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ARTICLE

Rationalizing Socrates' *daimonion*

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ABSTRACT

That Socrates took himself to possess a divine sign is well attested by ancient sources. Both Plato and Xenophon mention Socrates' *daimonion* on numerous occasions. What is problematic for contemporary scholars is that Socrates unfailingly obeys the warnings of his sign. Scholars have worried that Socrates seems to ascribe greater epistemic authority to his sign than his own critical reasoning. Moreover, he never so much as questions the authority of his sign to guide his actions, much less its divine nature. Socrates' unquestioning obedience to his sign thus appears to be in conflict with another of Socrates' defining characteristics: namely, his relentless rationality. However, Socrates does not seem to recognize such inconsistency. The problem of the *daimonion*, then, is this: is Socrates' professed commitment to rationality consistent with his unquestioning deference to his *daimonion's* warnings? And if so, how? In this paper, I first discuss several solutions to the problem of the *daimonion*. I aim to show that none of the accounts of Socrates' sign that have appeared in the scholarly literature are adequate. I then propose a new account of the *daimonion*, which, I argue, secures the rationality of Socrates' obedience to his divine sign.

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I. Introduction

That Socrates took himself to possess a divine sign is well attested by ancient sources. Both Plato and Xenophon mention Socrates' *daimonion* on numerous occasions.[1] Indeed, in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates' hapless interlocutor indicates that it was common knowledge amongst Athenians that Socrates claimed to possess such a sign (*Euthyphro*, 3b). Euthyphro even goes so far as to suggest that Socrates' claim to possess a divine sign was a principal reason for his prosecution. Given this, it is plausible that Socrates' possession of a daimonic sign – and, accordingly, his conception of himself as a 'seer' of sorts – was one of his defining characteristics in the eyes of his fellow Athenians, on a

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[1]In what follows, I will focus on the appearance of the *daimonion* in Plato's dialogues. I see the way in which Plato describes Socrates' sign throughout the dialogues as consistent, and am not committed here to any specific dating strategy regarding Plato's works, or any general interpretive method.

par with his penchant for elenctic argumentation and impoverished appearance (*Phaedrus*, 242c).[2]

What is problematic for contemporary scholars is that Socrates unfailingly obeys the warnings of his sign. If his *daimonion* signals that he ought not perform an action, then he does not perform that action.[3] Scholars have worried that Socrates seems to ascribe greater epistemic authority to his sign than his own critical reasoning, though as we shall see, there have been several attempts to 'save' Socrates from this consequence. Most important for my purposes here, however, is the fact that he never so much as questions the authority of his sign to guide his actions, much less its divine nature. Socrates' unquestioning obedience to his sign thus appears to be in conflict with another of Socrates' defining characteristics: namely, his relentless rationality. Socrates' commitment to the ultimate authority of critical reasoning is best evidenced by a statement he makes in the *Crito*:

> … I am not just now but in fact I've always been the kind of man who's persuaded by nothing but the reason that appears to me to be best when I've reasoned about it.
>
> (*Crito*, 46b; translation modified)

On the face of it, this claim seems inconsistent with Socrates' obedience to his *daimonion*: if Socrates were as rational as he claims, he would not regard his *daimonion* as having any authority to guide his actions – instead, he should always and only follow his own critical reasoning. But Socrates does not recognize this inconsistency. As Vlastos puts it: '[b]etween these two commitments – on one hand, to follow [reason] wherever it may lead; on the other, to obey divine commands conveyed to him through supernatural channels – he sees no conflict. He assumes they are in perfect harmony' (Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 157). The problem of the *daimonion*, then, is this: is Socrates' professed commitment to rationality consistent with his unquestioning deference to his *daimonion*'s warnings? And if so, how?

I have two principal aims in this paper. First, I discuss several solutions to the problem of the *daimonion*. As I see it, there are two general kinds of accounts of the *daimonion*: non-religious accounts and religious accounts. I aim to show that none of the accounts of Socrates' sign that have appeared in the scholarly literature are adequate. Second, I propose a new, religious account of the *daimonion*, which I argue provides an adequate solution to the problem of the *daimonion*.

[2]Citations of Plato's works come from Plato, *Complete Works*.

[3]Whether Socrates' *daimonion* does, in fact, 'trump' Socrates' reasoned decisions is a subject of some controversy, to which I will return in more detail, below.

II. Introducing the *daimonion*

Before I begin to review accounts of Socrates' daimonic sign present in the scholarly literature, it is appropriate to discuss the features Socrates ascribes to his sign. Socrates' *daimonion* is a source of moral guidance. However, the sign never tells Socrates that he *ought* to perform a certain action; rather, it tells him only that he *ought not* to perform a certain action: 'whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything' (*Apology*, 31d).[4] In this way, the *daimonion* is exclusively apotreptic.

