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Socrates

Ironist and
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6.1 SOCRATES' *DAIMONION*¹³⁹

At its first mention in Plato's *Apology* (31c) Socrates refers to it as "something godlike and divine" (θεῖον τι καὶ δαιμόνιον), but elsewhere frequently as simply τὸ δαιμόνιον. In its latter use δαιμόνιον is "elliptically substantival" (Riddell, 1867: 102), an adjective flanked by a semantic hole where a substantive has to be understood; as Burnet reminds us in his note on *Eu.* 3B5, "there is no such noun-substantive as δαιμόνιον in classical Greek" and the regular use of the word in that way "makes its first appearance in the Septuagint, where it is pretty clearly a diminutive of δαίμων rather than the neuter of δαιμόσιος."¹⁴⁰ So in Plato we should always read the word as a contraction for the phrase we see filled out in *R.* 496c, "the divine sign" (τὸ δαιμόνιον σημεῖον) and again in *Eud.* 272E, "the customary divine sign" (τὸ εἰωθὸς σημεῖον τὸ δαιμόνιον = τὸ εἰωθὸς δαιμόνιον σημεῖον; cf. *Phdr.* 242B3).¹⁴¹ As Zeller noted (1883: 82, n. 5), in Plato the substantival use of τὸ δαιμόνιον to refer to a divinity is restricted to his accusers; it is they who understand

to craft were identity instead of mere analogy. If A is analogized to B, it will be meant to hold forcefully and illuminatingly, if it is a good analogy in some, but by no means in all, respects. The crucial difference for Socrates is that no ordinary craft is sufficient to ensure happiness (the pilot can save his passenger's lives, but does not presume to ensure that the lives he saves will be worth living; *G.* 511D-512B), which is precisely what Socrates holds that virtue does ensure, so e.g. at *G.* 507B7-C7 [quoted as 122 in ch. 8].

¹³⁸ The qualification at 376B4-6, "Hence he who does wrong and shameful and unjust things voluntarily, O Hippias, if there be such a man, is none other than the good man," has often been noted.

¹³⁹ Cf. ch. 6, p. 167.

¹⁴⁰ He also reminds us that Socrates' *daimonion* "is never called a δαίμων, though the idea of the δαίμων as a guardian spirit was quite familiar" (*loc. cit.*).

¹⁴¹ There is no textual foundation for the assumption (Edmunds, 1985: 211 *et passim*) that in Plato τὸ δαιμόνιον is a contraction for "the divine thing."

ἄλλα δαιμόνια καινά to mean the new deities which they allege Socrates introduced to take the place of the city's gods. No less significant is Socrates' alternative use of expressions in which δαιμόνιον does not occur at all, replaced by phrases in which the operative word is "sign": "the god's sign" (τὸ τοῦ θεοῦ σημεῖον, *Ap.* 40B1; "the customary sign" (τὸ εἰωθὸς σημεῖον, *Ap.* 40C3); or just "the sign" (τὸ σημεῖον, *Ap.* 41D6). It comes to Socrates in the form of a "voice": "this is what I have had since childhood: a voice comes to me, and when it comes it always turns me away from what I am about to do, never towards it" (*Ap.* 31D; tr. after Allen).

Xenophon's usage does not make this nearly as clear. Here the word *is* used as a quasi-substantive. Marchant is not clearly wrong in translating τὸ δαιμόνιον σημαίνειν in *Mem.* 1.1.4, "the deity gave a sign." The difference from Plato is not so marked as to require that translation. We could still read his phrase as "the divine [sign] signified"; but if we did the resulting redundancy would suggest that Marchant's reading of the Greek phrase is more likely to be the right one. In any case, a material difference from Plato is that in Xenophon the *daimonion* does a lot more work and of a different kind from any it ever does in Plato. In Xenophon its promptings to Socrates are not restricted to dissuasion; they also give positive injunctions and, what is still more striking, the *daimonion* affords Socrates an intelligence service he can use to benefit third parties as well: "for many of his companions he advised beforehand (προηγόρευε) to do this, not to do that, in accordance with the forewarnings of the deity (τοῦ δαιμονίου προσημαίνοντος); those who heeded the advice prospered, those who did not would regret it" (*loc. cit.*).

