
The Daimonion and the Philosophical Mission — Should the Divine Sign Remain Unique to Socrates?

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When talking about Socrates' *daimonion*, there are two features almost all scholars nowadays agree with. The first one is about the very expression '*daimonion*' since Plato (as well as Xenophon¹) simply do not use the word '*daimōn*' to characterize what Socrates says occurs to him, we are not allowed to talk about the '*daimōn* of Socrates'. Moreover, it is probably because they do not want to confuse this 'daimonic thing', whatever it may be, with some traditional religious way of considering a *daimōn* as a personal guardian or the destiny of a person, that they both intentionally avoided such appellation. The second feature is about the recipient of the *daimonion*: Scholars seem to endorse the assumption that Socrates is the only recipient of that *daimonion*. I would like to challenge such an assumption. To be sure, Plato (as well as Xenophon) do say that such a *daimonion* occurred to Socrates, and to Socrates alone. But I would like to claim that it does not at all mean that it would not be possible that this *daimonion* might ever appear to someone else.

In this paper, I will analyse and try to refute some arguments that have been made to defend the traditional thesis of the uniqueness of the *daimonion*. As far as I can see, there are four main arguments for that

¹ In this paper, I will not consider the case of Xenophon, which would require primarily methodological considerations I cannot offer here. I just will refer to it from time to time just to give some parallel information.

thesis. There are, first, philological considerations, most from a passage of the *Republic* where Socrates seems to be referring the *daimonion* to his own case. When they philosophically defend the assumption that the *daimonion* is a private thing or event proper to Socrates, interpreters are referring it to Socrates' *atopia*: such a *daimonion* would be precisely one of the main features that make for such an *atopia*. First of all, the *daimonion* must be unique to Socrates since it helps him in his philosophical mission which is supposed to be unique to him. Second, and in the same way, only Socrates is called a 'daimonic man' (*daimonios anēr*) in the *Symposium* (203a5), since he has such a *daimonion*. And third, it is highly probable that such a uniqueness was one of the reasons for his trial. Since those arguments rest on very puzzling problems and controversies, and it therefore would not be possible to discuss them in these few pages, I must limit myself to giving just a brief answer to them and suggesting an alternative understanding of the role and recipient of the *daimonion*.

Let's begin with the philological arguments. As has been rightly stated, Plato obviously uses the expression *to daimonion* as an abbreviation of *to daimonion sēmeion*, because of the verb *gignetai*, ('occurs') that he uses in various passages (e.g., *Ap* 31d1-2; *Euthphr.* 3b5-6; *Tht.* 151a3): 'Something divine occurs', that is, as Plato specifies in some passages, a 'sign' (*sēmeion* — *Ap* 40c3, 41d6; *Euthd* 272e4), or 'the daimonic sign' (*to daimonion sēmeion* — *R* 496c2; *Euthd* 272e4), which comes from the god (*to tou theou sēmeion* — *Ap* 40b1), and which can be described as a 'voice' (*phōnē* — *Ap* 31d2).² And such a 'daimonic thing', or daimonic sign, which is always apotrepetic, occurs so frequently to Socrates that Plato does not hesitate to present it as a usual (*Ap* 40c2; *Euthd* 272 e4) and frequent event (*Euthphr* 3b6). But contrary to what many scholars seem to want us to believe, in talking about 'Socrates' *daimonion*' or using the expression '*his daimonion*', Plato is never making Socrates say something like 'my divine sign' (*to daimonion mou*).

2 That is to say that *daimonion* must be considered as an adjective (referring implicitly to *ti* or *sign*), as it is quite clear in *Ap* 31d1: *theion ti kai daimonion*. Pace Dorion 2003 who thinks that it must be a noun, but is nevertheless right to stress that *to daimonion* is a noun synonymous with *theos* in the *Memorabilia* (cf. *Mem* I 1, 2-4) since the verb going with *daimonion* is *sēmainein* and he never uses the word *sēmeion*. Let's notice that it is nevertheless not the case in Xenophon's *Apology*, at least at 13, where *daimonion* must also be considered as an adjective in the same way as in Plato's texts.