When Socrates receives a signal from his sign, he plausibly gains a kind of moral knowledge (McPherran, 'Socratic Theology and Piety', 268). However, he does not gain knowledge of general moral principles from his sign. As McPhrerran explains:

> [I]n no case does [Socrates' sign] provide him with general, theoretical claims constitutive of […] expert moral knowledge […]. Neither does it provide him with readymade explanations of its opposition. Rather, its occurrences yield instances of non-expert moral knowledge of the inadvisability of pursuing particular actions because those actions are disadvantageous to Socrates and others; for example, the knowledge that it would not be beneficial to let a certain student resume study with him.[5]
>
> (McPherran, 'Socratic Theology and Piety', 268)

Socrates does not gain knowledge of the form 'Actions of kind *K* are always wrong' from his sign. Rather, he gains knowledge of the form 'A particular action *X* is wrong'. Moreover, Socrates does not receive explanations from his sign as to why an action he was at least considering performing is wrong. When his sign forbids him from performing an action, Socrates is left to speculate as to why that action would be wrong. For example, in the *Apology*, after claiming that his *daimonion* forbade him from entering politics, Socrates states:

> This [i.e. the *daimonion*'s signal] is what prevented me from taking part in public affairs, and I think it was quite right to prevent me. Be sure, men of Athens, that if I had long ago attempted to take part in politics, I should have died long ago, and benefited neither you nor myself.
>
> (*Apology*, 31d)

It is necessary to mention two further attributes of the *daimonion*. In the *Apology,* Socrates makes this statement: 'I have a divine or spiritual sign

[4]See also *Phaedrus*, 242c, *Theaetetus*, 150c–151b and *Euthydemus*, 272e.

[5]It is plausible that Socrates would not himself hold that he gains knowledge from his daimonic experiences. In *Apology* 22a-b, Socrates claims that the poets and writers do not possess knowledge (arguably) because they are unable to give an account of why the things they say are true. Such a criticism may also apply to the beliefs Socrates forms on the basis of his *daimonion*'s signals. However, I hold that, by contemporary lights, Socrates does gain knowledge from his daimonic experiences.

which Meletus ridicules in his deposition. This began when I was a child' (*Apology*, 31d). Socrates also claims in the *Apology* that the *daimonion* at times forbids him from performing seemingly trivial actions: 'At all previous times my familiar prophetic power, my spiritual manifestation, frequently opposed me, even in small matters, when I was about to do something wrong … ' (*Apology*, 40a).

III. Non-religious accounts of the *daimonion*

Several scholars have proposed accounts of Socrates' *daimonion* according to which the *daimonion* is not – and Socrates does not consider it to be – a supernatural phenomenon. Call such accounts *non-religious accounts.* One non-religious account is what I will call (following Brickhouse and Smith) the *reductionist account* (Brickhouse and Smith, 'Socrates' *Daimonion* and Rationality', 44). Martha Nussbaum offers clear statement of this account's central thesis: 'the *daimonion* of Plato's Socrates is no standard tutelary deity at all, but an ironic way of alluding to the supreme authority of dissuasive reason and elenctic argument' ('Comment on Edmunds', 234). According to the reductionist account, Socrates' *daimonion* is not a deity. Rather, the *daimonion* is the power of critical (dissuasive) reasoning – or, as Vlastos would have it, 'rational intuition' (Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 283–5). Thus, there is nothing supernatural about the *daimonion*. Socrates refers it as 'divine' only because he places upmost importance on critical reasoning. The reductionist account provides a simple solution to the problem of the *daimonion.* This account identifies Socrates' *daimonion* with his own faculty of (dissuasive) reasoning. Thus, when Socrates obeys a 'command of his sign', he is simply acting as he has reasoned to be best. Therefore, there is no tension between Socrates' obedience to his *daimonion* and his professed commitment to rationality, since they turn out to be the same.

Roslyn Weiss offers an alternative non-religious account of Socrates' daimonic sign. Weiss' account is similar to the reductionist account in that, on both accounts, Socrates' sign is not – and Socrates does not take it to be – a supernatural phenomenon. For Weiss, Socrates' sign is 'divine' in these two respects: (a) it is uncommon for a person to possess such a sign; and (b) Socrates experiences his sign as adventitious – that is, as having a source outside of himself (Weiss, 'For Whom the *Daimonion* Tolls', 85). Weiss' account does not, unlike the reductionist account, *identify* the *daimonion* with Socrates' faculty of critical reasoning; rather, Weiss holds that Socrates' sign is *dependent* on Socrates' reasoning and his resulting beliefs and judgements (Weiss, 'For Whom the *Daimonion* Tolls', 89). For Weiss, the *daimonion* is a 'warning bell' whereby Socrates is prevented from performing unjust actions (Weiss, 'For Whom the *Daimonion* Tolls', 85). However, this signal is not in

principle unique to Socrates. In Weiss' account, anyone who is sufficiently concerned with doing what is just and avoiding what is unjust possesses a *daimonion*; likewise, anyone who is unconcerned with justice lacks a *daimonion* (Weiss, 'For Whom the *Daimonion* Tolls', 85).

