

CHAPTER 2

SOCRATES THE MYSTIC

JOHN BUSSANICH

I

Socrates' estimate of human cognitive and spiritual potential is pessimistic: "real wisdom is the property of god" and "human wisdom is of little or no value" (*Ap.* 23a5-7). On the other hand, Socrates boldly asserts that he pursues his philosophical mission "in obedience to the divine command" (23b4). Indeed, philosophical inquiry "has been commanded me ... by the god through divinations and through dreams and every other means through which divine apportionment has ever commanded anyone to do anything" (33c). I shall propose an alternative solution to the dilemma encapsulated in these passages from the *Apology*: between a Socrates who asserts his ignorance in strong terms but who also claims direct access to the divine.

It has been something of an embarrassment to received opinion to confront the fact that one of the founding figures of the western philosophical tradition openly acknowledged the existence of divinities and received regular communications from them. In its comprehensive picture of Socratic religion recent scholarship has exposed earlier humanist and completely rationalist accounts of Socrates to be inadequate. Vlastos, Brickhouse and Smith, Morgan, and McPherran have located Socrates precisely in his time and portrayed him as a deeply religious man engaged in many traditional religious practices – rituals, divination and the like – but also as a radical critic and reformer of traditional beliefs. A striking feature of this revised picture of Socrates is the claim that the figure of Socrates in Plato's early dialogues, with some additional information supplied by Xenophon's Socratic writings, corresponds in broad outline and in essential detail to the historical Socrates. Like most scholars, I applaud this expansion of our knowledge of the religious dimension of Socrates' thought. However, the figure that has emerged still does not, in my view, correspond accurately to the Socrates depicted in Plato and Xenophon as well as in the fragments of the lesser Socratics.¹ I shall argue that the new Socrates, though no longer the

1. In the present discussion I ignore the testimony of Aristotle, which I discount, along the lines argued by Kahn 1996, 79-87.

humanist some earlier scholars imagined, is still too much of a rationalist, that is to say, that Socrates' religious experiences, insofar as we can make them out, are too strictly circumscribed and limited by discursive rationality. I shall argue further that Socrates is better understood as a mystical philosopher of a practical bent.

The strongly historicist assumptions of many Socrates scholars complicates the task of determining his religious attitudes. Many, like Vlastos, hold that in his early dialogues Plato philosophizes Socratically: "Employing a literary medium which allows Socrates to speak for himself, Plato makes him say whatever he – Plato – thinks at the time of writing would be the most reasonable thing for Socrates to be saying just then in expounding and defending his own philosophy" (Vlastos 1991, 50). Despite the developmentalists' acknowledgement that the Socratic conversations presented in the early dialogues are "fictional recreations",² they nevertheless assume that modern scholarship really can get at the truth of the historical Socrates. Vlastos argues that, because Plato was deeply conscious that Socrates "lived his philosophy," he "has reason to tell us much about the man's life, including his inner life, allowing us a fuller, more intimate, view of the man than is given us of any character, real or fictional, in the whole of ancient Greek literature" (51). Though I shall not attempt to solve the Socratic problem, I note one strong objection to the developmentalist approach: the rejection of portions of the middle dialogues as evidence for understanding the figure of Socrates in Plato. The acceptance of Vlastos's famous "ten theses" by many scholars has removed these later writings from consideration of the thought of the character who appears in the early dialogues. While it makes sense to distinguish the Socrates of the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, who is committed to the reality of transcendent forms, from the Socrates of the *Apology* and *Euthyphro*, who is unaware of them, it seems to me that many biographical details in the middle and late dialogues should not be inadmissible in discussions of Socrates. Texts like the *Symposium* supply crucial evidence concerning his religious attitudes and practice and other psychological characteristics as well.

2. Kahn and some earlier German scholars adopt a more radical fictionalist line according to which the historical Socrates vanishes behind the various literary images created by his admirers and detractors alike. Cf. McPherran, 1996a, 15.

My assumption throughout will be that the figure of Socrates is truly a mystery that cannot be solved. Nevertheless, we should not resign ourselves to the view that each of the masks his admirers or opponents presents to the world is just as valid as any other. I intend to challenge, therefore, the picture of Socrates presented by both historicists and fictionalists (like Kahn and Nehamas, for example) alike, especially as it relates to these themes: I shall argue that (1) the role of the supernatural/divine in Socratic religion is underestimated by many scholars since it is excessively circumscribed by rationality and by a modern understanding of what rationality consists in; (2) that the affective elements in Socratic moral psychology, which have been ignored or deemphasized by the developmentalists, comprise an essential part of Socratic philosophy; and (3) that Socratic spirituality displays features that are commonly found in the lives of saints and mystics in various religious traditions. At the same time, I agree with those who remind us that Socrates is more mysterious and elusive than the historicists will admit. But if the historical Socrates is forever hidden behind the masks his biographers have sculpted for him, what purpose is served by promoting yet another image, this time of Socrates as a mystic? On the present occasion I focus on the figure of Socrates as fictionally represented by Plato, Xenophon and a few other Socratics without any attempt to establish that the features I highlight necessarily correspond to the "historical Socrates." I do assert, though without argument, that, because the features in question are unique it seems unlikely to me that Plato or other writers would create them to serve their own literary, philosophical, and religious agendas.

II

I begin with a review of received opinion on the core aspects of the religion of Socrates, who says at his trial: "I do believe in them (the gods), O men of Athens, more than my accusers do" (*Ap.* 35d5-6). Concerning Socrates' attitudes towards the gods, ritual, prayer and divination, I take the following to be established by recent research:

(A) Socrates believes in perfectly moral and wise divinities (*Ap.* 23a5-6; *Xen. Mem.* 1.1.19), since wisdom entails virtue. All goods come from gods: *Euthr.* 15a1-2 (cf. Brickhouse & Smith 1996, 179-180 and only good comes from the gods, not evil: *Rep.* 379b1-c7).

