Ratiocination and Socrates' Daimonion: A Practical Solution

Anthony K. Jensen
Emory University, Anthony.Jensen@providence.edu
Ratiocination and Socrates’ *Daimonion*: A Practical Solution

Anthony K. Jensen, Emory University

Presented at the January, 2005, Meeting of the SAGP

with the American Philological Association, in Boston

Recent accounts of Socrates’ *daimonion* normally begin by pointing out the apparent contradiction between Socrates’ commitment to obey natural reason and his commitment to obey divine commands. Scholars have asked which of these two commitments “wins” or “trumps” the other when they come into conflict. Two in particular, Gregory Vlastos and C.D.C Reeve, have argued with cited passages that Socrates will always and everywhere follow his natural reason, doing only those actions which seem best after a rigorous elenctic testing. On the other hand, M.L. McPherran, T.C. Brickhouse, and N.D. Smith have each emphasized the many clear instances of respect Socrates shows for oracles, possessions, and what is of special concern for our interests in this essay, the promptings of his *daimonion* or divine sign. From 1989-1991 this debate spilled onto the pages of the Times Literary Supplement and several important journals, only to be cut short prior to any clear resolution by the passing of Professor Vlastos.¹

It is my purpose in this essay to bring some fresh ideas to this once lively debate. The first step will be to clarify the precise nature of the *daimonion* by both understanding its role in the Socratic dialogues and briefly surveying the antecedent sources upon which Socrates drew to justify the existence of this quasi-mystical phenomenon in the eyes of popular Greek culture. Secondly, I shall argue that neither does reason “trump” the *daimonion* nor does the *daimonion* “trump” reason, therein attempting split the horns of the dilemma. Since I believe these two commitments have different objects under their sphere of authority and may not in any way be considered to “trump” one another, I think Socrates can and does maintain both a commitment to obey reason and a commitment to obey divine signs. Both are a part of his character, and he follows both without hesitation.

I

Socrates’ commitment to follow reason in intellectual matters is evident throughout the Socratic Dialogues. Indeed, Socrates is the consummate intellectualist, believing even that virtue is knowledge and thereupon grounding even a moral theory in terms of discursive rationality. The extreme consequence of following this intellectualist line of thought is that extra-rational religious experiences do not contribute significantly to the pursuit of the examined philosophical life.² At best, divine signs serve as a sort of ‘pat on the back’ once reason has decided the best course of action in a given circumstance. On this line it is not at all difficult to see why some of Socrates’ accusers in the *Apology* understand him to have been a kind of atheist: his positive references to divine beings and signs must only be examples of the famous Socratic Irony.³ This position is at least plausible in light of what he says in the *Crito*:
Not only 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 best when I
reason about it. (Cri. 45b)

While this is the best passage in support of the Vlastos/Reeve line, which we shall
explicate more fully in a moment, it is nevertheless important to understand that Socrates
is claiming to follow natural reason in opposition to divine signs. Divination is not
exactly what Socrates has in mind as the alternative here; rather it is Crito’s concern for
the opinions and threats of the mob that Socrates rejects in favour of reason in this
passage.

In any case, this current position aims to deflate the influence of the extrarational
inspiration that guides Socrates in “matters great and small” (Ap. 40a4-6). After all, his
entire philosophical mission was said to be inspired by his unwavering faith in the
Delphic Oracle’s dictum that ‘no one was wiser than Socrates’ (Ap. 20e3). His choice of
the philosophical way of life was neither simply the result of a rational inquiry, but
instead a divine commandment.

To do this [follow philosophy] has been commanded me, as I maintain, by the god
through divinations and through dreams and every other means through which
divine apportionment has ever commanded anyone to do anything. (Ap. 33c3-5)

There is no shortage of occasions on which Socrates takes divine messages seriously. In
particular, Socrates unqualifiedly puts his trust in the signaling or non-signaling of his
divine sign, his daimonion. Plato’s Socrates was a man convinced that human reason was
fallible and that his own wisdom - unsurpassed by any other mortal’s - is “worth little or
nothing” whereas only the “god is truly wise” (Ap. 23a5-7). How, then, could he choose
to trust his own reason above the signs and commands of divinity? At this point, we are
hung upon a very significant dilemma: does Socrates obey his commitment to reason or
his commitment to divine influence?

