At the height of the drama of Socrates’ trial before the Athenian jury, Socrates entertains the possibility that the Athenians might acquit him on the condition that he stops practicing philosophy. We do not know how many jurors were in fact so inclined to resolve the legal quandary before them, but it seems safe to assume that many would have regarded such a compromise as reasonable. What we do know is that Socrates famously rebuffed any suggestion along these lines in the following manner: “Gentlemen of the jury, I am grateful and I am your friend, but I will obey the god rather than you, and as long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease to practice philosophy... Be sure that this is what the god orders me to do, and I think there is no greater blessing for the city than my service to the god (τὴν ἐμὴν τῷ θεῷ ὑπηρεσίαν” (29d-30a). If the Athenians condemn him to death for rousing them to examine their lives in moral terms, so be it! Socrates is uncompromising—not out of stubbornness, but out of piety, he claims. What he did and will continue to do is done out of religious obedience; his activity is at once a service rendered to the god and a blessing for the city.

This short passage suggests that Socratic piety is rooted in a special relationship that he claims to exist between himself and the deity (be that Apollo in Delphi or some other god), a relationship that renders him at once obedient and, as individual member of a society, autonomous. It is also clear, from the whole of the Apology and the outcome of the trial, that Socrates’ self-proclaimed religious convictions contributed to convincing the majority of his jurors that he was guilty as charged. How exactly do we have to understand this potent and provocative notion of Socratic piety? The approach taken here differs from earlier attempts to grasp what “Socratic piety” amounts to by trying to contextualize it intellectually. Given that human ideas have histories, I shall try to understand Socratic piety by way of an understanding of other and clearly related ideas that may have prepared its ground. Moreover, it seems instructive to ask and...
pursue the question what happened to this particular notion of piety after the execution of its greatest champion.

As the title of paper suggests, my hypothesis is that the Socratic notion of piety indeed had a history—and, I may add, a fascinating one. The hypothesis may strike one as inherently paradoxical: Given that we do not know of any stages within Socratic intellectual development (apart from the few remarks in the Phaedo where Plato’s Socrates says that he dabbled in natural philosophy but soon thought the better of it) my title seems to indicate that Socrates adhered to a notion of piety which people other than Socrates embraced as well. If that is so, it would no longer be unproblematic to speak of a “Socratic” notion of piety. And indeed, in this paper I want to suggest something along these lines, that in Athens in the fifth century more than one intellectual reflected on religion, and in particular on the question on how properly to relate, as a human being, to the Greek deities. It was a time, I would suggest, which (among many other conceptual innovations, intellectual experiments and cultural debates) also began to revise traditional notions of piety, and that what I take to be the Socratic view is not an exceptional singularity but the expression of a broader movement of revolutionary religious thinking.

When I say that Athenians were revising a “traditional notion of piety,” I am well aware of the fact that it is far from clear what exactly this tradition was. I am invoking, of course, a historical construct, a construct which encompasses a set of religious attitudes that center around the notion that the gods are infinitely more powerful than man, that the gods are dangerous, and that it is paramount to please and appease them by sacrifice, prayer and invocation. Without being able to go into the details of each text, I would simply like to point out that I draw evidence for this historical construct of traditional piety from passages such as the following: 1) The circumstances surrounding the plague at the beginning of the Iliad (prayer by the priest Chryses; experience of divine power in punishment (plague); divination (Calchas); atonement of the god by sacrifice; finally, purification). 2) Thucydides VII, 50, the narration of Nicias’ and the army’s reaction to the eclipse of the moon on 27 August, 413. 3) The do-ut-des-piety of another Athenian general, Xenophon: sacrifice and prayers are answered by the gods with true oracles and signs. 4) Theophrastus’ Deisidaimon (Characters 16); this is an extreme caricature with a kernel of truth. 5) A late text, Porphyry’s De abstinencia 2.16, with the story of the poor man Clearchus of Methydrum, who makes the best sacrifices, because he sacrifices as the ritual prescribes monthly at new moon,

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