(B) Socrates engages in traditional religious ritual and prayer but he

rejects the *do ut des* principle.³ He sacrifices to household gods and prays. (On sacrifice see Xen. *Mem.* 1.3.1, 4.3.13, 4.3.6, 4.4.25; see Brickhouse & Smith 1994, 182 for references).

(C) Socrates has private access to the divine by means of his “divine sign” or *daimonion* (*Ap.* 31c7-d4, Xen. *Ap.* 12), which orders him not to engage in unjust or unwise actions.

Despite general agreement among recent commentators on the importance of Socrates’ belief in divinities, his practice of traditional ritual, and his trust in the *daimonion* for understanding his thought in general, there are several notable points of contention that demand further examination. First, on the charges brought against Socrates – that he disbelieves in the gods of the state and believes in new divinities – some conclude that Socrates was judged guilty because he believed in moralized gods (Vlastos 1991, 162–66; McPherran 1991, 167–68; 1996a, 161ff.), while others argue that it was because of his *daimonion* that Socrates was condemned, i.e., for belief in new divinities (Brickhouse & Smith 1994, 182–87). Vlastos argues that in light of Socrates’ revolutionary approach to the traditional Hellenic theology, such that the gods are responsible only for good and never for evil, “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” (Vlastos 1991, 166). This reading of the situation is too radical, since Socrates has not transformed the gods beyond recognition. Perhaps in his assertion that “I do believe in them (the gods), O men of Athens, more than my accusers do” (*Ap.* 35d5–6) he does not intend to demolish the old gods but rather to suggest that his accusers, and most Athenians for that matter, believe in the gods but have an incoherent conception of them.⁴ In any case there is little or no evidence to suggest that this factor, as opposed to Socrates’ private religious experiences, led to his trial.

3. As Brickhouse & Smith note, “With the exception of Aristophanes, all of the ancient characterizations of Socrates’ public or private practice of customary religious rituals make Socrates look unremarkable and ordinary ... Not once is there any suggestion that Socrates thought standard religious practices to be empty gestures or in need of revision” (1994, 182–83).

4. Cf. McPherran 1996a, 164. Despite some qualifications his view still seems rather close to Vlastos’s. The conception of the gods as moral and thoroughly beneficent is not, I think, as revolutionary as Vlastos and McPherran assert. Neither recognizes how deeply Socrates’ attitudes are anticipated by Heraclitus and Xenophanes especially. See Jaeger and Voegelin, 1957.

Even if Socrates’ conception of the gods were untraditional, his external religious practice does not seem to have been. I agree with the claim that Socrates’ practice of prayer, ritual, and sacrifice are “compatible with his view of piety” (McPherran 1996a, 150)⁵ inasmuch as piety, as an internal, psychological, and non-behavioral state, is the essential religious ground for religious behavior that would count as moral for Socrates.⁶ Still, we might wonder why Socrates prays and engages in ritual. Why, concretely, does Socrates perform public sacrifice, attend religious festivals, and perform rituals towards household divinities, especially if these activities carry “no doctrinal baggage” (McPherran 1996a, 159) for him?⁷ All agree that Socrates performed such actions in order to honor the gods who are the source of all good. But this explanation is not adequate in my view, especially when it is combined with the claim that Socrates is uncritical and superstitious when it comes to customary beliefs (the view of Vlastos 1991, 160 and Brickhouse & Smith 1994, 188–90). The connection between Socrates’ inner piety and external religious behavior is unclear and warrants further examination.

Some interpreters refer to *Phaedrus* 229b1–230a7 in order to explain this aspect of Socratic religious traditionalism.⁸ When asked by Phaedrus whether he believes the myth about Boreus, Socrates takes a dim view of allegorical interpreters of the myths and says “I do not bother about these things, but accept current beliefs about them, and direct my inquiries ... to myself.” Is Socrates just pragmatic here, as McPherran suggests, or perhaps he displays an uncritical and unreflective acceptance of religion as Brickhouse & Smith (1994, 189) maintain? It is not obviously true that Socrates’ deflationary view of rationalist allegorizers should be extended universally to cult practice, praying at his hearth, or religious beliefs

5. He also states that “Socrates accepts (perhaps weakly, without strong belief) the divinity of the moon and sun and the plurality of the gods” (McPherran 1996a, 166).

6. “Socrates is thus not – contra Vlastos – a wholesale threat to the actual practice of cult, but to the inner, narrow self-aggrandizing motivations of many of its practitioners: those who give priority to material sacrifice in the cause of external gain and neglect the form of ‘belief-sacrifice’ (‘self-examination’) mandated by Apollo” (McPherran 1996a, 150).

7. Brickhouse & Smith 1994, 183: “Not once is there any suggestion that Socrates thought standard religious practices to be empty gestures or in need of revision.”

8. McPherran 1996a, 167.

generally. Indeed, the emphasis on belief is problematic in itself.⁹ If indeed Socrates were a religious pragmatist, wouldn't he have some reason for performing rituals beyond saying to himself: "well, pouring this libation carries no doctrinal baggage for me so I might as well do it"? One might think instead that Socratic performance of traditional rituals and prayers was a practical expression of his inner devotion to the divine, i.e., that ritual enactments are natural and unsurprising concomitants of his piety. Consider the case of Socrates praying to the sun the morning after his 24 hour trance at Potidaea. It might be said that Socrates is "pouring new wine in old bottles," but, clearly, the old bottles are still suitable channels to express piety and, in this example, it might be more accurate to speak of a fervently felt thanksgiving to the divine for bestowing spiritual gifts on him. (I return to this passage below.) That there is no apparent doctrinal content to such a prayer hardly diminishes its impact on readers who can recognize in such an act a concrete example of Socrates' obedience to the divine and perhaps even a sense of awe and gratitude. Deeming such religious practice "superstitious" or a case of indifferently conforming to popular custom is to perpetuate the mirage of "Socrates the rationalist," which McPherran and Brickhouse & Smith, for example, have sought to dissipate, the only difference from the older version being that this Socrates still maintains some popular prejudices. However, I believe that there are more accurate ways of characterizing Socrates' expressions of piety than by stating that he is superstitious or a magician.

