THE NATURE AND INFLUENCE OF SOCRATES' DAIMONION

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Plato's Socrates speaks of his daimonion, or divine sign. "Daimonion" means "subordinate god" or "from the god." In the *Apology* 31d, Socrates provides the following explanation of his daimonion: "I have divine or spiritual sign.... This began when I was a child. It is a voice (*phônê tis*), and whenever it speaks it turns me away from what I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything." In the *Phaedrus* 242c, Socrates says: "the familiar divine sign came to me, which, whenever it occurs holds me back from something I am about to do. I seemed to hear a certain voice (*kai tina phônên edoxa autothen akousai*) forbidding me to leave the spot until I made atonement for some offense against the gods."

Although some argue that belief in the existence of daimonia was not uncommon in fifth century Athens,[1] the fact that Socrates is motivated to explain his daimonion to others fits well with his claim that "my own case is hardly worth mentioning—my daemonic sign—because it has happened to no one before me, or to only a very few" (*Republic VI* 496c). Each of the three above passages provides evidence that Socrates understands his daimonion as a rare if not unique phenomenon. The Socratic daimonion is more than a rational intuition, a guilty conscience, or a strange feeling that something bad is about to happen[2]—these are familiar to all of us, and to fifth century Athenians too.[3]

Socrates believes his daimonion is very rare, and it is not likely that he simply failed to recognize that those around him have guilty consciences and strange feelings. Moreover, those who know of Socrates' divine sign, for example, Euthyphro and Meletus, never claim to be able to identify with what Socrates (believes he) is experiencing. Indeed, there is good reason to hold that the charge for which Socrates is tried and sentenced to death, "making new gods and not believing in the old ones," refers to his daimonion as a "new" god, that is, one that others have not experienced. Euthyphro tells Socrates that these charges were brought against him "because you [Socrates] say that the divine sign keeps coming to you. So [Meletus] has written this indictment against you as one who makes innovations in religious matters" (*Euthyphro* 3b).[4] The bottom line is that Socrates holds, and those around him seem to agree, that whatever his daimonion is, it is not like anything familiar to the rest of us—or to fifth century Athenians.[5]

Some scholars resist identifying Socrates' daimonion as a voice. Instead, they use the phrase "divine sign" while speculating about what Socrates experiences during a daemonic intervention.[6] However, Plato's Socrates refers to the daimonion as a voice (*phone*) in both the *Apology* and in the *Phaedrus*.[7] It seems odd not to take Socrates at his word and commit to recognizing the daimonion as a voice, or at least a voice-like experience. It does not follow from the fact that Socrates often uses a more general term to refer to the daimonion, that his experience with the daimonion varies. It is worth noting that when Socrates does make a specific reference to his divine sign, he consistently refers to it as a voice (or voice-like). He never specifically refers to his daimonion as anything other than a voice, or at least as anything that could not come in the form of a voice, for example, a divine warning (*to gignomenon moi daimonion*). With this in mind, it seems safe to conclude that Socrates' daimonion is a voice, or at the very least a voice-like experience.

Socrates consistently describes the daimonion as having a negative function. It only opposes what he is about to do and never encourages him to do anything (*Apology* 31d). Thus, Plato's Socrates' diamonion is not the sort of thing that gives Socrates directions, or tells him what actions to take.[8] The fact that the daimonion opposes what Socrates is about to do, and not what he is doing or has done is also significant. As Nicholas Smith and Thomas Brickhouse make clear, this tells us (1) that Socrates receives his divine sign before he acts, but after his reasoning about an action is complete (if Socrates reasoned about the action at all) and (2) that the daimonion's opposition to an action trumps whatever reasons he has for taking the action in the first place.[9] Thus, we have good reason to hold that an individual occurrence of the daimonion can conflict with and will always trump Socrates' reasons for taking a particular action.[10]

Just as a daemonic occurrence convinces Socrates that what he is about to do is wrong, the absence of daemonic opposition convinces Socrates that what he has done is right. The trust that Socrates puts in his daimonion is so great that he not only believes that every time he receives the divine sign he should refrain from doing whatever he was about to do despite any reasons he had for doing it, he also believes that the daimonion *cannot* fail to let him know if any action he is about to take is wrong. Thus, for Socrates the daimonion's silence is evidence that he has made the right move. This is clear in *Apology* (40abc) as Socrates explains to his "friends," the members of the jury who voted to spare him from the death sentence, that death is certainly not an evil.

