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**The Socratic *Daimonion* Reconciling Religion Philosophy and Politics**

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The apex of Socrates' religious devotion happens in obeisance to *daimonion*, the negative sign of the deity that since childhood reduces his unwarranted speech or action to silence (*Ap.* 31d).<sup>1</sup> It is his customary divine sign stopping his tracks when about to act in a morally reprehensible way (40a-c). *Daimonic* activity brings Socrates to a halt grounding the moral force negatively; in care of the good it prevents by *apotreptic* and *elenctic* means what may cause harm.<sup>2</sup> Concurrently, *daimonic* intervention gives way to *aporia* regarding the superior wisdom of 'the god's' preventive alarm and moral warning.

Socratic *aporia* is ultimately oriented toward *aporia par excellence* the ever unsolvable *aporetics* of what the wisdom of the god might be; but, all *aporias*

disclose a spontaneously emergent questioning of what human wisdom might existentially accomplish here and now in the moral domain—for the sake of others—when empowered by *theion ti, daimonion ti*.<sup>3</sup>

In effect, Socrates' philosophical questioning opens the world to an *aporetic* wideness of meaning mirroring the unknowable sign of divinity in the excess of its negative orientation impetus and moral direction. His *atopia* therefore finds its genesis and *topos* in the radical interventions of *daimonion* that unequivocally frame and orient critical awareness and reasoned argumentation in the negative, reducing all rational and interpretative activity to *aporetic* questioning. This paper claims that the *daimonion*, wholly asymmetrical utterly non-rational and mysterious, constitutes the crux of Socrates' enigmatic profession of ignorance; it initiates his perpetual state of *aporia* through seemingly paradoxical activity that allows him to inhabit and creatively resolve moral tensions of self-other and society.

Undoubtedly, the negative divine sign constitutes the *axis mundi* of Socrates' religious-philosophical activity, hence his unequivocal obedience to its repeated *apotreptic* warnings to enter conventional Athenian politics (31d). Notwithstanding, it is by non-conventional politics that Socrates' divine mission becomes identical to his philosophical and social mission. In effect, his notorious searches after virtue edify genuine concern for social justice driving his investigations to the public places of Athens. As the city's gadfly he constantly urges fellow citizens to take care for the soul, keeping it in a virtuous state. His uncompromising dialogical passion for knowledge overcomes class boundaries and professions to include the whole spectrum of Athenians: slaves, craftsmen, and aristocrats; politicians, poets, rhetoricians, and

sophists. He works untiringly from within the thick context of the *agora* ceaselessly transforming ignorances into the light of day. Thus, he confronts on a daily basis the confines of socio-political discourse, subverting ossified belief outdated norms and the reigning opinions (or *doxai*).

As tradition has it, he is very much grounded in the community of the everyday roaming the streets of Athens barefoot in perpetual presence of the holy. He meanders around the busy and bustling *agora* the meeting of roads mixing with tradespeople, labourers, farmers and cobblers, engaging and questioning people of all kind citizens and foreigners.

He traces his occupation of doing so back to the oracle, the divine channel which disclosed his own ignorance. His vocation as philosopher begins in divinely inspired 'knowledgeable ignorance,' commencing as it were through single-minded contemplation of the Delphic pronouncement that there is *no other man* wiser than he (21a). His relentless testing of the Delphic proclamation's veracity initiates a perplexity and *aporia* which ripples outwardly -enveloping all and nothing- culminating in the firm realization that the negative divine sign gives rise to one and only certainty in knowledge, to one positive outcome: the confidence that the wisdom of the god is far superior to human knowledge: "it is really the god who is wise" (23a5).

Socrates neither feigns nor assumes ignorance rather his claim to "know that he does not know" (21d3-7) is straightforwardly sincere. He knows in earnest that he is "not wise at all" (21b4) although he is likely to be wiser than those thus far tested, only "to

this small extend” (21d6): he does not think he knows what he does not; he understands “that his wisdom is worthless” (23b3) before the superior wisdom of the deity. Effectually, his transcendently direct realization of the negative excess of so-called divine ignorance (unknowing), leads him to espouse the truth that his wisdom is worth “little or nothing” (23b1).