Relying on the later "Platonic" distinction between original and image, I suggest that sacrifice to household gods or to public divinities comprises "images" of piety. The reality or truth of the image would depend on the degree of virtue present in the person's soul. In other words, just as "ordinary justice" at the conclusion of the argument in *Rep.* IV is said to be an image of "psychic justice," so is pious behavior (and belief also, for that matter) an image of piety, whose original is in the soul.¹⁰ The original/image relation is applicable to interpreting Socrates' own psychology even if we do not press Platonic metaphysical terms and analysis too precisely. This approach is also helpful in assessing Socrates'

9. For a powerful critique of the assumption that religious attitudes and experiences can be reduced to doctrines and beliefs see W.C. Smith 1962, ch. 2. Smith demonstrates how this rationalistic conception of religion and piety is a creation of post-Reformation thought.

10. See *Rep.* 443c7-444a1.

attitude towards the gods of the state. Athenian civic piety, like the actions and beliefs of cave dwellers, involves both true and false beliefs. Insofar as Socrates criticizes traditional Hellenic theology and cult practice, therefore, he should not be characterized as "destroying the old gods," but rather, as he does in his elenctic inquiries, as making an effort to purify the beliefs of his interlocutors concerning the gods or the divine. The phrases "destroying" the gods and "superstitious" bespeak modern skeptical assumptions about the reality of the divine. From a more sympathetic perspective Socrates appears to be a reformer who resymbolizes the nature of the divine in itself as well as discovering new avenues of access to the divine. This is not to say, of course, that pious actions provide a definition of piety, since what is of primary importance for Socrates is the intentionality of the pious person and not the material nature of sacrifice.¹¹ Nevertheless, even though pious actions do not constitute sufficient conditions for piety, pious behavior should not be ignored or devalued simply because it does not carry "doctrinal content." Not every aspect of Socratic moral and religious psychology should be shaped and guided by rationality or condensed into propositional form.

The most striking aspect of Socratic religion is without doubt the fact that he is subject to spiritual experiences of the divine in dreams and by way of the divine voice, the *daimonion*, which speaks to him directly. These sorts of divine interventions, or theophanies, are also linked to his practice of the elenchus, which, he says, "has been enjoined upon me by the god, by means of oracles and dreams, and in every other way that a divine manifestation has ever ordered a man to do anything" (33c3-6). The *daimonion*, the divine voice that has spoken to Socrates "since childhood" (*Ap.* 31d2-3), is attested in numerous passages in both early and middle dialogues: *Ap.* 31c8-d1, 40a4-6, 40c3-4, 41d6; *Euthr.* 3b5-7; *Theages* 128d2-131a7; *Alc.* I 105d5-106a1; *Euthyd.* 272e4; *Rep.* 496c4; *Phdr.* 242b8-9, c2. There are two issues connected to the *daimonion* that I wish to pursue. First, its relationship to the practice of the elenchus and to rationality in general; second, whether daimonic interventions are only negative or also positive. The first question has generated strong disagreement among contemporary students of the philosophy of

11. McPherran 1996a, 158. I strongly agree with two points made by Brickhouse and Smith 1994. (1) Socrates' is primarily interested in action and not theory (43), and hence he examines his interlocutors' lives not just propositions they may or may not be committed to (12-14). (2) Though he pursues moral definitions, Socrates does not think that definitional knowledge is sufficient to live a virtuous life (63-67).

Socrates. He insists in *Ap.* 40a4–6 that the *daimonion* opposes him “quite frequently, even in little things, if I was going to do something wrong.” Its silence too carries great weight. Socrates concludes that the outcome of his trial is good because the *daimonion*, his own private means of divination, has not opposed him (*Ap.* 40c1). In these and other cases, some argue that Socrates completely subordinates divination and other non-rational experience to reason,¹² while for others some of his religious experiences, especially that of the *daimonion*, are independent of rational thought and justification.¹³ The first reading depends heavily on the *Crito* passage where Socrates says “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 about it” (*Cr.* 45b4–6). I endorse the interpretation of Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 193f) on which this passage should be read not as opposing rationality to divination or even, I might add, to any non-cognitive experiences, but instead as contrasting the unreflective and unfounded views of the many with the moral expert who possesses comprehensive and explanatory knowledge. In this sense, divination can indeed provide a reason for following a particular course of action.¹⁴ If in fact there is conflict between the *daimonion* and reasoning, the *daimonion* overrules reason, as for example when Socrates abstains from politics owing to the promptings of the *daimonion*: *Ap.* 31d2–5: “though reason does indeed play a role in Socrates’ subsequent attempt to understand why the *daimonion* stopped him when it did, there remains at the core of the divinatory experience a kernel of indisputable truth, which is itself in no way either the product of or qualified by ratiocination” (Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 195). Likewise, Socrates’ entire philosophical mission is justified by his acceptance of the truth of the Delphic oracle that “no man is wiser than he”; and he applies the elenchus to his fellow citizens in obedience to dreams, oracles, and revelations (33c5–7, quoted above).