> At all previous times my familiar prophetic power, my spiritual manifestation, frequently opposed me, even in small matters, when I was about to do something wrong, but now that as you can see for yourselves, I was faced with what one might think, and what is generally thought to be, the worst of evils, my divine sign has not opposed me, either when I left home at dawn, or when I came into court, or at any time that I was about to say something during my speech. Yet in other talks it often held me back in the middle of my speaking, but now it has opposed me no word or deed of mine. What do I think is the reason for this? I will tell you. What has happened to me may well be a good thing, and those of us who believe death to be an evil are certainly mistaken. I have convincing proof of this, for it is impossible that my familiar sign did not oppose me if what I was not about to do what was right.

This passage shows us that Socrates believes that the daimonion has opposed him at *all* previous times when he was about to do something wrong, and that it is *impossible* that the daimonion would to fail to intervene if what he were about to do was not right. The trust Socrates puts into the *daimonion's* non-performance as an approval of his actions is so great, that he readily dies saying: "it is clear to me that it was better for me to die right now and escape from trouble. That is why my divine sign did not oppose me at any point" (*Apology* 41d). Thus, for Socrates daemonic intervention trumps any (reasoned) intention to make the wrong action, and daemonic silence provides a divine seal of approval on a right action.

I believe that scholars tend to underestimate the significance of the daimonion's silence for Socrates.[11] I can only imagine what a great benefit it would be to be given assurance

at all times that each action I took was a right action. The belief that he is not acting wrongly must have allowed Socrates great confidence as he made a lifestyle of engaging, and often humiliating, his critics. (Imagine, never needing to ask yourself, "Was I too hard on him?" or "Did I say too much?") It is important to recognize that (and interesting to wonder how) the daimonion's silence had a constant and robust influence on the way Socrates behaved in daily life, "even in small matters" (*Apology* 40a). Of course, the texts do not provide a full account of this divine silent approval. However, one thing is certain: Plato's Socrates goes confidently to his death because of the daimonion's silence (*Apology* 41d).

The exact content of daemonic interventions cannot be known from the texts. That is, we do not know what Socrates' divine voice says when it speaks to him. However, it is worth noting that Socrates never seems confused about which action, or which aspect of an action, the daimonion opposes. In *Alcibiades* (103a),[12] Socrates reveals that the daimonion not only tells him who not to talk to, but also when not to talk to them as he tells Alcibiades: "I have never even spoken to you in all these years. Human causes didn't enter into it; I was prevented by some divine being.... But now it no longer prevents me, so here I am. I am confident it won't prevent me in the future either." This suggests that the daimonion provides some very specific information about which actions Socrates is to avoid.[13] However, while Socrates clearly seems to know *that* a particular action is wrong, he does not often claim to know *why* the action is wrong. Nor does he seem to know what particular harm or evil would ensue if he fails to follow the daimonion or what good might come about as a result of his heeding its warning.

