

# COLLOQUIUM

## SOCRATIC PIETY



Gregory Vlastos

Socrates' commitment to reasoned argument as the final arbiter of claims to truth in the moral domain is evident throughout Plato's Socratic dialogues.<sup>1</sup> He refers to it in the deliberation by which he justifies to Crito the decision to remain in prison and await execution:

**T1** *Cri.* 45b: "Not now for the first time, but always, I am the sort of man who is persuaded by nothing in me except the proposition which appears to me to be the best *when I reason* (λογιζομένῳ) about it."

And yet he is also committed to obey commands reaching him through supernatural channels. When explaining at his trial why the state's power of life-and-death over him could not scare him into abandoning the public practice of his philosophy, he declares:

**T2** *Ap.* 33c: "To do this<sup>2</sup> has been commanded me, as I maintain (ὡς ἐγὼ φημι), by the god through divinations and through dreams and every other means through which divine apportionment has ever commanded anyone to do anything."

Between these two commitments—on one hand, to follow argument wherever it may lead; on the other, to obey divine commands conveyed to him through supernatural channels—he sees no conflict.

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1. I take these to consist of the following (listed by self-explanatory abbreviations in alphabetical order): *Ap.*, *Ch.*, *Cri.*, *Eu.*, *Eud.*, *G.*, *HMi.*, *HMa.*, *Ion.*, *La.*, *Ly.*, *Meno.*, *Mx.*, *Pr.*, *Rep.* 1. I shall be referring to this group as "Plato's Socratic dialogues."

2. I.e. to "live philosophizing, examining myself and others" (28c).

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He assumes they are in perfect harmony.<sup>3</sup> Can sense be made of this? I want to argue that it can. This will be my first task in this paper. But what concerns me even more is a larger objective: to understand Socrates' conception of religion. So before closing I shall be returning to the point in the *Euthyphro* at which the search for the definition of piety is sidetracked in that dialogue.<sup>4</sup> I shall push that search a step further in the direction indicated there.

Let us begin by facing a fact about Socrates which has been so embarrassing to modern readers that a long line of Platonic scholarship has sought—in the most recent book-length study of the *Euthyphro*<sup>5</sup> is still seeking—to explain it away: Socrates' acceptance of the supernatural. I shall waste no time arguing against these scholars. The fact they are denying is so firmly attested in our principal sources—Plato's and Xenophon's Socratic writings—that to cut it out of them would be surgery which kills the patient. If we are to use Plato's and Xenophon's testimony about Socrates at all we must take it as a brute fact—as a premise fixed for us in history—that, far ahead of his time as Socrates is in so many ways, in this part of his thought he is a man of his time. He subscribes unquestioningly<sup>6</sup> to the age-old view that side by side with the physical world accessible to our senses, there exists another, populated by mysterious beings, personal like ourselves, but, unlike ourselves, having the power to invade at will the causal order to which our own actions are confined, effecting in it changes of incalculable<sup>7</sup> extent to cause us great benefit, or, were they to choose otherwise, total devastation and ruin. How they act upon us we cannot hope to understand. But the fact is that they do and their communications to us through dreams and oracles is one of the

3. As they must, since what is commanded him by the god in T2 is precisely to pursue the activity which exhibits the commitment to reason affirmed in T1.

4. As Brickhouse and Smith have pointed out (1983, pp. 660-61), *Euthyphro* is told at 14b-c that if he had answered the question at 14a9-10, Socrates would have "learned piety [i.e. learned what piety is]": "you came right up to the point and turned aside."

5. By the late Laszlo Versenyi (1982). For effective critique see McPherran 1985, pp. 292-297.

6. In Plato's Socratic dialogues the gods' existence and power are never called in question—not even as an abstract possibility. In the *Memorabilia* the farthest anyone ever goes in that direction is to disbelieve in the power of the gods and their care for men (Aristodemus at 1.4, *Euthydemus* at 4.3). For Xenophon's and Plato's Socrates, as for the vast majority of Greeks, the gods' existence is almost as much of a 'given' as is that of the physical world.

7. But by no means infinite. In striking contrast to the Hebraic and Christian deity of traditional theology, Greek gods are not omnipotent.

inscrutable ways in which they display their power over us. Born into this system of religious belief, Socrates, a deeply religious man, could not have shrugged it off.<sup>8</sup> And he could not have reasonably denied it without good reason: when a belief pervades the public consensus the burden of justifying dissent from it falls upon the dissident. And here his problem would be aggravated by the fact that the religious consensus has legal sanction. To flout it publicly is an offense against the state punishable by death.

A succession of brilliant thinkers from Anaximander to Democritus, had solved this problem with the utmost discretion. From their new picture of the world they had expunged the supernatural quietly, without ever naming it in a critique: the Greek ancestor of our word for it was not in their vocabulary<sup>9</sup> and they did not need to invent it in order to obliterate its referent. They did the job in attending to their own business of *physiologia*, “science of nature” by so expanding the concept of nature as to make nature encompass all there is,<sup>10</sup> thereby creating a new conception of the universe as a cosmos, a realm of all-encompassing, “necessary”<sup>11</sup> order whose regularities cannot be breached by interventionist entities outside it because outside it there is nothing. What room is there for god or gods in this new map of what there is? For supernatural gods there is none. For natural ones there is ample room—for gods existing not beyond nature, but in it. Not all of the *physiologoi* preserve deity under this name, for their world-picture is crafted to meet primarily scientific, not religious, needs; in principle they could complete it without any reference to god or gods... But they are not antireligious. Their temper is not that of the village atheist. When they postulate a cosmic intelligence to account for the intelligible order of their cosmos, most of them call it “god.” So did Xenophanes, Heraclitus, and Diogenes of Apollonia,

8. As did Thucydides, whose thoroughly secularized outlook, makes it possible for him to ignore the supernatural, except as the topic of beliefs which afflict the subjects of his narrative.

9. *ὑπερφυσικός* is a late, Neoplatonic concoction. As I have pointed out elsewhere (1975, p. 20) “the demolition of the supernatural is accomplished [in Ionian *physiologia*] without a single word about the victim.”

10. This assumption is built into the very phrase by which they commonly designate their subject-matter: “the all” or “all things.” Cf the Word-Index in Diels-Kranz 1952 (hereafter “DK”), s.v. τὸ πᾶν, τὰ πάντα, expanded into “the nature of all things” (ἡ τῶν πάντων φύσις), in Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.1.11 [quoted in part in T6 below] and 1.1.14).

11. Cf. the Word-Index in DK, s.v. ἀνάγκη: and cf. “necessary [causes]” in Xenophon’s description of “what the experts call ‘cosmos’” at T6 below.

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though not Anaxagoras:<sup>12</sup> in none of his fragments is the ordering mind which creates the world termed “god.”

Thus in Ionian *physiologia* the existence of a being bearing that name becomes optional. What is mandatory is only that to have a place in the real world deity must be naturalized and thereby rationalized, associated with the orderliness of nature, not with breaches of its order, as it continued to be for the vast majority of Greeks. Even someone as enlightened as Herodotus was content to minimize supernatural intervention in history without excluding it in principle.... When he tells the story of the prodigiously high tide that overwhelmed the Persian army at Potidaea he endorses the local belief that it was caused by Poseidon punishing the invaders for desecrating his shrine.<sup>13</sup> Should we ever forget how tiny is the band of intellectuals who accept *in toto* the point of view of the *physiologoi*, we should recall what happened on the plain of Syracuse on August 27, 413 BC. When immediate evacuation of the Athenian forces had become imperative, and the departure had been decided by Nicias, their commanding general, the full moon was eclipsed, whereupon, writes Thucydides,

**T3** Thuc. 7.50.4: “The mass of the Athenians was greatly moved and called upon the generals to remain.... And Nicias, who was rather too given to divination and the like, refused to even discuss the question of the departure until 27 days had passed, as the diviners prescribed.”

Remain they did, with the result that Nicias’ army was wiped out.

From Plato’s *Laches* we learn that Nicias knew Socrates well<sup>14</sup> and had been influenced by his moral teaching: in that dialogue Nicias is made the champion of the Socratic definition of courage. Nicias could not have acted as he did at Syracuse if his teacher had been Anaxagoras instead. That influence would have swept the supernaturalist view of eclipses clean out of his mind.<sup>15</sup> His association with

12. Nor yet, Anaximander, the true founder of Ionian *physiologia*, though this is controversial: cf. Vlastos 1952, p. 113; contra Jaeger 1947, 29ff. and 203ff.