For Weiss, the *daimonion* only warns Socrates against performing an action when that action is in conflict with his beliefs and judgements: 'What the *daimonion* opposes is not actions that are in accord with Socrates' considered judgment but actions inconsistent with that considered judgment' (Weiss, 'For Whom the *Daimonion* Tolls', 88). Moreover, Socrates' sign signals only when Socrates is in a state such that his beliefs and judgements are 'for the moment insufficient on their own to guide him aright' – for example, when his 'judgement is momentarily clouded' or when 'there are important considerations on both sides' (Weiss, 'For Whom the *Daimonion* Tolls', 89).[6] We can thus formulate Weiss' account as follows. Suppose Socrates, in a 'moment of weakness', is either considering performing an action *X* or has in fact decided that he will perform *X* (Weiss 'For Whom the *Daimonion* Tolls', 93). Socrates' beliefs and/or previous judgements, however, entail that he ought not perform *X*. On Weiss' account, the *daimonion* signals at precisely this moment of weakness, warning Socrates that performing action *X* would be inconsistent with his beliefs. In this way, Socrates' *daimonion* ensures that Socrates does not perform an action that is inconsistent with his moral convictions.

In Weiss' account, Socrates is justified in his obedience to his *daimonion* because his *daimonion* is itself grounded in Socrates' own reasoning and beliefs. In other words, when the *daimonion* signals that Socrates should not perform an action, this signal occurs strictly in virtue of the fact that Socrates' own beliefs and judgements entail that he should not perform that action. Thus, since it is rational for Socrates to act as his beliefs and judgements entail he should, it is rational for him to heed the guidance of his *daimonion*.

Both non-religious accounts are inconsistent with Socrates' description of a daimonic event found in the opening passages of the *Euthydemus*:

> As good luck would have it, I was sitting by myself in the undressing-room just where you [i.e. Crito] saw me and was already thinking of leaving. But when I got up, my customary divine sign put in an appearance. So I sat down again, and in a moment two of them, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, came in, and some others with them, disciples of theirs, who seemed to me pretty numerous.
>
> (*Euthydemus*, 272e)

There are four events described in this passage:

[6]All three quotations are from the same page.

(a) Socrates considers leaving the palaestra.
(b) Socrates gets up to leave.
(c) The *daimonion* signals.
(d) Socrates sits down.

What is problematic in this passage for the reductionist account is that Socrates does not appear to have any evidence in virtue of which he might reason that he should not leave the palaestra. There is therefore no explanation for why (c) occurs, insofar as the reductionist account is held. According to the reductionist account, the *daimonion*'s signal *just is* Socrates' own reasoning. For the reductionist account, then, Socrates must have some reason to suppose that the action he is about to perform is wrong in order for his *daimonion* to signal. But Socrates gives no indication that he is aware that potential philosophical interlocutors are approaching prior to the *daimonion*'s signal, and so he has no reason to suppose that there would be anything wrong with him leaving. This passage thus indicates that Socrates' *daimonion* cannot be identical with Socrates' reasoning.

The same passage from the *Euthydemus* poses a similar problem for Weiss' account. According to Weiss' account, when the *daimonion* signals that Socrates should not perform an action, it is because this action would be inconsistent with Socrates' moral beliefs and judgements. Weiss therefore holds that a daimonic signal may occur only when Socrates possesses evidence to suggest that his intended action is inconsistent with his moral convictions. This is a consequence of Weiss' view that the *daimonion* is a 'voice inspired by Socrates' thinking and intuition' (Weiss, 'For Whom the *Daimonion* Tolls', 89). But in the *Euthydemus* passage, Socrates does *not* possess such evidence: he is unaware that potential philosophical interlocutors are approaching, and so he does not possess any information to suggest that leaving the palaestra would be inconsistent with his belief that he ought to engage in philosophical discussion. And yet the *daimonion* signals regardless.