Socrates always obeys the daimonion despite the fact that he does not seem to know why it has opposed him, or what will come next. In the texts, Socrates often speculates about what he *thinks* the reasons for the divine opposition might be, or simply waits to see what happens next. Socrates tells Alcibiades why he *thinks* the daimonion prevented him from talking to him earlier: "When you were younger, before you were full of such ambitions, I think the god didn't let me talk to you because the conversation would have been pointless. But now he has [allowed] me to because now you will listen to me (*Alcibiades*, 105e-106a).[14] In *Euthydemus* (272e-273a), Socrates is "thinking of leaving" and stands up to do so, when he gets his "customary sign" and sits back down to wait and see what will happen next. Soon two sophists, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, enter and Socrates is able to engage them in philosophical exchange (a good thing for Socrates). In each of these cases Socrates seems certain of what the daimonion is asking of him and that he should obey, but seems uncertain of what will happen next. Thus, it seems that the content of daemonic events is very specific, but limited. The upshot of this section on the nature of Socrates' daimonion is that there is good evidence that Socrates understands his daimonion to be a very rare, if not unique, phenomenon that occurs as a specific, but limited, vocal (or voice-like) opposition whenever he is about to do something wrong and remains silent when he is going to do the right thing.

As we have seen, the daimonion has great influence on Socrates' behavior. Its opposition leads Socrates to reject his decision to take a specific action and its silence gives him confidence in his decision to take action. In this way the daimonion provides practical

guidance for Socrates in particular situations, some of which are moral situations.[15] However, it is important to note that not everything that provides guidance can be used as a guide. Socrates certainly does not act as if he can actively use his daimonion as a guide. He does not call upon the daimonion for guidance, or wait to hear from the daimonion before making decisions about how to act. Instead daemonic intervention is something that happens *to* Socrates. As Socrates tells us, the daimonion "never encourages [him] to do anything," rather it vocally opposes or silently approves of the actions he has already decided to take. Of course, reflection on past occurrences of daemonic opposition may play some role in his reaching the decision to take a certain action, but this is to receive guidance from the daimonion and *not* to actively use the daimonion as a guide. As Smith writes: It is not that "Socrates looks to his daimonion, so much as obeys it when it happens to call."[16] And I would add "and precedes to act with confidence when the daimonion does not call."

The fact that Socrates considers the daimonion's role in his decision to take a particular action as "convincing proof" of its moral status reveals that Socrates believes that (at least in some cases) his daimonion provides a type of moral knowledge, namely, knowledge of the moral character of particular actions. In other words, Socrates would claim to know that some particular action he was about to take, for example, leaving the spot before making atonement for some offense against the gods (*Phaedrus 242c*), is not a morally appropriate action. Or, similarly in the case of daemonic silence, the specific action he is taking, for example, leaving his home at dawn, coming into court (*Apology 41b*), is not a morally inappropriate action.

Socrates not only rethinks his individual actions in response to the daimonion's opposition(s), he also draws conclusions that serve as action-guiding moral principles. For example, in the *Apology*, Plato's Socrates claims that the daimonion prevented him from going into politics as he says: "This [the daimonion] is what has prevented me from taking part in public affairs, and I think it was quite right to prevent me" (*Apology 31d*). If the daimonion prevented Socrates from entering politics, then Socrates must have made a decision or, perhaps more likely, a series of decisions, to take part in public affairs only to have his reasoned decision(s) for doing so trumped by the daimonion's opposition. In this case the daimonion's opposition not only convinced Socrates that it would be wrong to take (a) certain political action(s) given the present situation, it also led him to the more general position that he should not take up politics at all, because no good or benefit could come from it. "Be sure...that if I had long ago attempted to take part in politics, I should have died long ago, and benefited neither you nor myself" (*Apology 31d*). Furthermore, Socrates was led to draw the even more general conclusion that "A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time" (*Apology* 32a). Thus, it seems that Socrates' daimonion not only influences his actions in particular (moral) situations thereby providing him with moral knowledge of particulars, it also provides some action-guiding moral principles.