13. 8.129.3: “in my opinion at any rate, they [sc. the Potidaeans] speak well in saying that this was the cause” (τοῦτο λέγοντες εὖ λέγειν ἔμοιγε δοκεῖν).

14. Note especially *La.* 187e-188c: he had evidently known Socrates at close quarters for he had become aware of the power of the elenchus to “examine” the life, no less than the beliefs, of Socrates’ interlocutors: cf. Vlastos 1983, p. 37.

15. As it did for Pericles: through his association with Anaxagoras, says Plutarch (*Life of Pericles*, 6), he “was made superior to the fearful amazement which superstition produces on those who are ignorant of the causes of events in the upper regions.”

Socrates had left it in place.<sup>16</sup> And we can see why. The way which the new “science of nature” had opened up out of that whole morass of superstition Socrates could not have taught to his companions because he had not found it himself. From the investigations of the *physiologoi* he had stood aloof.<sup>17</sup> Putting all his energies into ethical inquiry, he took no more interest in cosmology than in metaphysics, epistemology, ontology, or any other branch of investigation that falls outside the domain of moral philosophy.

However, it was bruited about that he pursued *physiologia* in private<sup>18</sup> and Aristophanes made immortal comedy of the canard. But our most reliable sources leave no doubt that the talk is groundless. Aristotle is so sure of this that he disposes of the matter in a parenthetical clause:

T4 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 987b1-2: “But<sup>19</sup> Socrates, occupying himself with ethical questions, *and not at all with nature as a whole* (τῆς ὅλης φύσεως)...”

In Plato’s *Apology* Socrates repudiates as slander the Aristophanic caricature of the man in a basket up in the air scanning the skies.

T5 Plato, *Ap.* 19c: “Of such things I know nothing, great or small. Not that I would speak disparagingly of such science, if anyone really has it. But the fact is, oh Athenians, that I have no share in it.”

16. Not that Socrates would have approved Nicias’ decision to follow the advice of the diviners in defiance of military prudence. In the *Laches* (198e-199a) Socrates reminds his interlocutors that the law requires the diviner to obey the general, not the general the diviner. Thucydides (7.48.4: cf. Connor 1984, p. 237) enables us to recognize the moral weakness which left Nicias vulnerable to the promptings of superstition at the fatal moment.

17. Which is not to say that he was scornful of it, as Xenophon would have us believe (T6 below). In Plato’s *Apology* Socrates expressly repudiates that sentiment (T5 below). This is one of several cases (cf. de Strycker 1930, pp. 199ff. *passim*) in which, faced with a conflict between Xenophon’s and Plato’s testimony, we have good reason to prefer Plato’s: he is less prone than Xenophon to tailor his representation of Socrates to apologetic ends (cf. n. 20 below).

18. In Aristophanes’ comedy he teaches behind well-guarded gates. At his trial (*Ap.* 19b-d) Socrates appeals to members of the jury (containing many men of his own age or even older) to speak up if any of them had ever heard him discuss such things, confident that no one has. Burnet (1914, in his note to 19d4) cites parallels from Andocides and Demosthenes which show that such an appeal would not be out of line with Athenian judicial procedure.

19. δὲ, strongly adversative: T4 is an interjection in the account of Plato’s metaphysics into which Aristotle interpolates a brief contrasting allusion to Socrates’ exclusive preoccupation with moral inquiry.

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Xenophon, with his proneness to apologetic overkill<sup>20</sup> pulls out all the stops to clear Socrates of the suspicion of having been a *cryptophysilogos*, representing him as scornfully hostile towards natural inquiry:

**T6 Mem.** 1.1.11: “Nor did he discourse, like most others, about the nature of the universe (περὶ τῆς τῶν πάντων φύσεως), investigating what the experts call ‘cosmos’ (ὁ καλούμενος ὑπὸ τῶν σοφιστῶν κόσμος) and through what necessary causes (τίσιν ἀνάγκαις) each of the celestial occurrences are generated. *Those who did so he showed up as idiots* (μωραίνοντας ἀπεδείκνυε).<sup>21</sup>

Thus from Xenophon no less than Plato and Aristotle, we get good reason for withholding credence from the representation of Socrates in the *Memorabilia*<sup>22</sup> as a dabbler in teleological cosmology in the style of Diogenes of Apollonia, producing a physico-theological argument for the existence of god premised on the man-serving order of a variety of natural phenomena, from the structure of the human organism to the solstitial motions of the sun.<sup>23</sup> Cosmological argument for the existence of god is cosmologist’s business. Why should Socrates produce such argument when cosmology is none of his?

To be sure, Socrates could hardly insulate his religious faith from the formidable energies of his critical intellect. But to find scope for these in his conception of the gods he would not need to desert moral inquiry for physics and metaphysics. He could require his gods to meet not metaphysical but ethical standards. The Ionians had rationalized deity by making it natural. From within the supernaturalist framework which they reject, Socrates makes a parallel move: he rationalizes the gods by making them moral. *His gods can be both supernatural and rational so long as they are rationally moral.* This, I submit, is his program.

20. For the strongly apologetic animus of the *Memorabilia* which determines the form of its construction see H. Erbse 1961, pp. 17ff.

21. *Mem.* 1.1.1. In his account of Socrates’ attitude to astronomy (*Mem.* 4.7.4-7) Xenophon makes Socrates side with the obscurantists, warning his associates that “he who ponders such things risks going mad like Anaxagoras.”

22. 1.4.1ff. (dialogue with Aristodemus); 4.3.3ff. (dialogue with Euthydemus).

23. As Jaeger (1947, p. 167 and notes) has pointed out, the arguments for this teleological theodicy which Xenophon here attributes to Socrates “are undoubtedly not Xenophon’s own”: we “find the same and similar explanations in the zoological works of Aristotle. Aristotle certainly did not take them from Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, but must have resorted to someone among the philosophers of nature who would count as particularly authoritative in such observations”; the evidence points to Diogenes of Apollonia as the source.

Given his obsessive concentration on ethics, a *natural theology* he could not have produced. But he could, and does, produce a *moral theology*, investigating the concept of god no further than is needed to bring it into line with his ethical views, deriving from his new vision of human goodness norms binding on the gods themselves.

Here is the first of the “outlines of theology,” τύποι θεολογίας, as Plato calls them, in Book 2 of the *Republic*:

**T7** *Rep.* 2, 379b: “Is not god truly good, and must he not be so described?...

And surely nothing good can be harmful? And what is not harmful does not harm?... And what does not harm does no evil? And what does no evil could not be the cause of any evil? And is not the good beneficent? Hence the cause of well-being?...

*So god cannot be the cause of all things, but only of good things, of evil things he is not the cause?...*<sup>24</sup>

I have italicized the final step in this sequence of inferences, the crucial one:<sup>25</sup> god cannot be the cause of everything in the life of men, but only of the good things in it. God’s causation of those good things Socrates makes no effort to explain. Only the boldest of metaphysicians could have tried to excogitate how a supernatural being may produce any changes, good or bad, in the natural order. Socrates, no metaphysician, sticking to his own last, the moralist’s, taking the fact of such causation for granted, is content to do no more than clamp on it moral constraints, reasoning that since god is good, he can only cause good, never evil.<sup>26</sup>

24. This comes from a passage in Book 2 of the *Republic* where Plato lays down the first of the articles of theology to which all references to the gods by the poets should conform. What is presented here in a dialogue of Plato’s middle period is pure Socratic heritage *employing no premises foreign to the thought of the earlier dialogues*. Only after this first τύπος θεολογίας has been nailed down, does Plato make Socrates go beyond it (380d ff.), introducing the new, distinctively Platonic, metaphysical premise that gods cannot change, because this would involve “departure from their own form” (380d cf. *Ti.* 50b; *Cra.* 439e), deriving from this metaphysical premise the conclusion that gods cannot lie, since this would involve them in change.

25. Reiterated for emphasis at 379c2-7: “thus, since god is good, he is not cause of all things that happen to human beings, as the many say, but of few of these: of many of them he is not the cause.” Here Plato highlights the great novelty in Socratic theology by setting it off in defiant contrast to “what the many say,” just as the great novelty in Socratic morality, the rejection of the *lex talionis*, is highlighted by representing it as a conscious departure from the common view: it is not just to do evil to those who have done evil to us, “as the many believe” (*Cri.* 49d).

