

## Socratic Knowledge and the *Daimonion*\*

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After being sentenced to death, Socrates told the jurors they gained nothing from it. He then spoke to the jurors who voted against the punishment of death, revealing that a guilty verdict must be what is good to the god. Socrates revealed that in all previous times his *daimonion*, a warning voice, opposed him whenever he was about to do something wrong. However, the *daimonion* did not stop him from leaving home that morning, coming to the court, or speaking to the jurors. He asks:

What do I think is the reason for this? I will tell you. What has happened to me may well be a good thing, and those of us who believe death to be an evil are certainly mistaken. *I have convincing proof* of this, for it is impossible that my familiar sign did not oppose me if I was not about to do what was right.<sup>1</sup>

Socrates is able to conclude that the lack of the *daimonion*'s constraint is convincing proof that his current action is good. This is a significant form of wisdom—to be able to know and understand what the god desires for him. However, earlier in this dialogue, he makes this confession: “For I certainly do not possess [human wisdom], and whoever says I do is lying and

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\* *Daimonion* and *daimon* mean essentially the same thing and scholars use both terms. I will use both interchangeably in this paper.

<sup>1</sup> *Apology* 40b–c, italics added.

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speaks to slander me ... I am very conscious that I am not wise at all.”<sup>2</sup> These two passages appear to be a contradiction in Socrates’ reasoning. However, I will demonstrate that the knowledge Socrates receives from the *daimonion* is not the philosophical knowledge he seeks but does not possess. I will first explain Socrates’ search for divine wisdom and his claim to ignorance. Second, I will analyze the knowledge the *daimonion* provides to Socrates. Third, I will refute the claim that the *daimonion* trumps Socrates’ own ratiocination. Finally, I will conclude that the knowledge Socrates receives from the *daimonion* is neither the knowledge he seeks, nor the knowledge of which he claims to be ignorant.

### The Search for Knowledge and the Claim to Ignorance

In the *Apology*, Socrates claims that his philosophical search for knowledge is an obligation and duty to the God. He traces this mission and “service to the god” to the Delphic Oracle.<sup>3</sup> Prior to this experience, Socrates lived a life of philosophy; in fact, philosopher Mark L. McPherran believes it is “reasonable to suppose that Socrates had been wielding the *elenchos* on topics of ethical import for a good deal of time prior to his setting about to ‘refute’ the Oracle.”<sup>4</sup> It would seem that his inquisitive mind at this time was at least impressive enough to prompt Chaerephon to travel to the Delphic Oracle, pay him, and question him as to the extent of Socrates’ knowledge.<sup>5</sup> The Oracle told Chaerephon that no one was wiser than Socrates. When Socrates heard this reply he was skeptical, believing that he was not wise in any matter.<sup>6</sup> He felt the Oracle’s reply must be some sort of riddle by God. The only way to understand the riddle was to find someone wiser than himself.

Socrates began his mission questioning the citizens of Athens who claimed to have knowledge. He went to the politicians, only to find that

<sup>2</sup> *Apology* 20e, 21b.

<sup>3</sup> *Apology* 23b.

<sup>4</sup> McPherran 215.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Yonezawa 349.

“none of them knew anything ‘beautiful and good.’”<sup>7</sup> Although they appeared to be wise, they did not know anything.<sup>8</sup> He then went to the poets, but found they “[did] not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets who also say many fine things without any understanding of what they say.”<sup>9</sup> Finally, Socrates confronted the craftsmen. Although they possessed a technical knowledge in their specialized field, they falsely claimed to have knowledge outside of their specialty.<sup>10</sup>

It seemed that Socrates’ search for wisdom was fruitless. “His activities had only revealed to him that he lacked all such wisdom, while others seemed to have a portion.”<sup>11</sup> However, he began to understand the Oracle’s meaning. It was precisely this antihubristic principle that Delphi had always insisted upon;<sup>12</sup> namely, that human wisdom is relatively meaningless, as wise men realize.<sup>13</sup> It was at this point that his mission of systematically questioning people who claimed expert knowledge began. He searched not for a worthless, worldly, and illusory knowledge, which the wise men of Athens possessed, but for the wisdom the gods possessed: “divine wisdom,” specifically, an expert moral knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