Even those who properly stress the significance of Socrates’ divinatory experiences in his pursuit of the virtuous life also argue that it is “uninformative” albeit infallible (Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 194) and

12. Vlastos 1991, Ch. 6; Reeve 62–73.

13. Brickhouse & Smith 1994, 189ff.; McPherran 1996a, 185ff.

14. Brickhouse & Smith rightly argue that the *daimonion* provides Socrates “with absolutely compelling reasons to cease and desist from the actions it opposes ... Socrates does not wait until he can concoct an argument to be persuaded that he must stop whatever he was about to do (*Ap.* 40a6). The opposition of his *daimonion* is itself Socrates’ reason for stopping” (1994, 193).

that divination is not accompanied by explanations of why what is revealed through divination is true, for example, that the god’s messages are always true (21b6–7) and that the god is concerned for human welfare (31a6–7, 41d2; cf. Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 39–40). Hence, they conclude: “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” (1994, 194). In a similar vein, McPherran, in the most comprehensive study of Socratic religion, argues: “I ground Socrates’ confidence in the *daimonion* in reason (esp. its inductively established reliability) and not by an irrational ‘leap’” (1996a, 208n69).¹⁵ He further asserts that whereas “the reign of secular reason will be constrained by the pure preinterpretive content of extrarational signs ... Socratic revelation will always appear in the docket of Socratic reason” (191). Indeed “extrarational phenomena are sources for the construction of particular moral knowledge claims that are themselves rationally grounded” (191).¹⁶ On this view Socrates employs only the elenchus to justify his divinatory experiences. However, while it is cogent to think that Socrates *confirms* the messages and admonitions of the *daimonion* and the gods in general, I don’t believe that what he seeks is justification. On the contrary, instead of basing itself on reason, Socratic confidence in the *daimonion* is better seen as a mode of faith. By faith I do not mean the *πίστις* of the bottom segment of the divided line, or even *δόξα*. We need not suppose that Socratic faith is an irrational attitude that is fundamentally opposed to rationality, as McPherran does when he characterizes it as an irrational “leap.” Socrates’ moral psychology has room for faith that involves loving and pursuing the truth: “faith is the ability to recognize a truth or reality lying behind and also transcending any given perception or expression, beyond any ‘belief’; ‘faith is the capacity to live at a more than mundane level, to see, to feel, to act in terms of a transcendent dimension.’”¹⁷ Or in the words of Aquinas “Faith is that tendency of the human spirit by which

15. McPherran 1996a, 186 plausibly suggests that the divinity behind the *daimonion* is Apollo. However, he also states, in apparent contradiction to the texts just quoted, that “Socrates’ trust in the *daimonion*’s accuracy is testified to precisely by his unhesitating location of its source in ‘the divine’.”

16. Note also the following assertions made by McPherran: “extrarational sources constitute a supplement to our merely human, rationally derived account of things” (189) and “such signs generally require the application of a rational assessment that both interprets and tests them” (1996a, 190).

17. W.C. Smith 1970, 170, 12.

our living in the realm of absolutes is launched. It is the capacity of the intellect to recognize the genuineness of the transcendent.”¹⁸

It wish to argue that the sharp contrast in these accounts of Socratic philosophy between irrational faith or superstition on the one hand and reason on the other hand derives from Christianizing assumptions that have been reified by post-Reformation and Enlightenment thought. The partial or complete eclipse of the role of faith or revelation in the philosophy of Socrates (and even in Plato) is the result of excessive focus on the philosopher’s beliefs or ideas while ignoring the experiences which motivated them (see Voegelin 1974, 229). This distinction between truths of faith and truths of “natural” or “secular reason” has had, I believe, a distorting effect on our understanding of theophany in the Plato. This false dichotomy should be rejected on the basis of the following interpretive principles developed by Eric Voegelin. First, “revelation is not a piece of information, arbitrarily thrown out by some supernatural force, to be carried home as a possession, but the movement of response to an irruption of the divine in the psyche … The fact of revelation is its content” (Voegelin 1974, 232). Second, “There is nothing ‘natural’ in the noetic illumination of consciousness of Plato and Aristotle; both thinkers were clear on the theophanic character of the event. That the insights of the classic philosophers have something to do with ‘natural reason’ as distinguished from ‘revelation’ is a conceit developed by the Christian Fathers when they accepted the Stoic symbols of Nature and Reason uncritically as ‘philosophy’” (Voegelin 1974, 48). Thus, “the life of reason is firmly rooted in a revelation” (228). I shall argue that these principles are fully applicable to understanding Socratic religion. Because Socratic rationality, viz. the practice of elenctic inquiry, derives from his theophanic experiences, it is inaccurate to describe it as “secular reason.”

There are in fact many claims Socrates makes which seem to derive from his divinatory experiences but which are not justified by the elenchus or by any other method. Rather they appear to be self-authenticating. Consider these many assertions which are not confirmed by the elenchus: it is better for him to die and be released from his troubles (*Ap.* 41d2-5); a better person cannot be harmed by a worse (*Ap.* 30c8-d1); “No evil comes to a good person either in life or death” (*Ap.* 41d1-2); “I know that it is evil and disgraceful to do injustice and to disobey

18. *fides est hábitus mentis, qua inchoatur vita aeterna in nobis, faciens intellectum assentire non apparentibus*, *S. Th.* 2:2:4:1.

one’s superior, whether god or man” (29b6-7); he’s convinced he has never wronged anyone (37b2-5); Socrates clearly thinks he did the right thing when he refused to assist in the arrest of Leon because it was unjust (32c4-d7); he claims he has made Athenians “be happy” (36d9-e1); “one must never harm or return harm for harm” (*Cr.* 49a4-b6).¹⁹ Socrates’ confidence in these claims is not warranted by elenctic testing and reasoning nor could the elenchus ever provide the comprehensive moral wisdom Socrates says he lacks. But if the *daimonion* and his other divinatory experiences leave him with certainty that he does no wrong and is in fact a good man, we should not be so certain that it is a grave deficiency in Socrates that he apparently lacks the comprehensive knowledge which would explain how these claims and beliefs are true.²⁰ As Kahn has put it recently: “Socrates betrays no need for the wisdom he does not possess” (1996, 97).²¹

Evidence from Xenophon complements the Platonic testimony examined so far.

I have described Socrates just as he was: so pious he did nothing without the judgment of the gods … so intelligent he never erred judging the better and the worse, but rather, without need of anyone else, was self-sufficient with regard to knowledge of these things. (*Xen. Mem.* 4.8.11, quoted in O’Connor 167).