26. Of this cardinal feature of Socratic theology, which would obliterate the whole apotropaic aspect of Greek religion, there is not a word in Xenophon, understandably

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But why should god be credited with such unexceptionable beneficence? Is it because of the superlative wisdom which Socrates,<sup>27</sup> in common with traditional Greek sentiment,<sup>28</sup> ascribes to the gods? No, not just because of that. To allow one's gods infinitely potent intellect is not of itself to allow them flawlessly moral will. It may only lead one to conclude, with Heraclitus, that god transcends the difference between good and evil,<sup>29</sup> and with Aristotle, that to ascribe moral attributes to god is to demean him.<sup>30</sup> Why should Socrates reach the opposite conclusion? Because, I suggest, for him the highest form of wisdom is not theoretical, but practical.<sup>31</sup> And it so, for there is no place for it in the conception of piety he ascribes to Socrates, which departs no further from vulgar notions than to teach that "modest sacrifices from persons of modest means are no less acceptable to the gods than frequent and lavish ones from those who have great possessions" and that "the greater the piety of the giver the greater was gods' pleasure in the gift" (*Mem.* 1.3.3), but still clings to the *do ut des* rationale of sacrificing (cf. *Mem.* 4.3.17, quoted in Endnote B below).

27. *Ap.* 23a-b: When Socrates discovers the true meaning of the oracle Chaerephon had received at Delphi he sees that compared to the divine wisdom man's "is worth little or nothing" In the *Hippias Major* (289b) Socrates endorses the saying of Heraclitus that "the wisest man is to god as an ape is to a man"; cf. Charles Kahn's gloss (1979, pp. 183-185) on this fragment (Number 68 in his book).

28. Even subordinate divinities, like the Muses, are credited with cognitive powers vastly superior to the human (*Iliad* 2.485-486: "You are goddesses, you are present, you know everything"; what men know is only κλέος (hearsay); divine beings are privileged with that perfectly 'clear' insight (σαφήνεια) which is denied to man (Almaeon, DK 24 B1).

29. DK 22 B 102: "For god all things are beautiful and good and just, but men have thought some things unjust, others just" Of all the Presocratics it is Xenophanes who might be credited with "moralizing divinity" (cf. Vlastos 1952, p. 116). Certainly none protested more strongly the *immorality* imputed to the gods in traditional belief (DK 21 B 11 and B 12). But this is dictated by his protest against anthropomorphism (B 23 and its immediate sequels in Clement, B14 and B15), *not* by the ascription of a specifically moral will to god as in Socrates' premise at T7 (ἀγαθὸς ὁ γὰρ θεὸς πᾶσι ὄντι τε καὶ λεκτέον οὕτω, 379b1). I must, therefore, demur from the suggestion (Flashaar 1958, p. 109, n. 2) that the τύποι θεολογίας expounded in *Rep.* 379a-383c "have been taken over from Xenophanes." This first τύπος certainly has not, and whether even the second has is doubtful: there is appreciable difference between the denial of motion to god in Xenophanes (B 26) and the denial of "departing from his own form" (τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ιδέας ἐκβαίνειν) in Plato: Xenophanes builds on a cosmological premise, Plato on a metaphysical one.

30. *Nic. Eth.* 1178b8: holding that "perfect happiness" (τελεία εὐδαιμονία), could only consist of purely theoretical activity, he infers that we would make the gods "ridiculous" if we imputed to them actions to which moral predicates apply.

31. *Moral* wisdom is clearly what he has in view in the doctrine that all the virtues 'are' wisdom (*Pr.* 361b; cf. Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.* 1145b23, *Eud. Eth.* 1215b1; *Magna Mor.* 1182a15). So if god's wisdom is higher than man's (n. 27 above) so must his virtue.



is of the essence of his rationalist program in theology to assume that the entailment of virtue by wisdom binds gods no less than men.<sup>32</sup> He could not have tolerated a double-standard morality,<sup>33</sup> one for men, another for the gods: this would have perpetuated the old irrationalism. If Socrates is to rationalize the moral universe as relentlessly as the Ionian *physiologoi* had rationalized the physical universe when they made a cosmos out of it, he would have to match in the moral domain their unstated axiom that the regularities discernible in terrestrial events hold for all events everywhere: if fire radiates heat and light in our fireplace, it must do the same in the remotest star, and the bigger the fire, the greater the heat, the brighter the light that it would have to generate.

To be sure, Socrates never states the moral analogue of this axiom. Do we know that he would stand by it? Would he want to say that principles discoverable by elenctic argument on the streets of Athens will be universally valid, holding for all moral agents, even if they are gods? There is evidence in the *Euthyphro* that he would. He asks there:

**T8 *Eu.* 10a:** "Is piety loved by the gods because it is piety? Or is it piety because the gods love it?"

He is pressing Euthyphro to agree that the essence of piety—its rationally discoverable nature—has no dependence on the fact that the gods happen to love it.<sup>34</sup> So he is assuming that what piety *is* depends no more on what they, or anyone else, feels about it, than does the nature of fire depend on what anyone, god or man, happens to think that fire is: piety, and by the same token, every other virtue, has an essence of its own which is as normative for the gods as it is for us, it determines what virtue is in their case as strictly as it does in ours. Thus Socrates would reason that if knowledge of good and evil entails moral goodness in a man it would entail the same in a god. And since the god's wisdom surpasses that of the wisest man, god's goodness must surpass that of the most virtuous man. And since he

32. This would follow from the unrestricted generality of the principle that "form is everywhere the same" (τὸ αὐτὸν πανταχοῦ εἶδος ἔστιν, *Meno* 72d). And cf. the next note.

33. His search for definitions is predicated on the assumption that if any moral character *F* is correctly defined the definiens will apply to *every* action characterizable as *F* (cf. *Eu.* 5d: "Is not piety the same as itself in every action?")

34. Cf. Crombie 1962, pp. 209-210; Taylor 1929, pp. 151-152; Cohen 1971, pp. 158-176.

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holds that goodness in a man can never cause evil to anyone,<sup>35</sup> he is bound to hold that *a fortiori* neither can goodness in a god: since god can only be good, never evil, god can only cause good, can never be the cause of evil to anyone, man or god.

To heirs of the Hebraic and Christian traditions this will hardly seem a bold conclusion. For those bred on Greek beliefs about the gods it would be shattering. It would obliterate that whole range of divine activity which torments and destroys the innocent no less than the guilty, as careless of the moral havoc it creates, as is, for instance, Hera in Greek traditional belief, who persecutes Heracles relentlessly throughout his life, beginning with infancy, when she sent snakes to finish his life before it started, and so on repeatedly thereafter until the day of his death, when she dispatched Lyssa to drive him mad so that he murders his own wife and children in a fit of insanity—all this simply because Heracles had been the offspring of one of her consort's numerous infidelities: the calamities she contrives for Zeus' bastard are one of the ways in which she makes the son pay for the father's offenses to her.<sup>36</sup> It would be hard to find a human female acting in a more viciously bitchy way than this goddess does in the myths.<sup>37</sup> What would be left of her and of the other Olympians if they were required to observe the stringent norms of Socratic virtue which require every moral agent, human or divine, to act only to cause good to others, never evil, regardless of provocation? Required to meet such standards, the city's gods would have become unrecog-

35. *Rep.* 335d: "Is harming anyone, be he friend or not, the function (ἔργον) of the just man, or of his opposite, the unjust?" This is a crucial premise for his rejection of the *lex talionis* in the *Cratylus*: to return harm for harm is unjust, because "to harm a human being is no different than to be unjust to him" (*Cr.* 49c).

36. I take the example from M.R. Lefkowitz 1989. She argues convincingly that such conduct by divine beings is portrayed in Euripides' plays not because the poet is "trying to get his audiences to question the gods' traditional nature, but because increased fears and resentments expressed by the characters are an aspect of Euripides' celebrated realism."

