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SOCRATES' PROFESSION OF IGNORANCE

MICHAEL N. FORSTER

IN a previous article in this journal¹ I developed an account of the historical Socrates' demand for definitions of ethical terms. The present article is interdependent with the previous one, but turns to a further topic. It is a well-attested fact that Socrates professed ignorance about the matters on which his enquiries focused, and indeed about all matters of real importance. Among those who knew him personally, both Plato and Aeschines of Sphettus depict this profession of ignorance, and a generation later Aristotle reports it as well.² What are we to make of this profession of ignorance?

For the most part, the explanations of it in the secondary literature fall into three classes. First, there are scholars who dismiss it as disingenuous, and who explain it as a sort of trick used by Socrates either in order to lure those guilty of the false conceit of knowledge into a conversation so that they can be refuted, or in order to hide his own ethical knowledge so that his interlocutors are forced to achieve such knowledge for themselves.³ Second, there are scholars

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¹ 'Socrates' Demand for Definitions', *OSAP* 31 (2006), 1–47.

² PLATO: *Ap.* 19 C, 20 C, 20 E, 21 B, 21 D, 22 D, 23 A–B; *La.* 186 B–E, 200 E; *Lys.* 212 A, 223 B; *Chrm.* 165 B–C; *H.Ma.* 286 C–E, 304 D; *H.Min.* 372 B; *Gorg.* 506 A, 509 A; *Meno* 71 A, 80 C–D; *Rep.* 337 E; *Sym.* 216 D; *Theat.* 150 C–D, 210 C. AESCHINES OF SPHETTUS: 'Though I possess no knowledge which I might teach a man in order to benefit him . . .' (fr. 12 Nestle). ARISTOTLE: 'He used to confess that he did not know' (*SE* 183^b7–8).

³ Examples of the former view: C. Ritter, *Sokrates* (Tübingen, 1931), 33–5, esp. n. 51; R. Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (Oxford, 1953), 8–9; N. Gulley, *The Philosophy of Socrates* (New York, 1968), 64. Examples of the latter view: F. M.

who allow that the profession of ignorance is sincere, and who explain it as the result of Socrates' having set up exalted standards for ethical knowledge (for example, certainty and precision, the possession of scientific definitions, the discovery of the function of human life, or a grasp of everything about the subject in question), striven to meet these standards, made some progress, but not yet met them to his own satisfaction.⁴ Third, there are a few scholars who allow that the profession of ignorance is sincere, and who explain it by saying that Socrates aimed primarily at dispelling the false conceit of knowledge in others and did not attain the (no doubt, in his view desirable) further end of affirmative belief.⁵ In short, we are offered Socrates the sly, Socrates the student, and Socrates the sceptic.

In what follows I would like to indicate some reasons for thinking that none of these explanations of Socrates' profession of ignorance is adequate, and to offer an alternative explanation. This alternative explanation will appeal not to Socrates the sly, Socrates the student, or Socrates the sceptic but instead to a fourth, and less often considered, Socrates, whom we may as well, for alliteration's sake, call Socrates the saint.

I

Plato's *Apology* records two important facts about Socrates which bear directly on his profession of ignorance. It is, I think, reasonable to expect any account of his profession of ignorance to do justice to

Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides: Parmenides' Way of Truth and Plato's Parmenides* (London, 1939), 245; L. Veresenyi, *Socratic Humanism* (New Haven, 1963), 118, 120-1.

⁴ 'Certainty and precision': J. Stenzel, 'Sokrates (Philosoph)', in A. F. Pauly, rev. G. Wissowa et al., *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft [RE]* (Stuttgart, 1894-1980), ii/5. 811-90 at 823. 'Scientific definitions': E. Zeller, *Socrates and the Socratic Schools* (New York, 1962), 101-11 (who seems to hold that Socrates eventually did meet his standards, however); T. H. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues* (Oxford, 1985), 39-40; R. Kraut, *Socrates and the State* (Princeton, 1984), 283-4. 'The function of human life': W. K. C. Guthrie, *Socrates* (Cambridge, 1971), 127. 'A grasp of everything about the subject in question': T. Penner, 'Socrates and the Early Dialogues', in R. Kraut (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge, 1999), 121-69 at 145.

⁵ G. Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (London, 1865), 373-4, 400. This was apparently also the interpretation given by those sceptics in the ancient world who interpreted Plato and Socrates as sceptics (see S.E. *PH* 1. 221-2; Cic. *Acad.* 1. 16, 44-6).

both of these facts. Moreover, since they appear to be inconsistent with each other, they form a sort of *aporia* which any account must solve.

The first fact is Socrates' commitment to the message from the Delphic oracle which began his philosophical career. The oracle, it will be recalled, said that there was no one wiser than Socrates, which puzzled him because he was aware both that he knew nothing and that the god of the oracle could not be mistaken (21 A–B). His eventual interpretation of the oracle, to the verification and dissemination of which he henceforth devoted his life, was that, god being really wise, human wisdom was worth little or nothing—Socrates being taken as a mere example to make the point that that human being was wisest who, like Socrates, recognized that he was worthless in respect of wisdom (23 A–B). This message of universal human ignorance did not exclude everyday knowledge about non-evaluative matters—Socrates in particular recognized that the artisans had such knowledge (22 C–E; cf. *Euthph.* 7 B–C; *Alc. I* 111 B–D; *Phdr.* 263 A–B; *Xen. Mem.* 4. 6. 2–8). Rather, it concerned knowledge of 'the other matters of most importance [τὰ ἄλλα τὰ μέγιστα]' (22 D–E), of what was 'fine [καλὸν ἀγαθόν]' (21 D), i.e. the ethical matters with which, as Plato and Xenophon both show, and as the latter also explicitly says (*Mem.* 1. 1. 16), Socrates' conversations were always concerned. It is, I think, beyond reasonable doubt that Socrates' profession of ignorance in other Platonic texts, in Aeschines of Sphettus, and in Aristotle must be understood in connection with his commitment to this oracular message of universal human ignorance concerning ethics.

That this is so immediately makes highly implausible the *first* explanation of his profession of ignorance offered in the secondary literature, according to which it is an insincere trick used by Socrates to lure interlocutors into a conversation so that they may be refuted, or to mask his own knowledge and thus force interlocutors to achieve knowledge for themselves.⁶

Furthermore, as I argued in 'Socrates' Demand for Definitions', it is clear that Socrates understands this oracular message that, god being really wise, human wisdom is worth little or nothing (23 A) as a timeless statement about the human condition in comparison with the divine (not merely an unfavourable report on *human beings*

⁶ Cf. G. Vlastos, 'Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 35/138 (1985), 1–31 at 5.

at the moment or human beings so far). And if that is so, then this evidence also makes it very difficult to believe the *second* explanation of his profession of ignorance offered in the secondary literature, according to which he has a demanding ideal of ethical knowledge which he is striving to achieve, though as yet without complete success. For if he is sure that it belongs to the human condition to be without ethical knowledge, and has indeed devoted his life to verifying and disseminating just this message, then it is very difficult to believe that he is striving to achieve ethical knowledge *at all*. Moreover, as I argued in 'Socrates' Demand for Definitions', there is, on closer inspection, nothing in the *Apology* or in other early dialogues before the *Gorgias* that really suggests that he is so striving.

The second fact revealed by the *Apology* seems at first sight to conflict sharply with that first one (i.e. with Socrates' commitment to the oracle's message of universal human ignorance concerning 'the . . . matters of most importance', or ethical matters). The second fact is that *Socrates has perfectly confident beliefs about ethical matters which he considers of the utmost importance*. Thus he is clearly in no doubt, and has indeed made it his life's work to impress on people (29 D–30 B, 32 B–D, 38 E–39 B), that one should pursue practical judgement (*φρόνησις*), truth, perfection of the soul, and virtue, since these are 'the things that are of greatest value [*τὰ πλείστου ἄξια*]', before wealth, honour, reputation, and the body, which are 'less valuable' (29 D–30 A). And he has further confident beliefs about ethical matters which he considers vitally important as well. For example, he insists that one must be guided in one's actions by one's judgement of what is right and wrong, not by fear of death (28 B–29 A, 32 B–D, 38 E–39 B; cf. *Crito* 48 B, 48 D, 54 B; *Gorg.* 512 D–E, 522 E). He insists that it is worse to do than to suffer injustice (30 D; this thesis is treated in more depth in the *Gorgias*). He insists that it is bad to disobey a better, whether man or god (29 B; cf. 28 D–29 A; *Crito* 50 E–51 C). He insists that it is impious to break, or encourage someone else to break, an oath (35 C–D). He insists that one must respect the law, even at the cost of one's own well-being (32 B–C; this doctrine is treated in more depth in the *Crito*). Finally, as religious principles closely bound up with his ethics, he insists that it is not divine law that a better man should be injured by a worse (30 D), and that the gods never allow harm to come to a good man in life or after death (41 C–D; cf. *Gorg.* 527 C–D).

This second fact from the *Apology* makes very implausible the *third* explanation of Socrates' profession of ignorance offered in the secondary literature, according to which he was primarily motivated by a concern to remove the false conceit of knowledge and did not arrive at the additional (and no doubt desirable) end of affirmative belief. For it seems that, on the contrary, he held many affirmative beliefs about ethical matters which he considered of the utmost importance.

Thus our two facts from the *Apology* appear between them to have excluded all three of the standard lines of interpretation of Socrates' profession of ignorance found in the secondary literature.

