Part One

PHILOSOPHY OF GENIUS

The scraps of paper which have been worn away and dirtied by a thousand fingers, and which we must accept as bad money, are repugnant to every tidy person. And the used-up, washed-out everyday words are no less repulsive to friends of mental tidiness, because they take on a different sense in each mouth, and thus, as currency of a higher kind, only simulate an illusory credit. So much more unpleasant does this devaluation of words become when one feels that they formerly numbered among the aristocrats of language. Such a degraded aristocrat, still betraying its noble lineage through its external appearance, is the word "genius."

—Georg Witkowski, Miniaturen
1 Greek Gods, *daimōn*, and Socrates’ *daimonion*

There is some truth in the popular notion that Plato leads Greek thought away from polytheism, yet the exact character of his turn remains mysterious. Neither Plato’s philosophy of ideas nor Socrates’ skepticism fully accounts for the theological impetus of the Platonic dialogues, because their explicit statements about the gods reach no univocal conclusion. A theological development shows itself indirectly: Plato performs one answer to established religion by representing the life and death of Socrates, who continues to affirm his unique encounters with divinity even when accused and tried for impiety. This biography had no need to be historically accurate in order to influence Western theology profoundly. At the end of a long line of revisions, modern European philosophers reconceive Socrates as a determined rationalist whose individual certainty does not preclude religious experience.¹

In the Platonic drama that transforms Greek religion, one key term is the Socratic *daimonion*, which is variously described as something divine, a customary divine voice or sign. Socrates’ *daimonion* has, however, always eluded definitive interpretation. The “something divine” (or daemonic) is already enigmatic when it first appears in

¹On Socrates as a prototype of modern man, see Benno Böhm, *Sokrates im achtzehnten Jahrhundert: Studien zum Werdegange des modernen Persönlichkeitsbewusstseins* (Neumünster: Karl Wachholtz, 1966), 11–19. Böhm also briefly discusses the functions of the *daimonion* (p. 16).
texts by Plato and Xenophon, and in subsequent tradition the ascribed meanings and functions only proliferate. With reason, the configuration of Greek daimôn, Latin genius, and French génie has been called “a wonderful confusion” (eine wunderliche wirrnis).2

The present discussion neither surveys the vast literature on Socrates' daimonion nor strives to recover the original form of this divine mystery. Daimonia will continue to lurk amid a multiplicity of textual topoi despite all efforts to curtail their operations and to deny their efficacy. If the attempt to entrap this trope is abandoned, how can one approach the active power of the daimonion? What are the dynamics of the daimonion in Plato’s dialogues? Although Plato’s Apology vividly depicts the trial and condemnation of Socrates, the significance of the Athenian decision remains controversial. Modern scholarship tends to view the accusations against Socrates as the consequence of long-standing prejudices rather than as a reaction to his alleged impiety. But the hostile response to Socrates’ theological leanings is the surest indication of their importance.

Hegel provides an incisive point of departure from which to understand Socrates’ “genius” as a religious innovation. Because his Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie construe Socrates allegorically, as a turning point in the development of spirit, Hegel reveals the strategic significance of Socrates’ references to divinity in opposition to established Greek religion. According to Hegel, the daimonion turns Socrates inward, away from Athenian norms, and makes Socrates a forerunner of modern subjectivity.

Following Xenophon, Hegel associates Socrates’ daimonion with the charge that he recognizes or imports novel divinities (kaina daimonia), although in fact Socrates introduces a novel form of divinity. The dispute over the grounds for Socrates’ conviction rests on shades of meaning, however, and the significance of Socrates’ theology emerges only in light of its context. If Socrates was charged with impiety as a consequence of his daimonion, then this figure must have been incompatible with the established religious language. In order to understand how this may have been the case, it is necessary to examine the traditional theological terminology.