37. Another example from Euripides: because Hippolytus had provoked Aphrodite's enmity she destroys not only him but two third parties as well, Phaedra and Theseus who had done no wrong and had done nothing to offend her. In her comments on my paper Professor Lefkowitz observes that in so acting the goddess "is playing by well-established rules" because when there are many gods all should be honoured." But *this* rule is far too general. To fit the case the rule would have to be that a god or goddess offended by a mortal may punish him by destroying innocent persons who had no hand in the offending action. Could there be a rule more obnoxious to the Greek, no less than our own, sense of decency?

nizable. Their ethical transformation would be tantamount to the destruction of the old gods, the creation of new ones—which is precisely what Socrates takes to be the sum and substance of the accusation at his trial:

T9 *Eu.* 3b: “They say I am a god-maker. For disbelieving in the old gods<sup>38</sup> and producing new ones Meletus has brought this indictment against me.”<sup>39</sup>

Fully supernatural though they are, Socrates’ gods could still strike his pious contemporaries as rationalist fabrications, *ersatz*-gods, as different from the ancient divinities of the cult as are the nature-gods worshipped in the godless Thinkery of the Aristophanic caricature.

Socrates could hardly have moved so far from the ancestral faith unless he had adhered uncompromisingly to the authority of reason, brooking no rival source of knowledge on any matter whatsoever, about the gods no less than about anything else. How could he have done so while believing, as we saw in T2 above, that communications from gods come regularly through extra-rational channels, reaching him in particular, through dreams and through his personal “divine sign”?<sup>40</sup> Should this incline us to believe that Socrates is counting on

38. I.e. the gods of the public cult (“the gods of the state”) in whose existence his old accusers, misrepresenting him as a godless *physiologos*, had claimed he disbelieves (*Ap.* 24b; Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.1.1). Not once in Plato’s *Apology* does Socrates plead innocent to this charge: that he believes in *gods* he makes clear enough; that he believes in the gods *of the state* he never says, as he does copiously in Xenophon to rebut the charge (*Mem.* 1.1.2; *Ap.* 11 and 24). Here, as elsewhere (cf. n. 17 above), when Xenophon’s testimony conflicts with Plato’s we would be wise to believe Plato rather than Xenophon, whose Socrates, a model of conventional piety (*Xen. Mem.* 1.2.64: “no one was more conspicuous in cult-service to the gods,” φανερός ἦν θεραπεύων τοὺς θεοὺς μάλιστα ἀνθρώπων; for “cult-service” as the sense of θεραπεύων cf. θύων φανερός at 1.1.2 with φανερός θεραπεύων here) would never have been prosecuted for impiety in the first place and if he had been would have had no trouble reassuring the jury (which was bound to be heavily weighted on the traditionalist side) that in the abundance of his sacrifices the piety of his life compared favorably with that of anyone in Athens.

39. And cf. his subsequent remark (*Eu.* 6a), “Is this why I am being prosecuted—because when such things are said about the gods [tales of savage strife between them], I find them hard to stomach?” Socrates would know that he was not alone in objecting to such tales (Euripides, for example, puts the objection in the mouth of Heracles, Hera’s victim: *Her. Fur.* 1340-1346). What is held against him, Socrates thinks, is that by pressing such objections in his *teaching* he undermines the common faith (“the Athenians don’t mind anyone they think clever, so long as he does not teach his wisdom; but if they think he makes others like himself, they get angry,” *Eu.* 3c7-d1).

40. At its first mention in the *Apology* (31c) he refers to it as θεῖόν τι καὶ δαιμόνιον, where δαιμόνιον is “elliptically substantival” (Riddell, 1867, 102), a contraction of τὸ

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two disparate avenues of knowledge about the gods, rational and extra-rational respectively, yielding two distinct systems of justified belief, one of them reached by elenctic argument, the other by divine revelation through oracles, prophetic dreams and the like?<sup>41</sup> If we did, then, since, as I remarked a moment ago, he shares the common Greek view that god's wisdom is infinitely superior to man's,<sup>42</sup> we would have to conclude that he would look to the intimations of his *daimonion* as a source of moral knowledge apart from reason and superior to it, yielding the certainty which is conspicuously lacking in the findings of his elenctic searches<sup>43</sup> I must, therefore, point out that it is unsupported by textual evidence and is in fact inconsistent with clear implications of the evidence.<sup>44</sup>

First let us look at the way Socrates views those dreams of his which he construes as divine monitions. Consider the one in the *Phaedo* (60e-61b):<sup>45</sup> He says that he had "often" had a dream "urging" (ἐπικελεύειν) and "commanding" him (προστάττοι) to "make music"<sup>46</sup> and that formerly he had *assumed* (ὑπέλαβον) that this meant he should be doing philosophy "since philosophy is the highest music" (61a), but that now in prison it has occurred to him that what the dream has been enjoining on him is "to make music in the popular

δαιμόνιον σημεῖον (R. 496c), as we can see at *Eud.* 272e, τὸ εἰωθὸς σημεῖον τὸ δαιμόνιον (=τὸ εἰωθὸς δαιμόνιον σημεῖον). (There is no textual foundation for the assumption [Edmunds 1985, p. 211 *et passim*] that τὸ δαιμόνιον is a contraction for "divine thing"). What the δαιμόνιον provides for Socrates are mental phenomena which, he believes, are caused directly by his god, to serve as "signs" from him.

41. He does not specify the further means, to which he refers at T2 above by the phrase καὶ παντὶ τρόπῳ ἧπέρ τις ποτε καὶ ἄλλη θεῖα μοῖρα ἀνθρώπῳ καὶ ὀτιοῦν προσέταξε πράττειν. But we should note that he never attaches such significance to any of the extraordinary *physical* events—lightning, thunder, earthquakes, floods, plagues, famine, eclipses, and the like—which figure so prominently as "signs" from the gods in the traditional religious view of the world (for examples see Vlastos 1975, pp. 11-13; Socrates never alludes to anything of that kind as a divine "sign.")

42. Cf. n. 27 above.

43. Elsewhere (1984, pp. 17-18 *et passim*; 1987, pp. 369-370) I have stressed the shortfall in certainty in what Socrates undertakes to find through elenctic searching.

44. Though extremely plausible, the position I am rebutting has never been clearly stated or successfully refuted in the scholarly literature..

45. This occurs in the biographical prelude to the philosophical argument of the dialogue (exposition of Platonic metaphysics) which is then capped with a biographical postlude (115b ff.: the death scene).

46. The dream "urging" and "commanding" (61a7, προστάττοι τὸ ἐνόπνιον) are clearly contractions: it is the god that does the "urging" and "commanding" through the dream (cf. *Ap.* 36c5-6).

sense of the word” (61a), i.e. to versify. So it has now “seemed” (ἔδοξε) to him that “it would be safer not to depart [from life] before fulfilling a sacred duty (πρὶν ἀφοσιώσασθαι) by composing verses in obedience to the dream.” The words he uses—“I assumed” in the first case, “it has seemed to me” in the second—are not those he would have chosen for knowledge-claims.<sup>47</sup> From what he relates and from the language he uses in relating it we can infer that he thinks of the dream as conveying to him a sign from the god susceptible of alternative interpretations, the choice between them left entirely to his own good sense.<sup>48</sup>

That he thinks of oracles too in the same way we can tell from his conception of divination. Though he never expounds this directly, we can reconstruct it from the theory of poetic inspiration which he develops with great gusto in the *Ion*,<sup>49</sup> alluding to it also in the

47. Socrates uses similar language in relating an encounter with his *daimonion* in the *Phdr.* 242b-c: “When I was about to cross the river my familiar divine sign came to me (ἔγένετο) and I thought I heard a voice (φωνὴν ἔδοξα ἀκοῦσαι), forbidding me to leave until I had made atonement for some sin to god. Well, I am a seer—not a very good one, but, like a poor reader, good enough for my own purposes. So I already see clearly what my sin was.” He had felt a warning from the *daimonion* while making that speech, and now he can see why: since *eros* is divine, it cannot be evil, as he had implied in that speech.

48. The same is true in the case of the dream recounted more briefly in the *Crito*: it too, like the first dream in the *Phaedo*, employs allegory: in the verse of the *Iliad* (9.363) which foretells Achilles’ death Socrates reads a prophecy of his own death; and here too he speaks only of “belief” or “seeming” (ἔδόκει, 44a10; ὡς γέ μοι δοκεῖ, 44b4).