The Platonic dialogues make it clear that expert moral knowledge is a craft. First, Socrates’ understanding of divine wisdom as a craft is evident in his belief about the gods. Since divine knowledge is held by the gods, Socrates concludes that they are divine craftsmen, having a specific purpose and function.<sup>15</sup> Second, the knowledge he is seeking—piety, temperance, justice, and so on—must have the same qualities as a craft.

Exploring the definition of piety, Socrates shows a discrepancy in Euthyphro’s definition by using a craft analogy. Euthyphro claims that

<sup>7</sup> Cross 112.

<sup>8</sup> *Apology* 21c.

<sup>9</sup> *Apology* 22c.

<sup>10</sup> Cross 112.

<sup>11</sup> McPherran 216.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Cross 112.

<sup>14</sup> McPherran 217.

<sup>15</sup> *Euthyphro* 13d-14a.

piety is tendance to the gods. However, “horses cared for by horse breeders are benefited and become better.... Is piety then, which is the care of the gods, also to benefit the gods and make them better?”<sup>16</sup> Euthyphro denies this and immediately understands that his definition does not work with the craft analogy. In the *Charmides*, Socrates tests a definition of temperance by comparing it to the work of a craftsman. He says,

And does a doctor have to know when he cures in a useful way and when he does not? And so with each of the craftsmen: does he have to know when he is going to benefit from the work he performs and when he is not?<sup>17</sup>

In the *Republic*, Socrates makes it clear that the wisdom for which he is searching, namely justice, is a craft. He asks, “Now, what does the craft we call justice give, and to whom or what does it give it?”<sup>18</sup>

Expert moral knowledge shares all of the qualities of a craft. Among other things, Socrates requires a craft to be teachable and learnable, explicable, repeatable and inerrant when the form is followed, unique, and functioning. It must also count as a form of knowledge or virtue, as seen in the *Gorgias*. Socrates argues that oratory may fit the other characteristics of a craft, but it lacks the virtuous element. He compares it to pastry baking, which “isn’t a craft but a knack and a routine ... along with [oratory,] cosmetics and sophistry.”<sup>19</sup> We see here that a craft must count as a form of knowledge or virtue. Socrates’ requirement that expert moral knowledge must be a craft is found often in the dialogues. For instance, Alcibiades claims to have justice, but Socrates desires to know who the teacher was “who taught [him] how to tell the difference between the more just and the less just.”<sup>20</sup> In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates expected piety to be a craft. For instance, the definition of piety had to be unique: specific

<sup>16</sup> *Euthyphro* 13b–c.

<sup>17</sup> *Charmides* 164b.

<sup>18</sup> *Republic* 332d.

<sup>19</sup> *Gorgias* 463b.

<sup>20</sup> *Alcibiades* 109d.

enough to only refer to the craft of piety, yet general enough to include all instances of piety.

Understanding the type of knowledge Socrates seeks does not resolve the problem of how he can claim to be ignorant. It would seem implausible that Socrates could make a disavowal of all forms of knowledge. After all, it is evident that he has enough knowledge to speak a language and rationally analyze arguments. In fact, he admits, "I do know, however, that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one's superior, be he god or man."<sup>21</sup> This implies that another type of knowledge must exist outside of craft knowledge: a nonexpert knowledge. Socrates admits that he is capable of learning things on the basis of abstract reasoning. In the *Crito* he says, "We must therefore examine whether we should act in this way or not, as not only now but at all times I am the kind of man who listens to nothing within me but the argument that on reflection seems best to me."<sup>22</sup> He determines what seems best in a situation after some deliberation. However, this knowledge is not a concrete, teachable, craft knowledge. It is a subjective knowledge or opinion, capable of being changed or refuted at any time when further deliberation or evidence finds it an insufficient explanation. Even if Socrates attempted the *elenchus* 999 times and discovered the same conclusion each time, there is always the possibility that the one-thousandth *elenchus* would have a different result.<sup>23</sup> There is no way for him to determine that his conclusion is the final or true conclusion.