It is important, however, to recognize the full force of the *aporia* which arises when the second fact is set beside the first. The first fact tells us that Socrates believes in universal human ignorance on the matters of most importance, i.e. ethical matters, and that his profession of his own ignorance must be understood in this light; the second fact then tells us that he has perfectly confident beliefs about ethical matters which he considers of the utmost importance.⁷ This *aporia* does not admit of any easy solution. In particular, these two facts cannot be reconciled by suggesting that Socrates considers his confident ethical beliefs to be too commonplace to count as significant exceptions to his denial of ethical knowledge. In his time they were actually far from commonplace, and the circumstance that he felt that he had to make it his life's work to impress them upon his fellow men (29 D–30 B, 30 D–31 C) shows that he did not consider them such either. Nor can these two facts be reconciled by suggesting that Socrates' achievement of confident ethical beliefs postdated and outdated the oracular message. Socrates actually gives no indication that he first came by these beliefs *after* receiving the oracular message. More importantly, he clearly implies that they did *not* outdate the message, for he says that he is *still now* verifying and disseminating it (22 B). Moreover, since (as has already been mentioned) the message is meant timelessly, it could not in any

⁷ In 'Socrates' Demand for Definitions' I argued that Socrates understands the oracle's message to deny *any* ethical knowledge to people. Notice, however, that there would be an *aporia* here even if that were incorrect. A version of this *aporia* was noted by T. C. Brickhouse and N. D. Smith, *Socrates on Trial* (Oxford and Princeton, 1989), 100 ff. Their account also agrees with the solution that I shall be offering here in suggesting that Socrates understands his ethical beliefs to have a divine source (105 ff.).

case be outdated (only refuted). The *aporia*, then, still awaits a solution.⁸

A satisfactory account of Socrates' profession of ignorance must therefore do justice to these two hard facts, and to the challenge of reconciling them.⁹ None of the standard accounts of Socrates' profession of ignorance in the secondary literature seems capable of achieving this. Can we find one that is?

II

Such an account, I believe the correct one, can be distilled from three sources. First, there is a set of early Platonic texts—the *Apology*, the *Ion*, and the *Crito*—which collectively point to it, though without stating it explicitly. Second, there is Plato's early middle dialogue the *Meno*, which states it explicitly. Third, there are the

⁸ Xenophon was evidently so impressed by the fact of Socrates' confident beliefs on important ethical and religious matters, and by its apparent irreconcilability with a profession of ignorance, that he made no room at all for such a profession in his portrait of Socrates, and indeed went out of his way to make his Socrates deny his own ignorance. Thus, Xenophon's pages are full of illustrations of Socrates giving confident ethical and religious instruction. And Xenophon is not shy about calling this knowledge; according to him, once Socrates had convinced an interlocutor of his ignorance, 'he began to expound very plainly and clearly the knowledge that he thought most needful [*ἀ τε ἐνόμιζεν εἰδέναι δεῖν*] and the practices that he held to be most excellent' (*Mem.* 4. 2. 40). Moreover, in the *Memorabilia* Xenophon has Hippias raise a suggestion of Socratic ignorance, accusing Socrates of mocking others, 'questioning and examining everybody, and never willing to render an account of yourself or to state an opinion about anything', and has Socrates retort to this: 'Indeed, Hippias! Haven't you noticed that I never cease to declare my notion of what is just?' (6. 4. 9–10). Xenophon's account should not, I think, cause us to question the weightier testimony of Plato, Aeschines of Sphettus, and Aristotle that Socrates professed ignorance. But it does show that Xenophon was so impressed by the fact of Socrates' confident beliefs on important ethical and religious matters and by its apparent inconsistency with a profession of ignorance that he could make no sense of such a profession.

⁹ A special case of this antinomy is Socrates' commitment to both (1) the priority of a grasp of definitions to any knowledge of a general quality or of its particular instances, and consequently, since he and others lack definitions in ethics, his own and others' lack of the latter sorts of knowledge in ethics as well, and (2) his own possession of authoritative insights into the character of ethical qualities and into their particular instances, on which insights he often relies in order to refute proposed ethical definitions and other ethical theses. Concerning this sort of problem, see J. Beversluis, 'Socratic Definition', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 11/4 (1974), 331–6. The solution to the general antinomy which I shall offer in this article also solves this special case of it.

fragments from the *Alcibiades* of Aeschines of Sphettus, which also state it explicitly.

We have just seen that Plato's *Apology* imposes the constraint on any satisfactory account of Socrates' profession of ignorance that it must reconcile Socrates' sincere belief in his own ignorance about all matters of most importance, ethical matters, with his possession of confident beliefs about ethical matters which he considers of the utmost importance. We might, therefore, usefully begin by asking whether the *Apology* or any other early work of Plato's indicates a way in which such a reconciliation might be possible.

The only route for a reconciliation to take, it seems, would be via a distinction between *knowledge* and *true belief*. For if Socrates recognized such a distinction, he might consistently hold both that he had no knowledge about (important) ethical matters and that he none the less had true beliefs about such matters.¹⁰ Do Plato's early texts anywhere record Socrates' recognition of such a distinction? They do in connection with one class of beliefs: the beliefs of poets, prophets, and oracle-givers, which come to them as a result of divine inspiration or possession. According to the *Apology* and the *Ion*, such people do state many truths (πολλά καὶ καλά, *Ap.* 22 c; *Ion* 534 B; cf. ἀληθῆ καὶ πολλά, *Meno* 99 c), but they make their statements 'not by wisdom [οὐ σοφία]' (*Ap.* 22 c; cf. *Ion* 536 c) nor 'from art [ἐκ τέχνης]' (*Ion* 533 E) nor with 'understanding [νοῦς]' (*Ion* 534 B, D), but instead 'because they are divinely inspired [ἐνθουσιάζοντες]' (*Ap.* 22 c) or 'divinely inspired and possessed [ἐνθεοὶ ὄντες καὶ κατεχόμενοι]' (*Ion* 533 E) or 'by a divine dispensation [θεία μοίρα]' (*Ion* 534 C).

Now in the *Apology* and the *Crito* we find two crucial passages in which Socrates shows that he understands his own ethical beliefs and the arguments which support them to be the result of divine inspiration as well. One of these passages occurs at the end of the *Apology*, where he infers that (his) death is a good thing from (1) the fact that the divine sign, which normally intervenes when he is about to do something that would result in bad consequences, has let him speak before the law court in such a way as to earn himself the death penalty, along with (2) an argument prompted by that divine hint to the effect that death is either the extinction of consciousness, and hence like a long dreamless sleep, in which

¹⁰ Cf. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory*, 39–41, who begins from the same idea but in the end gives a very different account from the one developed here.

case it is preferable to most of our life, or else a passage to an afterlife which promises divine judgement and, for the virtuous like himself, happy encounters with dead heroes and others from the past, in which case it is even better (40A–41D).¹¹

The other passage occurs in the *Crito*, an early dialogue which, like the *Apology*, depicts Socrates both expressing and arguing for confident ethical beliefs. After making an extended case for the moral necessity of obeying the laws of the state, Socrates closes the dialogue as follows:

SOC. Be well assured, my dear friend Crito, that this is what I seem to hear, as the frenzied Corybantian worshippers seem to hear the flutes, and the sound of these words re-echoes within me and prevents my hearing any other words. And be assured that, so far as I now believe, if you argue anything against these words you will speak in vain. Nevertheless, if you think you can accomplish anything, speak.

CRITO. No, Socrates, I have nothing to say.

SOC. Then, Crito, let it be, and let us act in this way, since it is in this way that the god leads/instructs us [*ταύτην ὁ θεὸς ὑφηγεῖται*]. (54D–E)

Socrates here likens his belief in the moral necessity of obeying the laws of the state and the argument which he has given in support of that belief to the divine tune that lays hold of a Corybantian worshipper. And that this suggestion of a divine origin for his own ethical belief and argument is not merely metaphorical is made clear by the last sentence, in which he unambiguously assigns responsibility for them to the god (*which* god we shall consider later). The more specific point of the simile of the Corybantian worshipper is made clearer by a remark in the *Ion*: ‘The Corybantian worshippers are keenly sensible of that strain alone which belongs to the god whose possession is on them, and have plenty of gestures and phrases for that tune, but do not heed any other’ (536c). Thus Socrates’ idea here at the end of the *Crito* is that the god’s inspiration of him with the argument for obedience to the laws of the state is of such a character as to make him unable to take seriously any other argument or an argument from any other source (so that he is ‘prevent[ed] [from] hearing any other words’ and ‘if [Crito] argue[s] anything against these words [he] will speak in vain’). It is probably also significant that Socrates had presented his argument for the moral

¹¹ In the *Gorgias* Socrates explicitly characterizes a version of the latter account as true belief, rather than knowledge (523A, 524A–B, 526D; cf. the distinction between (true) belief and knowledge at 454D).

necessity of obeying the laws of the state as though it were spoken by the personified, or deified, laws themselves (50A ff.). For the essential dependence of the *content* of the argument on a conception of the laws as persons (and hence as possessing moral claims on an individual) suggests that this personification, or deification, is more than a mere literary conceit.¹²

From the *Apology*, the *Ion*, and the *Crito*, then, one would have fairly good reason to infer that the correct account of Socrates' profession of ignorance about ethical matters is as follows: he draws a distinction between knowledge, on the one hand, and true belief resulting from divine inspiration or possession, on the other; he understands his own ethical beliefs to be true beliefs resulting from divine inspiration or possession, not knowledge; and this explains why there is no inconsistency between his profession of ignorance about the matters of most importance, ethical matters, and his indulgence in confident beliefs about ethical matters which he considers of the utmost importance.¹³

¹² It is no objection to the interpretation of the two passages from the *Apology* and *Crito* which I am giving here that Socrates develops *arguments* for his ethical conclusions in both cases. For, as B. Snell pointed out in *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature* (New York, 1960), 148–9, the absence of any sense of a tension between reliance on argument and reliance on divine inspiration is a characteristic feature of Greek culture in this period—visible, for example, in Parmenides' poem, where Parmenides relies *both* on the authority of the goddess's instruction *and* on the force of her argument (concerning the incoherence of the notion of not-being). Much of the recent secondary literature that deals with Socrates, religion, and reasoning—certainly work by Vlastos, but even M. L. McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates* (University Park, PA, 1999), ch. 4—seems to me vitiated by a failure to take this deep insight of Snell's sufficiently to heart, by an anachronistic assumption of a more modern conception of reasoning and divine inspiration as standing in natural opposition to one another. (Plato's own position is much closer to that modern conception, however—concerning which, see M. F. Burnyeat, 'Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 24 (1977), 7–16 at 13.)

¹³ Two additional points to note: (1) at *Euthph.* 5B Socrates implies a slightly different version of a distinction between knowledge/wisdom and true belief. There he envisages himself becoming Euthyphro's pupil concerning piety and religion and on that ground saying to his accuser Meletus: 'Meletus, if you acknowledge that Euthyphro is wise [σοφόν] in such matters, then believe that I also hold correct opinions [ὀρθῶς νομιζέειν].' This evidence coheres well with the account of Socrates' conception of his own ethical beliefs which I am giving here, for on this account with respect to such beliefs he will in effect be a pupil of the σοφός god whom he mentions at *Ap.* 23A.