Yet we have the famous *Republic* passage which is usually given as crystal-clear evidence that the daimonic sign must be proper and unique to Socrates:

What about our own case (*to hēmeteron*), the divine sign is hardly worth mentioning, either because it has never happened to anybody else or, perhaps has happened to somebody else in the past. (496c2-4)

To be sure, Plato is here reminding his reader of the passage from the *Apology* where Socrates tells his jurors that the daimonic sign has prevented him from doing politics (*Ap* 31c-e). But is he saying here that such a prevention by the daimonic sign was absolutely unique? The text evidence suggests just the contrary: we cannot be sure that the daimonic sign has appeared only to Socrates; perhaps it has occurred to another person too. Wouldn't such hesitation be unexpected if it were clear that such a phenomenon was absolutely unique to Socrates? Yet one may reply that this hesitation cannot have any importance since Socrates is obviously referring to his own case, using here the plural (*to hēmeteron*: 'our own case') with a singular meaning (and that is a singular that most translators render), since in Greek the first person of the plural of a verb can be used of a single person and we have some such cases in Platonic dialogues. But first, in fact these cases are verbs, and not pronouns or adjectives as we have here.³ And second, and more important, there is a

3 Joyal 2000, 217, gives other references: *Meno* 75b8, *Theages* 122d7, *Euthyphro* 12e2-4, *Theaetetus* 161e5. But even in these cases it is not obvious that such a use of the plural is of a singular person. At *Theaetetus*, 161e5, Socrates says that 'we are condemned to be laughed at' (*gelōta ophiliskanomen*), what interpreters generally understand as if Socrates were referring to himself. But this verb may have as subject Socrates and the whole business of dialectical discussion, that is Protagoras and the other sophists (as Nancy 1994 proposes in his note 163). At *Euthyphro* 12e1-4, Socrates says: 'Try then in this way to teach me what part of the just the pious is, in order that we can tell (*legomen*) Meletos not to treat us (*hēmas*) unjustly any longer or indict us for impiety, since we have learnt (*memathēkotas*) from you sufficiently what is holy or pious and what aren't'. At first sight, this must be the clearest evidence that Plato can sometimes use the plural of a single person since Socrates has been the only philosopher, as far as we know, to be tried by Meletos. But we have to note that this plural is repeatedly used as if it seems to have to be emphasized, and of course every Plato reader knows that it was only Socrates' task to reply to Meletos' accusation. So why has Plato chosen to use such this rather unusual plural instead of the singular? There must be a literary or rhetorical reason, but what is it? I suggest we

difficulty from a stylistic point of view, because a few lines before, he has used the same word as an adjective to refer to 'our friend Theages' (496b7), as every translator takes it, where the plural cannot but include Socrates and Adeimantus (or to say the least, I do not see any reason not to include Adeimantus here as Socrates' interlocutor), and perhaps the Socratic circle as well. Therefore it would be particularly strange that at 496c2-3 Plato uses the plural of the very same word to refer to Socrates alone. Translators understand that plural as a singular because they suppose to be obvious that the *daimonion* must be referred to Socrates' own case, but there is absolutely no philological reason to do so.

As already noticed, it is a fact that Plato never uses such an expression as to *daimonion mou*. The most probable reason is that he did not want to have his readers confuse this *daimonion*, or daimonic sign, with a traditional *daimōn*. But if you admit that explanation (against which I do not see any good argument), are we necessarily to understand that the difference between the *daimonion* and such a traditional *daimōn* consists in the difference between a personal *daimōn* all human beings possess and a very special 'daimonic thing' which belongs to Socrates alone? Of course, as a matter of fact we have to admit that Plato simply does not say that such a *daimonion* occurs frequently or usually to another human being. But nor does he say that such a *daimonion* has only ever occurred to Socrates, and he seems to admit such a possibility in the *Republic*. I therefore suggest that such a difference may be understood as that between a personal guardian (or destiny) which is different for every human being, and the sign from the god which is common (or, it would better to say: should be common) to all human beings and which has a

are to read this passage as reminding us of a previous one, just before the examination of the piety's definitions, where Socrates is ironically asking Euthyphro to become his teacher in order to change his mind about religious convictions; he then imagines himself saying to Meletus: 'Meletus, if you agree that Euthyphro is wise about the gods, you should also regard me as correctly acknowledging them and drop the charge. But if you don't agree, prosecute this teacher of mine rather than me' (5a9-b3). Even if Socrates is here using the singular when saying that he would reply thus to Meletus, he nevertheless includes Euthyphro in his future trial, claiming that Euthyphro must also have been a cause of his impiety, or false religious convictions. And that is why, I suggest, Plato uses this otherwise unexplainable repeated plural in the further passage: it is because Socrates is here again including (of course ironically) Euthyphro as his teacher in his defense.

function related to a specific activity that all human beings should practice (even though in fact they do not).