To focus the discussion of whether the daimonion “trumps” reason or vice versa,
it is necessary to first understand what exactly this divine sign is. As best one can tell
from the dialogues, Socrates’ daimonion is an internal, private admonitory sign, a voice
called to appear within the horizon of consciousness by a semi-divine daemon. He
believes that it has occurred to few or none before him (Rep. 496c3-5) and has been his
constant companion since childhood (Ap. 31d2-4; Thg. 128d3). The daimonion’s
intervention in both his great and small affairs (Ap. 40a4-6) is well known by his
associates (Ap. 31c7-d1; Eu. 3b5-7). It operates by giving him a warning signal not to
pursue some course of action he is about to begin (Phdr. 242b8; Thg. 128d4-6). The
warning is itself understood as unfailingly correct (Xen. Mem. 1.1.3-5), whether about
Socrates (or perhaps one of Socrates’ associates) actions. Noticeably, it never provides
Socrates with a rational argument explaining why Socrates was mistaken to think this
action would have been for the best. It never provides Socrates any reason as to why it
signals him at a particular time. And it is never open to interpretation at the moment it
signals, as are other extrarational sources of insight. It simply signals him. In each case, Socrates responds by immediately ceasing whatever he was about to do.

So much for what is said about the daimonion and the daemon in the writings of Plato. To fill in important details about what Socrates may have understood by his special sign, we turn now to three popular accounts from Homer, Hesiod, and Empedocles, authors with whom Socrates was certainly not unfamiliar. This will by no means be an exhaustive account of all the complexities surrounding this most variegated set of beliefs, but a brief sketch which intends only to highlight certain elements in the tradition that are relevant to our current discussion.

The earliest discussions of daemons that bear some similarity to those of Socrates are preserved in Homer. In both the Iliad and the Odyssey, there are several of examples of personages ascribing all sorts of mental events to the intervention of a nameless and indeterminate daemon. These vaguely conceived beings can inspire courage at a crisis or take away a man’s understanding of what he does. Following E.R. Dodds, they are also credited with a wide range of what may be called ‘monitions’. “Whenever someone has a particularly brilliant or foolish idea; when he suddenly recognizes another person’s identity or sees in a flash the meaning of an omen, ...he or someone else will see in it a psychic intervention by one of those anonymous supernatural beings.” Almost any idea or action that ‘pops’ into a person’s head without rational consideration and is not thought to be the intervention of a specific deity, such as Apollo or Aphrodite, is fairly called the work of a daemon. The reference to a daemon often implies a negative or harmful outcome of the action (e.g., Odyssey 15.172, 12.38, 14.488). And finally, for Homer, the daemones do not represent a different type of immortals besides the divine gods.

In Hesiod, the picture is quite different. “Now that the earth has gathered over this generation, these are called pure and blessed spirits; they live upon the earth, and are good, they watch over mortal men and defend them from evil; they keep watch over lawsuits and hard doings; they mantle themselves in dark mist and wander all over the country; they bestow wealth; for this right as of kings was given to them” (The Works and Days, 122-6). The daemones for Hesiod are men of the golden age raised up by the will of Zeus, designed to watch over men and protect them in their practical affairs. In the Theogony, we see Phaethon raised by Aphrodite from the world of mortality, having become a “godlike daemon” (Theogony, 991). The way by which they watch over their charges is unfortunately not described by Hesiod, but perhaps we can extrapolate something from what he does say. “Upon the earth there are thirty thousand immortal daemones, who keep watch for Zeus over all men do” (The Works and Days, 253-5; emphasis mine). Somewhat like the Furies, they deal justice on the behalf on Zeus for particular evil actions, a point which I believe will be an important element of Socrates’ understanding several generations later. Finally, in the Cratylus Plato has Socrates praise Hesiod’s rendition of the daemones as good spirits, as opposed to the mischievous spirits of Homer, with two important addenda: one, the daemones are said to be wise and knowing, and, two, every good man, whether alive or dead, is correctly called a daemon (Crat., 397e1-398c3). As a further similarity, for Hesiod the daemones wander the earth, taking note of right and wrong, observing justice and injustice, dispensing riches, and watching over mortals: compare this to the entity that watched over Socrates when he was to enter politics, took note of the wrong action he was about to do, and by means of
guiding Socrates away from a bad career choice, had endowed him all the riches of a philosophical life.