49. 533d-535a, with its pendant, 535e-536a—a remarkable passage, unique among Plato’s earlier compositions in its exuberance of poetic imagery: the poet is a “magnet”; he is a “winged” creature; a “bee” carrying away sweetness from honied fountains (untranslatable pun on μέλι, μέλη, μέλιτται, μελιρρύτον, μελοποιῶν, 534a-b); he is like the “bacchantes drawing honey and milk from streams” (534a). In explaining the poet to us, Plato lets Socrates talk like a poet for the nonce. But he does not make Socrates abandon his customary elenctic role on that account. What is different in this dialogue is that Socrates is allowed to propound *in extenso* a challenging theory before proceeding to vindicate it argumentatively, as he does with great vigor in due course: *pace* Verdenius 1943, p. 235, “il ne saurait démontrer cette conviction”: Socrates uses elenctic argument (536d ff.) to refute Ion’s claim that *he* “does not praise Homer κατεχόμενος καὶ μαινόμενος.” A parallel misunderstanding, caused by misjudging the relation of these two passages to their larger context, leads Wilamowitz-Möllendorf (1948, p. 100) to remark that in this dialogue Socrates does more “dozieren” than questing: outside of the two expository passages Socrates is as assiduous and deft a questioner and arguer as in any of Plato’s Socratic dialogues.

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*Apology*.<sup>50</sup> In the epic the poet had claimed confidently that he puts into his verse knowledge imparted to him—"breathed into him"<sup>51</sup>—by his divine mentor.<sup>52</sup> To this claim Socrates responds with a characteristic ploy. His reply is, in effect: "Yes, what the inspired poet puts into his poem is a wonderful, god-given thing; but *it isn't knowledge*—it can't be knowledge for it is mindless." The poet's claim to be the direct beneficiary of divine prompting, Socrates accepts; he allows it at its strongest, conceding that at the moment of inspiration the poet is ἔνθεος, he "has god in him";<sup>53</sup> he is "god-possessed" (κατεχόμενος).<sup>54</sup> But the very form in which Socrates allows inspired poetry a superhuman source, debunks its claim to constitute knowledge:<sup>55</sup>

T10 *Ap.* 22b-c: "I soon perceived that *it is not through knowledge* that poets produce their poems but through a sort of inborn gift<sup>56</sup>

50. 22b-c (= T10 below), a precious parallel, for without it we would be left wondering if the theory of poetic inspiration expounded in the *Ion* is sheer Platonic invention without foundation in authentic Socratic thought, as has been often assumed in the scholarly literature; so e.g. Guthrie 1975, p. 209: blandly ignoring the replication in the *Apology* of what is said by Socrates in the *Ion* (cf. ἐνθουσιάζοντες ὡσπερ οἱ θεομάντις καὶ οἱ χρησμοδοί, *Ap.* 22c, which parallels the bracketing of the inspired poets with the seers and oracle givers in the *Ion*, 533e-534c). Guthrie, like so many others, conflates the theory of divine possession in the *Ion* with its counterpart in the *Phaedrus*, shutting his eyes to the fact that in the *Ion* (and the *Apology*) the "madness" of ἐνθουσιασμός is viewed as mental aberration, lapse of rationality (the psychic state in which a person is out of his mind, ἔκφρων, 534b, bereft of νοῦς, 534c-d), while in the *Phaedrus* Plato reverses Socrates' epistemic denigration of ἐνθουσιασμός by grafting on it the Platonic theory of "recollection," thereby finding in divine possession *the highest grade of knowledge open to a philosopher*, though mistaken by the vulgar for craziness (249c-d).

51. Hesiod, *Th.* 31ff.

52. For references see Dodds 1951, pp. 80-82 and notes.

53. The Greek word comes through the translations feebly as "inspired," losing its literal force (for which see e.g. Burkert 1985, pp. 109-111: he takes *entbeas*, quite rightly, to mean "within is a god"): similarly weakened in translation is ἐνθουσιάζω, "to be inspired or possessed by a god, to be in ecstasy" (LSJ, s.v.); when ἐνθουσιασμός is anglicized as "enthusiasm" it becomes "ardent zeal" (O.E.D.); "frenzy" might come closer to its force.

54. The poets are described as "possessed by the god" (κατεχόμενοι: 533e7, 534a3-4 and e5), it is said that they βακχεύουσι ("speak or act like one frenzy-stricken," LSJ s.v. βακχεύω).

55. And most particularly, the supposed knowledge which had made Homer "the educator of Hellas," widely thought to deserve "to be constantly studied as a guide by which to regulate our whole life" (*Rep.* 606e, Cornford's tr.; cf. Verdenius 1943, pp. 248ff.).

56. φύσει τινι, "by a kind of native disposition" (Allen), "some inborn talent" (Grube). Cf. Burnet 1924, note on *Ap.* 22c1: "The word is used here in the sense in which it is opposed to habituation and instruction. It is the φῶά which Pindar (*Ol.* 2.24)

and in a state of inspiration (ἐνθουσιάζοντες),<sup>57</sup> like the diviners and soothsayers, who also speak many admirable things but *know nothing of the things about which they speak.*<sup>58</sup>

In Socrates' view the effect of the god's entry into the poet is to drive out the poet's mind: when the god is in him the poet is "out of his mind" ἔκφρων,<sup>59</sup> "intelligence is no longer present in him";<sup>60</sup> so he may find himself saying things which are admirable (πολλὰ καὶ καλά)<sup>61</sup> and true<sup>62</sup> without knowing what he is saying.<sup>63</sup> Thus to think of the poet as a recipient of divine *revelation*, i.e. as the beneficiary of "disclosure of *knowledge*"<sup>64</sup> to him by the god, would be to contradict Socrates' description of him as "speaking while *knowing nothing* of what he speaks": one who "has no knowledge of what one speaks" cannot have been given knowledge.<sup>65</sup>

opposes to the ineffectual efforts of poets who have been taught, and is in fact 'genius' in the proper sense of the word."

57. Cf. n. 53 above.

58. ἴσασιν δὲ οὐδὲν ὧν λέγουσι: "know nothing of the things they speak" (Allen); speak "without understanding of what they say" (Grube). The same phrase is applied to statesmen in the *Meno*: ἴσασι δὲ οὐδὲν ὧν λέγουσιν (99c), who are likened to the oracle givers and seers who are bracketed with the poets in the *Apology*.

59. "Out of his mind, beside himself" (LSJ, s.v. ἔκφρων, principal use)—not ἄφρων, "silly, stupid," as would have been the case if he had retained his own mind, albeit in an impaired condition.

60. ὁ νοῦς μηκέτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐνῆ... οἷς νοῦς μὴ πάρεστιν (*Ion* 534c-d).

61. T10 above. So too in the *Ion*: in the state of divine possession "admirable" (καλά: 533e7, 534e4) sentences are uttered by poets—which is scarcely surprising since it is "god himself who speaks to us through them" (ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸς ἐστὶν ὁ λέγων, διὰ τούτων δὲ φθέγγεται πρὸς ἡμᾶς, 534d3-4). It is reassuring to learn that Socrates did not consider inane or foolish the great poetry he hears on the stage or reads in Homer, whose words he has at his finger-tips and quotes freely (see the numerous listings s.v. "Ὀμηρος and its inflections in Brandwood 1976). His stubborn resistance to the popular Greek view that one may learn how to live by reading, hearing and memorizing the poets (cf. n. 55 above), instead of searching critically for the truth, does not keep him from admitting that there is much wisdom *in* poets who speak "by divine grace" (θεία δυνάμει, 534c) and are used by god as his mouthpiece (534d3-4).

62. *Ion* 534c: καὶ ἀληθῆ λέγουσι.

63. Cf. n. 58 above.

64. O.E.D., s.v. "revelation."

65. He might have true beliefs, yet lack that understanding which would enable him to see why they are true and draw the right inferences from them. The knowledge denied to the poets is reserved to the god who speaks through them or in them: *Ion* 534d: "it is not they [the inspired poets] who utter those priceless words while bereft of understanding (οἷς νοῦς μὴ ἐνῆ), but that the god himself is the speaker (ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸς ἐστὶν ὁ λέγων)."

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That this mediumistic theory of inspired poetry Socrates would apply also to divination follows directly from the fact that he regards divination as the theory's primary field of application: it is because he is *like* the diviner<sup>66</sup> that the inspired poet is "out of his mind" and "knows nothing of the things of which he speaks." So neither could Socrates think of the diviner as receiving knowledge in his mantic states: how could a mental state in which there is no νοῦς, no understanding, in which a person "knows nothing of what he speaks," constitute *knowledge*? For Socrates diviners, seers, oracle givers, poets are all in the same boat. All of them in his view are know-nothings, or rather, worse: unaware of their sorry epistemic state, they set themselves up as repositories of wisdom emanating from a divine, all-wise source. What they say may be true; but even when true it is, they are in no position to say why it is true. If their hearer were in a position to say why, then *he* would have the knowledge denied to them; the knowledge would come from the application of *his reason* to what these people say without reason.