Daimonion is a key word that cannot be firmly grasped apart from

2S. v. “Genie,” by R. Hildebrandt, in Deutsches Wörterbuch, ed. Jakob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm (Leipzig, 1854). This translation is my own, as are all translations hereafter, except where otherwise indicated.
Greek Gods, daimon, and Socrates’ daimonion

the ancient vault it unlocks: daimon and theos are basic terms in Greek piety. The complexity of Socrates’ daimonion derives in part from ambiguous links to the evolving tradition of daimones, guardian spirits. Homer and Hesiod are necessarily the ground of Platonic theology, and yet no map of this ground can master the turn that Plato gives to his precursors.

A first analytic gesture returns to the daimonion of Socrates by way of Hegel’s allegorical reading. Subsequently, an approach to the classical daimon prepares for a strategic reading of Socrates’ defense against his Athenian accusers, as presented in Plato’s Apology. Against the background of daimones and daimon, the Socratic daimonion revises the polytheistic tradition and moves toward a form of abstract monotheism.

Hegel’s “Socrates”

For Hegel, spirit is essentially related to language, and thus Socrates, a turning point in spirit, appears as a decisive moment in the historical text of philosophy. According to the Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie, Socrates is “not only a most important figure in the history of philosophy—the most interesting in the philosophy of antiquity—but also a world-historical person.” Emblem of a philosophic Aufhebung, Socrates does not merely oppose Greek custom but retains both sides of the dialectic in himself. Hegel’s Socrates allegorizes the development of spirit toward self-certain, self-determinative subjectivity: his destiny is a double movement of “turning back into himself” (Rückkehr in sich) and “decision out of himself” (Entscheidung aus sich). To the extent that Socrates represents the decision of subjectivity against Greek law, Hegel believes that he was necessarily an enemy of the state and rightly convicted.

The daimonion appears to confirm Socrates’ position as an outsider

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3See, for example, Hegel’s Phänomenologie des Geistes, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952): “We again see language as the existence of spirit. It is the self-consciousness existing for others, which is immediately present as such, and as this is universal” (p. 458).

in relation to Athenian norms. Hegel asserts that the first accusation, "that Socrates did not hold to be gods, those which the Athenian people held to be, did not have the old gods, but rather imported new ones," is connected with the *daimōn* (VGP 498). In short, the *daimōn* of Socrates was "a different mode [eine andere Weise] from that which was valid in the Greek religion." Religious innovation makes Socrates an enemy of the Athenians at the same time that he is "the hero who, in place of the Delphic god, established the principle: man knows in himself what the true is; he must look into himself" (VGP 502–3). Socrates is thus both a hero in the development of spirit and an enemy of his contemporaries.

Skeptical of the prophetic powers that some readers attribute to Socrates' *daimōn*, Hegel finds a similarity between Socrates' trances and abnormal states of consciousness. He writes that the *daimōn*, or "genius" of Socrates, "is not Socrates himself, not his opinion, conviction, rather something unconscious [ein Bewusstloses]; Socrates is driven" (VGP 491). The "something divine" at once becomes something unconscious, external (das Äusserliche) and yet subjective (ein Subjektives). Socrates' oracle takes on "the form of a knowing, that at the same time is bound up with an unconsciousness,—a knowing, that can also occur in other circumstances as a magnetic condition [of mesmerism]" (VGP 491). While Hegel never explicitly rejects the

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5 As evidence of this connection, Hegel repeats the account given by Xenophon at the start of his *Memorabilia*. He approves Xenophon's version, but where Xenophon reports that Socrates believed that "the *daimōn* gave a sign to him [eautōi sēmainein]" (Mem. 1.1.2), Hegel mistranslates *daimōn* as "the voice of God" (die Stimme Gottes) (p. 490). In Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Socrates defends himself by noting that his *daimōn* is not so different from innocent forms of prophecy. But Hegel repeats Xenophon's account only to show that Socrates was in fact guilty. A. E. Taylor, in his *Varia Socratica* (Oxford: James Parker, 1911), questions the association of the *daimōn* with Socrates' indictment: "If Socrates believed that 'heaven' gave him revelations by means of the *sēmeion*, he believed neither more nor less than any of his neighbors who put their faith in omens, or consulted a soothsayer about their dreams. And it follows at once that if Socrates could be charged with impiety for believing in the prophetic significance of his 'sign,' Anytus and Meletus could equally have brought a successful *graphē asebeia* against any Athenian who believed in dreams and omens, that is, against the great majority of the *dēmos*" (pp. 10–11). But Taylor attributes greater rationality and consistency to Athenian jurors than they need have possessed. And since Hegel treats the life of Socrates as an allegory of spirit, rather than as a literal history, Taylor's reasoning does not disqualify Hegel's reading of Xenophon.