This use of the *daimonion* as an occult prognosticator, never encountered in Plato, occurs repeatedly in Xenophon both in the *Memorabilia* (1.1.4-5, cited in part above) and in the *Apology of Socrates* 13, where it is put on a par with prognostications by diviners and is again put to work for the benefit of Socrates' friends ("I have announced to many of my friends the advice [about future events] the god has given me and it has never turned out false").¹⁴² We see the *daimonion* functioning in this way again in the pseudo-Platonic *Theages*, and there its treatment as a divine being in its own right becomes explicit. Young Theages speaks of it as a full-fledged

¹⁴² For the difference in Xenophon's treatment of the *daimonion* by contrast with Plato's see Maier, 1913: 456-7: "In Plato the *daimonion* does not yet have the magical character which Xenophon has given."

divinity which they should “prostitute¹⁴³ by prayers and sacrifices and by any other means the diviners may prescribe.” The youth’s father endorses the suggestion, and Socrates goes along: “if it seems that we should do so, let us do it” (131A). The mentality of the writer of this curious work is indicated by the fact that a young man is supposed to make moral progress simply by being in the same house with Socrates and “much greater if [he] sat at Socrates’ side and most of all when sitting right next to Socrates, touching him” (130E).

Once we set aside the *Theages* (except as a monument to the level of credulity to which some of Socrates’ superstitious admirers could sink after his death), our choice of sources of information about the *daimonion* falls between Plato and Xenophon. And if we assume that in this case, no less than in that of the others that have been noticed previously in chapter 3 and will be noticed again in the present chapter¹⁴⁴ and in additional note 7.1, the former’s testimony should be preferred as that of the more reliable witness, then the first thing we should do in our effort to get to the bottom of this very puzzling feature of Socrates’ conduct is to follow out the implications of his unique susceptibility to certain peculiar mental states which he construes as signs from the god. Does he see in these signs *revelation* in the proper sense of the word, i.e. “knowledge disclosed to man by divine or supernatural agency”¹⁴⁵? To do so he would have had to think of the god as providing him with not only (a) the sign, whose presentational content is immediately clear, but also (b) *the sign’s correct interpretation*, which is not immediately clear, and may be highly problematic. That Socrates assumes that (a) is true is clear enough in our texts. That he also believes that (b) is true is not: *there is not a single Platonic text in which Socrates says or implies that the god causes him not only to hear “the voice” but also to discern the right interpretation of its message.*¹⁴⁶ As I pointed out above (pp. 167–8), in the parallel

¹⁴³ παραυθείσθαι. The notion that a divine being would need to be (or could be) “prostituted” by special cult-services prescribed by diviners would give away the spuriousness of the *Theages* all by itself, even if there were no other grounds on which it would be suspect.

¹⁴⁴ Additional notes 6.3, 6.4, 6.5.

¹⁴⁵ Here again, as in n. 65 in ch. 6, I am quoting the *O.E.D.*’s definition of the word.

¹⁴⁶ Had this crucial difference between (a) and (b) been duly noticed by Brickhouse & Smith they might have been saved from their view that “there are some moral truths to which [Socrates] has direct and certain access” through the *daimonion* (1989: 241 *et passim*). The error is a long-standing one. Thus Zeller (1885: 86) maintains that “Socrates was conscious within of divine revelations” and proceeds to explain this consciousness as “the general form which a vivid, but unexplored sense of the propriety of particular actions assumed for the personal consciousness of Socrates” (*ibid.* 95), dodging the question of the epistemic import which these states of consciousness would have had for someone who did truly think of them as “divine revelations.”

case of the prophetic dream Socrates explicitly recognizes that the interpretation he puts on the surface-content of a supernatural sign at a given time may be in need of revision at a subsequent time, thereby acknowledging the possibility that at the earlier time he may have put the wrong interpretation on its message. There is no reason to suppose it would be different in the case of the *daimonion*. What the voice brings him is a message. For the true interpretation of that message he must rely entirely on his own, highly fallible, human resources.

If we review the passages in Plato whose context is informative enough to enable us to tell what goes on in Socrates’ mind when he speaks of receiving a monition from the *daimonion*, we shall find that they fall into two classes:

(A) Socrates has independent grounds for accepting what the voice tells him to do or to believe – grounds which would have sufficed to persuade him of the correctness of that action or belief even in the absence of that signal.

(B) Socrates has a “hunch” – a strong intuitive impression – that a certain belief or action is correct without being able to articulate his grounds for it at the moment.

Here are the passages that fall under (A):

(A) 1. *Ap.* 31C–32A. The *daimonion* has been opposing his participation in politics. He says he “believes that it does very well in opposing me” (παγκάλως γέ μοι δοκεῖ ἐναντιοῦσθαι) for if he had got into politics long ago he “would have perished long ago and done no good to [them] or to himself.” His perception that participation in politics would be unlikely to benefit the Athenians, while being virtually certain to bring about his own destruction is, clearly, a rational ground for keeping out of politics, regardless of what, if anything, he heard from the *daimonion* on that score.

