impact beyond a purely academic audience. 'When you do get to do some research, you usually focus on getting out those four-star publications, so that you satisfy the Research Excellence Framework (REF). Is that why we do research? I want to have an impact upon society, and for it to be read a little more widely than my academic colleagues. So the Fellowship gave me the opportunity to focus on some non-academic outputs.'

Dr Deborah Sugg Ryan (Falmouth University) made similar points. 'The Fellowship allowed me time away to think, to speculate, to experiment, to connect, to travel – and to say yes. So often I have to say no, because I work in Cornwall.' After sharing information about her research through social media, she took part in a BBC Two series called *Business Boomers*, about businesses that have survived during recession.

Dr Sugg Ryan also highlighted another spin-off benefit of the Fellowship. 'That enthusiasm and passion for my research has really invigorated my teaching as well. It has been a win-win situation for my students. I think students love being taught by active teachers. So it's not just about keeping your research going, it's about keeping your teaching going too.'

Further information about the British Academy Mid-Career Fellowships scheme can be found at **www.britishacademy.ac.uk/midcareer**