Our third account comes from Empedocles. Here daemones are seen as individual beings which dwell in men and in other natural creatures, beings fallen to the corporeal world, who must pass through many different life forms until they may at last hope for release. In the introduction to his poem on Nature, which is said to have its origin in daemonic inspiration -daemones who have once led his soul down to this earthly Vale of Grief (fr. 121, 4)\textsuperscript{18} - he describes how, by ancient decree of the gods and the compulsion of Necessity, every daemon came to be polluted and banished from the company of the blessed (fr. 115,3).\textsuperscript{19} On Empedocles' account, the earthly inhabitation of the daemones represents their punishment for having transgressed certain laws set upon them by higher divinities. Once inside a person, responsibility falls on the person inhabited to keep the daemon free from sin (frs. 136-7, 128, 9), usually by asceticism (frs. 23, 11, 144), in order that the daemon might, after several lifetimes of purifications, be freed to reenter the domain of the gods. Empedocles regards his own daemon as being in the final stage of such purification, next in line to divinity proper. While Empedocles is somewhat recalcitrant when it comes to explaining what they actually do, his description of the nature of daemones bears a striking resemblance to the transmigration theory that Socrates himself is wont to believe. His tale may also have provided Socrates the idea that daemones are personal entities that all men have (although most are unaware of this fact, cf. Crat., 397e1-398c3), and who are an important part of the spiritual makeup of a true philosopher.

This brief sketch, although far from saying all that could be said, serves to show that Socrates' understanding of the daemon was not purely an invention, but instead played an important role in the popular Greek theology at the time. It also lays the foundation for our own position concerning the role of the daimonion in the Socratic decision-making process. For notice closely, that in all three traditions, the daemones are meant to guard actions or ideas about to be done. This is the crucial fact for our debate: that in literary tradition before Socrates, daemones guard against foolish actions, not against faulty ideas as such.

III

Both sides of the disagreement take as a prime text Apology 31c3-32a3.

T3 It may seem strange that while I go around and give advice privately and interfere in private affairs, I do not venture to go to the assembly and there advise the city. You have heard me give the reason for this in many places. I have a divine or spiritual sign [daimonion], 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. This is what has prevented me from taking part in public affairs, and I think it was quite right to prevent me. Be sure, gentlemen of the jury, that if I had long ago attempted to take part in politics, I should have died long ago, and benefited neither you nor myself.

The question that lies before us is whether this passage should incline us to believe that Socrates is counting on two disparate avenues of knowledge, rational and extra-rational,
yielding two systems of justified belief, one of them reached through elenctic argument, the other by divine signs, prophetic dreams, oracles, and the like. Now, under the Vlastosian picture, all Socrates obtains from the daemonic sign at any given time is precisely what he calls the daimonion itself—a divine sign or signal. This sign is taken to mean nothing more than “Stop!” It has no moral or rational content, which, if it did, could itself form an intelligible objection to the reasons Socrates had for doing what he was about to do prior to the signal. Rather, it simply leads him to desist and only afterwards to speculate about its causes with his reason on his own. And as our passage in the Apology shows, this is generally just what Socrates does. In support of this portion of Vlastos’ view, although he is reluctant to mention it, is the probably spurious Theages 129d3-5, where Socrates ponders the reasons why the daimonion sounded. “For when the good-looking Sannio went out on campaign, the sign came to me; and he’s now with Thrasyllus on an expedition to Ephesus and the rest of Ionia. So I suppose he’ll either die or else come close to it, and I’m really afraid about the rest of that business.” Socrates knows the daimonion signaled him, presumably when he learned of Sannio’s decision to join the campaign, which he only retrospectively understands to mean that something very bad, probably death, is likely to have befallen his acquaintance.

C.D.C. Reeve argues that this passage suggests that Socrates found in the daimonion a source of knowledge, albeit non-rational, which establishes the truth of a given idea. “We may conclude not only that he obeys the prohibitions of the daimonion without independently justifying them, but that he uses the daimonion to establish truths which he could not establish any other way.” Socrates always heeds these divine warnings, but only, according to Reeve, because he had previously established their goodness through elenctically tested opinions about the gods. Because he has determined through his natural reason that the gods will never bring harm, his reliance upon extrarational influence is forever connected to the veracity of those prior opinions. So, while the daimonion is itself a reason, “that reason is not, however, logically independent of—indeed, it crucially depends upon—his elenctically sustained beliefs about virtue and the gods.”