(A) 2. *Ap.* 40A–C. The silence of the *daimonion* – the fact that it did not oppose the line of defense he took at his trial – is, he says, “a great indication (μέγα τεκμήριον)¹⁴⁷ for him” that no evil will befall

¹⁴⁷ “Indication” for τεκμήριον in Allen. “intimation” originally in Jowett. The word is frequently rendered “proof” in translations of the passage (so most recently in Brickhouse & Smith, 1989: 237ff.). But the Greek counterpart for “proof” would be ἀπὸδείξις. No interpretation of this text which understands Socrates to be getting “proof” of something or other from the silence of the *daimonion* could be justified by appeal to the use of τεκμήριον in this passage.

him as a result of the death to which he has been sentenced. But that death is no evil he establishes on rational grounds which are entirely independent of input by the *daimonion*. He does so at 29A, where the *daimonion* has not yet been brought into his speech, and then again, more elaborately, at 40C-41C, a passage he introduces by saying "and let us understand (ἐνωσήσωμεν) the matter in this way." If the divine monition had not come, Socrates would still have had the rationally grounded belief that death is no evil.

(A) 3. *Ap.* 28E, taken together with 33C. The *daimonion* is not named in either passage. In the former he says that "the god has commanded me, as I assumed and believed, that I ought to live philosophizing, examining myself and others," without specifying the means by which the command was conveyed to him. In the latter he says that "to do this, as I maintain,¹⁴⁸ was commanded me by the god through both divinations and oracles and by every other means by which divine dispensation has ever commanded a human being to do anything" – this is sweeping enough to allow us to infer that "the command" was supported *ex silentio* by the *daimonion* though not articulated by its "voice" (which would contradict the subsequent statement that "the voice always deters, never enjoins"). That Socrates has rational grounds for philosophizing should go without saying. From these he would infer that the god being what he is (wishing the best that could be achieved by human means for the Athenians), and Socrates being what he is (uniquely endowed with the capacity to bring home to his fellows the supreme importance of the pursuit of moral perfection), philosophizing is what would constitute the best service he could render the god.

Here are the passages that fall under (B):

(B) 1. *Tht.* 151C. When one-time associates of his who have drifted away from him return and beg to be readmitted to his company "the *daimonion* which comes to me forbids it in the case of some, allows it in that of others, and they are the ones that make progress." Here Socrates stops from doing something "without being able (at the time) to explain to himself the motive of reason and feeling which checked him" (Campbell, 1861: *ad loc.*). He is acting, as we all do often enough in life, on a "hunch" – on grounds we cannot articulate explicitly at the moment, but which seem nonetheless convincing enough to justify action.

(B) 2. *Eud.* 272E. He was alone in the palaestra, sitting, and was about to get up, when "the customary divine sign" checked him, so he sat down. He acted on just a "hunch" that he had best sit a little longer, and so he did.

(B) 3. *Phdr.* 242B-C. "As I was about to cross the stream the customary divine sign came to me – it holds me back from doing what I am about to do on each occasion [on which it comes] – and I seemed to hear a voice, forbidding me to leave the spot until I had made atonement for some offense to the god." Here Socrates has good reasons for making atonement for that offense. He proceeds to state them: he had spoken irreverently about love in his first speech. But at the moment to which he refers those reasons had not yet been clearly articulated in his mind, and they had been even less clearly articulated earlier on, while delivering that first speech, when "something divinatory" (242C7) "disturbed him." Divination and the *daimonion* are cited in explanation of his reluctance to leave before making amends to god for his impious first speech about love – reluctance which had been insistent, but became articulate only in retrospect.

From these passages, which give us content enough to enable us to tell what is going on in Socrates' mind when a visitation of the *daimonion* occurs, we can satisfy ourselves that none of them implies or even suggests that he would have been willing to accept a prompting from that source *if it had offered counsel obnoxious to his moral reason*. To be sure, if Socrates *knew* that X is a command from the infinitely wise god this would trump any rational scruples he might have had about it. But that is precisely what he does *not* know. All he has is subjective states of mind, putatively caused by the god, whose import remains to be determined by himself. Think, for example, of a command like that which Abraham gets in Genesis 22: "Take thou thy son, thine only son, Isaac, whom thou lovest. Get thee into the land of Moriah and offer him as a burnt offering." While Abraham could have taken, and did take, the surface content of the sign he got from God as its real meaning, Socrates could not. Both Abraham and Socrates believe that God is good and wills only good for those who serve him. And this would give both Abraham and Socrates a reason for doubting that God could be commanding something so horrendously iniquitous as killing an innocent child. But for Abraham faith trumps reason and he is praised for this by Kierkegaard as a "knight of faith." Not so in the case of Socrates, who lives with a commitment to argumentative reason (ΤΙ in chapter 6) for which there is no

¹⁴⁸ The words I have italicized here and in the preceding quotation emphasize the personal nature of the interpretation he is putting on the supernatural signs to which he refers.

parallel in Abraham or any other Old Testament figure. The god Socrates serves has only the attributes which Socrates' elenctic reason would approve. If the *daimonion* were ever to give a message which contradicts the character Socratic reason establishes for the gods the message would thereby condemn itself as a vagary of his own fancy instead of a true command from his god.