### The *Daimonion* as a Source of Knowledge

Although many articles have been written on the meaning and function of the *daimonion*, much of this information stretches the evidence to its limit. In actuality, Plato's descriptions in the dialogues are vague. I will attempt to present the information in the purest form possible, without intentionally making any unwarranted assumptions.

<sup>21</sup> *Apology* 29b.

<sup>22</sup> *Crito* 46b.

<sup>23</sup> Yonezawa 331.

Mention of a *daimon* is not unique to the Platonic dialogues. In fact, others have claimed to have a *daimon*; examples are found in the *Ennead* and Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*.<sup>24</sup> Some interpret the *Timaeus* to be evidence that each of us has a *daimonion*, found in "the most sovereign part of our soul as god's gift to us, given to be our guiding spirit."<sup>25</sup> Xenophon's description of the *daimonion* differs from Plato's in that the sign was not restricted to prohibitions.<sup>26</sup> Although these alternative explanations may be helpful in another literary analysis, we will restrict our discussion to Plato's understanding of the *daimonion*, in light of his statement found parenthetically in the *Republic*, that "the divine sign, is hardly worth mentioning—for I suppose it has happened to few or none before [Socrates]."<sup>27</sup> If this is the case, it is clear that Socrates' *daimonion* is more than the common voice of conscience. James Beckman writes that the *daimonion* is "confined to future contingencies (as opposed to pangs of conscience after the act) and does not always have to do with judgments of moral value;"<sup>28</sup> it is most often concerned with the practical consequences of Socrates' action. If Socrates' *daimon* is similar to the *daimon* that each man is able to choose in the Myth of Er,<sup>29</sup> it is clear that Socrates' has either made himself more able to receive *daimonic* alarms or his *daimon* is superior to others.

The *daimonion* can best be understood in the *Apology*. Socrates explains how it influenced him not to enter politics:

You have heard me give the reason for this in many places. I have a divine or spiritual sign which Meletus has ridiculed in his deposition. This began when I was a child. It is a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Rist 13.

<sup>25</sup> *Timaeus* 90a.

<sup>26</sup> Rist 16.

<sup>27</sup> *Republic* 496c.

<sup>28</sup> Beckman 76

<sup>29</sup> *Republic* 620d.

<sup>30</sup> *Apology* 31c–d.

The voice warns that an action will not be beneficial in the end.<sup>31</sup> In the dialogues, Socrates often hears the *daimonion* in reference to trivial non-religious matters. For instance, Socrates explains to Alcibiades that he never spoke to him all these years because he “was prevented by some divine being.”<sup>32</sup> In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates describes hubristic interlocutors who, after leaving him, sometimes come back to Socrates, wanting to learn again: “[W]hen that happens, in some cases the divine sign that visits me forbids me to associate with them; in others, it permits me, and then they begin again to make progress.”<sup>33</sup> In the *Euthydemus*, we learn of the *daimon*’s prophetic ability:

I was sitting by myself in the undressing-room . . . and was already thinking of leaving. But when I got up, my customary divine sign put in an appearance. So I sat down again, and in a moment the two of them, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, came in.<sup>34</sup>

Socrates was not permitted to leave before having a discussion with these two youths.<sup>35</sup>

Although on several occasions Plato insists that the *daimon* is restricted to negative alarms, the *Phaedrus* gives reason to doubt this claim. As Socrates is about to end his speech, the *daimonion* forbids him. He states,

My friend, just as I was about to cross the river, the familiar divine sign came to me which, whenever it occurs, holds me back from something I am about to do. I thought I heard a voice coming from this very spot, forbidding me to leave until I made atonement for some offense against the gods.<sup>36</sup>

He then proceeds to give a second, more reverent speech. This may be interpreted as evidence of a positive command by the *daimonion*. It is true that Plato does not make it exactly clear how Socrates deduces the mean-

<sup>31</sup> Beckman 76.