(2) It is significant that when Socrates comes to express and describe his confident ethical beliefs in the *Apology*, his description of his possession of them almost completely avoids the words which he had used to mean wisdom or knowledge throughout the oracle story: σοφία entirely disappears from view, and so does εἰδέειν

This account of Socrates' profession of ignorance inferred from Plato's early dialogues is confirmed by a slightly later Platonic work which explicitly attributes to Socrates all of the essential views in question: the *Meno*. There Socrates explicitly draws a distinction between knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη, σοφία, φρόνησις*) and true or right belief (*ἀληθῆς δόξα, ὀρθῆ δόξα, εὐδοξία*), pointing out that both are equally good as guides to right action (96 E ff.); he indicates that the paradigm example of true or right belief which is not knowledge is the divinely inspired belief of oracle-givers and prophets (99 B–C); and he says that virtue or ethical insight is not knowledge but true or right belief resulting, like that of oracle-givers and prophets, from divine inspiration:

SOC. Well now, since virtue is not taught, we no longer take it to be knowledge?

MENO. Apparently not.

SOC. So of two good and useful things [i.e. knowledge and true or right belief], one has been rejected: knowledge cannot be our guide to political conduct.

MENO. I think not.

SOC. Therefore it was not by any wisdom, nor because they were wise, that the sort of men we spoke of controlled their states—Themistocles and the rest of them . . . And if not by knowledge, as the only alternative it must have been by right belief. This is the means which statesmen employ for their direction of states, and they have nothing more to do with wisdom than oracle-givers and prophets; for these people utter many a true thing when inspired, but have no knowledge of anything they say . . . And . . . we can say of the statesmen that they are divine and inspired, since they are under the influence and possession of the god [*θείους τε εἶναι καὶ ἐνθουσιάζειν, ἐπίπνους ὄντας καὶ κατεχομένους ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ*] when they succeed in speaking many great things . . . Virtue

(with the explicable exception of just two passages, as already discussed in my 'Socrates' Demand for Definitions'). The word that replaces them is *φρόνησις* (29 E; cf. 36 c)—a word which continues to be preferred to *σοφία, εἰδέναι*, and other epistemic words in ethical contexts throughout Plato's works (see e.g. *Prot.* 352 c; *Meno* 88 B ff.; *Phaedo* 69 A–C; *Sym.* 209 A; *Laws* 631 C). Does Plato here echo a linguistic distinction which Socrates had used in order to mark the difference between knowledge, on the one hand, and ethical true belief resulting from divine inspiration, on the other? If so, then it must be admitted that Plato does not stay faithful to Socrates' usage—for example, at *Meno* 97 B ff. Plato groups *φρόνησις* together with *σοφία* and *ἐπιστήμη* and *in contrast* to true belief through divine inspiration. However, Aristotle may be staying more faithful to Socrates' usage in *NE* bk. 6, where he draws a sharp distinction between *φρόνησις*, on the one hand, and both *ἐπιστήμη* and *τέχνη*, on the other.

is found to be . . . imparted to us by a divine dispensation [*θεία μοίρα*] without understanding in those who receive it. (99 B–100 A)

These doctrines in the *Meno* are, of course, usually interpreted as *Platonic* rather than Socratic. On what grounds do I reject that usual view? Briefly: (1) my main ground is that, as we saw, the same doctrines already seem to be implicit in the *Apology*, the *Crito*, and the *Ion*, and that moreover, as we are about to see, they are also explicitly ascribed to Socrates by an independent authority of weight, Aeschines of Sphettus. (2) The idea that virtue is true belief through divine inspiration seems much more likely to come from Socrates, who places great weight on divine inspiration in other connections, and indeed accepts it as the very source and basis of his philosophical mission, than from Plato, who is generally disinclined to accord it such importance.¹⁴ (3) As far as I can see, the strongest argument *against* the doctrines being Socratic is that they seem to contradict Socrates' identification of virtue with knowledge, which is strongly attested both by Plato's early dialogues and by Aristotle.¹⁵ However, this contradiction is more apparent than real. For the *Meno* not only says that virtue is true belief through divine inspiration rather than knowledge; it also implies that if anyone had *real* virtue, it would be he whose virtue was indeed knowledge—that such a man would be, compared to those whose virtue consists merely in true belief through divine inspiration, 'in respect to virtue, . . . a real substance among shadows' (99 E–100 A). Socrates' full position, as reflected in the *Meno*, is thus that the merely human virtue which men sometimes possess consists in true belief through divine inspiration, although *real* virtue, which no man has (only god—*Ap.* 23 A–B), consists in knowledge. When Plato in the early dialogues makes his Socrates identify virtue with knowledge, he oversimplifies that position, but he does not deeply contradict it. (4) In so far as the denial that these doctrines from the *Meno* are Socratic stems from a general assumption that doctrines which appear for the first time in relatively late works of Plato's are not Socratic, it stems from an assumption which, besides being intrinsically dubious on reflection, is, I think, demonstrably false. For example, Socrates' doctrine that he is a sort of philosophical midwife famously first appears in Plato as late as the *Theaetetus*; yet at *Ar. Clouds* 135–9

¹⁴ Cf. E. de Strycker, 'Die historischen Zeugnisse über Sokrates', in A. Patzer (ed.), *Der historische Sokrates* (Darmstadt, 1987), 323–54 at 328–30.

¹⁵ See e.g. Kraut, *Socrates and the State*, 303–4.

we already find a joke about the miscarriage of an idea in Socrates' Thinkery (*φροντιστήριο*), which shows the midwife metaphor to have been genuinely Socratic (cf. *Theaet.* 149 D for a similar reference to 'miscarriages' of ideas).¹⁶ Or to cite another instance, Plato for the first time in the *Meno* with its slave-boy example gives a clear portrayal of Socrates as using a method of education that involves *drawing* insights *from* an interlocutor rather than *communicating* them *to* him, and yet the *Clouds* already ascribes just such a method to Socrates,¹⁷ and it is further confirmed as genuinely Socratic by the fragments of Aeschines' *Alcibiades* (as quoted next).¹⁸

The explanation of Socrates' profession of ignorance which I have given above receives further confirmation from an independent source of considerable weight: the extant fragments of Aeschines of Sphettus' *Alcibiades*. At the end of this dialogue Socrates lays claim to an ethical capacity. But he draws a distinction between, on the one hand, those capacities which consist in knowledge (or

¹⁶ This has been questioned by Burnyeat in 'Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration', 7, 14 n. 4. But Burnyeat overlooks the (in my opinion) clinching facts that the *Clouds* not only contains the revealing joke just mentioned but also, like the *Theaetetus* and its midwife metaphor, (1) portrays Socrates as using a method of education which involves *drawing* theses *from* an interlocutor rather than *conveying* them *to* him (385 ff., beginning with Socrates' proposal 'I shall teach you from yourself [*ἀπὸ σαυτοῦ γὰρ σε διδάξω*]; 695–782, beginning with Socrates' injunction 'Excogitate one of your own concerns [*ἐκφρόντισόν τι τῶν σεαυτοῦ πραγμάτων*']), and (2) depicts Socrates as examining and rejecting as worthless the results produced by the interlocutor (that is what happens in the play when Socrates applies the method to Strepsiades; cf. *Theaet.* 149 D, 150 B–C, 151 C–D, and the overall negative outcome of the dialogue as summed up at 210 B).

¹⁷ See the preceding footnote.

¹⁸ Plato's late interest in Socrates' midwife metaphor and in Socrates' method of educating by drawing insights from an interlocutor was presumably sparked by his own development, beginning in the *Meno*, of the doctrine of knowledge as recollection, with which Socrates' metaphor and method then appeared to cohere so well. One may speculate that Plato's late interest in Socrates' doctrine that human virtue is true belief through divine inspiration rather than knowledge was sparked in a rather similar way: in the *Protagoras* Plato, by oversimplifying Socrates' position in the manner indicated in (3) above, had run into the paradox 'Virtue is knowledge, knowledge is by its very nature teachable, yet virtue is not teachable.' Since Socrates' doctrine offered a way out of this paradox, Plato now saw a merit in it that he had not seen before, and therefore presented it as a solution to the paradox in the *Meno*. I suspect that a second and much less textually obvious paradox played an analogous role as well: the *Protagoras* had implied not only that virtue is knowledge but also that virtue is unstable, something people can lose again (344 B–345 C). How could this be, given that knowledge is of its very nature stable (see *Alc. I* 116 E–117 A; *Meno*, 98 A)? The solution in the *Meno*: strictly speaking, human virtue is not quite knowledge but only true belief, and as such lacks the anchorage in a definition [*αἰτίας λογισμῶς*] which would render it stable (97 D–98 A).

art), and, on the other hand, those which one enjoys through divine dispensation or inspiration. He denies adamantly that his ethical capacity consists in any knowledge (or art). And he insists that he instead enjoys it through divine dispensation or inspiration. His words are as follows:

If I thought that I could help someone by means of some art [*τιμι τέχνη*], I would condemn myself for the greatest foolishness. But in fact I believed that this capacity to help was granted me in connection with Alcibiades by divine dispensation [*θεία μοίρα*]. And nothing about that need cause surprise. For of the many sick people who get healthy also, some do so by means of human art and some by means of divine dispensation. Those who get healthy by human art do so by being treated by doctors. Those who get healthy by divine dispensation are led by their own impulse to that which is helpful; sometimes they are impelled to vomit, when this will help them, and sometimes to go hunting, when it will help them to exert themselves. But I experienced because of my love for Alcibiades just what the Bacchants experience. For the Bacchants, whenever they are divinely inspired [*ἐνθεοί*], draw milk and honey from springs where others cannot even fetch water. Thus did I, though I possess no knowledge which I might teach a man in order to benefit him [*οὐδὲν μάθημα ἐπιστάμενος, ὃ διδάξας ἄνθρωπον ὠφελήσαιμ' ἄν*], yet believe that through accompanying Alcibiades I would improve him [*βελτίω ποιήσαι*] because of my love. (fr. 12 Nestle)