However we characterize the limited, human wisdom Socrates did admit to possessing, it is worth recalling the report provided by Xenophon at *Mem.* 4.7.10, 1.1.7-8: Socrates counseled his associates to concern

19. Brickhouse & Smith acknowledge that “at least by the end of his life, he has sufficient experience with its [sc. the *daimonion*]’s warnings to be confident that if it has ‘turned him away’ from doing something, he can infer that what he had intended to do would have, in some way, produced an evil, and hence that desisting from it would prevent an evil. But in spite of the enormous benefit afforded him by the daimonic alarms that have warned him away from the commission of evils, his *daimonion* would nevertheless not allow him to draw authoritative inferences regarding what course of action would express moral virtue” (1994, 133).

20. See Brickhouse & Smith 1994, 39. If in fact Socrates derives much of his confidence in the divine from the private theophanies to which he is subject and not the elenchus, he might seem to resemble diviners, who, he asserts, say many fine things when mad, but do not understand what they say; see *Phdr.* 244a6-d5, *Ion* 534b5, *Ap.* 22b8-c4. These “fine things” are the product of the god not of their own wisdom; they may even know the future, as admitted in *Charmides* 173c3-7.

21. Kahn 1996, 97 also refers to Socrates’ trust in dreams as divine messages: cf. *Cr.* 44a-b, *Phd.* 60e-61b.

themselves with divination “if any of them wanted to prosper beyond the limits of human wisdom.” This passage may sound hubristic to those who stress the “ignorant” Socrates of Plato’s *Apology*, but Socrates’ epistemic humility can still be preserved by focusing on the god as the source, if not the mouthpiece, of the wisdom Socrates embodies.

III

The second aspect of the *daimonion* I wish to consider concerns the range of its injunctions. The rationalist approach to Socrates’ divinatory experiences asserts itself once again in the dismissal of evidence from *Alcibiades I* and *Theages*. The authenticity of neither dialogue was ever doubted in antiquity but it is widely suspect now because of the “occult” nature of the *daimonion*, especially in the latter dialogue. There the *daimonion* issues not only negative injunctions to others but it also gives positive advice:

I’ve told you all these things because this spiritual thing has absolute power in my dealings with those who associate with me. On the one hand, it opposes many, and it’s impossible for them to be helped by associating with me, so I can’t associate with them. On the other hand, it does not prevent my associating with many others, but it is of no help to them. Those whose association with me the power of the spiritual thing assists, however – these are the ones you’ve noticed, for they make rapid progress right away. And of these, again, who make progress, some are helped in a secure and permanent way, whereas many make wonderful progress as long as they’re with me, but when they go away from me they’re again no different from anyone else. (129e1-130a5).

Aristides confesses to Socrates: “By the gods, Socrates, you’re not going to believe this, but it’s true! I’ve never learned anything from you, as you know. But I made progress whenever I was with you, even if I was only in the same house and not in the same room – but more when I was in the same room. And it seemed, to me at least, that when I was in the same room and looked at you when you were speaking, I made much more progress than when I looked away. And I made by far the most and greatest progress when I sat right beside you, and physically held on to you or touched you” (130d2-e2). That the *daimonion* only indicates to Socrates when he should not associate with another is acceptable to scholars because it adheres to the description in the *Apology* and is echoed

at *Theaet.* 151a4-6. However, the notion that moral or spiritual benefit might be derived from physical contiguity or contact is dismissed as magical or occult; see, for example, Vlastos 1991, 281-82. I suggest that the personal numinosity evident here is a manifestation of Socratic eros, though the text does not say this explicitly. I shall take up Socratic eros below, but for the moment I point out that it is common in mystical orders for disciples to desire and derive benefit from physical contact with spiritual masters and gurus whose love exerts a spiritually erotic attraction on their disciples.²²

Those who pursue a largely rationalist approach to Plato’s Socrates often ignore the non-cognitive aspects of his personality and teaching as depicted in the writings of Plato, Xenophon and other Socratics. So much attention has been focused on the elenchus and Socrates’ search for definitions that the affective dimension of his search for self-knowledge has not received sufficient attention (notable exceptions being Voegelin, Kahn, O’Connor, Blank). The Socrates of the early Platonic dialogues possesses an eros for the Good and he seeks to administer the elenchus within the context of an erotic community. I begin with a passage at the beginning of Socrates’ refutation of Callicles in *Gorgias* 481c5-d6ff.:

If people had not certain feelings (*πάθος*) in common, some sharing one feeling, some another, but some of us had unique feelings unshared by the rest, it would not be easy to reveal one’s experience (*πάθημα*) to one’s neighbor. I say this because I realize that you and I are both now actually sharing a common experience: each of the two of us is a lover of two objects, I of Alcibiades, Clinias’ son, and of philosophy, and you of the demos of Athens, and the Demos who’s the son of Pyrilampes. (first sentence tr. Dodds; the rest tr. Zeyl).

As Kahn has brilliantly argued, the refutation of Callicles that follows, as well as the refutations of Gorgias and Polus beforehand, results from “something morally deeper than a true belief, namely the sense of shame. For it is each interlocutor’s vulnerability to shame that sets limits to what he is prepared to accept as the price for consistency. In such a case, shame is the signal of disharmony between the man and his thesis. Shame here is the negative counterpart to that positive love of what is good and is said to dominate in every soul” (Kahn 1992, 256). On this view, the purpose

22. With reference to the *Symposium* Kahn 1996, 273 compares Socrates to “a Zen master or an Indian guru.”

of *aporiai* elicited by the elenchus is to awaken the latent, suppressed or twisted love of the good present in everyone. No wonder, then, that Socrates appears as both lover and beloved, in both early and middle dialogues, and why erotics is the one thing he is said to know. This knowledge-claim should not be ignored if we are to have any hope of understanding the paradoxical nature of Socratic wisdom which is said to be ignorance. At *Lysis* 204c1-2 Socrates notes: "I may not be much good at anything else, but I have this god-given ability to tell pretty quickly when someone is in love, and who he's in love with."²³ The fact that Socrates says in *Symposium* 201d5 that Diotima, albeit a fictional character, taught him *τὰ ἐρωτικά* should not eclipse the fact that it is *love* which Socrates says he has learned and understands.