<sup>32</sup> *Alcibiades* 103a.

<sup>33</sup> *Theaetetus* 151a.

<sup>34</sup> *Euthydemus* 272e–273a.

<sup>35</sup> Beckman 76.

<sup>36</sup> *Phaedrus* 242b–c.

ing of the *daimonic* sign, but I believe that this passage can be explained. If Socrates has the ability to ignore the sign, he may have received the alarm prior to his speaking of the offensive words. Although he spoke the words and the sign went away (for he was no longer going to offend the god further) the sign returned during the attempt by Socrates to withdraw. At this moment, it would have been better to withdraw his previous offense than to simply leave. Although this explanation is by no means definitive, it shows that the passage in question provides no conclusive contradiction in Plato's writings.

Admittedly, the *daimonion* appears to be nothing extravagant, perhaps explainable by modern psychology. However, Socrates believed that it was much more than this. It is unlikely he could have considered common intuition something that few or none had ever had before him. Unfortunately, the information we learn from Plato regarding the *daimonion* is scanty. Philosopher John M. Rist believes, "This scantiness may well reflect the fact that Plato, who almost certainly regarded his master as especially gifted, felt awed in speaking of the *daimonion*."<sup>37</sup> Beckman has a different explanation:

[I]f one assumes that the vagueness of Socrates' conceptualization of the voice is not the vagueness of that which cannot be expressed in rational discourse, but rather purposive vagueness due to the strictness and consistency of his philosophical agnosticism, quite another result is obtained. Socrates' description of the *daimonion* reveals nothing about any god . . . precisely because no such thing is revealed to him.<sup>38</sup>

All that Socrates receives is the voice. It is not some special revelation, similar to many of the other prophetic voices of his time, proceeding as hidden messages from oracles and diviners, incomprehensible to human understanding. To Socrates, it is merely what it appears to be: a voice, a hunch or intuition that "comes" to him. "It does not proceed from the

<sup>37</sup> Rist 16.

<sup>38</sup> Beckman 77.

narrow circle of his conscious, willed activity; it does not proceed from his ego.”<sup>39</sup>

The information Socrates receives from the *daimonion* aids him in his philosophical search for knowledge. A *daimonic* alarm is able to give a unique knowledge to Socrates that his current action will not produce the best outcome. In this sense, the *daimonion* appears to be utilitarian in nature. The *daimon* consistently gives Socrates, on a frequent basis, knowledge of what actions will lead to future harmful or unbeneficial outcomes that he would never have known beforehand by his own human reasoning.<sup>40</sup>

Other than the alarm, the *daimonion* gives Socrates, *ex silentio*, another powerful access to knowledge. In the *Apology*, Socrates says that the *daimonion*'s silence is “convincing proof” that his death will “be a good thing. . .for it is impossible that my familiar sign did not oppose me if I was not about to do what was right.”<sup>41</sup> Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith point out that this gives Socrates “an incredibly powerful access to moral truth.”<sup>42</sup> If Socrates ever wanted to find out whether something was good or bad, he would only need to make an attempt toward something and see if the *daimonic* alarm sounded. If it did not, he could *know* that his current action was good.

### The *Daimonion* vs. Reason

Brickhouse and Smith point out an apparent problem with Socrates' use of the *daimonion*.<sup>43</sup> As we have already noted, Socrates claims to be a rationalist, who only accepts truth on the basis of reason. He states, “At all times I am the kind of man who listens to nothing within me but the argument that on reflection seems best to me.”<sup>44</sup> However, Brickhouse and Smith point out that “surely it is not reason that tells us to obey ‘oracles

<sup>39</sup> Beckman 77.

<sup>40</sup> McPherran 186-187.

<sup>41</sup> *Apology* 40b-c.

<sup>42</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, “The Divine Sign ...” 515.

<sup>43</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, “Socrates' Gods ...” 82.