In addition to confirming the account already given, this passage brings out one new point: Socrates recognizes, corresponding to his distinction between knowledge (or art), on the one hand, and divinely inspired capacities, on the other, a distinction between *teaching* and *improving*. Hence he claims in this fragment not to *teach* thanks to knowledge (*οὐδὲν μάθημα ἐπιστάμενος, ὃ διδάξας ἄνθρωπον ὠφελήσαιμ' ἄν*), but instead to *improve* (*βελτίω ποιήσαι*) thanks to a divinely inspired capacity. This solves another puzzle which inevitably strikes the reader of Plato's *Apology* and other Platonic dialogues: the puzzle of how Socrates can consistently, on the one hand, deny that he has ever been a teacher or had pupils (33 A) or has ever promised to teach or taught (33 B; cf. his argument in the *Protagoras* for the unteachability of virtue), while, on the other hand, vigorously urging people to accept the right ethical views (28 B–D, 29 D–E, etc.) and indeed explaining his whole life as devoted to the task of morally improving people (29 D–31 B).¹⁹

¹⁹ Part of the force of the contrast between teaching and Socratic improving is no doubt also that the latter, unlike the former, usually takes the form of *drawing*

III

I would suggest that the Platonic texts discussed above also support certain further speculations about Socrates' position. In the *Apology* Socrates says that in the course of testing the oracle he asked the poets for the meaning of what they said in their poems (τί λέγουειν), and that when he found that they could not answer this question, he inferred that 'they composed what they composed not by wisdom, but by nature and because they were inspired, like the prophets and oracle-givers; for these too say things many and fine [πολλά καὶ καλά], but know nothing of what they say [ἴσασι δὲ οὐδὲν ὦν λέγουσι]' (22 B–C).

This passage seems to me most plausibly interpreted in the following way. As I argued in 'Socrates' Demand for Definitions', Socrates' request for the poets' meaning (τί λέγουειν) was his notorious request for a definition of terms (τί ἐστι . . .). Moreover, as I argued there, Socrates believes the possession of definitions to be a necessary condition for understanding the terms one uses (hence, for example, his rhetorical question at *Theaet.* 147 B, 'Does anyone, do you think, understand the name of anything when he does not know what the thing is?' (cf. *Alc. I* 111 B–C; *Chrm.* 159 A)). It follows that the poets' failure to provide satisfactory definitions in response to his request was, in his eyes, a proof that they quite literally did not know the meaning of, did not understand, what they said (hence his extreme view in the *Ion* that when the poet composes, 'his mind is no longer in him [ὁ νοῦς μηκέτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐνῆ]), 534 B).

This enables us to interpret the above passage from 22 B–C more fully. In that passage Socrates is giving a highly compressed and

the correct view out of an interlocutor rather than *putting it into* him. The Aeschines fragment implies Socrates' employment of such a method in its use of the metaphor of the Bacchants drawing milk and honey out of springs to characterize Socrates' moral improvement of Alcibiades. There is also evidence that this was a characteristic Socratic method in sources as diverse as Plato's dialogues (e.g. the slave-boy example in the *Meno* and the midwife metaphor in the *Theaetetus*) and Aristophanes' *Clouds* (the episodes at 385 ff., 695–783). Moreover, at *Meno* 82 E, 84 C–D Plato actually depicts Socrates' use of this method as his ground for denying that he teaches (cf. *Ap.* 33 B; *Theaet.* 150 D). On the other hand, it seems unlikely that Socrates' use of this method is the *whole* explanation of his denial that he teaches, for it is pretty clear that his instruction was not *confined* to the use of this method (consider, for example, his use of exemplary passages of poetry and direct injunctions in the *Apology*, and his use of extended arguments of his own devising in the *Crito*). Hence we do need some further explanation, such as that offered above.

easily overlooked *argument* for both the ignorance and the divine inspiration of the poets (an argument which, he implies, can likewise be used to establish both the ignorance and the divine inspiration of prophets and oracle-givers). He is arguing that because, by failing to provide satisfactory definitions, the poets proved to 'know nothing of what they say', namely in the strong sense of *not understanding* what they say,²⁰ this showed that they 'did not compose what they composed by wisdom'. And he is arguing that because, by failing to provide satisfactory definitions, they proved to 'know nothing of what they say', namely again in that strong sense, but yet made statements 'many *and fine*', this showed that their statements were instead the work of an inspiring divinity. (Analogously, he implies, the fact that prophets and oracle-givers such as the Delphic Pythia 'know nothing of what they say', namely in the strong sense of not understanding what they say, shows that they do not speak by wisdom, and the fact that they 'know nothing of what they say', namely again in that strong sense, but yet make statements 'many *and fine*' shows that their statements are instead the work of an inspiring divinity.)

Now if this *is* Socrates' argument for the conclusion that the poets compose not by knowledge but by divine inspiration, then we may, I suggest, plausibly infer that it is also his argument for the conclusion that true ethical belief is not knowledge but the result of divine inspiration. Two considerations support such an inference. First, the 'many and fine' statements which in this argument Socrates concludes the poets make not by knowledge but by divine inspiration are almost certainly *themselves* conceived by him to be mainly ethical truths.²¹ After all, he is presumably questioning the poets in relation to ethical matters, since those are the matters he considers relevant to the oracle's message. And we know that he did consider poetry to be a source of important ethical truths, and was in the habit of quoting the relevant poetry in order to convey them. For at *Ap.* 28 B–D he quotes a passage from the *Iliad* in order to convey the ethical truth that one must do what one considers right, disdaining death; and at *Mem.* 1. 2. 56–9 Xenophon tells us that he made a practice of quoting poetry in order to convey ethical truths in this way.²² Second, in so far as Socrates believed that

²⁰ Cf. *Meno* 99 D for the use of the expression in this strong sense.

²¹ Cf. the ethical emphasis at *Rep.* 598 D–601 A.

²² This evidence shows that the historical Socrates' attitude towards traditional

people other than the poets—in particular, he himself—possessed ethical truths, he must surely have been *driven* to apply just the same argument to them as he applied to the poets. For, as we see in the early dialogues, he found not only the poets but also everyone else, including himself, to be at a loss for satisfactory definitions of ethical terms.

We have, then, at least some reason to think that Socrates' argument for ethical insight being not knowledge but divinely inspired true belief was the argument which he implies in the passage on the poets: since possession of definitions is a precondition of understanding, people's lack of ethical definitions shows that they quite literally do not understand their ethical claims. From this it of course follows that their ethical claims cannot constitute knowledge. And furthermore, since many of these claims, despite not being understood by those who make them, are yet clearly fine and right, it follows that they must instead have a divine source.²³

poetry must have been much less negative than it can appear from such Platonic texts as the *Ion*, the *Protagoras*, the *Gorgias*, and especially the *Republic*. It seems fairly clear that the historical Socrates did deplore large areas of traditional poetry, especially tragedy (this can already be seen from Aristophanes' *Frogs* 1491–5), and that he in particular objected to the false and immoral portrayals of the gods found there (see already *Euthph.* 6 A–C). But the above passages show that he just as surely saw other parts of traditional poetry as sources of ethical truth. Indeed, even in the *Republic* he is still portrayed as approving of *parts* of Homer in this spirit (see e.g. 389 E, 390 C–D), and a yet more striking and instructive example of the positive side of his attitude to traditional poetry can be seen in his response, beginning in bk. 1, to the poet Simonides' account of justice as 'rendering to each person what is due to him' (331 E): Socrates assumes that Simonides is 'wise and divine' (*ibid.*), and he accordingly proceeds in bk. 1 to run through a number of possible interpretations of Simonides' account, dismissing those which would make it false (very much as in the *Apology* he assumes the divine source and hence truth of the oracle and accordingly sets out to dismiss interpretations of it which would make it false—cf. M. Stokes, 'Socrates' Mission', in B. S. Gower and M. Stokes (eds.), *Socratic Questions: New Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates and its Significance* (London and New York, 1992), 26–81 at 37–8), never rejecting Simonides' account itself, but on the contrary later in the work himself coming to a definition of justice which he evidently conceives as capturing the real content of Simonides' account (cf. T. H. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford, 1995), 173–4). The combination of positive and negative attitudes towards traditional poetry which we see Socrates exhibiting in all of this evidence should not really be surprising: Hesiod already tells us at *Th.* 26–8 that the Muses convey both truths and falsehoods in poetry (albeit that Socrates would differ from Hesiod in laying the responsibility for the falsehoods at human doorsteps rather than divine).

²³ The interpretation developed so far prompts a question: *Why*, in Socrates' view, do ethical terms and claims exhibit these peculiarities? *Why* are the grasp of ethical definitions and hence the understanding of ethical terms, and hence also the

The *Meno* supports these interpretative speculations. At *Meno* 97 D–98 A Socrates argues that the distinguishing mark of knowledge, as opposed to mere true belief, is that knowledge is anchored in the soul by a definition, an *αἰτίας λογισμός* (cf. *Phaedo* 76 B).²⁴ Hence, as I just inferred from the passage on the poets, it is because those who possess ethical insight cannot give definitions of their ethical terms that Socrates believes them not to possess knowledge. Moreover, Socrates indicates in the *Meno* that, as I just inferred from the passage on the poets, he believes the possession of ethical true belief to be literally ‘without understanding [*ἄνευ νοῦ*]’ (99 E; cf. 99 C–D).²⁵ He does not explicitly say *why* he takes this extreme view,

understanding and knowledge of ethical claims, unavailable to human beings, only available to gods, whereas in the case of non-evaluative subject-matters, by contrast, human beings do possess definitions, understanding, and knowledge? As far as I am aware, Socrates nowhere explicitly addresses this question. However, it seems likely that his answer to it would be roughly as follows: since ethical matters are ‘the . . . matters of most importance’ (*Ap.* 22 D), it is natural that the gods would preserve them as their own cognitive prerogative.