His moral acumen bears the puzzling ambiguity and remoteness of the oracle’s riddle, is reinforced by the enigmatic otherness of the preventive voice of *daimonion*; both, foregrounding his ethical relation to others and otherness. The alleged wisdom and *ethos* of every person (every other) Socrates encounters establishes his relation to otherness *qua* the deity; it is essentially an erotic relation with the radical otherness of the other. It is a pre-ontological relation with *daimonion* with that which is *other* than reason in all ways superseding and enhancing it but not in conflict with it.

Rooted in otherness, Socratic *eros* points the way to the god. But the god speaks profoundly in silence in effect is silence-in-itself. The *daimonion* either speaks by tramping Socrates’ action reducing to silence, or else speaks by its very silence through lack of intervention as on the day of his trial (40b-d). Either way, the god grounds and confirms the good and virtuous *ex silencio*.

This perpetual presence of the silent god (*eros*) and its daimonic interventions or lack of them makes Socrates recognize the magnitude of his ignorance, leading him step by step to apprehend his investigations to be “in service of the god” (22a4); his search to be guided along the pathways “the god bade” him (23b5); his *elenctic* mission to come “to the god’s assistance” (23b7); his incessant questioning to exemplify the life

of a philosopher “as the god ordered” him (28e4); for it is “the god” that “has placed” him in the city (30e6); and he remained “attached” to it “by the god” (30e3); so finally, he leaves it only to “the god to judge” him (35d7). Before the god’s wisdom all knowledge is in principle philosophically questionable. Only divinity itself remains unquestionable, precedent unknowable. Thus, the deity is to be obeyed at all times whether it intervenes through *daimonion* oracles and dreams or any other form of divination (33c4-7).

Socratic *eros*—ultimately “expressed by the element *philo-* in the compound word *philosophos*”<sup>4</sup>—, manifests-itself as divinely inspired *pathos* for questioning, exemplifies the love of inquiry so central to Plato’s *Apology* (and the entire Platonic *corpus*). Most importantly, *eros* (unceasing philosophical inquiry, essentially love for the god) draws divinity and virtue near, disclosing to humans their long lost humanity. It bestows the gift of holy ignorance that utterly silent foundation of all knowledge and learning that grants the gifts of self-knowledge and scrutiny of circumstance. *Eros* ignites (*qua* ‘wise or divine ignorance’) philosophical questioning *elenchos* and *exetasis*—igniting evermore *thaumasmos*, transformation and renewal—by founding and un-founding: positioning and repositioning, envisioning and revisioning, learning unlearning and re-learning. It is the ubiquitous power issuing forth the moral force necessitating that one through critical and creative enactment question after wisdom, unceasingly putting to the test the *ethos* of what they professes to know.

Uprising *eros*, the drive for knowledge grounds the *philosophos* between knowledge and unknowing, directing emphasis on unknowing—, the knowledge that one’s

wisdom is worth “little or nothing” (23b1). Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge, his *aporia enthousiasmos* and *atopia* issuing forth his religiosity and philosophical *ethos*, animate context and circumstance through constant inquiry of self and other: law and character, the plurality of perspectives, the manner of lives lived. As such, Socratic ignorance igniting *eros* evermore, knows no bounds for unknowing reinvigorates *ethos gnosis* and *episteme*—*paideia, téchne, politiké, economia, dikaio*—making central the human and social dimensions of learning and community. Thenceforth, Socratic philosophical activity untiringly questions through dialogue and direct encounter the maneuvers of uprising *eros*, grounding the ministrations of the moral drive (*arête*) in society and its political institutions.

