

Why was Socrates charged with “introducing religious innovations”?

Since at least the time of Gregory Vlastos’s summary dismissal of Xenophon as a source for the historical Socrates (see, e.g., Vlastos 1971, 3–4), Xenophon’s *Apology* and *Memorabilia* have frequently merited little more than footnotes in the vast scholarly literature on Socrates generally, and on Socrates’s trial in particular. Consider, for example, the following literal footnote from a standard work in the field: “Where Xenophon’s and Plato’s versions disagree, most scholars reasonably take Plato’s to have the greater claim to accuracy, since Xenophon’s version is based upon second-hand information, whereas Plato was actually at the trial” (Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 6 n. 20). My intention here is to make a case for Xenophon – and, to a lesser extent, against Plato – as a source for understanding the nature and motivation of the charges against Socrates by focusing specifically on the second charge, namely, “introducing religious innovations” (ἕτερα δὲ καινὰ δαιμόνια εἰσηγούμενος). [NB: I follow the wording and order of the charges as found in Diog. Laert. 2.40; cp. Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.1 and Xen. *Ap.* 11. The order, though not the substance, of the charges differs in Pl. *Ap.* 24b.]

Plato’s *Apology* is, alas, not especially instructive on this charge generally. The substance of Socrates’s defense against it therein (see 27a ff.) amounts to little more than the attempt to establish a contradiction between it and the preceding charge, “not recognizing the gods recognized by the state.” Only a passing reference at *Ap.* 31c offers any indication of what may in fact have underlay this particular charge. There Socrates says: “I have a divine or spiritual sign, which Meletus mocked in his indictment ...” (But cf. *Euthphr.* 3b: “I understand, Socrates. This is because you say that the divine sign keeps coming to you.”)

Xenophon, by contrast, is clear and consistent in claiming that Socrates's divine sign motivated the second charge. So, for example, in *Mem.* 1.1.2, he writes: "It was common knowledge that Socrates claimed to have a 'divine sign' (τὸ δαιμόνιον), which in fact seems to me the principal reason that they charged him with 'introducing religious innovations' (καινὰ δαιμόνια εισφέρειν)." The evidence from other cases of individuals prosecuted in Athens for the unauthorized introduction of new gods or cults suggests that the operative legal phrase was actually καινοῦς θεοῦς (de Strycker & Slings 1994: 88). The substitution of δαιμόνια for θεοῦς in Socrates's case was presumably intended to call to the jurors' minds his peculiar, and apparently notorious, δαιμόνιον. Xenophon confronts this charge head on by attempting to show that Socrates's "divine sign" isn't really *innovative* at all, since it resembles other, recognized forms of divination.

But even were one to suppose that Socrates's "divine sign" did somehow represent a religious innovation of sorts, Plato's account of τὸ δαιμόνιον makes it difficult to imagine why this should have been a cause for public concern, much less grounds for a formal, legal charge. Xenophon's accounts in both his *Apology* and *Memorabilia*, however, once again offer clarification. Whereas in Plato's dialogues Socrates's "divine sign" has a consistently negative and purely personal function (see, e.g., Pl. *Ap.* 31d), Xenophon portrays τὸ δαιμόνιον as a source of positive and negative advice both for Socrates personally and, through him, for others. This characterization of Socrates's "divine sign" makes far better sense of its rôle in Socrates's prosecution. A man claiming to have a certain inner voice that advises him against a wrongful course of action on which he is about to embark might be regarded as eccentric, but hardly for that fact alone criminal or especially dangerous; however, someone claiming to have a direct pipeline to the divine on the basis of which he

urges his devoted followers – who include a number of powerful, young, Athenian aristocrats – to specific action could indeed represent a genuine and significant threat to the established order.

Bibliography

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