²⁴ The unusual expression *αἰτίας λογισμός*, literally an ‘account of cause’, is equivalent to more usual Platonic expressions for a definition such as *λόγος* or *λόγος τῆς οὐσίας*. That Socrates does mean a definition by an *αἰτίας λογισμός* is shown in the *Meno* by his statement at 98 A that he and Meno have agreed that arriving at an *αἰτίας λογισμός* is a matter of recollection, for this must refer back to 80 D–81 E, where Socrates had argued that discovering the definition of virtue is possible because the soul knows everything from a previous life and so need only recollect what virtue is, and to 86 B–C, where he had reiterated this position that defining virtue is possible through recollection after proving the theory of recollection to Meno by means of the slave-boy example (cf. *Phdr.* 249 C for the word *λογισμός* used alone in the sense of a definition). The full expression *αἰτίας λογισμός* is explained by the fact that Socrates understands the form or *εἶδος* which a definition describes (e.g. strength) to be in some sense the *cause* of a particular thing’s possession of the corresponding quality (e.g. so-and-so’s being strong). Hence at *Meno* 72 E a strong woman is said to be strong ‘by reason of’ (instrumental dative) the form of strength, and at 72 C virtue is said to be the form ‘because of which [*δι’ οὗ*]’ particular virtues are virtues (cf. *Phaedo* 100 B–101 C, where forms are similarly characterized as causes; also *Euthph.* 6 D). (The question of the *nature* of the causation involved is of course a further matter.)

²⁵ Kraut says that ‘in this passage to lack *νοῦς* is merely to lack knowledge or wisdom’ (*Socrates and the State*, 302–3 n. 82). But this seems to me incorrect. The passages which Kraut adduces as evidence (*Meno* 88 B, *La.* 188 B, etc.) do indeed show that lack of *νοῦς* *can* mean no more than ignorance or stupidity. However, the passages which it is more relevant to consider here are the ones in the *Ion* which discuss the lack of *νοῦς* of the poets, prophets, and oracle-givers, for it is to these people that the *Meno* is comparing men who have ethical insight (99 C). The lack of *νοῦς* that is said to affect such people in the *Ion* is far more than a mere lack of knowledge; it is a complete lack of understanding (534 B–D). (On the other hand, Kraut seems to me correct to say that lack of *νοῦς* does not imply lack of *reasons* (*Socrates and the State*, 303 n. 82). The Socrates of the *Crito* presumably considers

but it seems reasonable to infer that his ground for it is the mere true believer's lack of definitions. For, as has been mentioned, there is strong evidence that Socrates considers the possession of definitions to be a necessary condition for understanding (*Alc. I* 111 B–C; *Chrm.* 159 A; *Theaet.* 147 B).²⁶ If this *is* his implicit reason in the *Meno* for holding that ethical true belief is 'without understanding', then his full argument there for the position that ethical insight is not knowledge seems to be as follows: ethical believers lack ethical definitions; since definitions are a prerequisite for understanding, this shows that they literally fail to understand their own ethical claims; therefore these claims cannot constitute knowledge. In other words, we here again find Socrates relying on the first part of the argument to which the passage on the poets pointed.²⁷

Similarly concerning the second part of that argument. At *Meno* 99 C–D Socrates in effect argues that if, like certain ethical believers, one has no understanding of one's ethical claims, and yet they are fine claims (correct and beneficial for action), then this shows that they must be the result of divine inspiration:

SOC. And may we . . . rightly call those men divine who, having no understanding, yet succeed in many a great [*μεγάλα*] deed and word?

himself to possess his divinely inspired ethical beliefs concerning obedience to the laws without *νοῦς*, but he none the less has quite elaborate divinely inspired reasons in support of them.)

²⁶ The situation is complicated, though. While I do believe that the *Meno* is still implicitly relying on this consideration, I do not think that the work's failure to articulate it explicitly is merely an accidental omission. Rather, it occurs because the work is beginning to develop a new Platonic line of thought that is in sharp tension with this consideration, namely a line of thought (which I have discussed in 'Socrates' Demand for Definitions') to the effect that understanding comes in degrees, and that positive degrees of understanding can occur even without an ability to state a definition.

²⁷ It is, of course, a consequence of this interpretation that the historical Socrates considered human ethical insight to be at bottom an acceptance of uncomprehended true sentences. I can imagine someone being prepared to tolerate that as an interpretative possibility and yet balking at the further consequence that when Socrates is depicted as basing ethical insight on reasoning, as at the end of the *Apology* or in the *Crito* for example, he must consider such reasoning to be again a matter of intuiting logical relations between uncomprehended true sentences. However, I would suggest that such an asymmetry of response is in fact unwarranted, that if Socrates can accept the one consequence then he can just as well accept the other. Indeed, since it is part of the very nature of deductive inference that it is possible to recognize its validity without comprehending the non-logical vocabulary involved, to this extent at least one should actually find it *easier* to ascribe to Socrates a conception of uncomprehended reasonings than to ascribe to him a conception of uncomprehended beliefs.

MENO. Certainly.

SOC. Then . . . we can say of the statesmen that they are divine and inspired, since they are under the influence and possession of the god when they succeed in speaking many great things, while knowing nothing of what they say.

On the reasonable assumption, once again, that Socrates' implicit ground here for holding that men have no understanding of their ethical claims is their lack of ethical definitions, we have here precisely a version of the argument for ethical insight being divinely inspired to which the *Apology's* passage on the poets pointed: people who possess ethical insight have no definitions of their ethical terms; since definitions are a prerequisite for understanding, this shows that they do not understand their ethical claims; yet these are fine claims (correct and beneficial for action); therefore one must infer that they have a divine source.

Now there may be a temptation to object that this argument would involve either outright absurdity or vicious circularity, and in too crass a way for its attribution to Socrates to be plausible. The threatening outright absurdity: in identifying people as possessing ethical insight, or invoking the 'finesse' or 'greatness' of their ethical claims, in order thence to infer the divine source of those claims, would Socrates not himself have to be making ethical claims, ones which his demonstration that nobody possesses ethical definitions, and that therefore nobody understands his own ethical claims, invalidates? The threatening vicious circularity: in order to cope with that problem, would Socrates not have to be already assuming that certain ethical claims, in particular his own, had a divine source, and hence already assuming what he is setting out to prove? For, while it is indeed usually rational to react to a discovery that one fails to understand a claim one has made by retracting the claim, there will admittedly be exceptions in cases where one can rely on authorities (for example, the layman relies on the physicists' testimony that ' $E=mc^2$ '), but in this case human authorities are ruled out because human beings all lack ethical definitions and hence any understanding of ethical claims, so it looks as though, in order to avoid the outright absurdity that threatens, Socrates could only be appealing to divine authorities. However, there may in fact be an alternative way for Socrates to avoid the Scylla of outright absurdity *without* perishing on the Charybdis of vicious circularity. Suppose someone were to discover that nobody, including himself, under-

stood some really central and indispensable area of discourse—such as ethics arguably is—but still felt strongly inclined to make certain claims and to deny others in it. Might it not be rational of him to make an exception to the rule of retraction in such a case too (i.e. even without any appeal to authorities)? If so, then Socrates could reasonably be making certain admittedly uncomprehended ethical claims (perhaps some of them without any deeper justification, but others justified in terms of their derivability from those ones, as in the *Crito*) without depending on any justificatory appeal to a divine source as an authority—and hence escape not only outright absurdity but also vicious circularity.

Nor does another consideration which might be thought to force his argument into vicious circularity apply. On a divine-command conception of morality (like that of Duns Scotus, for example), ‘fine’ or ‘great’ might actually *mean* (or at least *imply*) divinely commanded, in which case there would clearly be a vicious circle in arguing from a premiss that such-and-such ethical claims are ‘fine’ or ‘great’ to the conclusion that ethical claims have a divine source. However, there is in fact no question of a divine-command conception of morality being involved here; the oracle story in the *Apology* represents the god of the oracle as *knowing* ethical truths (not making them), and in the *Euthyphro* Socrates’ refutation of Euthyphro’s definition of the pious as what is loved by all the gods takes it as axiomatic that what is pious is loved by the gods because it is pious, not pious because it is loved by the gods.

The *Meno* also shows that an additional argument supported Socrates’ conviction that ethical insight was not knowledge but instead the result of divine inspiration. In effect, the argument is as follows: ethical insight is not teachable; men have no control over who does and who does not attain it (89 D–96 D).²⁸ But knowledge is of its very nature teachable (87 B–C, 89 C).²⁹ Therefore ethical insight is not knowledge (99 A–B). Moreover, since a person’s attainment of ethical insight is not controlled by men (89 D–96 D), and it is not controlled by the person’s inborn nature either (89 A–

²⁸ Cf. *Prot.* 319 A–320 B. Note also Diogenes Laertius’ report that Socrates’ followers Crito and Simon wrote Socratic dialogues with the titles *That Men are Not Made Good by Instruction* and *Of Virtue, that it Cannot be Taught* respectively (D.L. 2. 12–13). I agree with Kraut, *Socrates and the State*, 247 ff., that Socrates’ denial of the teachability of virtue must be considered quite sincere.

²⁹ Cf. *Prot.* 361 A–B.

B, 98 D–E),³⁰ one must infer that it is instead controlled by the gods: 'Virtue is found to be neither natural nor taught, but is imparted to us by a divine dispensation [*θεία μοίρα*]' (99 E).³¹

IV

If the account of Socrates' position given so far is broadly correct, then it is appropriate to ask how exactly he conceives the mechanisms and sources of the divine inspiration which lends him his ethical insights.

It is, of course, tempting to speculate that he regards his notorious *δαιμόνιον* as the *mechanism* responsible.³² And the role of the *δαιμόνιον* in leading him to the insight that death is a good thing at the end of the *Apology*, together with its similar role in leading him to see that one should stay out of politics at *Ap.* 31 D–32 A, shows that there must be some truth in this.

However, I think it would be a mistake to exaggerate the role of the *δαιμόνιον*. For one thing, there is little or no textual evidence of the *δαιμόνιον* establishing further ethical principles for Socrates. For another thing, the case at the end of the *Apology* is peculiar in that it was the *inactivity* of the *δαιμόνιον* which did the work, not its activity. For yet another thing, several characteristics of the *δαιμόνιον*, as Plato and Xenophon describe it, make it seem a relatively unlikely source of ethical insights: as characterized by Plato, it only forbids but never enjoins (*Ap.* 31 D); in both Plato and Xenophon it always concerns some specific course of action rather than a general principle (at least in the first instance); in both it is almost always narrowly prudential and predictive rather than moral; and in both it is often concerned with rather trivial

³⁰ In some additional fragments from Aeschines' *Alcibiades* Socrates similarly argues that good judgement is not an inborn trait (P.Oxy. xiii, no. 1608, frs. 1–4).