Socrates definitely revolutionizes knowledge by directly linking moral activity and *arête* to divine unknowing. Association with the god issues forth the wisdom of knowledgeable ignorance: a kind of knowing-ness in unknowing; or else, the open *topos* of birth from which virtue manifests-itself. Accordingly, ‘knowledge is virtue’ it ensues in unknowing and exemplifies the positive power of being. Moral action and *arête* are neither solely a matter of cultivation nor can they be defined understood or comprehended by rational means; instead they are to be apprehended beyond the boundaries of the knowable in direct relation to deity. Excellence therefore ensues directly from divinity, and the arena of testing *arête* foregrounds the mystery of dialogue and direct encounter against the backdrop of the opening of world and circumstance.

Socrates’ negative manifestation of deity establishes that conquest lies not in knowledge: craft-knowledge rational scientific technical or technological knowledge.

Rather, it lays in virtue the negative excess of neither knowing nor unknowing but that which bears a coincidence of both in the pre-ontological arising of form and formlessness, meaning and meaninglessness, the opening of world and wordlessness. Therein *arête* manifests in-silence the positive power *that is* knowledge.

Socratic *eros* ignites *arête* by questing after the divinity that imparts it. The early Socratic dialogues make clear that the question 'what is virtue' (either temperance courage piety justice) resolves in irreconcilable *aporia*. There is no conclusive essentialist or universal explanation of the nature of virtue; the question is not solely a matter of what virtue is but whence it comes from. For Socrates, all *aporias* regarding virtue culminate "in the *aporetics* of what the wisdom of the god might be."<sup>5</sup> This ever renewable question demonstrates the magnanimity of Socratic knowledge (albeit of ignorance) distinguishing Socrates' call to self-transcendence as most radical, indeed making him a sophist more appropriately an exemplar *philosophos* initiating a substantive rupture with ancient Greek thinking and culture, perhaps with all extant knowledge and things past.

His *praxis* in virtue, 'he would rather suffer injustice than give it out' (*Grg.* 469c1-2), outrightly challenges Homer's and Hesiod's mythological conception of justice which has *Dike* doll out good for good and evil for evil.<sup>6</sup> He repeatedly repudiates banal sentiments infusing popular Greek theology poetry and tragedy that essentially turn the human into a puppet of the gods their elliptical, often unjust and conflicting emotions and decrees. By contrast, he finds the superior wisdom of 'the god' neither rewards nor punishes; simply just humans well established in the truth of the deity enjoy virtue and all good things. The virtuous person bears the responsibility of good

and bad actions attaining a proper relation to the divine solely by their own efforts in philosophizing.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, Socrates' dialogical calling to self-transcendence, modeled in the negative after his *daimonic* interventions, initiates abrupt transformation in the affairs of the *polis* threatening the community's norms and standards. In promoting the "god's moralizing agenda" he essentially opens "war with the city and its values."<sup>8</sup> Outrightly, he tells his *dikasts* (those upholding justice): the one "who genuinely opposes you or any other populace and prevents many unjust and illegal things from happening in the state," will not survive for long (31e-32a). And again: "who knows what that virtue is that is appropriate to a man and a citizen" (20b)? Moreover, "it is not from wealth that virtue comes, but from virtue excellence come wealth and all other good things for men, both in private and in public" (30b). As such, only the *bios* undergoing *exetasis* constant scrutiny and review is worth living: *ho de anexetastos bios ou biōtos anthrōpō*—the unexamined life is not liveable by humans (38a).

Socrates never doubts the manner of his defense rather asks his *dikasts* to judge according to the law and their oaths. He admonishes them: "direct your mind to whether I speak justly or not for that is the excellence of a judge" (18a). But as it stands, he needs no external judges; there is divine confirmation for the goodness of his actions: the silence of *daimonion* on the day of his trial speaks for itself.