Weiss appears to recognize that this passage is problematic for her view. She attempts to explain it as follows:

> To those scholars who insist on taking the *daimonion*'s appearance in the *Euthydemus* as seriously as its other appearances, I should point out that my thesis can still fairly easily accommodate it: when Socrates subconsciously senses the group [i.e. Socrates' potential interlocutors] approaching, his interest in philosophical conversation triggers the *daimonion* since a conflict arises between what Socrates cares about and his plan to leave.
>
> (Weiss, 'For Whom the *Daimonion* Tolls', 89, footnote)

The concern with this interpretation of the passage is that it, in effect, attributes to Socrates the capacity for clairvoyance. After all, there seems to be no other way whereby Socrates could 'subconsciously sense' that a group

of potential interlocutors are approaching. If so, then this interpretation of the passage is clearly *ad hoc*. Given that the *daimonion* is, in Weiss' account, a natural phenomenon that occurs only in virtue of Socrates' own beliefs and judgements, there is no textual evidence available to Weiss to support the claim that Socrates possesses the capacity for clairvoyance. Thus, Weiss' interpretation of this passage is unsatisfactory, and so her account remains inconsistent with this passage.

There is an additional criticism of the non-religious accounts of Socrates' sign. Both accounts attempt to explain away the religious connotations of the language Socrates uses when speaking of his sign. Nussbaum, for example, holds that Socrates is being ironic when he describes his sign as 'divine'. Likewise, as noted above, Weiss holds that Socrates' sign is divine only in the sense that it is uncommon. But these explanations suggest a portrait of Socrates that is dubiously secular. Plato's dialogues, in fact, give us no reason to suppose that Socrates was such a 'secularizer', who would use terms with strong religious connotation – such as 'divine' and 'spiritual' – in reference to a non-religious phenomenon (*Apology*, 31d; *Euthydemus*, 272e).[7]

In summary, both non-religious accounts are unable to provide an adequate interpretation of Socrates' daimonic experience in the *Euthydemus*. They succeed in rationalizing Socrates' obedience to the *daimonion*'s warnings, but only at the cost of inconsistency with textual evidence. Moreover, they fail to take seriously Socrates' religious beliefs. Thus, neither non-religious account provides an adequate account of Socrates' divine sign.

IV. Religious accounts of Socrates' *daimonion*

Several scholars have provided alternatives to the non-religious accounts of Socrates' sign. In this section, I discuss three such accounts. These accounts differ from the non-religious accounts insofar as they hold that Socrates takes his *daimonion* to be a genuinely supernatural phenomenon. Nonetheless, these accounts purport to resolve the apparent tension between Socrates' professed commitment to rationality and his obedience to his divine sign's warnings. Call such accounts *religious accounts*.

Vlastos has proposed a religious account of the *daimonion*. Following Brickhouse and Smith, I will call this account the *interpretationist account* (Brickhouse and Smith, 'Socrates' *Daimonion* and Rationality'). Vlastos states the central thesis of this account as follows:

> [A]ll [Socrates] could claim to be getting from the *daimonion* at any given time is precisely what he calls the daimonion itself – a 'divine sign,' which allows, indeed

[7]For a detailed study of Socratic religion, see McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates*.

> requires, *unlimited scope for the deployment of critical reason* to extract whatever truth it can from those monitions.
>
> (Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 170)

When Socrates receives a signal from his sign, Socrates engages in the process of *interpretation*. On the interpretationist account, the beliefs formed as a result of a daimonic signal are exclusively the result of Socrates' own reasoning about these signals – that is, his own interpretation of the signals. Moreover, according to the interpretationist account, daimonic signals do not have *any* semantic content in themselves. This follows from Vlastos's claim that daimonic signals allow 'unlimited scope for the deployment of critical reason' (Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 170; italics removed). If daimonic signals did have intrinsic semantic content, this would restrict Socrates' interpretation of them – it would limit the scope of Socrates' reasoning with respect to them. Daimonic signals therefore do not have semantic content in themselves; they are, as it were, blank slates onto which Socrates projects his own ratiocinations, thereby imbuing them with semantic content. This putative feature of the *daimonion*'s signals – that they lack intrinsic content – allows Vlastos to ameliorate Socrates' obedience to his sign with his commitment to rationality. The information Socrates receives from a daimonic signal is purely the result of Socrates' reasoning about the signal. The signal does not itself provide Socrates any guidance with respect to his actions. Thus, when Socrates obeys his *daimonion*, he is simply acting as he reasoned best. There is therefore no conflict between Socrates' rationality and his deference to his divine sign.