³¹ If the account given so far is correct, then we must revise even the judgement of one of the recent commentators who has been most hospitable to the religious side of Socrates' thought, McPherran, who writes of 'Socrates' and Plato's general disparagement of divine inspiration as a source of intellectual and moral guidance' (*The Religion of Socrates*, 196). Such a judgement is true enough of Plato, but not of the historical Socrates.

³² Accordingly, at least one attempt has recently been made to interpret the *δαιμόνιον* as the mechanism responsible for his ethical inspiration: Brickhouse and Smith, *Socrates on Trial*, 242 ff.

matters (for example, avoiding being bowled over in the street by a herd of stampeding pigs!).

This point is of some importance for the following reason (among others). If one assumed that Socrates normally identified the *δαιμόνιον* as the mechanism of his ethical inspiration, then one would infer that he normally thought of his ethical inspiration as a *direct* communication from god to man, since he seems to understand the *δαιμόνιον* in that way (at Xen. *Ap.* 12 he refers to the *δαιμόνιον* as ‘a voice of god [θεοῦ . . . φωνή]’; cf. Plato, *Ap.* 21 D). However, such a *direct* conception of his ethical inspiration may very well not be his usual one at all.

Thus, he certainly at least entertains the possibility of *indirect* ethical inspiration—that is, inspiration by a god via one or more persons acting as intermediaries—in the case of *other* people. That much is implied by his efforts to improve others by communicating his own divinely inspired ethical insights to them, as those efforts are depicted in such texts as Plato’s *Apology* and Aeschines’ *Alcibiades*. And in the *Symposium* it is suggested that ethical inspiration can occur at a still further remove from its divine source, that the inspiring power of Socrates’ discourses entrances and possesses not only those who hear them from Socrates himself but also those who hear them from somebody who has heard them from Socrates: ‘As soon as we hear you [Socrates], or your discourses in the mouth of another . . . we are entranced and possessed [ἐκπεπληγμένοι ἐσμὲν καὶ κατεχόμεθα]’ (215 D). Indeed, Socrates probably thought it possible for people to receive indirect ethical inspiration via a fairly long human chain or tradition, just as long as that chain or tradition originated with direct inspiration by a divinity. For it is in this way that he envisages divine inspiration operating in the case of poetry in the *Ion*, and we have seen at least some reason to think that he regarded poetry as the mechanism of part of people’s ethical inspiration. In the *Ion* he likens the poetic inspiration of the Muse to a magnet which

not only attracts iron rings, but also imparts to them a power whereby they in turn are able to do the very same thing . . . , and attract other rings; so that sometimes there is formed quite a long chain of bits of iron and rings, suspended one from another; and they all depend for this power on that one stone [the magnet]. In the same manner the Muse inspires men herself, and then by means of these inspired persons the inspiration spreads to others, and holds them in a connected chain. (533 D–E; cf. 535 E–536 A)

Now, if this is the way in which Socrates envisages divine ethical inspiration operating in the case of *other* people, then it is, I suggest, at least a possibility that he may also understand some of his *own* ethical insights to have been inspired in an indirect way, that he may see *himself* as, on some ethical matters at least, a 'ring' at several, or even many, removes from the divine 'magnet'. None of the three texts in which he most explicitly invokes the inspirational model of ethical insight—the *Crito*, the *Meno*, and Aeschines' *Alcibiades*—contains any real obstacle to supposing that this may be his view. (Part of the significance of this point will become clear in the next section.)

V

If Socrates understood his ethical insight to be divinely inspired, then it also makes sense to ask whether he had any more precise conception of its divine *source*.

We know that he was especially devoted to one god in particular: Apollo. The evidence for this is abundant in both Plato and Xenophon. For example, Plato's *Phaedo* from beginning to end bears witness to Socrates' special devotion to Apollo, not least in Socrates' statement there that like the swans he is a servant of Apollo, consecrated to this god and imbued by him with a gift of prophecy (84 E–85 B).³³ And Plato's *Apology* of course explains Socrates' life as lived in obedience to a mission imposed on him by Apollo through the Delphic oracle. In addition, there are many further references in Plato and Xenophon to Socrates' deference towards Apollo's oracle at Delphi.³⁴

More specifically, we know beyond reasonable doubt that Socrates devoted his life to philosophical activity because he understood this to have been ordained by Apollo, and we even know in some detail how he understood this command to have been communicated to him. In the *Apology* he tells us that Apollo commanded him to engage in his philosophical cross-examinations 'through oracles and dreams and in every way in which any man was ever commanded by divine power to do anything whatsoever' (33 C). As

³³ Cf. *Euthd.* 302 C–D.

³⁴ See esp. *Alc. I* 124 A–B; *Phaedr.* 229 D–230 A; Xen. *Anab.* 3. 1. 5–7; *Mem.* 1. 3. 1; 4. 3. 16–17; 4. 6. 24.

to *oracles*, the *Apology* of course itself explains in detail the role of the message delivered to Chaerephon by Apollo through his oracle at Delphi. As to *dreams*, we learn in the *Phaedo* that Socrates repeatedly received dreams telling him to make ‘music [*μουσική*]’ and work at it, and that he understood these as commands to engage in philosophical activity (60 E–61 A). And lest there be any doubt as to his view of the divine source of these dreams, we are told that while in jail, just in case they after all meant ‘music’ in a narrower sense, he set about composing verses, first among them a hymn to *Apollo* (60 D, 61 B). As to other ways in which he received Apollo’s command, it is, for example, pretty clear from a variety of sources that Socrates understood the maxim of the Delphic oracle ‘Know thyself [*Γνῶθι σεαυτόν*]’ as an injunction to philosophical cross-examination.³⁵

In view of Socrates’ special devotion to Apollo in general, and Socrates’ understanding of his philosophical activity as commanded by and serving Apollo in particular, it would hardly be surprising if he understood this god to be the primary source of his own ethical inspiration. Indeed, it would be somewhat surprising if he

³⁵ The following evidence strongly suggests this. (1) Xen. *Mem.* 4. 2. 24–5: Xenophon has Socrates explain his subjection of an interlocutor to a demoralizing refutation (4. 2. 1–23) by reminding the interlocutor of this Delphic maxim. (2) Aristotle, as reported at Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1118 C: Aristotle says that ‘Know thyself’ seemed to Socrates the most divine of the Delphic maxims, and that it ‘was the original source of Socrates’ perplexity and search’. (3) Ar. *Clouds* 842: Aristophanes apparently makes a humorous allusion to Socrates’ association of the duty to refute with this Delphic maxim when he has Strepsiades, newly instructed in Socratic learning, say to his son, ‘Thou shalt know thyself, that thou art ignorant and dense [*γνώσει δὲ σαυτὸν ὡς ἀμαθῆς εἶ καὶ παχύς*]’. (4) At *Phileb.* 48 C–49 A Socrates interprets the maxim as including an injunction not to suppose that one has wisdom when one does not. (5) At *Chrm.* 167 A Socrates considers an interpretation of the maxim which equates knowing oneself with knowing what one does and does not know, and knowing what other people do and do not know, but merely believe they do, i.e. with just the sort of ‘human wisdom’ enjoined on him by the oracle’s message to Chaerephon as related in the *Apology* (on the other hand, it is admittedly puzzling that in the *Charmides* Socrates fails to embrace this as his own position, and indeed criticizes it; perhaps Plato is using his literary mouthpiece ‘Socrates’ to test a position originally held by the historical Socrates?).

Since the maxim was traditionally interpreted as a warning that men should know and keep to their lowly place in relation to the gods, one can readily understand that Socrates must have interpreted its message as similar to that of the oracle given to Chaerephon: that, god alone being truly wise, human beings’ wisdom is of little or no value (*Ap.* 23 A). And one can readily understand that, just as Socrates saw his refuting activity as standing in the service of demonstrating and disseminating this oracular message (23 B), so he must have seen it as standing in the service of demonstrating and disseminating the message of the maxim.

did not (after all, he does say at *Ap.* 23 A that Apollo possesses the ethical knowledge which he and other human beings lack). And I would suggest that—especially when one keeps in mind the possibility raised in the previous section that he saw himself as at least to some extent *indirectly* inspired via a human tradition—there turns out to be a sufficiently striking congruence between his substantive ethical views and ethical views associated with one or another known Apolline milieu to bear out the suspicion that he believes Apollo to be the primary source of his ethical inspiration.

In order to see this, let us focus on three complexes of ideas central to Socratic ethics. The first such complex is the doctrine of the *Apology* that people should care for practical judgement (*φρόνησις*), truth (*ἀλήθεια*), perfection of the soul (*ψυχή*), and virtue (*ἀρετή*) before wealth, honour, reputation, and their bodies.³⁶ As Burnet emphasized, such a doctrine was far from being a commonplace at the date when Socrates advanced it.³⁷ None the less, its various parts were all strikingly anticipated by sources (both philosophical and non-philosophical) intimately associated with Apollo.

Consider, first, the positive side of the doctrine: the injunction to care for practical judgement, truth, perfection of the soul, and virtue (*qua* perfection of the soul). The most distinctive ideal here is that of perfecting one's soul. This ideal was no commonplace when Socrates advanced it. The very conception of the soul which it employs would probably still have seemed strange to most people: at a time when most of them probably still had a version of the Homeric conception of it as merely the insubstantial shade or ghost that left a man's body at death, Socrates was identifying it with the person and making it the possessor of the person's intellectual and moral qualities. Accordingly, Aristophanes could rely on a mere reference to the 'clever souls [*ψυχὰι σοφαί*]' of Socrates' Thinkery to raise a laugh among his contemporaries (*Clouds* 94). However, this conception of the soul and the ideal of perfecting the soul were not unprecedented either. Where did they come from? Tragedy con-

³⁶ That this doctrine is genuinely Socratic is confirmed by its attribution to Socrates, or repetition, in several other first-generation sources besides Plato. Concerning the whole doctrine, see e.g. Ar. *Clouds* 414–22, 439–42; Aeschines, fr. 29 Nestle; Antisthenes, at Xen. *Sym.* 4. 34–45 and fr. 57, 65, 72, 73 Nestle. On the central idea of care for the soul specifically, see e.g. Xen. *Mem.* 1. 2. 4; Aeschines, fr. 29 Nestle; Antisthenes at Xen. *Sym.* 4. 34–45 and fr. 65 Nestle.