Though Socrates does not apply this theory explicitly to prophetic dreams or to his own "divine sign" the connection with the latter is unavoidable, since he refers to the functioning of his *daimonion* as his "customary divination,"<sup>67</sup> without ever denying, directly or by implication, that what is true of divination generally would also apply to that homespun variety of it with which 'divine dispensation' has favored him. So all he could claim to be getting from the *daimonion* at any given time is precisely what he calls the *daimonion* itself—a "divine sign,"<sup>68</sup> which allows, indeed requires, *unlimited scope for the deployment of his critical reason* to extract whatever truth it can from those monitions.<sup>69</sup> Thus without any recourse to Ionian *physiologia*,<sup>70</sup>

66. *Ap.* 22b-c: "they compose their verses not by skill but by a sort of natural endowment and divine inspiration, *like the diviners and oracle-givers*" (ὡσπερ οἱ θεομάντες καὶ οἱ χρησμοδοί). In the *Ion* (534c) god uses poets *and* oracle-givers and "those of the diviners who are divine" as his servants by "taking away their understanding from them" (ἐξαιρούμενος τοῦτων τὸν νοῦν). We should note that both passages speak of "oracle-givers," *not* of the "oraclemongers" (χρησμολόγοι), who are treated with such scorn by Aristophanes and whom Socrates ignores as unworthy of any notice at all.

67. *Ap.* 40a, ἡ εἰωθυῖά μοι μαντικὴ ἢ τοῦ δαιμονίου. And to himself as recipient of the signs of the *daimonion* he refers as a "seer": εἰμὶ δὴ οὐ μάντις... (n. 47 above).

68. Cf. n. 40 above.

69. It is in this direction that Plato develops his own theory of divination in the *Ti.* 71e: a god-given sop to human weakness (ἀφροσύνη θεὸς ἀνθρώπινῃ δέδωκεν), enabling us to enjoy divinatory powers in certain abnormal states (dreams, or illness, or



Socrates has disarmed the irrationalist potential of the belief in supernatural gods communicating with human beings by supernatural signs. His theory both preserves the venerable view that mantic experience is divinely caused *and* nullifies that view's threat to the exclusive authority of reason to determine questions of truth or falsehood.

Thus the paradox I confronted at the start of this paper dissolves: there can be no conflict between Socrates' unconditional readiness to follow critical reason wherever it may lead and his equally unconditional commitment to obey commands issued to him by his supernatural god through supernatural signs. *These two commitments cannot conflict because only by the use of his own unfettered critical reason can Socrates determine the true meaning of any of these signs.* Let me apply this result to the signs from the god on which Socrates predicates his philosophic mission in the *Apology*.<sup>71</sup>

Some scholars have expressed bafflement, or worse, incredulity, that from the Pythia's "No" to the question "Is there anyone wiser (enthusiasm) whose import we may try to understand when we revert to a normal condition: "it is for the rational nature (τῆς ἔμφορονος φύσεως) to comprehend (συννοῆσαι) the utterances, in dream or waking life, of divination and possession "

70. In Democritus this tradition produces a naturalistic theory of divination (68 A 136-138), the complement of his naturalistic theory of poetic inspiration: endorsing the view that fine poetry is produced by its creators "with enthusiasm and a holy spirit" (DK 63 B 18; cf. B 21) The divine influx into the poet's mind is explained, like everything else in Democritus' natural philosophy, in corpuscularist terms (Plutarch, *Moralia* 734F-735C: cited as Democritus' fragment A 77 in DK, with which A 79 and B 166 in DK should be compared). For a detailed exposition of the Democritean theory see Delatte (1934, pp. 28ff.) who, however, assumes (pp. 56ff.) that the theory of inspiration in the *Ion* was derived from Democritus—a groundless guess, which would have had considerable plausibility *if* we knew that Socrates has been receptive to the speculations of the *physiologoi*, while, as we know, he insisted that he had no truck with them (*Ap.* 19c).

71. I shall be following exclusively Plato's version of the oracle story. In Xenophon's *Memorabilia* there is no reference at all to the oracle Chaerephon brought back from Delphi (a curious discrepancy with the Xenophontic *Apology*, where it forms the centerpiece of Socrates' defense), and the whole motif of a command from God is suppressed—understandably so, given the apologetic animus of the former: for that purpose the claim to have received a divine commission would be counter-productive: it would be seen as self-serving megalomania, which is indeed how Socrates fears it is being viewed by many of his judges in the Platonic *Apology*: "if I were to say that this [giving up his mission to win acquittal] would be to disobey the god and this is the reason why I could not keep silent, you would not believe me, thinking that I was shamming" (37e). (I give further comment on the difference between Plato's and Xenophon's versions of the oracle story in Endnote A below).

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than Socrates?" Socrates should have derived the command<sup>72</sup> to philosophize on the streets of Athens.<sup>73</sup> Wouldn't that be pulling a rabbit out of a hat? Quite so. And is there any difficulty about that if you are licensed to put the rabbit into the hat yourself in the first place? Socrates makes no secret of how subjective had been the process by which the god's command had reached him:

**T11** *Ap.* 28e: "The god commanded me, *as I supposed and assumed* (ὡς ἐγὼ φήθην τε καὶ ὑπέλαβον), to live philosophizing, examining myself and others."

Here again the same language as in recounting the dream in the *Phaedo* where he had "assumed" (ὑπελάμβανον, *Phd.* 60e) that "make music" meant "do philosophy." So even if that oracle from Delphi had been the only sign Socrates had received from the god, he could still have pried out of the Pythia's "No" the command to engage all and sundry in philosophic discourse: he could do so by "supposing and assuming" that this had been the hidden meaning in the riddling declaration<sup>74</sup> that no one alive was wiser than himself, though he was painfully "aware of being wise in nothing, great or small" (21b). But in point of fact that oracle was by no means the only sign Socrates had received. It was only the first of many. Let me cite **T2** once again:

**T2** "To do this has been commanded me through divinations and dreams and through every other means through which divine apportionment has ever commanded anyone to do anything."

So there had been more divinations (some of them no doubt from his own *daimonion*) and more than one prophetic dream. Suppose that one of these had spelled out fully what the god wanted him to do, ordering him to do it in the very words in which he describes his own activity:

**T12** *Ap.* 30a-b: "I do nothing but go about persuading you, young and old, to have your first and greatest concern not for your body or for your money but for your soul, that it should be as excellent as possible."

72. I see no case for weakening the plain wording of our texts (τοῦ θεοῦ τάττοντος, *Ap.* 28e4; προστέτακται ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, 33c4) from "command" to "message," as maintained by Brickhouse and Smith 1983, p. 661, following Guthrie.

73. Hackforth (1935, pp. 88ff.) is greatly exercised over this, as are the other commentators to whom he refers. He concludes that to make sense of the narrative in Plato's text "we must deduct from that story the element of the imperative in the oracle" (p. 93). But see, rightly to the contrary, Brickhouse & Smith 1983 (cf. n. 4 above), pp. 657-659.

74. Which he had found so baffling on first hearing. (21b: "I kept thinking: What does the god mean? What is he hinting at? ...For a long time I was baffled..."; cf. Burnet's note on 21b3).

Suppose the dream had told him to do just that. Would this have given him the certainty that the command comes from god? How would he know that this is not one of those lying dreams which the gods have been traditionally thought to send to men when they want to deceive them?<sup>75</sup> And how could he tell that it does not come from his own fancy instead? There is only one way he could have proceeded to still that doubt. He would have had to ask himself: do I have *reason* to believe that this is work the god wants done by me? Is he that sort of god? What is his character?

Fully explicit in the text is one item in the character Socrates imputes to the god upon first hearing the report Chaerephon brought back from Delphi:

T13 *Ap.* 21b: "Surely he is not lying. That would not be right for him."

Why so? The gods in whom the city believes have no such scruples. They have been lying since Homer.<sup>76</sup> Why should Socrates think his god would be so different? Because, as we saw earlier, unlike their gods, Socrates' god is invariably good, incapable of causing any evil to anyone in any way at any time. Since to deceive a man is to do evil to him, Socrates' god cannot be lying. And since his goodness is entailed by his own wisdom,<sup>77</sup> which is boundless, his goodness must be boundless too. And since his good will is directed to Socrates' fellow-townsmen in Athens, no less than to Socrates himself, he must wish that they should put the perfection of their soul above all of their other concerns.