I will now give some arguments for that claim, analyzing and rejecting the first and main philosophical argument for the uniqueness of the *daimonion* to Socrates. The *daimonion* is usually considered as preventing or warning Socrates from doing an immoral action, that is a non-beneficiary action (since what we call a moral action is for Socrates a prudential one). But what are these actions? In fact, Plato does not give us examples of such immoral or imprudential actions, contenting himself with underlining the frequency and usualness of the daimonic alarm. But if one considers in which contexts these interventions take place, one realizes that they always occur in the context of philosophical activity and are linked to Socrates' mission. That is obviously the case in the intervention of the sign in the *Theaetetus* (151e), as well as in the dubious Platonic *Alcibiades* (103a; 105e; 124c-d) and the spurious *Theages* (128d-31a): Socrates is warned by the daimonic sign not to accept such and such a young man as a 'disciple' or, alternatively, he accepts such a disciple because of its silence. And that is also the case in *Euthydemus* (272e) and *Phaedrus* (242b-c) where Socrates is prevented from leaving, which he interprets as a kind of exhortation to pursue his philosophical inquiry. But that's also the case in the *Apology* which is in fact the only genuine Socratic Plato's dialogue where Socrates presents the *daimonion* in a somewhat detailed manner, as well as in the *Euthyphro* and the *Hippias Major*. Let's examine these passages a little bit closer.

It is well known that the first mention of the *daimonion* in the *Apology* comes in the context of Socrates' presentation of his mission (at 31c-e). That passage is one of the most famous in the *Apology*: That mission consisting in practicing refutation, Socrates compares himself to a gadfly, the shame resulting from being refuted being similar to a gadfly bite; since such a mission is commanded by the god, Socrates claims to be the god's gift to the city which would otherwise spend all its time sleeping. He then has to face an objection: isn't it strange (*atopos*) to give advice (*sumbouleuein*) to others whereas he has never committed himself to political activity whose primary function is to deliberate or give public advice? One knows the reply: It is the *daimonion* which has prevented him from doing politics. But the most central point of the passage is the explanation, or interpretation, Socrates gives of such a warning:

This is what has prevented me from taking part in politics, and I think it was quite right to prevent me. Be sure, men of Athens, that if I had long ago attempted to take part in politics, I should have died long ago, and benefited neither you nor myself. (31d5-e2)

The reason why the *daimonion* has prevented him from doing politics is that had he done so, he would not have had enough time to accomplish his mission. Socrates also says that doing politics would not have been beneficial for him either, but the reason is not different: He would not have been capable of accomplishing that mission of elenctic practice enough to have lived a life really worth living (more on that later). So, in this very first occurrence of the *daimonion* in the *Apology*, the link between the philosophical mission he has been commanded to accomplish by the god, and the *daimonion* which is a sign from the god is evident: it is a means by which Socrates is helped in accomplishing that mission.

We can add to this another passage which occurs a little further on: 'To do this (i.e., cross-examining those who think themselves wise) has, as I say, been ordered to me by the god, by means of oracles (*ek manteiōn*), dreams, and in every other way that divine power has ever ordered a man to do anything' (33c4-7). Although Socrates does not explicitly mention the *daimonion*, it is difficult not to see an allusion to it, as interpreters have proposed.⁴ I see two possible explanations. We can take it either as a kind of oracle since the *daimonion* is referred to a little further on as an art of prophecy (*mantikē* — 40a5⁵), which quite well explain why he speaks of oracles in the plural, alluding therefore to another than the one reported by Chaerephon. Or we can take it as one of those 'other means', by which the *daimonion* would be certain daytime means by which Socrates is commanded to do his mission, just as dreams are nighttime means (since dreams are believed to come from gods; cf. *Phaedo*, 60 e-61a) and the oracle reported by Chaerephon a public one.⁶

4 E.g. West 1979, 194-5.

5 I say 'a reference' because I think that *tou daimoniou* is probably a gloss here (see Joyal 2001, 344-8).

6 L-A. Dorion has objected against such a reading the very fact that such a presentation of the *daimonion* would contradict the usual one, where the *daimonion* has only a apotreptic function. But it must be noted that the famous silence of the *daimonion*