Pushing this rationalistic interpretation farther, Vlastos extrapolates from Socrates’ retrospective examination of the divine warnings to what, I believe, is a precarious position: “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.” This conclusion takes all the extraordinary force away from the daimonion—it nullifies the daimonion’s “threat to the exclusive authority of reason.” For Vlastos, as for Reeve, Socrates only takes seriously such warnings because he has already employed the force of reason to determine that the gods are in every way good and cannot possibly do evil. Prior to this belief, however, “He would have to ask himself: do I have reason to believe that this is the work the god wants done by me? Is he that sort of god? What is his character?” Divine signs are relegated to being mere assurances that the course of action reason selected was indeed correct. The upshot of this position is that the daimonion never really determines the actions in opposition to what Socrates had already reasoned he must do. Text T1 trumps text T2; ratiocination trumps the daimonion. But why does he believe the daimonion is even an assurance in the first place?
The Second Book of the *Republic* is sufficient to obviate any doubts that Socrates believes the gods do only good.\textsuperscript{28} But the Vlastos/Reeve position assumes that there is no difference between what is given by the gods and the *daimonion* that comes from the *daemon* attached to Socrates. Both Vlastos and Reeve have decidedly blurred the line between the *daimonion* and ‘every other means through which divine apportionment has ever commanded anyone to do anything’.\textsuperscript{29} However, as I have demonstrated above, Greek popular belief kept the two distinct and, moreover, Socrates himself nowhere says they are identical. To state my case more strongly: because the *daimonion* is said to never have given insight about what to do, only what *not* to do -while on the other hand he plainly does receive affirmative orders from other extra-rational sources, such as the dream commanding him to make music (*Phd.* 60e-61b)- Socrates himself must have considered the *daimonion* a special kind of extra-rational inspiration distinct from any other form which comes from the gods. This point is perhaps most clear in Socrates’ discussion of the various forms of divinely inspired madness in the *Phaedrus*, none of which resembles the *daimonion*. He says for instance, “Third comes the kind of madness that is possession by the Muses, which takes a tender virgin soul and awakens it to a Bacchic frenzy of songs and poetry that glorifies the past and teaches them to future generations” (*Phdr.* 245a1-3). Certainly, this form of extrarational inspiration appears a far cry from the monitions of Socrates’ *daimonion*.

M.L. McPherran confirms just this objection with a convincing grammatical argument. “Just as the *daimonion* may not be treated as being strictly analogous to dreams, neither may it be assimilated with confidence to Socrates’ analysis of ‘inspired’ poets or diviners. Such people are possessed by a *daemon* or a god, but by contrast, Socrates never treats the *daimonion* as a phenomenon of this sort.”\textsuperscript{30} The very adjectival character of το δαίμονιον differentiates it from a straightforward substantive use of δαίμον or θεόν, and Socrates stresses that it is a voice or sign that comes from such an entity. Moreover, the trial of Socrates itself would have been pointless had Socrates and the Athenian people believed the *daimonion* itself counted as a divine being, rather than simply, as McPherran says, “a divine doing.”\textsuperscript{31} For if it had been the opinion of the average Athenian citizen that Socrates’ divine sign was the legitimate voice of an acknowledged divinity, then the charge of impiety would certainly have seemed ridiculous. Now, Vlastos’ arguments for the rational justification of divine signs through elenchus have textual support only in the context of *god-sent* signs.\textsuperscript{32} My suggestion is that we, following McPherran, do not assume off-hand that Socrates would have done so with the *daimonion* as well.

By distinguishing Socrates’ personal divine sign from all other forms of god-sent inspiration, we must also assign his proof of the gods’ determination of good things only to the domain of those things expressly granted by the gods. The *daimonion* is simply not one of them; it is granted by a *daemon*, which, if we can assume that Socrates was reasonably familiar with the poets and Empedocles, would not necessarily have fallen under the protection of that argument. In fact, Homer believed that such a *daimonion* could actually be a very foolish type of monition to follow (cf. *Ody.* 15.172, 12.38, 14.488). Empedocles even claimed that the *daemons* were expelled from the Isle of the Blessed on account of their sins committed against divine decrees (*fr.* 115, 3). There is nothing in the popular beliefs to suggest that the work of *daemons* could be regarded as free from mischief. How then, if there is no plain certainty in the Greek literary tradition
and if Socrates makes no specific argument for their infallibility, \(^{33}\) can the intellectualist position of Reeve and Vlastos maintain the assumption that Socrates followed the *daimonion* simply because he had already argued that the *gods* were necessarily good? More importantly, why does Socrates, if he does not rely on a rational justification for the infallible goodness of *daimonion*, nevertheless follow it?