6 Neither the ordinary language nor the psychology of Hegel's time distinguished between *bewusstlos* and *vorbewusst*, "consciously" (or "unconscious") and "preconscious." Hegel's coinage plays on a second meaning of *bewusstlos* as "senseless" and leads to an extended discussion of abnormal psychological states.
prophetic image of Socrates, he makes the supposedly pathological manifestation of the *daimonion* appear far more compelling than its divinity.

Hegel bases his theory that the Socratic *daimonion* is "something unconscious" on the *Symposium* 220cd.² Plato's Alcibiades associates Socrates' motionlessness with the depth of his meditations, and Hegel takes this anecdote as evidence of the profundity of his spirit. But Hegel is not satisfied with the trance as a sign of Socrates' reflective depths and calls it a cataleptic state in which Socrates is "completely dead as a sentient consciousness"; this is "a physical tearing away of the inner abstraction from the concrete bodily being, a tearing away, in which the individual separates himself from his inner self" (*VGP* 449). While Socrates' thought represents a particular level of world-historical consciousness, his trances are pathological (*krankhaft*), and Hegel later argues with increasing urgency that Socrates' *daimonion* is linked to cataleptic trances (*VGP* 495). Neither Plato nor Xenophon associates the *daimonion* with Socrates' trancelike states. Hegel makes this connection in order that the pathological Socrates may function as an allegory of his relationship to the Athenian people: Socrates is like a sleepwalker, and Athens is like a waking person. Hegel's allegory directly contrasts Socrates' self-interpretation as a gadfly that rouses the sleeping horse, Athens (*Apol.* 30e–31a).³ Despite Socrates' own references to the Delphic exhortation "Know thyself," Hegel suggests that Socrates himself was incapable of self-knowledge in relation to his experience of the *daimonion*.

From the start of his exposition on Socrates' *daimonion*, Hegel main-

²According to Alcibiades, "On one occasion some idea came to him [*synnoētas*] early in the morning, and he stood there contemplating [*skopon*] it. When he made no progress, he wouldn't give up, but went on inquiring [*zetōn*]. At noon he was still there; men were noticing him and saying to each other in marvel that Socrates had been standing there considering [*phrontizōn*] since sunrise. Finally, in the evening some of the Ionians took their meal, brought out their mats and lay down in the cooling air—this was in the summer, of course—to see whether he would also stand through the night. He stood there until morning, and then at sunrise he said his prayers to the sun and went away." The words used to describe Socrates' thought process are incompatible with a dysfunctional, pathological condition. I have consulted and modified the translations from Plato that appear in the *Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

³Compare Heraklitus' use of the sleeping/waking opposition, in Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmenten der Vorsokratiker* (which I shall henceforth cite as Diels and Kranz), 3 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1954) B1, B21, B26, B73, B88, B89; and see also the discussion of divination in the *Timaeus* 71de.
tains a cautious distance: "In connection with this famous Genius of Socrates, as a so much talked-about bizarrerie of his imagining, neither the idea of guardian spirit or angel, nor that of conscience, should occur to us" (VGP 490–91). The daimonion, or "genius," is a "bizarrerie" of his imagining, and we must guard against conceiving it as a guardian spirit or angel. Although Socrates is characterized as "one who is certain in himself," his daimonion does not represent anything universal, such as conscience (Gewissen). The daimonion stands opposite the universality of Socratic reason: the revelations of the daimonion concern mere particulars and are thus "less significant than those of his spirit, of his thinking" (VGP 501). But even if the daimonion proves inferior to intellectual self-determination or conscience, what convinces Hegel that it is not to be imagined as a guardian spirit (Schutzgeist) or angel (Engel)?