Miraculously,

at his trial, the *apotreptic* power of his *daimonion* is transformed into something extraordinarily positive disclosing to him *ex silencio* that "something good" (*Ap.* 40b6) which is the lot of just humans well established in the truth of the deity. Socrates is able



to die convinced that he never willingly wronged anyone (37a4-5); aware that death is no evil (40b6-7) for a just man but a blessing; knowing all too well that his accusers by imputing the death sentence will harm themselves more than him for a just man cannot be harmed by worse men (30c6-d2); convinced “that a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death, and that his affairs are not neglected by the gods” (41d2). The complete lack of intervention by *daimonion* before and during his trial confirms circumstance and the rightness of his defence demonstrating his adamant faith in that “something good” (40b1) initiated through the silence of divinity (40d4-5), the good that his enacted piety brought forth and his philosophising attested to and was an elucidation of.<sup>9</sup>

Mostly, *eros* for the good in the Socratic sense points the way to the highest philosophic *ethos*, transforming us into better citizens and serious political philosophers.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, Socrates’ way of facing death first generates *politike philosophia* radically accentuating the primeval paradox between the individual and community values, a paradox still very alive and unresolved in our pluralistic democracies today. Kronick says:

The paradox is that the philosopher’s vision of truth is, as Socrates demonstrates, private and singular, but it must be tested in public before the court of opinion. Socrates tries to convince the Athenian court that his private vision contains a universal truth. His failure to do so exemplifies the conflict between philosophy and politics, but it did not exempt him from obeying the law. The soul of the philosopher may be singular, but as a citizen, the inhabitant of a body, the philosopher is a member of the plurality, the *polis*. When Socrates refused to flee Athens and escape his sentence, he confirmed that private persons cannot contravene the law.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, Eva T.H. Brann, in *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic* says:

*In extremis*, radical reflection and civic reverence might indeed appear to be irreconcilable, yet the founder of all inquiry reconciled them precisely in his death: He was condemned to die because he refused to cease asking questions, and he was executed because he declined to flout his city’s laws by running away.<sup>12</sup>

The universal truth of Socrates' religico-philosophical activity poses a perennial challenge to subsequent political philosophy. By accepting death and the obvious limit of law (*nomos*) he resolves perhaps once and for all the paradoxes of 'private-singular' 'communal-plural,' bringing a *coincidentia oppositorum* between 'radical reflection' and 'civic reverence'. Most notably, his *daimonic* religiosity empowered by divine *eros* overcomes in power of insight the collective *nomoi* and *archai* of the *polis*. However, as *dikaios polites* bearing the weight of a purposive *telos* he succumbs to the limit of *nomos* though at once surpasses it by far in fearless stance. He opts for death favoring the greater moral demand and *ethos* of philosophic truth and justice<sup>13</sup>: thus acts decisively for the good of the *polis* and the human collective more generally.

Saunders says that for "Socrates philosophy is morals, philosophy is politics, and philosophy is life".<sup>14</sup> But life not a value-in-itself is divine *eros*, that unknowable yet miraculous power igniting *aporia*: the moral drive for knowledge at the very heart of humanity. Precisely, Socratic *eros* (translating to *politics of transformation* accomplished by non-conventional political means<sup>15</sup>), grounds that inwardly directed moral power dedicated to the advancement of philosophical *paideia* and culture for the sole betterment of society.

Socrates' ceaseless inquiry was not reserved for his own benefit or for his inner circle of friends it rather aimed at benefiting his fellow citizens and transforming humanity at large. Hence, Socratic philosophical questioning bequeaths a lifelong journey of transformative knowledge, of virtue ensuing from *exetasis* solely for the benefit of public life and the common good. Of Socrates, Emerson says:

When we consider how much this individual fulfilled the great duty which every man owes to his fellow men,—that of crowding into a little life the most extended benefit, and contributing the strength of his soul to the aggrandizement of the species,—we shall acknowledge that few men can cope with him.<sup>16</sup>

Socrates' philosophical social-political activity is informed framed and given its orientation by his divine mission: that *pathos* of enacted religiosity aiming at good results. He discovers the *pathos* for the good in the *eros* of everydayness inaugurating selfless service to fellow humans. Ultimately, he heralds the truth that philosophizing must bear the internal aim of justice-for-all. Hence, his philosophizing constitutes transformative inquiry for the sake of the community, requires that politics is informed animated and ethicized by the *aporetic* life of dialogical philosophy. Here, critical consciousness backed up by *daimonion* works within the parameters of truth and unknowability to defend above all justice and freedom of speech and thought.<sup>17</sup>

Surely, Socrates bearing the torch of new spiritual truth causes a definite break with old habits, false opinions, outdated norms, ancient laws, and set doctrines. His philosophical activity constitutes an internal affair between the individual and the deity appears to manifest-itself at odds with communal life. But ultimately, it constitutes a movement towards radical interiority and self-transcendence for the sake of the community.