Brickhouse and Smith hold a more plausible answer. Returning to text T3, they note that while Socrates does not say so explicitly, it must be taken for granted that, prior to the *daimonion*’s monition that he not enter into politics, Socrates had in fact considered whether it was best to do so. \(^ {34}\) Any rational being, much less Socrates, would carefully weigh the benefits and drawbacks of such a life-affecting decision as this. A contrary position would have to see Socrates making one of the most important choices in his life without any prior deliberation whatsoever, which by itself paradoxically undermines the intellectualist reading. Socrates’ reason must have evidently led him to believe that the ‘taking part in public affairs’ was right for him. So, following his natural reason, he was about to commit himself to such a life. The *daimonion* signaled him, probably saying something like, “don’t enter the political life!” Immediately he desists. Notice that Socrates mentions no process of deliberation prior to halting what he was about to do. He is never caught wavering upon the *daimonion*’s monitions. “The *daimonion* offers Socrates no rules of conduct, no general principles, no moral definitions; its activity seems always to be unexpected and it offers Socrates no explanations of its activity.” \(^ {35}\) He is not free to employ “unfettered critical reason to determine the true meaning” of this sign. It is only afterwards, and this is marked by the very change in the tenses of his story, \(^ {36}\) that he realizes the possible reasons why the *daimonion* had signaled him. Only afterwards does he speculate as to why it might have prevented him: it probably saved him from being killed and thus from benefiting no one. But none of this explains why Socrates quit the action in the first place.

“When Socrates... desists from the action in question—and not once do we find Socrates failing to desist after such opposition- he does so in spite of whatever reasons he may have had for taking the action in the first place, reasons which led him to be on the verge of taking action, if only his *daimonion* had not intervened.” \(^ {37}\) Socrates must have had good reasons for entering politics; for if he had rationally decided that entering politics would have resulted in death we may assume that he never would have done so in the first place, thus obviating the need for a *daemonic* monition. So, in this case Socrates obeys the warnings of his *daimonion* even though natural reason had led him to do otherwise. Reason might well play a role in Socrates’ later attempt to understand why the *daimonion* might have stopped him, for instance at Theages 129d1-e1, where he can only speculate as to the reasons why it might have opposed Sannio’s campaign. Immediately after that passage Socrates gives the strongest support for the Brickhouse, Smith, and McPherran position, “I’ve told you all these things because this spiritual thing [*daimonion*] has absolute power in my dealings [*τα πράγματα*] with those who associate with me” (Thg. 129e1-4). He may have no idea why the sign stops him at the time it signals, but he seems completely and unshakably certain that he must not do what he was to do. \(^ {38}\) As Brickhouse and Smith imply, Socrates follows the *daimonion* simply because it has never led him astray; his reasons are practical as opposed to theoretical. \(^ {39}\) Xenophon also suggests that Socrates may inductively believe it, because in his long experience, it has never been shown not to be a reliable warning system (Apol.13; cf.
Plato, *Ap. 40a2). The reliability of its alarms has been confirmed by the good results that flow from heeding it and the tragedies that ensue for others when its warnings are ignored. Besides, while we do see Socrates defend the goodness of the gods in arguments, never once do we find Socrates defending the goodness of the *daimonion* by such arguments. So, instead of a theoretical reason for believing in these divine monitions, Socrates has a practical one: he heeds the *daimonion* because it has never failed him.

The upshot of the Brickhouse/Smith position is that Socrates needs no extra reasons to follow the commands of the divine signs; the *daimonion* is itself the reason. “We must not simply assume that Socrates would consider the monitions of his *daimonion* as non-rational signs.” This leads to a general reinterpretation of Socratic rationality, which essentially intends to subsume both mysticism and intellectualism under the rubric of ‘Socraticism’. Unfortunately, we do not have time to do justice to their complicated exposition here. In any case, the argument is that the monitions of the *daimonion* serve as the reasons to desist from doing an action which reason would previously had led him to do. There is no additional epistemological content to interpret, as it sometimes the case with other forms of extrarational inspiration, but a sort of ‘stop sign’ which does not explain why one ought to stop, only that one must stop. Socrates had already made up his mind to act but the divine sign overrides his reason. The *daemonic* monition is a new reason for stopping. Plain is the opposition to the Vlastos/Reeve position: here the *daimonion* “trumps” natural reason.