³⁷ J. Burnet, 'The Socratic Doctrine of the Soul', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 7 (1916), 235–59 at 243 ff.

tains precedents for both.³⁸ But in all probability Socrates' main source for them was Pythagoras and his followers, with whom Plato closely associates Socrates in his ideas concerning the soul in the *Phaedo*.³⁹ Pythagoras seems to have been the first thinker to develop a conception of the soul somewhat like Socrates'.⁴⁰ And the ideal of perfecting the soul was developed by Pythagoras as well. Thus Diogenes Laertius ascribes to Pythagoras the view that 'the most momentous thing in life is the art of winning the soul to good or to evil. Blessed are the men who acquire a good soul' (D.L. 8. 32); and in an ode which Pindar wrote under Pythagorean influence early in the fifth century we read of the blessings enjoyed by 'those who . . . have . . . been courageous in keeping their souls pure from all deeds of wrong' (*Ol.* 2. 68–70). Moreover, Socrates' closely related ideas concerning the soul's afterlife and judgement, of which there is evidence not only in several Platonic dialogues but also in Aristophanes' *Birds*,⁴¹ point in a similar direction. Once again these have precedents in tragedy,⁴² but once again it is probable that they are mainly of Pythagorean provenance.⁴³ Now (and

³⁸ A conception of the soul rather like Socrates' already occurs fairly frequently in tragedy. And Aeschylus already implies the ideal of having a good soul: see A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Chicago and London, 1975), 248–9.

³⁹ Cf. *Rep.* 600 A–B, where Socrates speaks approvingly of Pythagoras' way of life generally.

⁴⁰ Pace Burnet, 'The Socratic Doctrine of the Soul', 252. The most important evidence that Pythagoras abandoned the Homeric conception of the soul as a mere shade, identified it with the person, and ascribed mental functions to it is Xenophanes fr. 7, where Pythagoras, who believed in metempsychosis, is said to have told a man to stop beating a puppy because 'it is the soul of a friend of mine which I recognized when I heard its voice' (this evidence, overlooked by Burnet, is discussed by D. Furley, 'The Early History of the Concept of the Soul', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 3 (1956), 1–18 at 4, 11).

⁴¹ That the historical Socrates really did hold something like the suspicions about the soul's afterlife and judgement which Plato attributes to him in the *Apology*, the *Crito*, the *Gorgias*, and the *Phaedo* seems beyond much doubt in the light of *Birds* 1553–64.

⁴² Aeschylus in particular had expressed such ideas (see Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, 143–4).

⁴³ It is indeed in connection with this particular aspect of Socrates' theory of the soul that we have what is perhaps the most explicit evidence in Plato that the theory was Pythagorean in origin. At *Meno* 81 A–B Socrates attributes the doctrine of the soul's immortality and judgement to 'certain priests and priestesses who have studied so as to be able to give a reasoned account of their ministry; and Pindar also', and he goes on to quote a passage from one of Pindar's Pythagorean-inspired poems on the subject. It is fairly certain that the priests and priestesses in question are the Pythagoreans, and the reference to and quotation from Pindar provide another

this is the crucial point), it is well known that Pythagoras was intimately associated with Apollo.⁴⁴ In Diogenes Laertius alone we find reports that Pythagoras sacrificed only at the altar of Apollo, that he was said to have obtained most of his doctrines from the Delphic priestess, even that his followers thought he *was* Apollo.⁴⁵ The rest of the positive side of Socrates' doctrine—his injunction to care for practical judgement and truth—also has precedents with an Apolline background. For example, a saying of Pittacus, one of the seven wise men traditionally associated with Apollo, includes the prescription 'Love . . . practical judgement [*φρόνησις*], truth [*ἀλήθεια*] . . .'.⁴⁶

Consider next the negative side of Socrates' doctrine, the side requiring subordination of concerns for wealth, honour, reputation, and the body. This is a version of Socrates' insistence on *ἐγκράτεια*, or the subordination and control of (bodily) desires—an insistence expressed by Plato's Socrates at *Rep.* 430 E ff., most heavily emphasized by Xenophon and Antisthenes,⁴⁷ and confirmed as genuinely Socratic by the earlier evidence of the comic playwrights.⁴⁸ Now, this feature of Socrates' morality is a version of the characteristically Apolline virtue of temperance [*σωφροσύνη*], which finds expression in the Delphic maxim 'Nothing too much [*Μηδὲν ἄγαν*]',⁴⁹ and in numerous sayings of the seven wise men traditionally associated with Apollo, such as 'Lack of self-control is a harmful

link to Pythagoreanism. The *Phaedo* of course furnishes additional evidence of a Pythagorean background here, again showing Socrates' account of the soul's afterlife and judgement in close association with Pythagoreanism.

⁴⁴ See W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and their Gods* (Boston, 1955), 197–8; H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle* (Oxford, 1956), 401.

⁴⁵ D.L. 8. 13, 37, 8, 11. Another thinker who may possibly have had some influence on Socrates' conception of the soul is Heraclitus, who at least broke with the traditional conception to the extent of ascribing intellectual and moral properties to it—as can be seen from fr. 118, where he says that a dry soul is *wisest* and *best* (cf. fr. 98, 107). Like Pythagoras, Heraclitus would bear out my point concerning the Apolline background of Socrates' views (Heraclitus' Apolline and Delphic commitments are evident in fr. 51, 92, 93, 101, 116).

⁴⁶ O. Barowski, 'Sieben Weise', in *RE* ii/4. 2242–64 at 2259.

⁴⁷ Xenophon's Socrates describes *ἐγκράτεια* as 'the foundation of all virtue' (*Mem.* 1. 5. 4; cf. *Xen. Ap.* 16). For Antisthenes' adoption of this ideal, see e.g. *Xen. Syn.* 34–45 and fr. 12, 13 Nestle.

⁴⁸ See e.g. Ar. *Clouds* 414–22, 439–42. The evidence is fully discussed by H. Gomperz, 'Die sokratische Frage als geschichtliches Problem', in Patzer (ed.), *Der historische Sokrates*, 184–224.

⁴⁹ Also, albeit less obviously, in the Delphic maxim 'Know thyself' (see *Alc. I* 131 B, 133 C; *Chrm.* 164 D).

thing [βλαβερόν ἀκρασία]’ and several sayings which enjoin a care for virtue over pleasure.⁵⁰

The second complex of Socratic ethical ideas which we should consider concerns laws, oaths, and authority. Socrates’ profound respect for law is well attested. Plato and Xenophon both emphasize this aspect of his ethical outlook in recounting his behaviour during the trial of the sea generals after the battle of Arginusae (Plato, *Ap.* 32 B–C; Xen. *Mem.* 4. 4. 2 and *Hell.* 1. 7. 14–15); Xenophon in one place gives an extended illustration of Socrates’ deep respect for law, citing in addition to his behaviour during the trial of the sea generals his refusal to obey the Thirty Tyrants by arresting Leon of Salamis and his refusal to flatter the jury during his own trial (*Mem.* 4. 4. 1–4); and Plato’s *Crito* is of course from beginning to end devoted to illustrating and explaining Socrates’ deep respect for law. Now, this ethical attitude is very characteristic of devotees of Apollo, since Apollo is the god most intimately associated with the giving and protection of laws.⁵¹ This special association of Apollo with law, together with the fact that in speaking of ‘the god [ὁ θεός]’ in the *Apology* Socrates clearly means Apollo, makes it virtually certain that when at the end of the *Crito* Socrates says that ‘the god’ has guided his argument for obedience to the laws, that god is none other than Apollo. Moreover, we have further evidence that he attributed his respect for law to Apollo’s inspiration in the form of a report by Xenophon that he used to follow, and counselled others to follow, a response of Apollo’s oracle at Delphi, ‘Follow the law of the state: that is the way to act piously’ (*Mem.* 1. 3. 1; 4. 3. 16–17).⁵² So, at least where this part of Socrates’ ethical outlook is concerned, it seems almost certain that the hypothesis that he understood Apollo to be the source of his ethical inspiration is correct.

Related to Socrates’ respect for law is his respect for oaths. This is prominent in his explanation at *Ap.* 35 C–D of why it would be wrong of him to beg his judges to acquit him; and again in his explanation at *Mem.* 1. 1. 18 of his behaviour during the Arginusae trial. It also lies behind his striking use in casual contexts of such

⁵⁰ Barowski, ‘Sieben Weise’, 2256, 2258.

⁵¹ For an account of this function of Apollo, see Guthrie, *The Greeks and their Gods*, 183 ff. This function was especially associated with Apollo in Sparta, a state for which Socrates is known to have had a special affinity.

⁵² Cf. *Rep.* 427 B–C.

pseudo-oaths as 'by the dog' in place of oaths naming the gods. For such pseudo-oaths were used in order to avoid swearing by the gods, as a sign of deep respect for the gods and their oaths.⁵³ Now, it was again one of Apollo's special functions to watch over the keeping of oaths.⁵⁴ And concerning Socrates' avoidance of casually swearing by the gods in particular, it is recorded that among the precepts of Apollo's oracle at Delphi was one that read 'Use no oath [*ὄρκῳ μὴ χρῶ*]'.⁵⁵

One should also consider here, as related to Socrates' insistence on respect for laws and oaths, his insistence on respect for authority. This is exemplified in the principle, which he states in the *Apology*, that it is bad to disobey a better, whether man or god (29 B; cf. 28 D–29 A; *Crito* 50 E–51 C). It is also exemplified in his reported fondness for a famous Homeric passage which forcefully makes the point that one should obey one's betters, namely the Thersites passage from *Iliad* book 2 (Xen. *Mem.* 1. 2. 58; cf. *Rep.* 389 D–E). Now, insistence on respect for authority is once again a characteristic theme of Apolline ethics. For example, among the Delphic maxims are found 'Fear authority' and 'Bow before the divine'.⁵⁶

Third and finally, consider the following Socratic religious doctrines intimately bound up with his ethical outlook: the doctrines of the *Apology* that the gods do not allow a good man to come to harm in life or after death (41 C–D), and that it is not divine law for a better man to be injured by a worse (30 D); and the closely related doctrine attributed to Socrates by Aeschines that it is a mistake to believe that 'good and bad men enjoy the same fortune, rather than that the gods grant a better fate to virtuous and more pious men'.⁵⁷ Views of this sort were at this period by no means the commonplaces that they are likely to sound to our ears today. However,

⁵³ A scholiast reports that such 'Rhadamanthian' oaths were used 'in order to avoid swearing by the gods' (see Plato, *Euthyphro*, *Apology of Socrates*, *Crito*, ed. J. Burnet (Oxford, 1924; repr. 1986), 173–4). That the intention was pious rather than the opposite, if not already sufficiently shown by Socrates' otherwise pious nature, is confirmed by the fact that Delphi encouraged such an avoidance of oaths (as my main text goes on to show), and also by Libanius' discussion of the matter in his *Apology*, which makes this point (*Ap.* (= *Decl.* 1) 109, v. 74 Foerster).