Hegel relies in part, no doubt, on the opinion Schleiermacher expresses in his contemporary edition of Plato's dialogues. Schleiermacher's note to the Apology 27c argues that neither Socrates nor Meletus understood the daimonion as "a particular being [Wesen] of a higher kind." Rather the daimonion is "only a special effect [Wirkung] or revelation of the, or of an indefinite, higher being." 9 Hegel's tone is significant, however, when he denies all argument its place and asserts that "the idea of a guardian spirit, angel," should not even occur to us. Hegel claims that Socrates believed himself to possess what we should not seriously consider.

Hegel ultimately evades any direct confrontation with questions of the divinity of the daimonion. Although he opts for an allegorical reading of Socrates as a moment in the development of spirit, Hegel reduces the occurrence of the daimonion to a psychological aberration. 10 Furthermore, Hegel preserves for the daimonion a middle ground

10Hegel's psychological reading of Socrates is exaggerated and literalized by L. F. Lelut's Du démon de Socrate, 2d ed. (Paris: J.J.B. Ballière, 1856): "Socrates was a Theosophist, a visionary, and, to say the word, a madman; this opinion is the only true one" (p. 93). Søren Kierkegaard responds with hostility to the 1836 edition of Lelut's book in The Concept of Irony, trans. Lee M. Capel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968): "There has also been considerable difficulty with this daimon quite recently, and I see from a publication by Heinsius that a psychiatrist in Paris, F. Lelut, has been so self-wise as to claim: 'Socrates was afflicted with that madness which in technical language is called hallucination' " (p. 186n). Yet Kierkegaard does not take issue with Hegel as regards the daimonion.
"between the exteriority of the oracle and the pure interiority of spirit" (VGP 495). Socrates appears to Hegel as prophet of internal certainty (innere Gewissheit), but to Socrates’ contemporaries, this certainty appears as a new god. From the standpoint of the Athenians, then, Hegel considers the accusation against Socrates as completely correct, and Hegel ratifies their condemnation of him.

Like many other post-Enlightenment thinkers, Hegel recognizes Socrates’ significance as a self-determinative consciousness and yet cannot accept his theological innovation. The meaning of the daimonion remains a problem for modern thought, because this mysterious agency can neither be identified with a guardian spirit nor reduced to the voice of conscience. Hegel chooses to understand the activity of the daimonion as an expression of a pathological condition in which Socrates loses rational awareness and submits himself to "something unconscious." Although modern interpreters acknowledge the significance of Socrates as an individual, they deny the divine influence of the daimonion.

Hesiodic daimones and Homeric daimon

_Daimones_ and daimon are precursors of the Socratic daimonion. Daimones appear influentially in Hesiod as minor deities, guardians over men; daimon occurs often in Homer and reveals a plenitude of meanings close to the omnipresent theos. The moment of Socratic subjectivity depends on its opposition to the shadowy terminology it displaces.

Hesiod narrates the history and activity of daimones in two central passages of the _Works and Days_. In a double narrative of decline, Pandora first exposes men to all the ills of life; afterward the golden race is followed by silver, bronze, semidivine, and iron generations. The first two generations transmigrate and become spirits, epichthonioi and hypochthonioi:

But after earth covered over this generation,
They are called the earth-dwelling spirits,
Noble warders-off of evil, protectors of mortal men,
Who keep watch over judgments and wicked deeds,
Clad in mist wandering everywhere over the earth. . . .
But after earth covered over this generation,
They are called by men the blessed dwellers under the earth,
Second in order, but nevertheless honor attends upon these also.11

Echoes of the Hesiodic daemonology in expressions attributed to
Thales, Theognis, Heraklitus, and Empedocles attest to its prevalence.12 In most instances, the guardian spirits are souls of the dead.

Passages in Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Plato,13 Xenocrates, Plutarch, Maximus of Tyre, and Apuleius,14 further repeat and revise the image of daimones. The tension between daimones and daimon recurs in Socrates’ life: just as the traditional daimones precondition the charge that Socrates recognizes novel divinities (kaina daimonia), so also is Homeric daimon the precondition for Socrates’ peculiar daimonion. The charge thus stands in the tradition of Hesiod, while Plato’s account continues the tradition of Homer.