**IV**

My own position splits the horns of this dilemma. I believe reason can no more “trump” the *daimonion* than the *daimonion* can “trump” reason. Instead, I submit that they each have authority, but under their two discontinuous domains. I take as evidence for this position the fact that Xenophon himself actually reports how Socrates thought there were two distinct avenues of inquiry, each appropriate to different subject matters: “What the gods have granted us to do by help of learning, we must learn; what is hidden from mortals we should try to find out from the gods by divination” (*Mem.* 1.1.9). Reason and *daemonic* inspiration each have roles to play in a decision making process: reason upon things which can be known, divine inspiration upon things which cannot, namely, the myriad of unforeseeable possible outcomes for any contingent course of action. Let us look more closely at the passages in which Socrates tells us the *daimonion* comes to him.

At *Apology* 31c3-32a2, quoted above in full, Socrates explains how the *daimonion* prevented him from entering politics even though he evidently had prior rational grounds for doing so. Retrospectively he understands the sign’s monition as beneficial, since “had I long ago attempted to take part in politics, I should have died long ago.” This rational extrapolation tries to determine why the divine sign might have signaled, but in no way can explain why the factors that led to his decision might have been mistaken. It does not warn him against a faulty hypothesis or logical inference during the course of his deliberation. It does not tell him where his reasoning went wrong. In fact, Socrates never learns for certain why the *daimonion* signals him in a given instance. Why would Socrates have been killed? Did he know for a fact that there would have been assassins or some such thing awaiting him after a particularly controversial speech? Could he have known such a thing? Or was he simply speculating
at the causes of the divine phenomena’s actions? It seems fairly clear that Socrates does not think entering politics is a bad thing in and of itself, but only because the sign occurred to him does he think that that action at that moment would have led to disastrous results. Socrates never does come to believe that his prior deliberation was somehow misguided, but only that for whatever reason he should not act in this case. In fact, Book VIII of the Republic clearly shows Socrates extolling the very necessity of a philosopher king for the possibility of a truly good city. Yet by that time in Socrates’ life the daimonion had already prevented him from such a life of his own. How can this be? How can argumentation still lead him to believe that the most beneficial thing for a city is the rule of a philosopher while he himself—a philosopher—had already been prevented from acting upon this belief? This is just my point: the daimonion does not change Socrates’ mind about the truth or falsity of the results of his rational inquiry. It only stops his actions, never refutes his theories.

Another occasion of daemonic monition comes at the end of the Apology, “What has happened to me now has not happened of itself; but it is clear to me that it was better for me to die now and to escape from trouble. That is why my divine sign [daimonion] did not oppose me at any point” (Ap.41d2-4). In this case, Socrates has several well-known arguments supporting his view that death is not harmful to the philosopher (e.g., Ap., 40c3-end). The daimonion fails to signal him, which, as a parallel with what we saw above, cannot by itself suggest that the arguments for the immortality of the soul or any other argument of that sort were infallibly correct. Socrates clearly puts stock in his reason, but not because there is no daemonic warning. He had already made up his mind what was best; the silenced daimonion only serves to reinforce the determination of his action, but not the determination of his truth claim. In fact, he never once awaits the nonsignaling of his sign as a divine approval of any conclusion; nor, for that matter, does the sign ever affect him when the argument takes an incorrect turn. His reliance on critical reason concerning the truth or falsity of philosophic claims never wavers. In the case of the Apology, the absence of the warning merely suggests that his actions in the trial and sentencing would not prove harmful to his soul. It never proves that his arguments were correct.

A further passage supports this same interpretation. “He [Charmides] once happened to be consulting with me when he was just about to train for the race at Nemea. As soon as he began to tell me that he was going to train, the voice came and I tried to stop him and said, ‘As you were speaking, the voice of the spiritual thing came to me. Don’t train!’—‘Maybe’, [Charmides] said, ‘its significance is that I won’t win; but even if I’m not going to win, I’ll benefit from the exercise I’ll get’” (Thg., 128e2-6). Here Socrates does not seem to have any rational qualms as to why Charmides should not have trained at the time. Given his respect for physical exercise, it might even have been the case that Socrates agreed to Charmides’ justification of his plans. What is certain is that Socrates nowhere defends an argument that physical exercise is harmful. The daemonic warning does not change his mind in regards to his rational viewpoint concerning the benefit or harm of physical exercise any more than it does with respect to the intrinsic worth of a wise man ruling the city. It only speaks to the particular actions of Charmides, the full results of which no amount of rational gymnastics can predict.