Socrates' decision not to enter politics given that "a man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life" (*Apology 31d*) is a conclusion that Socrates draws about moral principles based on patterns of daemonic opposition. His decision to accept the death penalty is a conclusion that Socrates draws about moral principles based on

patterns of daemonic silence. He makes this clear as he says: "it is better for me to die right now...That is why my divine sign did not oppose me at any point" (*Apology 41d*). Although (Plato's) Socrates does not provide us with obvious examples of conclusions Socrates has reached through a pattern of both daemonic opposition and daemonic silence, it is most plausible to hold that they exist.[17] That fact that Socrates' daimonion opposed his practicing politics, but was presumably silent when he decided to practice philosophical exchange in public, may be credited with his conclusion that: to practice philosophical exchange in public is part of (or not inconsistent with) the good life.[18] Thus, it is clear that Socrates believes that the daimonion is a source of practical, and often moral, knowledge in particular situations, as well as action-guiding principles we can know. He clearly credits the daimonion as the source of such principles, which suggests that he may not have discovered them without the daimonion's interventions. But does it follow from this that Socrates is not morally autonomous? In other words, does this mean that Socrates is not the sort of man he claims to be in the Crito: "the kind of man who listens only to the argument that on reflection seems best to [him]?" (*Crito* 46b) I do not think it does for at least two reasons.

First, although Socrates credits the daimonion as the source of such principles, the principles do not seem to be *pure* products of the daimonion. As discussed above, while the daimonion's performance may tell Socrates *that* a particular action is right or wrong, it does not seem to tell him *why* the action is right or wrong. Any conclusions Socrates draws about moral principles based on patterns of daemonic opposition and/or silence would require reflection on the limited information supplied by the daimonion, and therefore would be products of both the daimonion and ratiocination. Secondly, Socrates may have good reason to heed the daimonion's warnings. For example, one can provide an empirically-grounded reliabilist justification for Socrates' belief that when the daimonion warns him against doing x, he should not do x.[19]

Thus, it does not follow from the fact that Socrates believes he gets moral knowledge about how to behave from the daimonion, that Socrates does not act only in accordance with reason. Moreover, when we read the Crito with the understanding that Socrates has good reason to follow the daimonion, it makes sense that Socrates begins the discussion about how to act by saying: "We must therefore examine whether we should act in this way or not, as not only now, but at all times I am the kind of man who listens only to the argument that on reflection seems best to me," (*Crito* 46b) and close the discussion by saying: "Let us act in this way since this is the way the god is leading us" (*Crito* 54de). In other words, it makes sense to hold that Socrates has good reason to trust the daimonion and that this trust does not compromise his moral integrity.

Moreover, the moral knowledge Socrates gets from the daimonion does not have a direct influence on his philosophical search for moral knowledge. Although Socrates may get moral knowledge concerning particular events and even some action-guiding principles from the daimonion, this knowledge is limited to particular situations or specific actions. There is no reason to suspect that Socrates gets what he would consider philosophically significant moral knowledge from the daimonion. The daimonion may oppose Socrates when he is about to do something evil and silently approve him when he does something

good, but it does not reveal the essence of *the evil, the good, the virtuous,* or *the noble,* and so forth. Identifying such universal moral concepts is the work of Socratic philosophy. To the extent that this work can be done at all, Socrates acts as if it can be done not by the daimonion, but through the elenchus, Socrates' method of question and answer.[20] As James Lesher writes:

> What most perplexed Socrates was not how to identify bad things and good things, noble acts and the virtues, but what in the (agreed to be) goods, noble acts, and virtues makes them what they are and how can we accomplish them often, as reliably, or as expertly as possible? Identifying the goods and evils of ordinary life was in short as philosophically uncontroversial as it was uninteresting.[21]