What motivates the elenctic examination of his interlocutors is not only the love of wisdom but also, as a brief aside in the *Euthyphro* indicates, the love of persons: "the lover of inquiry must follow his beloved wherever it may lead him" (14c4-5). When Socrates confesses that he is "at a disadvantage with handsome people" (*Meno* 76c1-2) or that he is "in difficulties" (*Ch.* 155c5-6) when Charmides sits next to him, his self-assurance knocked out of him by the stunning beauty of his interlocutor, we should take him at his word. Socrates' erotic feelings towards Alcibiades are noted in the opening frame of the *Protagoras*.²⁴ The pedagogic focus of Socratic eros is also central in Socrates' speech in Aeschines' *Alcibiades* fr. 11 Dittmar: "Through the love I felt for Alcibiades I experienced a kind of Bacchic inspiration. When the Bacchants are filled with the god's power they draw milk and honey from wells which do not even yield water to others. I have no learning to teach anyone and help him in that way, but I thought that through just being with him my love for him might make him better."²⁵ Xenophon too mentions that Socrates often said he was in love (*Mem.* 4.1.2).²⁶ This is not to say that Socrates relies exclusively on love in his effort to help his interlocutors examine themselves. Nor, on the other hand, should we rely only on elenctic arguments. The dialectical and the erotic, the

23. See also *Symp.* 177c, *Theages* 128b.

24. Note the comment of Adam ad *Protagoras* 309a1: "It was part of Socrates' habitual irony to pretend to be in love with young men of ability" (p. 80). It is essential to my argument that this scholarly detachment from the intensity of Socratic eros must be abandoned.

25. Translation McPherran 1996a, vii

26. I am indebted to O'Connor's important study on Socratic eros in Xenophon.

cognitive and the affective work together.²⁷ In any case, we should reject Vlastos' odd interpretation that Socratic eros is a "relish" and that Socrates' "only interest in his associates seems to come from the epistemological gains he makes from them" (Vlastos 1981, O'Connor 152n).

Socrates is the lover in pursuit of interlocutors whom he will seduce, cajole, enchant, mesmerize, and stun. But he is also, for many, the beloved who awakens deep feelings of love towards Socrates as the epitome of the lover of wisdom and self-disgust and shame at their own inability to live a virtuous life. In his *confessio amoris*, one of our main sources for discerning the emotional effects Socrates has on his lovers, Alcibiades remarks: "He's made fools of them all, just as if he were the beloved, not the lover" (*Symp.* 222b2-4).²⁸ It is because Socrates is the most intense and deep lover, that is to say, because his love is for the good and the wisdom acquired through the quest for it, that he has become for many the most dazzling beloved of all. In the *Symposium* Apollodorus, a recent convert to philosophy through contact with Socrates, considers everyone he knows failures because they don't realize that their unexamined lives are full of trivial matters (*Symp.* 173cd).²⁹ The emotional impact of Socrates' words is immense even when heard at second hand, as is evident in Plutarch's account of Aristippus' conversion to philosophy: "Upon hearing some small seeds and bites of Socrates' *logoi*, Aristippus was seized with emotion, so that his body collapsed and became completely pale and thin, until he sailed to Athens and, thirsty and sunburnt, he drank from the source and researched the man, his arguments, and his philosophy, whose goal it was to recognize one's own ills and leave them behind" (Plutarch *de curiositate* 516c11; see Blank 437, Kahn 1996, 16n30). In the Platonic dialogues the most dramatic and well-known example of the powerful effect of Socrates' person and words on an associate is the speech of Alcibiades. In his encomium of Socrates Alcibiades compares the philosopher to the sileni statues which when opened reveal figures of the gods inside (215b). But Alcibiades accuses Socrates of hubris (215b7). He compares Socrates to a piper who

27. For several cogent examples see Blank.

28. I agree with the principle stated by Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 105n5 on *Symposium*: "Although the *Symposium* is generally regarded as a middle period work, the speech of Alcibiades is regarded by most contemporary Socratic scholars as compatible with the Socrates portrayed in the early dialogues." It is noteworthy that Vlastovians, like Brickhouse and Smith, McPherran et al. usually ignore the speech of Alcibiades in presenting their accounts of Socrates' personality, religiosity, and psychology.

29. Cf. Kahn 1996, 273.

bewitches his interlocutors with simple words: “we’re absolutely staggered and bewitched (*κατέχόμεθα*)” (215d5-6).³⁰ “For the moment I hear him speak I am smitten with a kind of sacred rage, worse than any Corybant, and my heart jumps into my mouth and the tears start into my eyes – oh, and not only me, but lots of other men” (215e1-4).³¹ As many commentators have pointed out, Plato has invested this dramatic account with details suggestive of extreme states of consciousness alluded to in the mystery religions and also in erotic lyric poetry. The image of the heart “jumping in to the mouth” occurs elsewhere in Plato (*Ion* 535c, *Phaedr.* 251c) and in Sappho 2.5. The Corybantic theme is also widespread in Plato.³² It is especially significant, I think, that Socrates refers to the Corybants at *Crito* 54d, a passage from an undeniably early dialogue. The state of consciousness associated with possession by the Corybants is a transrational state of mind, which in the *Crito* puts Socrates in tune with the celestial laws. He compares the experience of hearing their words to “a mystic hearing the strains of music” (Cr. 54d3).

IV

Returning to Alcibiades’ narrative, he asserts that he has heard other orators but they never affected him the way Socrates does. “They never turned my whole soul upside down and left me feeling as if I were the lowest of the low.” He shames Alcibiades into the admission that he has neglected the pursuit of self-knowledge: “Socrates is the only man in the world who can make me feel ashamed” (216b2-3). As in the *Gorgias* it is shame, *pathos*, that cuts into the soul of Socrates’ interlocutors and lovers. The rest of Alcibiades’ speech highlights two aspects of Socrates which pertain to the mystical. First, Socrates’ remarkable courage and self-

30. On *κατέχεσθαι* as indicating possession see Bury ad *Symp.* 215c and *Meno* 99d, *Phaedr.* 244e, *Ion* 533eff.

31. This is reminiscent of the theme of love in Sufi poetry, most dramatically in Rumi : “As soon as I saw the face of that unique beloved, I saw my heart in infinite heartache” (Chittick 297). Or: “That moon [sc. the spiritual master], which the sky ne’er saw even in dreams, has returned / And brought a fire no water can quench. / See the body’s house, and see my soul, / This made drunken and that desolate by the cup of his love” (Rumi 27).