⁵⁴ K. Wernicke, 'Apollon', in *RE* i/3. 1–111 at 14. (This function also belonged to Zeus.)

⁵⁵ W. Dittenberger, *Sylloge inscriptionum Graecarum*, 4th edn. (Hildesheim, 1960), iii, no. 1268.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
⁵⁷ Fr. 9 Nestle. It seems likely that these religious doctrines were at least part of Socrates' grounds for his principle that virtue is necessary and sufficient for happiness (*Gorg.* 470 E ff.; cf. Antisthenes, fr. 12 Nestle; Aeschines, fr. 29 Nestle).

they were already circulating in close connection with Apollo by the last decades of the fifth century. This can be seen from Euripides' *Ion*. Written during Athens' trials in the Peloponnesian wars, and in particular her bitter experience of the Delphic oracle's bias in favour of the Spartan cause, this play has sometimes been read as an indictment of Apollo. In truth, however, it is rather a reaffirmation of faith in the god: after apparently abandoning Ion and Creusa, Apollo in the end arranges things for their best advantage (just as, one may infer Euripides hoped, he would arrange things for Athens' best advantage after his apparent abandonment of her). The closing lines of the play express this reaffirmation of faith in Apollo, and in doing so ascribe to him a role as guarantor that good men and bad shall enjoy their respective deserts which is identical in spirit to the role ascribed to the gods by Socrates' doctrines: 'Hail Apollo, child of Zeus and Leto! He whose house is vexed by misfortunes ought to revere the deities and be of good courage! For at the last the good shall attain their deserts, but the bad, as their nature is, will never fare well' (Eur. *Ion* 1619–22).⁵⁸

Reflection on these three complexes of Socratic ethical ideas shows, then, that they are strikingly congruent with ethical ideas associated with one or another known Apolline milieu. This fact—and perhaps especially Socrates' explicit attribution to Apolline inspiration of his ethical views concerning respect for the law—confirms the suspicion that he understands Apollo to be the primary source of the divine inspiration that gives him his ethical insight.

VI

Observe, finally, the striking coherence that this interpretation lends to the historical Socrates' philosophical life. Socrates learns that Apollo's oracle has said that no one is wiser than he. Puzzled because he knows that he is ignorant and yet knows that Apollo must be right, he sets out to discover the real meaning of the oracle by first of all refuting it in its apparent sense, and thereby confirming his suspicion that this is not its real sense. But when he

⁵⁸ It is just possible that Socrates is the *source* of these ideas found in the *Ion* rather than their *recipient*. If so, this evidence would provide even stronger support for my main point, namely the intimate association of Socrates' ethical doctrines with Apollo.

looks for someone with wisdom to whom he might point in order to refute it in its apparent sense, he finds that those who at first seemed wise are in fact not, and he proves this on each occasion by refuting them—especially, by asking them for the meaning of the terms they use and then refuting the definitions which they give in response, thereby showing that they do not even understand their own claims. As he proceeds in this way, it gradually dawns on him that he is after all verifying the oracle in its apparent sense. And so eventually he realizes that the oracle is indeed meant in its apparent sense, and that its ulterior point must be that, unlike the god of the oracle, men have no ethical knowledge, he being the wisest of them who, like Socrates, recognizes his ignorance. And he infers that Apollo has sent him the oracle—along with encouragement in dreams and other signs (such as the Delphic maxim ‘Know thyself’)—in order to induce him to demonstrate and disseminate this insight to his fellow men, a task to which he henceforth consciously devotes his life.

This much we are told fairly explicitly in the *Apology*.⁵⁹ But it is really only half of the story. As Socrates tested men’s ethical definitions and found that neither they nor he possessed any that were defensible, he was forced to the conclusion that men’s ethical claims were made quite literally without understanding. Yet it seemed clear to him that in many cases these claims were nevertheless right and beneficial for action. How could this paradox be explained? The only solution was to suppose that these uncomprehended but right and beneficial claims were, like the uncomprehended but right and beneficial claims of the Pythia and her ilk, the deliverances of divine inspiration. And as Socrates reflected on certain further peculiarities of ethical endowment—how it appeared to be neither innate nor voluntarily communicated from one man to another like skill in the arts, but to have some other controlling source—this reinforced him in his conviction that its origin must be divine. And of course, once he was thus convinced of the divine origin of ethical insight, and in addition noted the Apolline character of the ethical principles which seemed right and beneficial, the whole situation was clear to him: Apollo was the divine source of ethical insight, and had sent Socrates on his mission in order to convince Socrates and other men not only of the negative point that, while Apollo had ethical knowledge, men had none, but also of the more positive

⁵⁹ For a fuller explanation, see my ‘Socrates’ Demand for Definitions’.

point that men were dependent for whatever ethical insight they *could* achieve on Apollo's inspiration, and ought therefore to follow the ethical principles bestowed by this god.

I can think of no more, or equally, satisfactory explanation of what should otherwise strike one as the quite puzzling fact that in the *Apology* Socrates, after giving in the oracle story an elaborate explanation of his refuting activity as ordained by and standing in the service of Apollo, subsequently goes on to imply that he believes, not only his refuting activity, but also *his communication of a set of positive ethical principles* to have been ordained by and to stand in the service of Apollo.⁶⁰ If made the offer of being set free on the condition that he desist from philosophy,

I should say to you: 'Men of Athens, I respect and love you, but I shall obey the god rather than you, and while I live and am able to continue, I shall never give up philosophy or stop exhorting you and pointing out the truth to any one of you whom I meet, saying in my accustomed way: "Most excellent man, are you . . . not ashamed to care for the acquisition of wealth and for reputation and honour, when you neither care nor take thought for practical judgement and truth and perfection of your soul?" And if any of you argues the point, . . . I shall question and examine and test [ἐλέγξω] him, and if I find that he does not possess virtue, but says he does, I shall rebuke him for scorning the things that are of greatest value and caring more for what is of less worth. This I shall do to whomever I meet . . . For know that the god commands me to do this, and I believe that no greater good ever came to pass in the city than my service to the god.' (29 D–30 A)

VII

I turn now to a few concluding remarks. The Socratic position which I have described in this article is of course unlikely to be found philosophically attractive today. We have quite left behind the religious world-view that it presupposes. Moreover, as I argued in 'Socrates' Demand for Definitions', Socrates' notion that an ability to provide definitions is a precondition of understanding is fatally flawed—so that the main argument which we have here found undergirding his conviction that ethical insights are not known but divinely inspired is vitiated.

However, Socrates' position remains of considerable historical

⁶⁰ Concerning this puzzle, cf. Stokes, 'Socrates' Mission', 74–5 (who suggests a different solution to it, however).

interest. And it is also important for the light that it promises to shed on Plato's position. For Plato's position can be fully understood only by seeing in which respects it agrees and in which it parts company with his teacher's.

In that connection, the lesson that emerges most immediately from the present enquiry is as follows: whereas Socrates' philosophical project involved a rather thoroughgoing dependence on divine inspiration, Plato was evidently uncomfortable with this, and increasingly eliminated it from his own position. That process is already at work in the *Apology*, where, although the dependence of the motivation of Socrates' *critical* project on divine inspiration is made clear (especially in the oracle story), his conception of positive ethical insight as divinely inspired is obscured. In subsequent dialogues Plato's suppression has an opposite emphasis: the dependence of the motivation of Socrates' critical project on divine inspiration (especially the oracle story) virtually drops from view, though there is a temporary rehabilitation of Socrates' conception of positive ethical insight as divinely inspired (in the *Crito* and the *Meno*). Eventually, however, Plato virtually eliminates this whole aspect of Socrates' position altogether.

This development is closely connected to another (which I merely sketch here, but hope to explain more fully in future work): the historical Socrates had a reasonably *unified* critical method, the elenchus, which, though dependent on the gods for its motivation (in particular, via the oracle), *did not itself depend on the gods*, whereas his positive philosophizing involved a *motley* of methods which *did depend on the gods* (including appeal to the *δαίμόνιον*, positive arguments such as those at the end of the *Apology* and in the *Crito*, the extraction of principles from an interlocutor by cross-questioning in the manner described by Aeschines' *Alcibiades*, and the discovery of principles in divinely inspired poetry). Plato evidently found the positive side of Socrates' philosophizing unsatisfactory both because of its reliance on the gods and because of its use of a motley of methods. He therefore attempted to solve both of these problems in one fell swoop by *turning the elenchus into a positive method*—something of which there is as yet no sign in the *Apology*, but which does occur in subsequent early and middle dialogues, indeed in about half a dozen different variants, including the following: the (unexplained) appearance of progress via successive applications of elenchus to attempts at a definition, as in the

Euthyphro; the application of elenchus to theses selected in such a way that demonstrating their falsehood will also constitute a substantive positive result, as in the *Protagoras*; the use of elenchus as a positive method for discovering truth given a strong background assumption, not only that vulnerability to it is a sufficient condition of falsehood, but also that invulnerability to it is a sufficient condition of truth, as in the *Gorgias*; the theory of recollection in the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, which *explains* why successive applications of elenchus can reasonably be expected to produce progress towards the truth; the positive method of hypothesis in the *Phaedo*, which incorporates elenchus as an essential part of itself; and finally, the positive method of dialectic in the *Republic*, which likewise incorporates elenchus as an essential part of itself.

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