How could the god implement this wish for them? How could he bring everyone in Athens to see that "they should have their first and greatest concern for their soul that it should be as excellent as possible?" He could send them signs to that effect, dreams and oracles galore. But *unless they brought the right beliefs to the interpretation of those signs, they would not be able to read them correctly*. And they could not have come by those right beliefs unless they had already engaged

75. As e.g. in *Iliad* 2.6ff.

76. See e.g. Deichgräbe 1952. That the traditional gods think nothing of deceiving each other is one of the first criticisms the Ionian rationalists directed against the deities of popular belief (Xenophanes B11). How could such gods scruple deceiving men?. "Athena has deceived me," Hector reflects (*Il.* 22.299) in that duel with Achilles which is to be his last.

77. Cf. pp. 220-221 above.

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in the quest for moral truth.<sup>78</sup> So the god is stuck. Vastly powerful in innumerable ways though he is, in this matter he is powerless to give effect to his will by his own unaided means.<sup>79</sup> He must, therefore, depend on someone who does have the right beliefs and can read signs correctly to assist the god by doing on his behalf for the people of Athens what the god in his boundless good will for them would be doing himself in person, if he only could. This being the case, is it not understandable that Socrates should have seen his street-philosophizing as work done on the god's behalf and should, therefore, have a rational ground for "believing and supposing" that this is what the god is commanding him to do, declaring in that oracle given to Chaerephon at Delphi that no man is wiser than Socrates, not to give Socrates cause to preen himself on that account,<sup>80</sup> but to make it possible for him to guess that a unique responsibility was laid on him to use in the god's service what little<sup>81</sup> wisdom he has?

We can now move to that point in the *Euthyphro* to which I said at the start of this paper I would return near its close. In the search for the answer to 'What is piety?' Euthyphro has got as far as saying that piety is "service" to the gods.<sup>82</sup> But when pressed to say what sort of service this would be, he can only think of the traditional answer:

T14 *Eu.* 14b: "Speaking and doing what is pleasing to the gods by praying and sacrificing—this is piety."<sup>83</sup>

78. As Socrates already had, else *he* could not have read correctly the signs the god sent him. Scholars who think that Socrates' moral inquiries begin with his receipt of the Delphic oracle (Ross 1987, p. 227; Ferguson 1964, pp. 70-73) seem unaware of this fundamental point.

79. A parallel (and entirely independent) use of this idea is made by C.C.W. Taylor (1982, p. 113): "But there is one good product which [the gods] can't produce without human assistance, namely good human souls." That Socrates sees the pious man as a kind of craftsman who aims at the production of an "all-glorious" *ergon* is emphasized by Brickhouse and Smith (1983, p. 665: cf. n. 72 above). But they underestimate the novelty of this conception of piety: when they see here a rapprochement with the common view, which also requires that one should aid the gods by carrying out what they ordain: did any Greek god ever ordain anything remotely like Socrates' philosophic mission or anything else, for that matter, as *an aid to him in the performance of his own ergon*?

80. As he does in the Xenophonic *Apology of Socrates* (15-17) where mention of the oracle (blown up to declare that "no one is more liberal, more just, or wiser than Socrates"), triggers a lengthy outburst of self-congratulation.

81. "Human wisdom," he calls it, admitting that this much he *can* claim (*Ap.* 20d-e) in the very context in which he declares that he "is not aware of being wise in anything, great or small" (21b: cf. Vlastos 1985, pp. 25-26).

82. 13d: ὑπηρευτική τις... θεοῖς (13d7).

83. This is virtually the same as the definition of "piety" Xenophon puts into

Sniffing out here the age-old *do ut des* conception of worship—swapping gifts of sacrifice in return for prayed-for benefits—Socrates rebuffs it brutally. He says that, if so, piety would be “an art of commercial exchanges between gods and men” (ἐμπορικὴ τις τέχνη, 14e6), exchanges which would make no sense since they would be so one-sided: the gods stand in no need of gifts from us, while we are totally dependent on their gifts to us—“there is no good in our life which does not come from them” (15a)—so we would be the exclusively advantaged party; if piety is holy barter it is a bargain for us, a swindle for the gods. So the definition in T14 is decidedly on the wrong track. To forestall that wrongheaded, diversionary move Socrates had asked:

T15 *Eu.* 13e10-11: “In the performance of what work (ἔργον) does our service to the gods assist them? In Zeus’ name, tell me, what is that glorious<sup>84</sup> work the gods perform by using us as their servants?”

That is the critical point in the search. Socrates remarks a moment later that if that question had been answered correctly, the goal of the search would have been reached: Socrates would have learned what piety is.<sup>85</sup> That is a very broad hint. But how could Euthyphro have taken advantage of it? The clue he is offered is lost to him because the notion that the gods have work to do,<sup>86</sup> work in which human beings could assist them, is utterly foreign to Greek religion.<sup>87</sup>

Socrates’ mouth in the *Memorabilia*: “The pious man is rightly defined as ‘he who knows the νόμιμα concerning the gods’”(4.6.14); these νόμιμα are the lawfully prescribed sacrifices (1.3.1).

84. πάγκαλον, “all-beautiful, marvellously fine.”

85. Cf. n. 4 above.

86. The imputation of an *ergon* to the gods has been thought a conclusive objection to taking the question in T15 a true lead to the discovery of what piety is: Burnet, Allen, Versenyi have contended that Socrates could not have predicated the search on a notion which is so patently foreign to the common Greek conceptions of the gods. For the references to this contention and for its refutation see Brickhouse and Smith 1983, pp. 661–662 and McPherran 1985, pp. 292–294.

87. The nearest thing to it in Greek mythology is the “labors” of Heracles. Socrates, clutching at a straw, alludes to them at one point in his defense: he speaks of the hardships of his mission (22a) “as if they were labours I had undertaken to perform” (ὥσπερ πόνους τινας ποιοῦντος), choosing to ignore the fact that Heracles’ labours had been a torment inflicted on him by the ill-will of Hera, while Socrates’ labours had been the source of the greatest possible happiness in his life (38a). (Professor Lefkowitz in her comment reminds us of Ion’s “labor” (πόνον, *Ion* 528) for Apollo; but this case is not illuminating: Ion is a religious professional, a temple-servant).

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But just suppose that Euthyphro had been allowed a preview of the speech Socrates was to give at his trial—that part of it which recounts the oracle story and Socrates' response to it. Would it be too much to hope that even Euthyphro's sluggish mind would have picked up the needed clue? For then he would have realized that Socrates saw his own work in summoning all and sundry to perfect their soul as work he did at the god's command,<sup>88</sup> as his own service (*λατρεία*, *ὑπηρεσία*) to the god.<sup>89</sup> And that Socrates did consider this a "glorious work" could hardly have escaped Euthyphro if he had heard Socrates assuring the judges

T16 *Ap.* 30a: "I believe that no greater good has ever come to you in the city than this service of mine to the god."

With these pieces of the puzzle before him Euthyphro should have been able to see what piety means in Socrates' own life: doing on the god's behalf, in assistance to him, work the god wants done and would be doing himself if he only could.<sup>90</sup> To derive from this a definition of piety Euthyphro would then have had to generalize, contriving a formula that would apply not only in Socrates' case but in every possible case of pious conduct. This is a tall order and it is by no means clear that Socrates himself would have been able to fill it. But this technical failure would not shake—would scarcely touch—the central insight into the nature of piety with which, I submit, we can credit Socrates on the strength of what is put into his mouth in the *Apology* and the *Euthyphro*. **Piety is doing god's work to benefit human beings**—work such as Socrates' kind of god would wish done on his behalf, in service to him. Whether or not a formula could be devised to encapsulate this insight in an elenctically fool-proof definition, this much should be already clear: Socrates has hit on a **new conception of piety**, as revolutionary in the religious domain, as is his non-retaliatory conception of justice in the moral one.

How radical, how subversive of traditional Greek belief and practice this conception of piety would be, we can see if we reflect that what had passed for religion to-date had been thick with magic. By

88. That Socrates so thinks of it is made abundantly clear in the wording at *Ap.* 28e4 (τοῦ δὲ θεοῦ τάπτοντος), and its analogizing to the order of a military commander.

89. 23b-c: τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ λατρείαν, and 30a6-7: τὴν ἐμὴν τῷ θεῷ ὑπηρεσίαν. The former had especially strong religious evocations; cf. *Phdr.* 244c: θεῶν εὐχὰς τε καὶ λατρείας.