The second explicit occurrence of the *daimonion* in the *Apology* is at the end, when Socrates is addressing the judges who had acquitted him. In this case, the divine sign prevented Socrates from doing or saying something bad in a different way. It hasn't occurred to Socrates before the process or during his speech, what he interprets as meaning that he was not about to do or say something wrong, i.e., something unbeneficial. But death is thought to be something unbeneficial, even the most unbeneficial thing that can happen to a human being. So the two possible interpretations Socrates offers to explain the sense in which death is not something unbeneficial are these: either death is simply an eternal sleep, or death is the beginning of an afterlife which is a far better life than life on earth. At first sight this case is not to be understood as linked to philosophical activity or mission, since death is here presented as beneficial for Socrates himself: 'It is clear to me that it is better for me (*beltion moi*) to die now and to escape from trouble' (41d3-5).⁷ But what is exactly the trouble Socrates thinks he will escape by dying now? Plato does not tell us. But Xenophon does in his *Apology* (which obviously is a kind of response or rewriting of Plato's *Apology*⁸: perhaps it is here an answer to Plato's silence): This trouble means the physical troubles of old age which make life no longer enjoyable (*Ap* 9). Burnet⁹ proposes that we should understand this trouble as referring to the exertions, compared to the labors of Heracles (at 22a7), demanded by the philosophical mission. But as has been rightly indicated by de Strycker-Slings,¹⁰ the traditional rendering as the trouble of old age is more probable, since this colloquial expression is also well attested to by other Platonic texts.¹¹ Still, I believe that Burnet was right in suspecting that Plato might not

at the end of the *Apology* (40a-c) is also in contradiction to that usual presentation. So if we are to understand that passage as implicitly referring to the *daimonion*, as I think it is difficult not to do, it should be seen as an exception too, and consider that the *daimonion* has here a protreptic dimension as it is the case by Xenophon.

7 That's the reason why many interpreters (e.g., de Strycker-Slings 1994, 216) have rejected such a link between the *daimonion* and the philosophical mission.

8 As has been demonstrated by Vander Waerd 1993.

9 Burnet 1924, *ad loc*

10 de Strycker-Slings 1994, 395

11 E.g., *R* 406e3.

have had just such a very earthy explanation in mind, especially if we read that expression in the light of what was said just a few lines earlier, where Socrates is describing his possible future life as an endless philosophical conversation with the great heroes of the past. Even if we cannot be sure whether he is really serious or joking here, it seems clear that if there is a life after death, it must be a very happy one since it will be a philosophical one: 'To discuss with them there, to associate with them and to examine them, wouldn't that be an extraordinary happiness?' (41c3-4). I suggest understanding the trouble of old age in the light of this passage: The very trouble of old age is not in the first instance a physical one, but the intellectual diminution which will render Socrates' art of conversation and cross-examination impossible or unbeneficial. So the reason why the god does not stop Socrates in his speeches is that his mission should now end since he is getting old and won't be able to pursue it properly.

The third passage comes from the *Euthyphro*. It is well known that the beginning of that dialogue constitutes a very important passage on the very puzzling question of why Socrates has been put on trial, since it explicitly links the accusation of corruption to the religious one. And it is Euthyphro who links such an accusation to the *daimonion* and who says to Socrates, 'you say it occurs to you on each occasion' (3b5-6). Here too, as in the *Apology*, Plato does not tell us what such occasions are. But I think he nevertheless gives us a clue. I think the most important feature Plato is briefly alluding to here is the link between his religious convictions, including the *daimonion*, and the fact that he is imparting or teaching (whatever that 'teaching' may consist in) his knowledge to others ('Athenians are not much concerned if they think someone is clever, so long as he does not teach [*didaskhein*] his own knowledge [*sophia*]. But if they think that he is making other people clever like himself, they get angry'; 3c6-d1). What sort of knowledge? I think there is a very precise answer to that question in the dialogue itself on the condition that we admit, with a lot of interpreters nowadays, that that dialogue is not an aporetic one, but contains a positive answer to the question of what piety is. The knowledge Socrates has and wants to share, I suggest, is that piety, according to the third definition, consists in the service we have to render to the gods, which is, if we link that passage to the *Apology*, the philosophical mission (more on that further). And so, in this passage too, we may have a link between Socrates' religious convictions, the *daimonion* being a part of them, and philosophical activity.