Concluding, Socrates follows 'the god's' bidding to assist the divine by benefiting public life through radical intervention and questioning: 'a politics of transformation' established in proper relation to the deity's negative determination. His *daimonion* promotes justice in fidelity to circumstance bespeaks the unceasing *ergon* of

philosophical knowledge political *ethos* and civic virtue. But mostly, the virtue of his paradoxical practice clears cloistered conceptions of truth reconciling in-itself *homo religiosus*, *homo philosophicus*, and *homo politicus*.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper references Socrates as portrayed in Plato's *Apology*, with minimal reference to the early Socratic dialogues.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. P. E. Michaelides, "Ethics *qua* the Divine: Inflections of Otherness in Socrates," *Phronimon* 9 (1, 2008): 57-76.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. P. E. Michaelides, "Socratic Ignorance and *Aporia*: What the Wisdom of the God Might Be?," in K. Boudouris ed., *Greek Philosophy and the Issues of our Age* (Athens, GR: Ionia Publications, 2009), 146-159.

<sup>4</sup> S. J., E. De Strycker, *Plato's Apology of Socrates: A Literary and Philosophical Study with a Running Commentary* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 64.

<sup>5</sup> Michaelides, "Socratic Ignorance and *Aporia*," 151.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J. F. McGlew, *Tyranny and Political Culture in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 57-59.

<sup>7</sup> The acceptance of personal responsibility in and of itself rules out any interpretations based on Socratic cult (as in 'religious cult'—or the religious adoration of a charismatic figure).

<sup>8</sup> J. Bussanich, "Socrates and Religious Experience," in S. Ahpel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar eds., *A Companion to Socrates* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 205.

<sup>9</sup> Michaelides, "Socratic Ignorance and *Aporia*," 146-147.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. R. E. Allan, *Socrates and Legal Obligation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); D. D. Corey, “Socratic Citizenship: Delphic Oracle and Divine Sign,” *Review of Politics* 67 (2005): 201-228; R. Kraut, *Socrates and the State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); M. Lutz, “Civic Virtue and Socratic Virtue,” *Polity* 29 (4, 1997): 565-595; J. R. Wallah, “Socratic Citizenship,” *History of Political Thought* 9 (1988): 393-413.

<sup>11</sup> J. G. Kronick, “The Death of Theory and the Example of Socrates,” *Southwest Review* 91 (2006): 457-458.

<sup>12</sup> E. Brann, “The Offence of Socrates: A Re-Reading of Plato’s Apology,” *Interpretation* 7 (1978): 1-21.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J. Vasili, “What is a Philosopher’s Best Friend?,” *Existential Analysis* 15 (1, 2004): 95-108. Vasili finds “Socrates embodied the experience of being with his philosophy that is his existential philosophical legacy”. In this light, “one is not duty bound to follow in his philosophical footsteps, one is duty bound to be true to one’s philosophy, or to one’s own self be true” (96).

<sup>14</sup> T. J. Saunders trans., *Early Socratic Dialogues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 34.

<sup>15</sup> The expression ‘politics of transformation’ translates to Socrates’ *pathos* for philosophy and life—a passion knowing no bounds—a radical politics that unceasingly activates the transformation of religious philosophical and societal norms and values.

<sup>16</sup> R. W. Emerson, *Representative Men* (London, UK: Dent, 1908), 93. Cf. D. Knox, “Socrates: The First Professor,” *Innovative Higher Education* 28 (2, 1998): 115-126, 125.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. V. A. Shukov (2003), “An Apology for Socrates’ Freethinking,” *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 42 (1, 2003): 48-65.