90. Cf. n. 78 above.

“magic” I understand<sup>91</sup> the belief, and all of the practices predicated on it, that *by means of ritualistic acts man can induce supernatural powers to give effect to his own wishes*. In black magic one exorcises supernaturals to do evil to one’s enemy. In white magic one seeks to prevail on them through prayer and sacrifice to do good to oneself and to those for whom one cares—one’s family, friends, nation, and the like: good which, but for those ritualistic performances, the gods would have withheld.<sup>92</sup> As practiced all around Socrates, religion was saturated with just that sort of magic. From religion as Socrates understands it magic is purged—all of it, both white and black. In the practice of Socratic piety man would not pray to god, “My will be done through thee,” but “Thy will be done through me.” In this new form of piety man is not a self-seeking beggar beseeching self-centered, honor-hungry gods, cajoling them by gifts of sacrifice to do good which without that gift their own will for good would not have prompted them to do. Man addresses gods who are of their very nature relentlessly beneficent: they want for men nothing but what men would want for themselves if their will were undividedly will for good.

If some such thing as this is what Socrates’ conception of piety would do for Greek religion, we may still ask what it would do for Socrates himself. What is it that doing god’s work on god’s behalf to benefit other persons brings to Socrates’ own life and character that would not otherwise be assured for it? Here is my answer in nutshell form: It brings a release from that form of ego-centricity which is endemic in Socratic eudaemonism, as in all eudaemonism. In that theory the good for each of us is unambiguously our own personal good: the happiness which is the final reason for each of our intentional actions is our own personal happiness.<sup>93</sup> To what extent we

91. The primary sense of “magic” according to the O.E.D. is “the pretended art of influencing course of events by occult control of nature or of spirits.” Among the senses of “occult” it recognizes “beyond the range of ordinary knowledge; involving the supernatural.”

92. Most of petitionary prayer accompanying sacrifice as conceived by the Greeks would have to count as white magic: the sacrificial gift to the god is usually designed to elicit a special favor to the worshipper. See Endnote B below.

93. This assumption is so deeply embedded in Socratic eudaemonism that no need is felt to make it explicit. But its presence is easily detectable when the text is closely read. Thus in explaining the general principle that in all our actions we pursue the good Socrates moves from ‘because we think it better’ (G. 468b, οἰόμενοι βέλτιον εἶναι) to ‘because we think it better *for us*’ (οἰόμενοι ἄμεινον εἶναι ἡμῖν) without any apparent awareness that what is expressed in the second phrase is substantially different from what is expressed in the first.

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should care for the good of others will then depend on those contingencies of blood or fortune which so bind their good to ours that we can perceive their good as our good, their happiness as a component of ours. In Socratic piety that link between our good and that of others is made non-contingent through devotion to a disinterestedly benevolent god who, being already perfect, does not require from us any contribution to his own well-being but only asks each of us to do for other persons what he would be doing for them himself if he were to change places with us. To the spiritual toxins in eudaemonist motivation high religion here provides an antidote. Were it not for that divine command that first reached Socrates through the report Chaerephon brought back from Delphi there is no reason to believe that Socrates would have ever become a street-philosopher. If what he wants is partners in elenctic argument, why should he not keep to those in whose company he had sought and found his eudaemonist theory—congenial and accomplished fellow-seekers after moral truth? Why should he take to the streets forcing himself on people who have neither taste nor talent for philosophy, trying to talk them into submitting to a therapy they do not think they need? The physician who seeks out people who fancy themselves in the best of health, taking it on himself to persuade them that they are mortally sick, is undertaking a thankless task. Would Socrates have given his life to this task if his piety had not driven him to it?

In closing let me offer a passage which is a far cry from Socrates' own world and shows what his piety would be like if transposed into the language of an altogether different religious creed and practice:

**T17** *The Book of the Perfect Life*: "When men are enlightened by the true light they renounce all desire and choice and commit and commend themselves to the Eternal Goodness, so that every enlightened man would say: 'I fain would be to the Eternal Goodness what his own hand is to a man.'"

The language is that of mystical religion, and Socrates is no mystic. And "renunciation of all desire and choice" would be decidedly out of the question for him as a declared eudaemonist. But this much



he would have in common with that medieval mystic. He too would fain be to an infinitely wise and benevolent being what his own hand is to a man or, better still, what a man's argumentative voice is to a man.<sup>94</sup>

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94. In revising this essay for publication I have benefitted from criticisms by Professor Lefkowitz and have made some corrections accordingly. But I am puzzled why she should think the gods she has in view here (and in her admirable paper to which I refer in n. 36 above) worthy of reverence (σέβας: piety *is* εὐσέβεια). Think of Hippolytus. Straitlaced in his abstention from "the works of the night" over which Aphrodite presides (in his case, since he is unmarried, these would be fornication and adultery), he is upright, though eccentric: chastity is no crime, even when it is overdone. What could be his feelings for the deity who destroys him—"powerful, proud, intolerant, and quite without scruple or pity" (Barrett, 1964, pp. 155)? Can he honor a deity he considers vicious (κακίστη, *Hippol.* 13-14)? Professor Lefkowitz thinks he should, because "he will suffer if he doesn't." Certainly, to keep out of trouble, he should have paid the formal tribute she demands. But should such concessions to power devoid of moral quality be reckoned εὐσέβεια, and the sentiment which inspires them σέβας?

### Endnote A: The Two Versions of the Oracle Story

This is how the story runs in the Platonic *Apology* (abbr. to "PA"):

AT1 PA 20e-21a: "You surely know Chaerephon... Once upon a time he had the brass to go to Delphi and request an oracle on this—I say, gentlemen, don't make a disturbance—he asked if there is anyone wiser than myself. And the Pythia responded (ἀνεῖλεν) that no one is. Chaerephon is now dead. But his brother is here and will testify about it."

And here is Xenophon's version of it in his *Apology* (abbr. to "XA"):

AT2 XA 14: "When Chaerephon once inquired about me at Delphi in the presence of many Apollo responded (ἀνεῖλεν) that no man was more liberal, more just or more wise than myself (μήτε ἐλευθεριώτερον μήτε δικαιοτέρον μήτε σωφρονέστερον)."

In Xenophon we are not told what the question was; only that laudatory epithets spilled out. In Plato we are told that it was, precisely, "Is anyone wiser than Socrates?" and that the answer was, precisely, "No." Which of the two shall we believe? The forensic credibility of the two stories is strikingly different. Xenophon's could hardly be weaker: all that the court is offered is the defendant's say-so. In Plato's a witness well qualified to stand in Chaerephon's place, his own brother, is in court to attest the story.

Moreover in this version Chaerephon's question to the priestess is answerable by a simple 'Yes' or 'No'; so his inquiry could have been processed by cleromancy which, as Paul Amandry has shown (1950, pp. 53, 245), is known to have been practiced in Delphi during the fourth century and may well have been practiced much earlier: A vessel containing two beans sits before the priestess. She picks one at random. She answers "yes" if it is white, "no" if it is black. If this had been the method used in Chaerephon's case a nasty problem would dissolve: how was it that a stay-at-home Athenian philosopher who had published nothing had acquired such extraordinary fame that Delphi would risk its reputation on the verdict that no one was wiser than he? If cleromancy had been the method, there would be no need for Socrates to have achieved so great a fame, or any fame. The Pythia and her advisers would not need to agonize over the answer. All she would need to do is pick up a bean.

### Endnote B: Xenophon vs. Plato on the Rationale of Sacrificing

The staple of Greek religion had always been petitionary prayer predicated on the ritual honors the petitioner had paid the supplicated god or gods. So Apollo's priest prays to him in the *Iliad* (1.39-40):

If ever I burned to thee fat thighs of bulls and rams,

Fulfil thou this prayer of mine.

And so do countless others in recorded Greek devotions. In Xenophon Socrates' piety is not so crass. He counsels that we ask the god simply "to give good things," trusting them to send us whatever they, in their greater wisdom, deem best for us (*Mem.* 1.3.2). He teaches that there is no advantage in lavish offerings, for the gods are as pleased by modest ones (*ibid.* 1.3.2). But even so the *do ut des* rationale of divine worship remains in place:

Xen., *Mem.* 4.3.17: "It is by falling no whit short of one's power to honor the gods that one may hope confidently for the greatest goods. From whom could a prudent man expect more than from those who have the power to confer the greatest benefits?"