One final text: “It seems to me Socrates, that we should do this: let’s test this spiritual thing by associating with one another. If it allows us, then that’s what’s best; if
not, then we’ll immediately think about what we should do—whether to go and associate with someone else, or try to appease the divine thing that comes to you with prayers and sacrifices and any other way the diviners might suggest” (Thg., 131a1-5). Here Theages and Socrates cannot agree on the basis of reason alone whether it would be beneficial for Theages to undertake an educational apprenticeship under the elder Socrates. They have not reached a definitive course of action by use of their reason alone and, so, await the signal or non-signal of the daimonion to see if the course of action will be beneficial or harmful. The theoretical benefit of proper education, however, is never under question. Only in this case, for reasons he could not possibly foresee, for this action Socrates is about to undertake, do he and young Theages put their faith in the divine sign for its monition concerning the action about to be done.

V

In light of everything that has been said, I suggest we look once more at text T1. “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 best when I reason about it.” Emphasized in this way, the passage makes perfect sense for a man with both a commitment to follow reason wherever it may lead and a commitment to heed extrarational signals whenever they occur. Contra McPherran, Brickhouse, and Smith, Socrates does in fact follow only natural reason concerning the truth or falsity of a given proposition. Contra Vlastos and Reeve, the argument is followed only when he reasons about it, not when he acts upon it.

Socrates’ natural reason, in contrast to the daimonion, has sovereign influence with respect to elenctic investigation concerning truth claims. The divine sign never influences Socrates’ deliberation about the best course of action in a given circumstance. It never uncovers what action best reflects the nature of goodness. However, once the deliberation is complete and the conclusion is to become an action, the monition of the daimonion takes control. If it does not signal him, then the action he is about to do will not likely bring him any serious harm. But if, it does, if it says, “Stop!” then Socrates will quit his action immediately and without deliberation. Reason has its influence over the domain of theoretical understanding; the daimonion provides direction concerning the advisability of a particular action. Reason cannot foresee all the results that will follow the course of action already deemed best. The daimonion does not inform him about the truth or falsity of a certain hypothesis. Reason and the daimonion do not “trump” one another. Because they each have their own domains of influence, Socrates can and does maintain both his commitments—both to natural reason and to the promptings of his divine sign.


2 To complicate the issue, there is a passage in the Timaeus, which obliges us distinguish between the daimonion, which comes from the particular daemon that Socrates claims to have, and the daemon itself that is commonly in all men. Plato writes, “And as regards the most lordly kind of our soul, we must conceive of it in this way: we declare that God has given to each of us, as his δαίμονα, that kind of soul which is housed in the top of our body and which raises us... up from earth towards our kindred in heaven” (Tim90a2-6). I will expand on this issue in the course of the paper.


4 See for example Apo.31d3, 31c8-d1, 40a4-6, 40c3-4, 41d6; Euthpr. 3b5-7; Cr.44a5-b4; Ph. 60d8-61b8; Euthyd. 272e4; Rep.496c4; Phdr.242b8-9, 242c2; etc.

5 We need only be reminded here of Xenophon’s bewilderment at the charges, “I am amazed, therefore, how the Athenians could have been persuaded that Socrates was not temperate regarding the gods, when he never did anything impious against the gods, neither by word nor need, but what he said and did regarding them were always the words and deeds of one who deserves to be recognized as a most pious man” (Mem.1.1.20).


8 This particular claim is troubling in light of the evidently well-known belief in daemonic possessions, which we shall expound momentarily. As a further query, why does no interlocutor really bother to investigate what this strange phenomena if it was indeed as rare as he claimed?

9 Cf. Thg. 129d1-e1. While most scholars generally agree that Plato is not the author of this work, I feel it is still a useful account of what Socrates may have thought about the daimonion, or at least what someone with a thorough understanding of the subject thought about it. Theages has at least as much credibility as our best modern secondary sources.

10 Here I disagree with Vlastos (see [1989a], 152). He says, “So all he could claim to be getting from the daimonion at any given time is precisely what he calls the 'daemon' itself—a divine sign, which allows, indeed requires unlimited scope for the deployment of his critical reason to extract whatever truth it can from those monitions” (emphasis Vlastos). Not once, though, does Socrates ever test the truth of the daimonion by elenchus; he simply responds by desisting what he was about to do. In some cases he does ruminate about the reasons why it signaled when it did, but this is always after the fact, and in no way does it yield Socrates the same sort of episteme he seeks with purely rational processes.