32. Dover points out the corybantes were a mythical group associated with the goddess Cybele. Drum and pipe were employed to induce frenzy (167); cf. Dodds 77-80. On the corybantic theme in Plato see the valuable discussion of Morgan 27-30, 95ff. Note also Bury 146: “among the symptoms of *κορυφαντιασμός* were the hearing of faery flute-notes, visions, hypnotic dreams, dance-motions etc.”

control and, second, his states of intense mental self-absorption. Alcibiades lavishes praise on Socrates for his courage and equanimity on the battlefields of Delium and Potidaea, his complete imperviousness to bitter cold, and, most notoriously, for his sexual detachment from him. Plato leaves no doubt in the minds of his readers that this Socrates has achieved an extreme degree of courage and self-control. Set this image concretely before the mind and consider in what sense Socrates can be said to lack virtue, specifically courage. Alcibiades describes Socrates’ appearance during the battle at Delium: “I noticed for one thing how much cooler he was than Laches, and for another how – to borrow from a line of yours, Aristophanes – he was walking with the same ‘swagger and sideways glance’ that he goes about with here in Athens. His ‘sideways glance’ was just as unconcerned whether he was looking at his own friends or at the enemy.” (*Symp.* 221a7-b4). Socrates displays the same eerie self-control during his night-long embrace with Alcibiades (219bc). This combination of extreme detachment and self-sufficiency is evidenced in Xenophon as well: Socrates claims that “to need nothing is divine” (*Mem.* 1.6.10). The attainment of such radical detachment is widely attested in mystical traditions, a fact which is barely noticed by Platonic scholars. I cite as one example this passage from the Commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* by the great Maharashtran saint Jñanesvar.³³

O Arjuna, if you want to have the vision of wisdom, pay attention to Me [sc. Krṣṇa]. I will explain to you how to recognize wisdom. You may recognize wisdom in a person who has patience without intolerance.

He is like a lotus on the surface of a deep lake, or wealth in the house of a fortunate person.

O Arjuna, I will tell you clearly the characteristics of one who possesses forebearance.

He patiently bears all things, just as a person wears his favorite ornaments.

Even if calamity should come to him, he wouldn’t be overwhelmed by it.

His attitude is one of glad acceptance, whether he obtains what he wants or what he doesn’t want.

33. For another powerful account of mystical detachment see Meister Eckhart “On detachment.”

He bears with equanimity both honor and shame, he is the same in happiness and sorrow, and he isn't affected differently by praise or blame.

He isn't scorched by heat, nor does he shiver with cold. He isn't intimidated by anything ...

Whatever happens to his body he accepts as his own, and he takes no credit for what he suffers.

O Arjuna, that person is the essence of wisdom.

(Jñāneśvarī xiii.338-52).

Further support for my claim that the Socrates as represented by Plato resembles in many respects advanced saints and mystics are the abnormal states of mind he is habitually prone to. At the beginning of the *Symposium* Aristodemus reports that Socrates fell behind on the way to Agathon's party and was standing on porch: "It's quite a habit of his, you know; off he goes and there he stands, no matter where it is" (175b2-4). An even more dramatic example of this proclivity is recounted in the final section of the dialogue when Alcibiades reports that on one occasion Socrates *stood* "lost in thought" for twenty-four hours, from sunrise to sunrise.³⁴ On the second morning "he said his prayers to the sun and went away" (220d4-5). Nehamas claims that "we shall never know what occupied Socrates during his habitual and often long periods of silence. They must have even baffled Plato himself, since he never tries to explain them: they are for him simply part of what Socrates was" (158). In a strict sense, this description is sensible and accurate, but it is also flat-footed and unimaginative. It is hardly convincing to suppose that someone who composed the Parable of the Cave and the visionary account of the celestial journey of the soul in the *Phaedrus*, just to cite two examples, knew nothing of transcendent states of awareness and was baffled by behavior suggestive of transcendent states of consciousness. At any rate, the act of praying to the sun is a simple but profound image of Socrates' obeisance to a divinity. Now, it would be foolish to claim with certainty what Socrates' internal states were on this and similar occasions, but since these episodes were common and also, at Potidaea, induced "astonishment" (*θαυμάζοντες*, 220c6) in the onlookers, it is not unreasonable to suppose that they were some sort of transcendent state of awareness; and some of them may well have been divinatory experiences.

34. "He started wrestling with some problem or other about sunrise one morning, and stood there lost in thought, and when the answer wouldn't come he still stood there thinking and refused to give it up" (220c3-5).

In the early years of this century Burnet (Burnet 1911, xlvii) suggested that these reports indicate Socrates' tendency to enter into mystic trances. But this explanation has not fared well since then. Zeroing in on the cognitive vocabulary of *Symposium* 220c, Vlastos objects that Burnet's discovery of "ecstatic vision" in this passage is the product of an overheated imagination: "Plato represents Socrates as thinking, investigating, searching (*συννοήσας, σκοπῶν, ζητῶν*), not contemplating" (97n51). McPherran echoes Vlastos in rejecting Burnet's comment: "Socrates was no mystic in the strict sense: he offered no hope of ecstatic visions of the divine or union with it" (295). The vocabulary is general, it is true, though the prefix in *συννοήσας*, taken with *έαυτῷ πως προσέχοντα τὸν νοῦν* in 174c, suggests an introspective, meditative self-reflexivity, instead of "normal" discursive reasoning. In any case "ecstatic visions of the divine or union with it" are not necessary conditions for the presence of the mystical. Many mystics, including some eminent ones, would no longer be counted mystics if these criteria were accepted as a litmus test to determine who is a mystic and what is a mystical experience. Most of the Zen traditions, for example, would have to be classified as non-mystical because the texts do not contain any reference to "ecstatic visions of the divine or union with it." Other characteristics are also widespread in mystical texts and traditions: radical detachment from the needs of the body and mind, self-sufficiency, selflessness, intense love for the divine or the spiritual master, and direct contact with the divine realm or transcendent states of awareness – all of these, and others that could be cited, are evidence of a mystical experience or attitude.