There are several problems with the interpretationist account. I believe Brickhouse and Smith have adequately addressed these problems, and so I will not discuss all of them here (Brickhouse and Smith, 'Socrates' *Daimonion* and Rationality'). However, I will note what I take to be one of their central objections to the interpretationist account. Recall that Socrates' *daimonion* is exclusively apotreptic. In the writings of Plato, there is never a case in which Socrates' *daimonion* signals that he ought to perform a certain action; rather, the *daimonion* only ever signals that Socrates ought not to perform a particular action. Thus, it seems that Socrates cannot interpret these signs however he likes. The signals of the *daimonion* must therefore possess at least some minimal semantic content by which Socrates' interpretation of these signals is restricted. If so, then the *daimonion*'s signals *do not* allow for 'unlimited scope' of Socrates' critical reasoning (Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 170). Thus, the interpretationist account is inconsistent with Plato's characterization of the *daimonion*.

I now turn to a second religious account of Socrates' sign. This account is the first of what I call *derived rationality* accounts, because it holds that the rationality of Socrates' obedience to his *daimonion* is derived from something

else, such as some other beliefs or evidence that he may have. The central claim of this account is that it is rational for Socrates to obey his *daimonion* because he possesses independent evidence of his sign's reliability. Call this account the *empiricist account*.[8] This account appears to have been endorsed by several formidable scholars. For example, A. A. Long holds that 'the certitude that [Socrates] vested in the *daimonion* [was] inductively warranted, like what we might call instant obedience to one's conscience or moral inhibition' (Long, 'How Does Socrates' Divine Sign Communicate with Him?', 73). Long further claims that the sign's 'reliability for [Socrates] was what made it rational' (Long, 'How Does Socrates' Divine Sign Communicate with Him?', 73).[9] Likewise, Mark McPherran states: '[Socrates' trust in the *daimonion*] is in no way irrational, for it may be rationally confirmed in its wisdom and so given credence on an inductive basis … ' (McPherran, 'Introducing a New God', 18).[10] Brickhouse and Smith have offered what is perhaps the most nuanced version of the empiricist account. Thus, in what follows, I will address their version of this account.

Brickhouse and Smith ask us to consider the case of Jeanne, a freedom fighter who plans attacks on an authoritarian regime by which her city is occupied (Brickhouse and Smith, 'Socrates' *Daimonion* and Rationality', 59). Jeanne's task is not easy: sometimes the attacks that she plans go well, and other times they do not. On the night before an attack, Jeanne receives a mysterious note on which the word 'don't' is written. At this point, Jeanne does not believe that the appearance of the note is related to the planned attack, and so she pays it no heed. However, on the following morning, Jeanne's attack does not go well: many of her comrades are captured or killed. This leads Jeanne to suspect that the enemy was aware of her plans. This process soon begins to happen with some consistency: whenever Jeanne receives a note, the subsequent attack goes poorly. After this process has been repeated a number of times, Jeanne begins to see the notes as warnings. She regards the notes as reliable indicators that the enemy is aware of her position, despite the fact that she is unaware of the source of the notes. Thus, whenever a note appears, Jeanne believes that the attack planned for the following day will not be successful.

[8]This name, again, is given in Brickhouse and Smith, 'Socrates' *Daimonion* and Rationality'.

[9]Long, I should note, also seems to express some sympathy with the sort of account offered by Lännström ('Trusting the Divine Voice'), which derives the rationality of Socrates' obedience to his sign from his religious worldview (I discuss Lännstöm's account below). However, as I read him, Long ultimately accepts an empiricist account of the *daimonion*.

[10]McPherran's account has an additional feature that is worthy of mention. In addition to holding that Socrates' obedience to his sign was justified by induction, McPherran also holds that Socrates' *deduced* that his sign was reliable from certain premises regarding the gods and the divine nature of his sign. See McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates*, 188–9. I think the criticisms I raise for Lännstrom's account below also apply to this view; for this account, like Lännström's, derives the rationality of Socrates' obedience to his *daimonion* from Socrates' religious beliefs.

In this case, it seems that it is rational for Jeanne to form beliefs based on the terse notes. The previous cases in which the notes have proven reliable in providing true information about the world serve as an evidential base. Because Jeanne possesses this evidential base, it is perfectly rational for Jeanne to form beliefs on the basis of these notes and, moreover, to act upon these beliefs. To be sure, Jeanne may not gain *knowledge* from the notes, but this does not threaten the rationality of her trust in the notes. Moreover, Jeanne need not know the source of the notes in order to form beliefs rationally on the basis of the notes. In order for her trust in the notes to be rational, Jeanne need only possess strong evidence gathered over time indicating that the notes are a reliable guide to truth (Brickhouse and Smith, 'Socrates' *Daimonion* and Rationality', 60).