To those passages, we may add a last one from the *Hippias Major*:

Hippias, my friend, you are a lucky man, because you know which activities a man should practice, and you have practiced them successfully as you say. But I am apparently held back by a certain daimonic destiny (*daimonia tis tuchē*): I wander around and I am always getting stuck (*planōmai kai aporō aei*) (304b7-c2)

Socrates does not explicitly refer to the daimonic sign here, but we can suppose that he implicitly does.¹² If we accept seeing such an allusion here, it is another confirmation of the link between the *daimonion* and Socrates' philosophical activity, since *aporia* and wandering are the very condition of the philosophical quest.

Now there are at least two difficulties I have to face. First, Socrates explicitly says that the *daimonion* occurs to him 'even in small matters', or, what has been translated, 'even in trivial matters' (*epi smikrois*, 40a5). And can we consider philosophical activity or Socrates' mission as a small or trivial matter? But these 'small' or 'trivial matters' should not necessarily refer to the meaning and context of the daimonic alarm; it may just be referring to the circumstances of that alarm. As has been suggested,¹³ in other dialogues we can find examples of such small or trivial circumstances: In the *Phaedrus*, it is crossing a river, and in the *Euthydemus*, it is getting up from a bench, which are in fact very small things in comparison to being condemned to death. And in both cases the *daimonion* occurs in the context of Socrates' mission. Yet it may be objected that Plato could not have had those examples in mind for the very reason that those dialogues were written long after the *Apology* (and agreeing that those examples are most probably not historical facts Plato could have had in mind either). But then I reply that after all Plato could not have considered a moral or prudential action as 'trivial' or not really worthwhile, because every moral action must be considered important, since each contributes to our happiness. So whatever example Plato may have had in mind when writing the *Apology*, I do not think that such an expression could have referred to a moral or a prudential action, but only to the circumstances of an action.

12 With Reeve 2000, 32, and Balaudé 2004, 314 n 1.

13 Brisson 1997, 158 n 302

A second difficulty is that Socrates also says that the *daimonion* has occurred to him 'since his childhood' (*ek paidos arxamenon*, 31d2).¹⁴ Because he has not been a philosopher since his childhood, it may be argued, the daimonic sign cannot be related to his philosophical activity alone. But I do not think we should understand such a statement so literally. In fact, it can be read as a reference to the popular view of the *daimōn* as attached to each person from birth.¹⁵ To be sure, Plato does not want to confuse such a *daimōn* with the daimonic sign, but such a reminiscent reference to a very well known traditional fact may be a kind of rhetorical way of presenting the *daimonion* to the jurors. And in this way, that statement should not necessarily be understood with a literal temporal meaning, but as a kind of destiny (as the daimon has in other Platonic texts¹⁶), and so might mean something like 'ever since'. Notice that in the following lines Socrates is telling to the judges that such a *phonē* 'prevents (*enantioutai*) me from doing politics' (31d5-6), where the verb is in the present, and means something like: the *phonē* has repeatedly prevented me from doing politics ever since.

If my remarks are correct so far, I conclude that in all passages from Plato's dialogues, there is a link between the *daimonion* and philosophical activity. But does that imply that the *daimonion* should remain unique to Socrates? We might be tempted to believe so since Socrates presents his mission as an order from the god. But some interpreters¹⁷ have remarked that there are passages, in the *Apology* and elsewhere, which obviously present such a mission as an ideal all human beings are to pursue. There is first of all the famous phrase: 'the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being' (38a5-6). This phrase is rightly held as a kind of motto of Socrates' intellectualist philosophy: only a philosophical life, whose practice is the elenctic examination, is worth living for a human being, that is the only way of life which can offer real happiness. And, because we all human beings want to be happy, how can we understand it but

14 That statement is found again in the *Theages*, 128d3.

15 Cf. Joyal 1995, 43, who gives as references: Pd 9 28-9 and Men Fr 714.

16 E.g. in the *Phaedo*, 107d6-7, where the *daimōn* of every person is a sort of guardian which is allotted by the destiny during his life (*daimōn, hōsper zōnta eilēchei*).

17 Mostly McPherran 1996, 233 ff.

in the sense that philosophical activity (is not in fact but) should be the proper activity of all of us?