<sup>44</sup> *Crito* 41b.

and dreams,' or signs and voices, but rather a very unsophisticated and superstitious sort of religious faith."<sup>45</sup>

Socrates considers the knowledge he gains from the *daimonion* to be greater than his own reason. Brickhouse and Smith believe that if Socrates' reason were to ever conflict with the *daimonion*, he would choose the *daimonion* to "trump" his own conclusion. This is evident in Socrates' teachings on wisdom. In the *Apology*, he understands that the wisdom of men, including his own wisdom, is "worth little or nothing," while "the god is wise."<sup>46</sup> In other words, any thought, command, or persuasion from the god will be more reliable than any thought, idea, impulse, or decision made by Socrates.

Smith and Brickhouse further believe that Socrates' *daimonion* would trump his own ratiocination based on the situations Socrates gives when he receives the alarm. For instance, in the *Apology*, Socrates describes the *daimonion* as opposing him "often, even in small matters, when [he] was about to do something wrong."<sup>47</sup> They point out that in order for the alarm to oppose Socrates before doing something wrong, Socrates would have already deliberated on the action, made a decision, and nearly acted when the *daimonion* opposes him. However, in each example, Socrates obeys the *daimonion*, trumping his premeditated action. "[H]e does so in spite of whatever reasons he may have had for taking the action in the first place, reasons which led him to be on the verge of taking the action, if only his *daimonion* had not intervened."<sup>48</sup>

Although Brickhouse and Smith have remained dedicated to their conclusion, despite the "differences of opinion among contemporary scholars,"<sup>49</sup> I feel that their explanation is insufficient. A superior explanation must be able to reconcile Socrates' assertion in the *Crito* that he listens to nothing but reasonable arguments with the evidence that he appears to disregard his previous ratiocination.

<sup>45</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, "Socrates' Gods ..." 82.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*; *Apology* 23a5-7.

<sup>47</sup> *Apology* 40a4-6.

<sup>48</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, "Socrates' Gods ..." 83.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

I argue that Socrates does not disregard reason in light of a *daimonic* alarm. As we have discussed, Socrates chooses the conclusion “that on reflection seems best” to him.<sup>50</sup> If Socrates were to receive further evidence, after reasoning and coming to a conclusion with the previous evidence, it would seem reasonable that he would reevaluate his argument in light of the new evidence. What greater expert witness could count as sufficient evidence for Socrates than a prompting by the divine voice? Contrary to Brickhouse and Smith, the *daimonion* does not “trump” Socrates’ reasoning, but becomes a key piece of evidence, or knowledge, in determining his decision.

### The *Daimonion* as Expert Moral Knowledge

With this understanding of the *daimonion* and the knowledge it gives to Socrates, we are able to explore the paradox at hand: why Socrates would claim ignorance and have the need to philosophize when he has such a great source of knowledge given by the *daimonion*. First, I will establish the authenticity of his claim to ignorance. Second, I will examine the problems of *daimonic* knowledge. Third, I will demonstrate the *daimonion*’s inability to qualify as the craft knowledge, or divine expert knowledge that Socrates seeks.

It would seem that Socrates’ claim to ignorance is insincere. However, thinking him insincere would call his integrity into question.<sup>51</sup> In the *Apology*, the claim to ignorance is central to his argument against his first accusers, and he continually assures the jurors to “be sure that all that I shall say is true.”<sup>52</sup> For this reason, it seems that in order to resolve the paradox, we must go beyond accusing Socrates of insincerity. Therefore, we must further analyze the knowledge Socrates receives from the *daimonion*.

<sup>50</sup> *Crito* 41b.

<sup>51</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, “The Divine ...” 517–8.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 518; *Apology* 20d.

Let us examine the *daimonic* formula:

A. If Socrates does X in situation A at moment P, and receives the *daimonic* alarm, Socrates can conclude that X is not good in situation A at moment P.

B. If Socrates does X in situation A at moment P, and does not receive the *daimonic* alarm, Socrates can conclude that X is good in situation A at moment P.