Brickhouse and Smith argue that Socrates' obedience to his *daimonion* is rational for the very same reasons that Jeanne's trust in the cryptic notes is rational (Brickhouse and Smith, 'Socrates' *Daimonion* and Rationality', 60). Socrates had many daimonic experiences over the course of his life. When Socrates first received a signal from the *daimonion* as a child, he may have been hesitant to heed its warning. However, Socrates observed over time that the *daimonion* only warns against actions that he later discovers would have been wrong for him to perform because they would have been unbeneficial to him in some respect. He thus accumulated strong evidence that the *daimonion* was a reliable guide to truth. As a result of this evidence, Socrates eventually came to trust his *daimonion* to guide his actions (Brickhouse and Smith, 'Socrates' *Daimonion* and Rationality', 60). This trust was rational because of the evidence Socrates had available to him indicating that the *daimonion*'s signals were always trustworthy.

We can put the empiricist account more precisely by considering a hypothetical daimonic event. While Brickhouse and Smith do not spell out exactly what they take to occur when Socrates receives a signal from his divine sign, I take it that they are proposing something like the following. Suppose Socrates is about to perform an action *X*. However, just before he performs *X*, Socrates experiences a daimonic signal. Socrates takes the *daimonion* to be warning him that it would be wrong for him to do *X*. He then infers that it would actually be wrong to perform *X*, based on an induction from past experiences of this sort. According to the empiricist account, it is rational for Socrates to form this belief because of the evidential base Socrates possesses with respect to the *daimonion*. This evidential base is constituted by Socrates' previous daimonic experiences, all of which corroborate the *daimonion*'s reliability.

While the empiricist account of Socrates' sign is compelling, there are a few problems with it. For one, Brickhouse and Smith intend the case of Socrates to be analogous with that of Jeanne. But it seems that they are disanalogous in at least one important respect. When Jeanne first receives the notes, she regards

them with suspicion. It only after the reliability of the notes has been confirmed that she trusts the notes, and hence their unknown source. But it is implausible that Socrates ever regarded his *daimonion*'s signals with such suspicion, if he did indeed experience his *daimonion*'s signals as religious phenomena. As Anna Lännström puts it: 'When we believe that a god speaks to us, we generally do not wait for him to prove that he is trustworthy before trusting that he knows what is best for us; we simply trust him' (Lännström, 'Trusting the Divine Voice', 49). So Socrates' situation and Jeanne's situation are not straightforwardly analogous. I will return to this feature of Socrates' daimonic experiences – that he does not subject them to interrogation – in the following section.

That Socrates' and Jeanne's cases are not perfectly analogous does not, of course, pose a grave threat to the empiricist account; the account could be formulated without the analogy. However, there are two more serious problems for this account. The first problem is that this account actually convicts Socrates of irrationality. Recall that Socrates, in the *Apology*, claims that his *daimonion* has been with him since he was a child (*Apology*, 31d). Consider the first few instances in Socrates' life in which he received a signal from his *daimonion*. On the occasion of these daimonic events, Socrates did not possess evidence indicating that his divine sign was a reliable guide to truth. But in the empiricist account, it is this evidence that secures the rationality of Socrates' obedience to his *daimonion*'s signals. In the absence of such evidence, it would be irrational for Socrates to obey his *daimonion*'s warnings. But Socrates gives no indication that he has ever regarded his *daimonion* as unreliable, and thus gives us every reason to suppose that he obeyed his *daimonion*'s signals even as a child. Thus, when he was a child, Socrates obeyed the *daimonion*'s signal despite the fact that he lacked evidence of his sign's reliability. If so, then according to the empiricist account, Socrates acted irrationally. This consequence of the empiricist account may not, on the face of it, appear to undermine the empiricist account. After all, this account merely convicts Socrates of irrationality as a child. However, as I will soon show, there is a plausible way to understand Socrates' reactions to his *daimonion* as fully rational even when he first experienced it.

The second problem is intimately related to the first. According to the empiricist account, Socrates' obedience to his divine sign is rational because Socrates possesses evidence of the sign's reliability. This evidence constitutes an evidential base. Crucially, with every piece of evidence indicating that the sign is reliable, this evidential base expands. As this base expands, it will become more rational for Socrates to form beliefs as a result of his *daimonion*'s signals. In short, it is a consequence of the empiricist account that the epistemic status of Socrates' sign will *change* as Socrates acquires further evidence of its reliability. The problem with this is that Socrates gives no indication that the epistemic status of his sign changes over the

course of his life. Textual evidence gives us no reason to suppose that Socrates put greater trust in his sign as he received more signals from it.