The daimonion does contribute to Socrates ability to identify the particular goods and evils of everyday life. It does not provide the philosophically interesting knowledge of the universal concepts of the good and the evil. The daimonion has at best an indirect influence on Socratic philosophy. For example, the daimonion might influence a philosophical exchange by stopping Socrates "in the middle of [his] speaking," but it never tells him what to say or provides the answer to philosophical questions; that is, it never provides the essence of *F*. It is clear that Socrates does credit the daimonion with at least one general moral principle: "A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life," and reflection on this action-guiding principle may provide some insight into how to live a just life. However, it must be conceded that such principles are neither pure products of the daimonion, nor the caliber of principle for which Socrates searches philosophically. The principle is limited; it does not provide a complete understanding of the concept of justice. It is most significant that Socrates never attempts to justify his position in a philosophical argument by direct reference to his daimonion or information it provides. In other words, it is clear that Socrates does not regard the daimonion as providing the sort of knowledge he seeks in philosophy.

Conclusion

It seems that Socrates regards his daimonion as a very rare, if not unique phenomenon, that occurs as a specific, but limited vocal (or voice-like) experience whenever he is about to do something wrong and remains silent when he is going to do the right thing. The daimonion influences Socrates' behavior through its opposition and silence. The daimonion trumps Socratic reason. That is, Socrates will always desist from an action the daimonion opposes despite any reasons he had for taking the action in the first place. In some situations, Socrates recognizes individual actions opposed by his divine sign as morally wrong, and those unopposed as morally appropriate. In this way, he can be said to get knowledge of the moral character of particular actions and upon reflection even some action-guiding moral principles (for example, "a man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life") from the daimonion. However, because Socrates can be said to have good reason to obey the daimonion's signals, his obedience to the divine sign does not compromise his moral integrity. Moreover, the knowledge of morality in particular cases and practical moral principles Socrates receives from the daimonion is not to be confused with the philosophically relevant knowledge of the essence of virtue that Socrates seeks through his question and answer method of the elenchus.[22]

NOTES

1. See Gocer 115-29.

2. This position is contrary to the view put forward by Gregory Vlastos. See, for example, 285.

3. It is true that there are examples within Greek literature of such feelings accompanied by something that might be identified as a divine sign, but such signs are usually external signs, for example prophesies from an oracle, or dreams that need to be deciphered, sometimes by a religious expert (see for example: Aristophanes, *The Wasps* 52.) Such external divine signs are different from Socrates' daimonion. Unlike oracles, the daimonion is internal in the sense that Socrates alone experiences it (but external in the sense that Socrates believes that it originates from the god). Unlike dreams, the daimonion does not require the interpretation of religious experts.

4. See also Kraut 13-23, and Brickhouse and Smith, "Socrates' Gods and the *Daimonion*" 76-88.

5. Although most scholars tend to agree that the Daimonion is very rare, if not unique to Socrates, at least two scholars have recently challenged this understanding. See Destrée 63-79, and Weiss 63-79.

6. See for example, Brickhouse and Smith, "Socrates' Gods and the *Daimonion*" 86, and Vlastos 60-62.

7. Xenophon's Socrates also refers to the daimonion as a voice. See *Apology* 13 and *Memorabilia* 1.1.

8. Xenophon's Socrates does seem to take directions from his diamonion. For more on the differences between Socrates' daimonion as represented in Plato and Xenophon, see Robin Waterfield 79-114, especially 100-101.

9. Brickhouse and Smith write: "[T]he daimonion does not oppose Socrates when he merely considers courses of action; rather, it opposes him when he is going to take action. This certainly suggests that the opposition of the daimonion comes when Socrates' own deliberations are complete (if he did deliberate).... When Socrates, upon receiving his daimonion's opposition, desists from the action in question—and not once do we find Socrates failing to desist after such opposition—he does so *in spite of whatever reasons he may have had for taking the action in the first place*. . .This can be explained only if Socrates' daimonion is able to trump reason." Brickhouse and Smith, "Socrates' Gods and the Daimonion" 82-83.

10. However, as I discuss below, the daimonion's trumping of Socrates' reasons for taking a particular action does not entail that the daimonion trumps Socrates' reasoning on universal philosophical matters; nor does it entail a compromise of Socrates' moral autonomy.