11 See McPherran [1992], 354, for a similar discussion. I think McPherran is on the mark when it comes to his overview of the nature of the daimonion. However, after implying that the signal yields no theoretical knowledge he says, “Rather, it yields, I shall argue, instances of what we might call non-expert moral knowledge of the inadvisability of pursuing particular actions, e.g., the knowledge that it would not be beneficial to let a certain student resume study with him (see, e.g., Thg. 150e1),” 354. Although it may be slightly unclear what is meant by ‘non-expert moral knowledge’, I agree fully with his conclusion: “In
sum, I think we ought to understand the daimonion to be a unique source of information for Socrates, information that yields instances of knowledge of the advisability of particular courses of action,” 371.


13 E.R. Dodds, op. cit., 11.

14 Ibid.

15 Homer has no technical term for the monitions of the daemones. They do seem, however, to be roughly like the daimonion in as much as they are the monitions of daemons.

16 Homer typically does recognize individual men who are raised, body and soul, to undying life. He also makes mention of great men like Memnon or Achilles who receive a new life after their death and now live on in undivided unity of body and soul. Never, though, are these considered a class of divinity, mediated or unmediated. See Erwin Rohde, Psyche (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1925), 71-73.

17 It is my impression that Rohde somewhat overstates the distinctions between Plato’s conception and that of Hesiod (op. cit., 85). Plato’s attitude in this passage is one of critical acceptance, which in comparison to other passages mentioning the poet’s portrayal of divinities appears all the more amiable. While these two addenda are important, it seems the general conviction that they are essentially good spirits who watch over and judge the actions of mortals is the important characteristic common to both. It should be noted, however, that Plato is not expressing his own view of his own daemon, but an interpretation of what Hesiod had written.


19 Rohde, op. cit., 381-404.

20 This is indeed the question Vlastos first poses at the outset of the debate. See Vlastos [1989a], 150.

21 Ibid., 152.

22 Evidence for this comes from Theages 128e4-5, where Socrates gives the only description of the kind of signal the daimonion gives. “As you were speaking, the voice of the spiritual thing came to me. ‘Don’t Train!’” This, I submit, is the extent of the content of the divine sign.

23 Reeve, 70.

24 Ibid.

25 Vlastos [1989a], 152. Emphasis his. Vlastos also claims that Socrates’ ratiocination was the impetus for straying from the traditional Greek faith, which justifies Meletus’ charges against him, contra the already cited Xenophon passage at Mem., 1.1.20.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 153.

28 See especially Rep 379b1-c,3 “Now, a god is really good, isn’t he, and must be described as such? ...And surely nothing good is harmful, is it? ...And can what isn’t harmful do harm? ...Therefore since a god is good, he is not the cause of everything that happens to human beings but of only a few things. ...He alone is responsibly for the good things...”


30 McPherran [1992], 362.

31 Ibid.

32 For example, he says, “Suppose the dream had told him to do just that [to care for souls]. Would this have given him the certainty that the command comes from god? ...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? Vlastos [1989a], 153.

33 While Cratylus 397e1-398c3 does argue for just this case, the argument is firmly couched in a larger interpretation of what Hesiod’s poems.

34 T. C. Brickhouse & N. D. Smith [1994], 190-91.

35 Ibid., 194.

36 “This is what has prevented me from taking part in public affairs, and I think it was quite right to have prevented me” (Ap.31e-32a, emphasis mine).

37 Brickhouse & Smith [1994], 191.

38 Ibid., 194.

39 Ibid., 192.

40 McPherran [1992], 356.
12

Ibid., 193.

Ibid.

Ibid., 192-194.

"If a city is to achieve the height of good government, ... their kings must be those among them who have proved to be best, both in philosophy and in warfare" (Rep. 543a1-5).

This is where I part ways with McPherran, Brickhouse, and Smith. "[Socrates] is, for example, convinced that his daimonion... is a trustworthy guide that warns him away from harm and falsehoods" (McPherran, op. cit., 347; emphasis mine). Not once, though, do we see Socrates signaled in the midst of an elenchus, when either he or an interlocutor is led astray by the argument or some errant hypothesis. Therefore, we cannot assume that the signal protects him from falsehood as such, but only harmful actions.