‘Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World, ’ by Tim Whitmarsh

By REBECCA NEWBERGER GOLDSTEIN NOV. 20, 2015 The New York Times

The philosopher Sidney Morgenbesser, beloved by generations of Columbia University students (including me), was known for lines of wit that yielded nuggets of insight. He kept up his instructive shtick until the end, remarking to a colleague shortly before he died: “Why is God making me suffer so much? Just because I don’t believe in him?” For Morgenbesser, nothing worth pondering, including disbelief, could be entirely deparadoxed. The major thesis of Tim Whitmarsh’s excellent “Battling the Gods” is that atheism — in all its nuanced varieties, even Morgenbesserian — isn’t a product of the modern age but rather reaches back to early Western intellectual tradition in the ancient Greek world.

The period that Whitmarsh covers is roughly 1,000 years, during which the Greek-speaking population emerged from illiteracy and anomie, became organized into independent city-states that spawned a highachieving culture, were absorbed into the Macedonian Empire and then into the Roman Empire, and finally became Christianized. These momentous political shifts are efficiently traced, with astute commentary on their reflection in religious attitudes.

But the best part of “Battling the Gods” is the Greek chorus of atheists themselves, who speak distinctively throughout each of the political transformations — until, that is, the last of them, when they go silent. If you’ve been paying attention to contemporary atheists you might be startled by the familiarity of the ancient positions. So here is Democritus in the fifth century B.C. — he who coined the term “atom,” from the Greek for “indivisible,” speculating that reality consisted of nothing but fundamental particles swirling randomly around in the void — propounding an anthropological theory of the origins of religious beliefs. Talk of “the gods,” he argued, comes naturally to primitive people who, unable yet to grasp the laws of nature, resort to fantastical storytelling. The exact titles of his works remain in doubt, but his naturalist explanation of the origins of conventional religion might have made use of Daniel C. Dennett’s title “Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon.”

Or take the inflammatory title of Christopher Hitchens’s book, “God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything.” Lucretius, who lived in the first century B.C., chose a more neutral title for his magnificent poem, “De Rerum Natura,” or “On the Nature of Things,” but he concurred with the sentiment expressed in Hitchens’s subtitle. He focused not just on the groundlessness of beliefs proffered in ignorance of the natural causes of physical phenomena but also on their behavioral consequences. ,In the grip of religious conviction, a person will commit acts too horrific to otherwise contemplate. So Agamemnon, advised by a priest, made a human sacrifice of his daughter to appease the goddess Artemis, who had been offended over the killing of a deer. “Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum,” Lucretius wrote: “Such is the terrible evil that religion was able to induce.” Though the religion may have changed, the point remained sufficiently pertinent for Voltaire to quote the line to Frederick II of Prussia in urging the case for secularism.

But whereas Lucretius focused on the immorality of men when under their religious delusions, other ancients stressed the immorality of the gods themselves, who either passively permit or actively participate in human tragedies. The gods are not great. Euripides, toward the end of his life, composed “The Madness of Heracles,” which has one character dressing down Zeus: “You are a stupid kind of god, or by nature you are unjust.” Mortals morally overtake immortals, the gods being oblivious to what the virtuous know: the value of human life, the outrage of its guiltless suffering. And then there are those preSocratics, like Xenophanes and Anaxagoras, who, in my mind, foreshadow what would be Spinoza’s special brand of atheism, identifying God with nature — or, more specifically, the intelligible structure of

nature expressed in unchangeable laws. “Xenophanes, then, was not an atheist in any straightforward sense,” Whitmarsh writes. “He was not denying the existence of deity but radically redefining it.” The author goes on to ask whether anything would be lost “in Xenophanes’ account of the world if we substituted ‘nature’ for ‘the one god.’” Such a redefinition reappears not only in Spinoza’s magnum opus, the posthumously published Ethics, but in those who studied Spinoza, including Einstein. When asked whether he believed in God, Einstein responded, “I believe in Spinoza’s God,” which amounted to an affirmation of the guiding principle of science, namely nature’s beautiful intelligibility.

But where, among the ancient Greeks, did I catch the strains of Sidney Morgenbesser? Not surprisingly, it was in a play by the comic poet Aristophanes, who, like Euripides, was an Athenian of the fifth century B.C. In the opening scene of “Knights,” two slaves are complaining about another overbearing slave. How can they evade him? One suggests they go to the statue of some god and prostrate themselves, which calls forth a disdainful reaction from the other: Do you really believe in gods? What’s your proof? “The fact that I’m cursed by them,” comes the response. I can well imagine Sidney in the role.

Ancient Greece was full of myths, and we are full of myths about ancient Greece. One of these is that Greece was so replete with religion — for there were indeed religious rites accompanying almost every facet of public life — that it soaked through to the Greek view of both the physical and the moral spheres. This is demonstrably false. As Whitmarsh states, Greek religion was consistently silent on precisely those questions on which religion as we know it is most noisily insistent: “As a rule, Greek religion had very little to say about morality and the nature of the world.” Scholars have all too often imposed the Abrahamic conception of religion onto the ancient Greek world, thereby failing to see how a secular worldview easily cohabited with frenetic religious activity.

But if Greek religion didn’t ponder the great moral and metaphysical questions, what was its point? Whitmarsh argues convincingly that Greek religion functioned mainly as an expression of civic engagement, both at the local level of the city-states, each of which had its own favored divinities and rites, and at the broader level of greater Hellenicity. The civic function of their religion left Greeks the intellectual space in which to exercise reason in pursuing ontological and normative questions, which led to the beginnings of both natural philosophy (later called science), devoted to puzzling out the nature of reality, and moral philosophy, devoted to puzzling out how we best ought to live. Both disciplines are necessary for a robust secularism; Whitmarsh shortchanges one of them, which results in some sentences that I would wish away from this admirable book, including: “In an advanced capitalist economy based on technological innovation, it has been necessary to claw intellectual and moral authority away from the clergy and reallocate it to the secular specialists in science and engineering.” Thank God, secular specialties aren’t confined to science and engineering but also include moral philosophy, which, if it has stopped short of presuming the mantle of “moral authority,” has nevertheless helped in the laborious process of expanding our moral intuitions. Or rather, don’t thank God. Thank the Greeks.