Yet it may be objected that we should make a distinction between Socrates' mission, which consists in 'teaching' philosophy, and philosophical research itself, as we nowadays distinguish between academics or professional philosophers, and philosophy which can be practiced by anyone interested in philosophy. With such a distinction, we might understand why Socrates can at the same time say that philosophy is an activity which all human beings should practice, and that he is the unique philosopher in Athens. But I wonder whether we can really find such a distinction in Plato's texts. On the contrary, every passage presenting us with what philosophical activity consists in, insist on the fact that it must be a discussion where two persons take part, both as agents and as patients. Let us read the whole motto's passage:

But again, if I say it is the greatest good for a human being to discuss virtue every day, and the other things you have heard me discussing and examining (*exetazontos*) myself and others about, for the unexamined life (*anexetastos bios*) is not worth living for a human being, you will believe me even less. (38a1-6)

As it appears in this passage, Socrates is using the verb *exetazein* ('to examine'), in reference to a self-examination, but also to an examination of others. In other passages, this verb does in fact represent the activity of *philosophhein*, as in 28e5-6: 'The god ordered me ... to live the life of a philosopher, that's to examine myself and others'. One naturally relates such an examination to the famous Delphic inscription we also find in other Plato's Socratic dialogues, 'know thyself', which inscription we most probably already find alluded to in a fragment of Heraclitus.¹⁸ But I think it is most important to specify that such a motto cannot determine a solitary task (as may have been the case for Heraclitus), but a dialogical one, since the means for such a task is the *elenchos*, and the *elenchos* needs two persons who are alternatively the one who makes the inquiry and the one who is the object of the inquiry. Therefore, it seems unlikely that Socrates would have made the distinction we make between philosophy as a practice everyone can sometimes do and as a profession.

18 Fr DK 101: 'I asked myself'.

Accordingly, the duty to philosophize, that is to examine oneself and others, cannot be a mission unique to Socrates. There are, I believe, two main and more precise proofs of that. When telling the story of the Delphic oracle, Socrates seems to give the impression that he is the only wise person, wise in the sense that he knows that he knows nothing, and therefore that he must be the only person in Athens who has received the mission to philosophize. To be sure, Plato wants to present Socrates as the very first philosopher, that is, the first one to conceive philosophy as a cross-examination of oneself and others. But must he remain the unique one? A little further on, Socrates adds this:

And it seems that when he refers to the Socrates here before you and uses my name, he makes me a *paradeigma*, as if he were to say, "That one among you is wisest, mortals, who, like Socrates, has recognized that he's truly worthless where wisdom is concerned". (23a7-b4)

Interpreters have often understood this '*paradeigma*' as meaning 'example'.¹⁹ But, as others have suggested,²⁰ it may be understood in a stronger way, as a 'paradigm', that is an example we have to follow. I think this understanding is the right one since Socrates immediately adds that there are already a lot of people who are imitators of his elenctic method: 'They often imitate (*mimountai*) me themselves and in turn attempt to cross-examine others' (23c4-5). There is absolutely no trace here of a (Platonic) condemnation of *mimēsis*: the fact that there are now other people cross-examining, that is other philosophers, is just a consequence of Socrates' status as a *paradigm*. So our text must be read as a kind of exhortation: Socrates is an example the god has given Athens in order that all Athenians follow him in recognizing that their knowledge is worthless in comparison to the knowledge of the gods.

The second reason I have for claiming that such a philosophical mission should not remain unique to Socrates is taken from the same text, where Socrates' philosophical mission is said to be 'assistance to the god' (23b6-7) and 'service to the god' (23c1). A few Stephanus pages further, Socrates repeats that his mission is such a service, referring to it

19 E.g., de Strycker-Slings 1994, 289, claim that Socrates is just an example here because he is well-known to the Athenian public.

20 Cf. Stokes 1992, 44-50, followed by Doyle 2004, 30-1.

saying 'my service to the god' (30a6-7), and that such a service is the best gift Athens has ever received from the god. But the reason why he insists on *his* service is that he alone is truly a believer in the gods (35d6-7). Or more precisely, he is the only such believer until now. But of course it does not imply that other people can not become true believers like him. It therefore does not mean that such a service must remain unique to him either. We conclude the contrary again, if we link such passages, as many other interpreters have done,²¹ to the conception of piety we find in the third definition of the *Euthyphro* to which I referred earlier. For in that dialogue, the definition of piety as service to the gods must of course serve as a definition valid for all humans. For a human being, to be pious is to be a servant of the gods, that is to help them accomplish their specific work which is their goodwill toward human beings. As Plato forcefully says (and as Xenophon shows on a cosmological level²²): 'There is for us no good that we do not receive from them' (*Euthyphro* 15a3-4). Therefore to help the gods to realize their work, their 'great and good work' (*to pankalon ergon* — *Euthyphro* 13e10-11), means then to practice philosophy, since it is the highest good for human beings; and it is the highest good because it alone can make us understand what virtue is, which is what we have to know if we want to be really happy.