Are we to suppose that Socrates, while he stood motionless for twenty-four hours, was engaged in a rational review of *elenchoi*? McPherran at least implies that something like this approach is the proper one: "As for the scene in the snow at Potidaea, we are explicitly told several times that Socrates was there trying to think through and solve some intractable problem: so what if it took twenty-four hours? If that's solid evidence for more-than-rational-consciousness, then I know some people in modal logic who will be surprised to learn that their papers came out of a mystical void."³⁵ This is a superficial and atomistic approach to Plato's careful and nuanced presentation of Socrates' behavior and its effect on his companions and interlocutors. What is required to make sense of these puzzling reports of Socrates' way of being

35. McPherran 1996b, 12. Linking the mystical with the void is rhetorical hyperbole. Socratic mysticism is not Buddhist.

in the world is a holistic approach which considers all the possibilities available to us in philosophical and religious literature. When taken together with Socrates' extraordinary behavior on the battlefield, his eccentric self-sufficiency, his sobriety even when consuming wine, the self-control exhibited at his death, it makes much more sense to suppose that Socrates' "thinking fit" is a meditative trance rather than a twenty-four-hour session of discursive thinking. This conclusion seems warranted by the facts that Socrates is never said to be interested in logic or in abstract theorizing of any sort, but is said to be interested in practical wisdom and how to attain it. There is, therefore, strong circumstantial evidence for some sort of meditative trance, of extreme self-absorption and detachment from ordinary consciousness.³⁶ The plausibility of this interpretation is enhanced significantly by the fact that the episode is recounted during the narrative of Socrates' extraordinary courage and detachment from cold. Surely, Plato knows what he is doing in weaving together these remarkable features of his teacher's personality.³⁷ Whether they belong to the "historical Socrates" is of course impossible to prove, but their uniqueness and evocative power make it likely that they do.

If this account is accurate, then the sharp contrast between Socrates the religious rationalist and Plato the mystic must be reexamined. That Plato is a mystic in some sense is widely acknowledged. Vlastos states unequivocally that Platonic metaphysics "is grounded in mystical experience" (1981, 54). In his view "beatitude is achieved in a miraculous junction of love, knowledge, moral resolve, and spiritual exaltation" (55), though he cautions that mysticism should not be "confined to sporadic states of

36. See Guthrie 1969, 404-405, Morgan 98. Both refer to a trance state but do not explain how it fits in to the psychology of Socrates of the early dialogues.

37. Morgan 97 devotes much attention to Socrates' religious activity and beliefs but seems confused: "His portrait of Socrates' immunity to drink, like his sexual restraint, are a studied counterpoint to Bacchic frenzy, whereas Socrates' ability to withstand cold and ice and his capacity to engage trance-like in thought all day are the characteristics of a magician or sorcerer." There may be no precedent in archaic and classical Greece for this combination of sexual and alcoholic abstinence with intoxication or possession, but there certainly are among saints and mystics in several traditions. Note the description of the Sufi saint or master in Rumi 30-31:

The man of God is drunk without wine.
The man of God is distraught and bewildered.
The man of God has no sleep or food.
The man of God is not learned from book.
The man of God is beyond infidelity and religion.
In any case, it is grasping at straws to describe Socrates as a sorcerer.

ecstatic awareness" (54). McPherran frames a particularly stark opposition between the religious attitudes of Socrates and Plato. Where Socrates is an advocate of traditional, sober Apollonian virtue, "on the other hand, Plato might fairly be said to storm the heavens with an erotically passionate, epistemic optimism, that Socrates would have found intolerably hubristic and unrealistic (and reminiscent of the previous day's encounter with the amazing Euthyphro)" (McPherran 1993, 119). I have already argued that this picture of Socrates as rationalist and skeptic is a distortion.

There is yet another reason to support this contention – the likelihood that Socrates is in reality the most important source of Platonic mysticism.³⁸ Scholars have ignored the possibility that Plato is able to represent the emotional disruptions Socrates elicited in others because he too experienced them. The idea that Socrates' spiritual power is conveyed in the master-disciple relationship is discussed by Plato himself in *Letter VII*: "There is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one. For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself. And this too I know: if these matters are to be expounded at all in books or lectures, they would best come from me" (341c5-d3). I see no reason why this celebrated text should not be considered as a veiled account of how spiritual power and wisdom flowed from Socrates to Plato. Socrates is a mystic in the sense that he experienced direct contact with the divine in a variety of forms, both by the *daimonion* and in dreams and perhaps in meditative states of absorption. His practice of human wisdom, i.e. ignorance, should not be interpreted as a pessimistic assessment of the limitations of human knowledge but rather as a rudimentary form of negative theology. The fact that Socrates is unable to arrive at satisfactory definitions of the virtues is evidence *for* not *against* his having mystical tendencies. He doubts that definitional knowledge will make a person morally wise. Hence, there is something ineffable about his human wisdom and his divinatory experiences. Socrates did live a virtuous life in service to the

38. Certainly, Plato's speculative mysticism differs in kind from that I attribute to Socrates. Plato's involves a metaphysical, imaginative, symbolic, literary, cosmological expansion of the core experiences or insights of Socrates. In order to defend this claim, further discussion is required.

divine and made Athenians "be happy", as he himself claimed (36d9-e1). Socrates is a medium for the circulation of divine energy: his ignorance is in reality the emptiness necessary for the vessel to be able to receive and to transmit the power that enables others to seek and attain wisdom.

University of New Mexico

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