11. Most scholars fail to comment on the daimonion's silence at all, and those who do consider the daimonion's silence tend to focus on the interesting but relatively narrow issue of whether or not such silence leads Socrates to contradict himself in the *Apology* with regards to whether or not we can know that death is a good thing. In the passage cited above (*Apology* 40c) Socrates says his death "may well be a good thing." But in *Apology* 29a and 37b Socrates says he does not know whether (his) death is good or bad. I do not address this narrow issue in this paper; instead, I simply want to draw attention to the more general, and very important, point that the daimonion's silent divine seal of approval has significant influence on Socrates' beliefs and behavior.

12. Although contemporary Plato scholars tend to agree that Plato was the author of the *Alcibiades*, its authorship has a history of controversy. See: Cooper v-vi and Denyer 14-26.

13. See also *Alcibiades* 105e: "I think this is why the god hasn't allowed me to talk to you all of this time; and I've been waiting for the day he allows me." *Theaetetus 151a:* "Sometimes [people who have worked with me and left prematurely] come back, wanting my company again, and ready to move heaven and earth to get it. When that happens, in some cases the divine sign that visits me forbids me to associate with them; in others, it permits me, and then they begin again to make progress." Although, it is generally agreed by scholars that Plato is not the author of the *Theages* (Cooper v-vi, Guthrie 392-94), the theme that Socrates' daimonion influences who he associates with is represented there. *Theages 129e:* "I've told you all of these things because this spiritual thing (*tou daimoniou toutou*) has absolute power over my dealings with those who associate with me." *Theages, 130e:* This is how it is when you associate with me, Theages. If it is favored by the god you will make great and rapid progress; if not, you won't."

14. Cooper's translation reads: "But now he has told me to because now you will listen to me," but I believe "allowed" is more faithful to the Greek.

15. Determining whether or not Socrates recognizes *all* of the situations in which the daimonion intervenes is moral situations is beyond the scope of this paper. Although the fact that Socrates says the daimonion intervenes "even in small matters" (*Apology* 40a) suggests that the daimonion intervenes in some matters that are not moral matters. Moreover, for my purposes it is enough that at least *some* of the situations in which the

daimonion intervenes are moral situations. Recall that the language Socrates uses in the passages cited above (*Apology* 40a-c and *Phaedrus* 242c) is the moral language of right and wrong and of offense and atonement.

16. Brickhouse, Thomas C., Mark L. McPherran, Nicholas Smith, and Gregory Vlastos. Socrates and His Daimonion: Correspondence among the Authors. "Letter 4. Smith to Vlastos, June 11, 1989 182.

17. Socrates' speculation that Alcibiades would not listen to him before but will now, (*Alcibiades 106a*) is too weak to be the sort of conclusion that I have in mind here.

18. Although I will not pursue this issue here, it is worth noting that there seems to be an epistemic difference between the mere speculations about what Socrates thinks the motives of the daimonion might be (for example, Socrates *thinks* the daimonion prevented him from speaking to Alcibiades because Alcibiades would not have listened), and moral principles he claims to get from the daimonion, of which he says we can have knowledge, or "be sure" (*èu iste).* For example, "a man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public life" (*Apology* 31d – 32a).

19. On an account offered by Brickhouse and Smith Socrates is rationally justified to trust the daimonion because his own experiences have shown that the daimonion is reliable. As they write: "For Socrates, a long life in which experiences of his daimonion have been frequent—together with his own observations of the results of accepting the daimonion's warnings—have provided substantial suitable corroboration for Socrates' trust in his daimonion" *Divine Sign* 60.

20. If Socrates did have access to the sort of knowledge he seeks philosophically, then he would not continue to profess ignorance in these matters as he does in the Apology (21b): "I am very conscious that I am not wise at all." See also *Meno* 71d, *Hippias Major* 304b, and *Euthyphro* 16a.

21. Lesher 287.

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