Another derived rationality account has recently been proposed by Anna Lännström. Call this account the *culture-bound account*. This account plausibly holds that Socrates was a devoutly religious man. Moreover, Socrates indicates that he experienced the signals of his sign as *religious* phenomena (Lännström, 'Trusting the Divine Voice', 42; see *Theaetetus,* 150c–151b and *Phaedrus*, 242c-d). Thus, due to his 'god-filled worldview', it would seem perfectly rational to Socrates to trust the warnings of his sign, precisely because he experiences them as messages from a divine source (Lännström, 'Trusting the Divine Voice', 42). This account thus appeals to the religious nature of Socrates' daimonic experiences in order to show that it is rational for Socrates to form beliefs on the basis of such experiences.[11] However, there is a problem with the culture-bound account. According to this account, it is rational for Socrates to form beliefs on the basis of his daimonic experiences because such beliefs cohere with his religious worldview (Lännström, 'Trusting the Divine Voice', 44). Thus, it would be irrational for Socrates to form such beliefs if he lacked this worldview. But Socrates presumably *did* lack such a worldview as a child – or at least we have no reason to suppose that his childish worldview was itself sufficiently well developed or coherent to provide the sort of justification the culture-bound account requires.[12] Thus, like the empiricist account, the culture-bound account convicts the young Socrates of irrationality.

To be sure, both derived rationality accounts more or less succeed in defending the mature Socrates' commitment to rationality with his obedience to his sign. However, they fail to give an adequate account of the *daimonion*, for the reasons discussed above. As I see it, the problem with the derived rationality accounts is that they assume that the rationality of Socrates' obedience to his sign must be derived from something else Socrates' possesses, such as an evidential base or some specific (and presumably coherent) set of other beliefs. But it seems to me that such derivations are not, in fact, required. Thus, in what follows, I reject the derivationist assumption and propose an alternative account of Socrates' divine sign. I aim to explain why Socrates is entitled to hold beliefs formed as a result of his daimonic experiences simply in virtue of the sort of process I take Socrates' *daimonion* to be.

[11]C. D. C. Reeve has proposed an account that is, by my lights, similar to Lännström's account. Like Lännström, Reeve holds that Socrates' trust in his *daimonion* is based on his religious beliefs – in particular, his beliefs that the gods are good, and so would not lead him astray. However, Reeve, unlike Lännström, holds that these beliefs are secured by means of elenctic testing. See Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology*. For criticisms of this view, see Brickhouse and Smith, 'Socrates' *Daimonion* and Rationality'.

[12]One might hold that the young Socrates did possess a religious worldview that was sufficiently well developed and coherent so as to provide justification for his acceptance of his daimonic experiences. It seems to me that this would make the young Socrates a rather unique child. Such a claim would therefore require textual support.

V. A new account of Socrates' *daimonion*

Consider a typical case of sense perception. While walking through a garden, you happen upon a rose bush. You see the rose bush before you. You see the redness of the flowers, the thorns protruding from their stems. If you are a typical human perceiver, then your perception of the rose bush will lead you to form beliefs about it: you will believe that the bush is there; you will believe that its flowers are red. Moreover, all things being equal, your perceptual experience will automatically induce these beliefs. In this way, perception is an automatic belief-forming process. Now consider a question: is it rational to form beliefs on the basis of your perceptual experience? The answer seems to be 'yes': clearly, you are not violating any norms of rationality in believing that the roses are red. To be sure, if you acquire sufficient evidence that your sensory modalities are unreliable guides to truth, it may become irrational for you to form beliefs on the basis of your perceptual experience. However, such belief formation is rational in the absence of such evidence: perception is, as it were, innocent until proven guilty. Moreover, it seems that it would be rational for you to form beliefs on the basis of your perceptual experience *even if* you lacked evidence that your visual perception is a reliable guide to truth. For example, the blind person newly made to see possesses no evidence to suggest that her visual experience reliably provides her with accurate information about the world, and yet it is rational, it seems, for her to form beliefs on the basis of the information provided to her by visual experience.[13] Indeed, it seems that it would be unreasonable for her to *doubt* her visual experience. After all, such doubt, it seems, would be reasonable only if she possessed evidence her visual experience is unreliable. On what basis could she reject the information provided by her visual experience in the absence of such evidence?

I propose that just as it is rational for one to form beliefs on the basis of perceptual experience, so too it is rational for Socrates to form beliefs on the basis of his *daimonion*'s signals. When Socrates receives a signal from his sign that he should not perform an action *X*, this experience has a forceful phenomenal character, as is the case with any instance of sense perception. That Socrates experiences this daimonic experience as a *religious* experience might contribute to the phenomenal force of this experience, but this is not necessary for my purposes. All that matters for my purposes is that when

[13]Some epistemologists have argued that the beliefs formed as a result of certain cognitive processes (such as perception) enjoy *epistemic entitlement*. Because beliefs formed by means of such processes enjoy epistemic entitlement, one has a right to hold these beliefs even in the absence of evidence indicating that the process by which they are formed is reliable. There are both religious and non-religious accounts of how certain cognitive processes entitle us to hold beliefs formed by these processes. Graham ('Epistemic Entitlement') appeals to natural selection, whereas Alvin Plantinga (*Warrant and Proper Function*) appeals to intelligent design. My argument in this section is that the beliefs Socrates forms as a result of his divine sign enjoy just such epistemic entitlement: Socrates has an epistemic right, as it were, to hold beliefs formed on the basis of his daimonic experiences.

