

The Divine Sign and the Socratic Problem

This paper addresses three questions related to the historical Socrates' *daimonion*, the divine sign that weighed in on his decisions according to both Plato and Xenophon. First, was the *daimonion* an important part of Socrates' personality? Second, did the *daimonion*'s influence on Socrates pose a threat to his rationality? Finally, was the *daimonion* exclusively apotrepic (meaning that it only turned Socrates away from actions that he was about to take and never prompted him to take action), as Plato claims, or did it also turn Socrates toward positive action, as Xenophon claims?

A look at the rhetorical strategies employed in the *Apologies* of Plato and Xenophon is useful in establishing the importance of the *daimonion* to the historical Socrates. In addition to responding to the charges for which Socrates was tried in 399 BC, (impiety and corrupting the youth), Plato and Xenophon also used their *Apologies* to weigh in on the post-trial debate about how Socrates handled his defense (Danzig 2003). In particular, each author dedicated a significant portion of his *Apology* to justifying Socrates' boastfulness (*μεγαληγορια*) during his trial (Danzig 2003). The efforts that Plato and Xenophon took to defend Socrates' boastful speech suggest that Socrates did, in fact, speak boastfully during his defense. Both Plato and Xenophon show Socrates using his *daimonion* to boast in their *Apologies*, with each author making an effort to defend him for doing so (Plat. *Apol.* 31c4-32a3; Xen. *Apol.* 11-13). This paper argues that Plato and Xenophon felt compelled to defend Socrates' boastfulness regarding the *daimonion* because this was, in fact, one of the ways in which the historical Socrates boasted in his trial, and that, given the stakes of appearing impious in this context, the *daimonion* was likely important to Socrates.

Although Plato and Xenophon unequivocally depict Socrates as claiming to possess a divine sign that guided his actions, many interpreters put a great deal of effort into qualifying and downplaying the role of the *daimonion* in Socrates' decision-making, largely because of the perception that being too heavily influenced by a divine force would conflict with Socrates' apparent commitment to make decisions based solely on reason (e.g., Vlastos 1991, 157; Brickhouse and Smith 2005, 43; Senn 2012, 10). However, the idea that Socrates commits himself to act on reason alone is based on a misreading of *Crito* 46b4-6. In addition, the tendency to assume that Plato's early dialogues hold the key to the Socratic problem has contributed to a tendency to dismiss Xenophon's Socratic writings. Yet Xenophon's discussion of the separate realms of human knowledge and divine revelation at *Mem.* 1.1.6-9 provides a useful and culturally relevant framework for analyzing Socrates' relationship to his divine sign. By explaining the widespread misreading of *Crito* 46b4-6 and by providing an overview of *Mem.* 1.1.6-9, this paper shows that the perceived conflict between Socrates' commitment to reason and his obedience to the *daimonion* is a false problem.

When it comes to how the *daimonion* functions, Plato and Xenophon explicitly disagree. For Plato, the *daimonion* is exclusively apotreptic, meaning that it only turns Socrates away from, and never toward, action (Plat. *Apol.* 31c8-d4.). For Xenophon, the *daimonion* is both apotreptic and protreptic, and thus it also turns Socrates toward action (Xen. *Apol.* 12; *Mem.* 1.1.4; *Mem.* 4.8.1). When considering which of the two descriptions may be more historically accurate, recent scholarship tends to assume that Plato's version is more plausible than Xenophon's (e.g., Nussbaum 1985; Vlastos 1991; McPherran 2005). There is good reason to doubt this, however. This paper proposes that Plato's *daimonion* functions in a way that fits so

well with Plato's literary and philosophical goals that scholars should consider whether Plato may have molded his description of the *daimonion* to support these goals.

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