

Socrates the Mantis and the Divine Sign in Plato's *Phaedrus*

The nature of the divine sign (*to daimonion*) that manifests itself to Socrates and its role in his philosophical activity has been the subject of recent debate (Dorion 2003; Joyal 2005; Long 2007). Gregory Vlastos (1991) suggests that it merely provides monitions and is not a source of knowledge, whereas Mark McPherran (1996; 2005) asserts that divination and the divine sign in particular do provide Socrates with information but that this is subjected to rational justification (the *elenchus*). Both Plato (*Ap.* 40a; *Phdr.* 242b-c) and Xenophon (*Mem.* 1.1.3-4) characterize the divine sign as a form of divination. In this paper, I show *how* Socrates is, as he says in the *Phaedrus* passage, a mantis, what role the divine sign plays, and what bearing this has on Socrates' philosophical activity. Specifically, I argue that the divine sign does convey substantive messages to Socrates; that Socrates acts as a mantis for himself by interpreting such messages; but that the divine sign, at least according to Plato, has little to do with Socrates' philosophical work. The argument is based on close reading of the *Phaedrus* (242b-d), which contains the fullest description of the divine sign in the Platonic corpus.

Plato twice indicates (*Ap.* 31d; *Phdr.* 242c) that the divine sign is a kind of voice, though scholars (Long, 2007; McPherran, 1996) have referred to these as separate entities. The identification is important, for in the *Phaedrus* Socrates states to his interlocutor that the voice occurred ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, "from right here." Thus, the divine sign is not an "inner voice," as some might have it, but an external phenomenon. Further, *pace* Joyal (2001), the voice gives an articulate message. The message, according to Socrates, is that he cannot cross the river until offering atonement to the gods for an error he has committed (*Phdr.* 242c). I offer a close reading of the text that dispels Joyal's (2001; 2005) argument that Socrates infers these details from an inarticulate sign. Although Socrates' statement that the voice forbids him (φωνήν... ἣ με οὐκ ἔἵλ

ἀπιέναι, *Phdr.* 242c) does not necessarily entail an articulate message, the information that Socrates has done some wrong (ὥς τι ἡμαρτηκότα εἰς τὸ θεῖον, *Phdr.* 242c) is presented, I argue, as coming from the divine sign. Indeed, Joyal (2001) relies upon a variant reading from Proclus (which, as I show, Platonic usage does not support) to found his claim that Socrates himself, without a message from the sign, infers he has done wrong.

It is significant that the divine sign does give Socrates a message, for in the very same passage Socrates speaks of being a mantis. It is in virtue of this, he says, that he has determined what error he has committed (εἰμι δὴ οὖν μάντις μὲν... σαφῶς οὖν ἤδη μανθάνω τὸ ἀμάρτημα. *Phdr.* 242c). I suggest that Socrates means that he, like a diviner, has interpreted the message of his divine sign and thereby determined what error he has committed. Thus, Socrates' mantic activity entails his interpretation of an articulate message from his divine sign, which manifests like a voice.

Finally, the *Phaedrus* passage indicates too the limited scope of Socrates' divination. Socrates states that he is not much of a mantis, rather, like those who are bad at writing, he is only adequate for himself (οὐ πάνυ δὲ σπουδαῖος, ἀλλ' ὥσπερ οἱ τὰ γράμματα φαῦλοι, ὅσον μὲν ἐμαυτῷ μόνον ἱκανός, *Phdr.* 242c). McPherran (1996) understands by this statement a reference to a basic rational power possessed by all people. I submit, however, that Socrates means his mantic ability to interpret the sign is available only to himself. It is easy to understand why this is so: the divine sign manifests to Socrates alone, so his mantic abilities only operate when the sign appears and then only for Socrates.

Works Cited

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