Now, let us take together the two claims I have tried to argue for. The *daimonion*, which is a sign or a voice coming from the god, helps the recipient in his practice of philosophy; such a practice is the very condition of living a worthy life for a human being, that is the only way to be happy. It follows that if philosophy is (should be) common to all human beings, the *daimonion* must therefore be common to all human beings, too. If piety, which is a virtue everybody must have (since piety is a part of justice, which is the most important virtue) in order to be happy, consists in practicing philosophy, and if the *daimonion* is a help in such a practice, the *daimonion* must be a help for every person who devotes herself to philosophy. It is true that Plato never says that the *daimonion* has appeared to someone else, but that is because Socrates is, until now, the only true philosopher, since he is the only true believer in the god (or is the only one who has a right conception of the god and piety). Socrates

21 Vlastos 1991,176, followed by McPherran 1996, 47-82 and Brickhouse-Smith 1989, 92-4.

22 On this, see McPherran (1996), 272-302, and Nancy (1997).

therefore should not remain the only philosopher under the order of the god, since everybody has the duty to be truly pious and to philosophize.

We should now briefly review the second philosophical argument for the uniqueness of the *daimonion* to Socrates. In the *Symposium*, Socrates, and Socrates alone, is called a daimonic man (*daimonios anēr*, 203a5 and 219c1) in reference to or in reminiscence of the *daimonion* which is a typical feature of him.²³ At first sight, we might dismiss such an interpretation since Plato never mentions the *daimonion* in this (post-Socratic) dialogue; on the contrary, here he only uses the traditional word *daimōn* to mean the god or half-god Erōs, which is the symbol of philosophy, and Socrates is certainly called a daimonic man because he is a philosopher just as Erōs is, as well as an erotic man (and a third reason could be a allusion to the word *daēmōn*, meaning 'expert' or 'wise' as stated in the *Cratylus*, 398b-c). In this case, one might say that such a name is proper to Socrates because he is such an 'atopic' man, a sort of messenger sent by the gods to human beings. To repeat, there is absolutely no mention of the *daimonion* in this entire passage, and to claim that there is nevertheless an implicit mention of it would contradict Plato's intentionally avoiding the use of the word *daimōn* when speaking of Socrates' *daimonion*. But I still think it may be an implicit link between such an expression and our *daimonion* question. I do not have room here to develop a detailed interpretation of this whole passage of the *Symposium*, but even if we take for granted that Plato intentionally avoids using the term *daimōn* when speaking of Socrates' daimonic sign, he nevertheless does not hesitate linking it with *daimones* in the *Apology* (*Ap* 27c). For in denying being an atheist, saying that it is impossible to believe in *daimones* without believing that such gods, or god's children, exist, he seems to acknowledge that there must be a link between the *daimonion*, which is the ground for the religious accusation (as said in the *Euthyphro*), and the *daimones*. Whatever that link may be, it is therefore not surprising that in the *Symposium* we find the god of philosophy described as such a *daimōn*, since we know that philosophy is precisely the very activity the god has given to Socrates as a mission to accomplish. And so, since in the *Apology* the *daimonion* is unique to Socrates because of his *atopia* (or because of the uniqueness of his mission), one is tempted to believe Socrates is the only daimonic man: he is the very messenger of the gods to help people do philosophy, which is

23 Cf. Hadot 2002, 130, followed by Hoffmann 1985-1986, 426-7, and Joyal 2001.

now defined in a Platonic way as delivering a message to all humans and exhorting them to contemplate the Form of Beauty itself. Such a reading is misleading in my opinion. To be sure Plato wants to present Socrates (even if the Socrates of the *Symposium* has a very different idea of the way to practice philosophy) as the very first real philosopher, and so describes him as a daimonic man. But just as he did in the *Apology*, Socrates is a paradigm we should follow and imitate. Erōs itself represents the desire we all have for happiness: So to take our own desire seriously, we should all become philosophers, just as Socrates was in a perfect way. And we should all become like him, real erotic humans beings: not to have erotic passions as bodily passions, but passion of our souls, whose activity is the contemplation of the Forms.

Even if, then, the context and meaning of Socratic and post-Socratic dialogues are very different, the presentation of Socrates as a paradigm remains the same from the *Apology* to the *Symposium*. In both cases, Socrates is an exceptional human being since he has been elected (if I may use such an anachronistic term) by the gods to initiate such a new practice of philosophy as care of the soul. And he is such an exceptional man since he is the very first philosopher to practice philosophy in such a way. But precisely as the very first and perfect one, he must be a paradigm we should imitate.