Socrates' *daimonion* appears to him, he has a vivid experience, the content of which is that performing action *X* would be unbeneficial to Socrates. The vivacity of this daimonic experience induces Socrates to form a belief that he ought not perform action *X*. Like sense perception, Socrates' *daimonion* is an automatic belief-forming process: it automatically induces belief. The belief Socrates forms as a result of his *daimonion*'s signal is therefore not formed as a result of Socrates' reasoning about the signal – his trust in his *daimonion* is not *derived* from anything else; the belief is formed, as it were, reflexively (Senn, 'Socratic Philosophy, Rationalism, and "Obedience"', 19). Because Socrates' *daimonion* is an automatic belief-forming process, Socrates cannot be convicted of irrationality for forming beliefs on the basis of his daimonic experiences.[14]

To be sure, Socrates' *daimonion*, like sense perception, is a *defeasible* belief-forming process. If some other of Socrates' cognitive processes, such as perception, were to present him with overwhelming, decisive evidence that his *daimonion* was not a reliable guide to truth, it would become irrational for Socrates to form beliefs on the basis of his daimonic experiences. If this were to occur, then Socrates would have to learn to resist the information provided to him by his *daimonion*, just as we learn to resist the information provided to us by perception in cases of illusion. However, insofar as Socrates does not possess sufficient evidence that his sign is unreliable, it is rational for him to obey his *daimonion*. Moreover, if Socrates possesses no such evidence, then there is no rational basis for him to doubt the warnings of his sign: why would he reject the information provided by his daimonic experiences if he has no reason to suspect that his sign is unreliable?

I do not deny that evidence of the *daimonion*'s reliability supports the rationality of Socrates' obedience of his *daimonion*'s signals. Rather, I am denying that such evidence is required for Socrates to hold these beliefs rationally. On the present account, it is rational for Socrates to form beliefs on the basis of his *daimonion*'s signals even when he does not possess evidence indicating that his *daimonion* is a reliable guide to truth. Just as it is rational for the blind person newly made to see to form beliefs on the basis of her visual experience, so too it is rational for Socrates to form beliefs on the basis of his *daimonion*'s signals when he lacks evidence of their reliability. Moreover, neither am I denying that Socrates experienced his *daimonion*'s warnings as religious phenomena. However, unlike the culture-bound account, my account relies on neither the religious nature of these experiences nor any specific culture-based assumptions in order to secure the rationality of Socrates' trust in his *daimonion*. All that my account requires is

[14]It is important to note that I do not claim that Socrates must be aware that his *daimonion* is an automatic belief-forming process in order for his obedience to his sign to be rational.

that Socrates' daimonic experiences were forceful enough to induce belief, all else being equal.

VI. Conclusion

I have attempted to show that several prominent accounts of Socrates' *daimonion* are inadequate. Each of these accounts either is inconsistent with textual evidence or convicts Socrates of irrationality (or both, in some cases). Moreover, I have proposed a new account of Socrates' *daimonion*. According to this account, Socrates' *daimonion* is an automatic belief-forming process. Because Socrates' sign is a process of this sort, Socrates is entitled to form beliefs on the basis of his daimonic experiences. There is, however, a qualification that must be made. If Socrates were ever questioned about the rationality of his obedience to his sign, we might now agree that he would perhaps appeal to either evidence of its reliability or his religious beliefs in order to defend his rationality. As I have argued above, such evidence and beliefs are *not* required for his obedience to his sign to be rational: Socrates could in principle simply appeal to the sort of process his *daimonion* is in order to defend his rationality.[15] Nevertheless, it seems plausible that Socrates might also – or instead – cite evidence of his sign's reliability and his religious beliefs if the rationality of his obedience to his sign were challenged by an interlocutor. Such a response, after all, would seem perfectly natural. In this respect, then, the two derived rationality accounts are correct: evidence or religious beliefs may well have a role to play in a full account of the rationality of Socrates' obedience to his divine sign – at least by the time Socrates comes to realize just how unusual and peculiar his particular gift turns out to be.

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[15]This response is available to Socrates, of course, only if he is aware that his *daimonion* is an automatic belief-forming process. While I leave open the possibility that Socrates *could* be aware of this, it, again, is not required by my account.

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