Nonetheless the impression persists in the mind of some readers of the *Apology* that Socrates does allow his "sign" to trump a decision he has reached on rational grounds. The impression is articulated as a formal thesis by my friends, Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith (1989), in their book *Socrates on Trial* and then again in their letter to *TLS* of January 26 – February 1, 1990. To support their thesis that Socrates does allow it they refer to *Apology* 31D–E. But does that passage really provide evidence for their thesis? It certainly would if what is said there were, as they claim in their letter, that Socrates had "already decided to engage in [political] activity" and the "sign" supervened to oppose the decision. They had made the same claim previously in their book: the *daimonion* opposed him "each time he has resolved to undertake political activity" (1989: 168); "it opposed him each time he has tried" to go into politics (169).

But is this said in the text? Does Socrates say he had *decided* to go into politics, had *resolved* to do so, and had *tried* to do so? No. Not a word there to indicate that he had done any of these things. All he says is that the *daimonion* "opposes my engaging in politics" (31D5), and that he sees good reason for its doing so (31D6–E2). When the text is closely read all we learn from it is that his "sign" opposes his going into politics, and that so does his reason. "Sign" and reason are in accord. There is no trumping.

How is it then that Brickhouse and Smith take that text as evidence to the contrary? The answer is made disarmingly plain in their letter to *TLS*: "the *daimonion* could not have 'turned [Socrates] away' from political activity unless he had already decided to engage in such activity." Surely this is false. Consider: I am offered a job that would double my pay but might prove disastrous in other ways. I spend a sleepless night turning over the offer, sugar-plums of bigger pay dancing in my head. I rise *almost* ready to write the letter of acceptance. If I were favored with a divine sign solicitous of my welfare wouldn't that be a good time for it to speak its "Don't", instead of waiting until after I "had already decided" to accept?

Socrates must have often been in like need of his sign's advice. Living in a city that practices participatory democracy and enjoys

the ethos epitomized by Pericles in Thucydides (2.40.2): "the man who takes no part in politics we regard not as one who meddles with nothing but who is good for nothing." Socrates, an ultra-conscientious man, seeing dreadful goings-on close to him, must often have had twinges of self-questioning, often wondered if he was right to persist with mulish obstinacy in his principled abstention from politics, and in specially trying circumstances – say, on the morning when the question of exterminating Melos would be coming up for debate in the Assembly – had all but reached the point of doing what his conscience had vetoed heretofore. But did he ever go as far as *deciding* and *resolving* to do it? Would he have *tried it*, if his "sign" had not intervened? This is what we do not know and shall never know if we stick to the evidence and continue doing history instead of switching to historical romance.

6.2 *ION* 533D–536A¹⁴⁹

This is a remarkable passage, unique among Plato's earlier compositions in its exuberance of poetic imagery; the poet is a "magnet"; he is a "winged" creature; he is a "bee" carrying away sweetness from honied fountains (untranslatable pun on μέλι, μέλη, μέλιτται, μελιρρῦτων, μελοποιῶν, 534A–B); he is like the "bacchantes drawing milk and honey from streams" (534A). In explaining the poet to us, Plato lets Socrates speak like a poet for the nonce. But he does not make Socrates abandon his customary elenctic role on that account. What is different here in Socrates' practice of elenchus is his propounding *in extenso* a challenging theory *before* proceeding to vindicate it argumentatively. This reversal of the usual order in no way diminishes the vigor of his elenctic argument when he does come around to it. *Pace* Verdenius (1943: 233ff. at 235, "il ne saurait démontrer cette conviction"), Socrates uses elenctic argument forcefully (536Dff.) to refute Ion's claim that *he* "does not praise Homer in a state of possession and madness (κατεχόμενος καὶ μαινόμενος)." And *pace* the remark of Wilamowitz (1948: 100) that in this dialogue Socrates does more "dozieren" than questioning, once Socrates gets past the exposition of the "possession" theory (533D–535A and 535E–536D), Socrates is as assiduous and deft a questioner and arguer in the *Ion* as in any of Plato's Socratic dialogues.

With this passage we should read *Ap.* 22B–C (= T10 in ch. 6) – a

¹⁴⁹ See ch. 6, p. 168.