The last argument for the uniqueness of the *daimonion* to Socrates comes from his trial. There has always been the huge problem to determine exactly why Socrates was tried and convicted: political reasons (since he was the 'teacher' of Critias and Alcibiades), religious reasons (because he did not recognize the gods of the city and created new gods or new conceptions of the gods) or a sort of mix of political and religious reasons? One very attractive way of considering such a mix is to argue that the main reproach the Athenians might have had against Socrates was his *atopia*, his willingness to be an *atopos*.²⁴ More precisely, his willingness to cut himself off from the normal Athenian way of life, i.e. doing politics in the Assembly, and consulting the oracles with the help of the diviners. His lack of both aspects are at the core of Socrates' *atopia*: his refusal to do politics (and certainly his critiques against democratic customs like drawing lots, too), and his pretention to be visited by a *daimonion*. To claim to directly hear a voice of a god, that is being the

24 Mostly Kraut 2000.

recipient of divine advice, must have been seen as a trait of disdain for religious traditions and practices. And to claim that he knew what the god wanted the Athenians to do must have been considered an insupportable trait of superiority which is incompatible with *isēgoria* and *isonomia* which were the very fundamentals of democracy.

But I think we have to go further in such a presentation. For the very reasons why Socrates was tried could not be just those. After all, had he remained personally out of politics and claimed he was blessed in hearing a god's voice, he would have been considered a fool, but not a real threat to the city. As very clearly stated at the beginning of the *Euthyphro*, the most important reproach was corrupting young people. But what precisely did such corruption consist in? I suggest that the most important feature in that corruption is his claim to be a paradigm all Athenians have to imitate. To be a paradigm in the practice of elenctic refutation, as Socrates explicitly refers himself to in the *Apology*, but also in his proposal of a new conception of and relationship to the gods all the Athenians should share. But what conception? Gregory Vlastos²⁵ has claimed that such a new conception was in the first instance the moral conception of the gods as perfectly moral beings, in opposition to the traditional gods described by Homer and Hesiod. But such a moral conception already existed in Greece before Socrates, and we do not see the very traditional Euthyphro being shocked by such a conception. I therefore suggest that the religious conception Socrates was accused of teaching, or of being the first supporter of, is the conception of piety he is offering in the third definition we mentioned. Not a few interpreters nowadays²⁶ are tempted to see Socrates, against Vlastos and other rationalistic interpreters, as a very religious and traditional man. To be sure he was a very religious man, since he repeatedly said that his mission and philosophical activity was a pious one, and that the *daimonion* was a help to that mission. And he can be seen as a traditional man since he probably practiced sacrifices and other rituals, and since he constantly refers to the god in Delphi. But, as Burnyeat²⁷ and others have stressed, he simply never says that he believes in the god the city believes in (nor does he

25 Vlastos 1991, ch. 6

26 Mainly Reeve 1989, Brickhouse-Smith 1994 and McPherran 1996.

27 Cf. Burnyeat 1997.

reply to Meletos that he believes the moon and the sun to be gods; cf. *Ap* 26d), nor does he mention Apollo by name. I think the reasons are mainly two: He believes in gods (or in a god?) which are perfectly just and happy, which is not the case, either with the gods as generally conceived by the Greeks, or with the god Apollo who is also the god of plagues (so, contrary to the idea that the gods are only causes of goods); and more importantly for our problem, he believes in gods who commend all of us to practice philosophy. That precisely may be one, or even the central reason for his trial: with such a conception of the gods and piety, Socrates was trying to convince Athenians to abandon their traditional way of life, that is doing politics, as well as their political or civic religion. Let's appreciate in the ears of the Athenian court the revolutionary force of the famous motto, 'the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being', that is only a philosophical life is worth of living for a human being: Isn't such a motto claiming that our traditional and usual Athenian political way of life is not worth living?! Therefore that was the very corruption of youth: to persuade them to get out of politics (at least politics as practiced by the Athenians), claiming that the gods were commending that. And since the daimonic sign was a special help for such a new way of life, it must have been seen as the most provocative evidence that Socrates was really an impious man in the eyes of Athens; and since such a new way of life is what the gods commend them all to undertake, with the help of a *daimonion*, the paradigm for such a new conception of life must have been seen as a terrible threat to Athens.²⁸

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