It is clear that if Socrates accepts what he learns from either of these two experiences as divine wisdom, it would be impossible for us to resolve the paradox; he would surely be claiming to have expert knowledge and at the same time be ignorant of it. However, these final pages will demonstrate that Socrates is unable to claim that the knowledge he receives from the *daimonion* is expert moral knowledge.

The main problem found in *daimonic* knowledge is the vagueness of the message. There is no question as to truthfulness of the *daimonic* message, since the god could never lie.<sup>53</sup> Socrates can be certain that if he hears the alarm, he should refrain from the action he was about to do. However, this alarm tells him very little about three things: (1) *when* the action is wrong in future circumstances, (2) which action was wrong, and (3) what makes the action wrong.

First, outside of the specific time the *daimonic* alarm sounds, Socrates is unable to know whether his action is always wrong or just wrong at that moment. Although he may be able to notice patterns in the *daimonic* alarms, even if a certain action caused the alarm to sound 99 times, he could never be certain that he would receive the alarm the next time. In the *Euthydemus*, Socrates stands up to leave, but his divine sign stopped him.<sup>54</sup> He sits back down which leads him to a philosophical discussion. Socrates could not conclude anything from the *daimonion*,

<sup>53</sup> *Apology* 21b.

<sup>54</sup> *Euthydemus* 272e.

except that it does not want him to leave at that specific moment. He cannot assume that hours later the *daimonion* would (or would not) prevent him from leaving again.

Second, the *daimonic* alarm does not specify which of Socrates' actions were offensive. At any given time, Socrates may be doing and thinking a number of things. Brickhouse and Smith propose, "Socrates could go through and carefully extract the elements of what he was about to do and see which element (or elements) was (or were) the offender(s) by trying them out and seeing which one(s) cause the *daimonic* alarm to sound."<sup>55</sup> However, they claim that even this process has its flaws. Even the simplest of human acts contain many elements of thought and movement, each of which could be broken down into subcategories of thought and movement.

Third, even if Socrates could determine which of his actions is wrong and when it is wrong, he does not know *what* makes the action wrong. Socrates is able to conclude that his death must be good, since the *daimonion* was silent, while at the same time believe he has "no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld."<sup>56</sup>

Once we understand the vagueness of the *daimonion*, we can understand why Socrates is unable to count it as divine wisdom. As we have determined, expert moral knowledge must be a craft. However, if we examine the qualities of a craft or *techné*, it becomes obvious that no analysis of a *daimonic* alarm could give Socrates this type of knowledge. First, Socrates is unable to teach the knowledge he receives from the *daimonion*. When he receives the divine sign, he is unable to know whether the action would be harmful if another person did it. He cannot teach a person *when* a certain action is wrong. He cannot even explain *why* the action is wrong, although he may attempt to make a hypothesis. Each instance of the *daimonion* can only give Socrates information about that specific situation. Brickhouse and Smith suggest that although Socrates may be able to "generate a great body of data" after many experiences with the *daimonion*, the

<sup>55</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, "The Divine Sign ..." 521.

<sup>56</sup> *Apology* 29a-b.

explanation and analysis is fully within Socrates.<sup>57</sup> “Hence, any application of what he gets from his *daimonion* that might count as knowledge goes well beyond what he actually gets from any of its alarms.”<sup>58</sup>

### Conclusion

At the end of his life, Socrates could stand in front of the jury with “convincing proof” that his death was a good thing, yet confess his ignorance of knowledge. The type of knowledge he searched for was not human wisdom, which “is worth little or nothing,” but the wisdom that god has—an expert moral knowledge. Although he could conclude that his actions leading up to his conviction were according to god’s desire, he had no way of knowing *why* his death was good. The *daimonion* gave him guidance throughout his life, helping him to avoid unbeneficial outcomes. It also provided additional evidence to aid Socrates in his rational decision-making. However, the *daimonion* did not provide the teachable, explicable, repeatable, expert moral knowledge that Socrates sought.

<sup>57</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, “The Divine Sign ...” 524.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

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