The plurality of Hesiodic daimones contrasts the characteristically singular Homeric daimon. Literary histories often begin with Homer, yet Hesiod’s writings most likely represent earlier religious beliefs. Thus the plural Hesiodic daimones probably preceded the singular Homeric daimon, and Homer anticipates Plato’s turn away from the polytheistic divine apparatus. While daimones are spiritual entities,
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guardians over men, daimōn only exceptionally refers to a definite spiritual entity. Homer's indefinite mode of expressing divinity is, perhaps inadvertently, a step toward monotheism.

Many classical scholars seek to define the elusive daimōn in Homer's poetry by fixing it according to a stable rule of meaning. Others recognize the instability of the daimōn as a kind of "floating signifier" (signifiant flottant). For convenience, these may be labeled the "essentialist" and the "rhetorical" approaches. The essentialist view seeks to delimit meanings as if they adhered to words; the rhetorical view emphasizes that meaning extends beyond isolated words to the functional mechanisms that govern their use. Specifically, the essentialist approach attempts to establish the core meaning of Homeric daimōn as a spiritual being, power, or essence; the rhetorical approach conceives daimōn in connection with its distinct uses, strategic force, or function. Whereas the essentialist view understands daimōn as a simple name, the rhetorical view understands daimōn in terms of the narrative configurations that represent it.

The meaning of daimōn has always been considered in conjunction with that of theos, but modern scholarship has increasingly rejected the essentialist notion that daimōn must name a definite divine being. Nineteenth-century classicists generally view daimōn either as a synonym for theos or as the name for some inexplicable divine power. One early classicist distinguishes between three Homeric uses of the word daimōn: a) as an equivalent of theos; b) as a name for "the divine efficacy [Wirkung] in general"; and c) as "the dark, wonderful reigning [Walten] of a higher power." Other classical scholars compare the

16Rhetorical reading attends closely to the workings of performative language, but it stands apart from the tradition that views rhetoric merely as language of persuasion.
17What is the extent of Plato's irony when, in the Cratylus 397–98, he depicts Socrates as an essentialist who traces false etymologies of theoi and daimones? Focusing on the act of naming, Socrates attempts to localize the meaning of theoi in terms of their "running" (their) nature and explains that daimones are wise and knowing (daemons). Since Socrates, many interpreters have attempted to specify the etymological associations of daimōn. Yet the search for etymologies generally discovers only what it hopes to find. F. G. Welcker, for example, writes in his Griechische Götterlehre (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1857): "According to the basic meaning of daio, divide, separate, is also to order and to know; for we know only that which we divide, as Schiller writes to Goethe" (p. 138). Thus daimōn becomes a kind of guardian over efforts to discriminate among meanings, encouraging us to believe that to separate is to know.
relationship between *daimôn* and *theos* to that of divine essence (*numen*) and divine persona (*persona divina*) in Latin texts. At the end of the nineteenth century, Hermann Usener takes the first major step toward a rhetorical understanding when he observes that “what suddenly comes to us like a sending from above, what makes us happy, what depresses and bends us, appears to the exalted perception as a divine being. To the extent that we understand the Greeks, they possess for this the species notion *daimôn*. The word *daimôn* is no longer conceived as Homer’s name for a divine reality; rather, *daimôn* characterizes the vocabulary of men, who speak with limited comprehension of providence. Any occurrence that “comes to us like a sending from above” may be associated with *daimôn*, divinity or fate as it “appears to the exalted perception.”

Twentieth-century scholars radicalize the rhetorical approach, for they tend to attribute different narrative roles to *daimôn* and *theos*. Rather than name indistinct or distinct divine beings, then, these words appear to characterize different modes of expression. By contrasting the speeches of Homer’s characters with the Homeric narrative, recent classicists argue that while the narrator refers to the gods by their names, his epic characters express themselves more vaguely: “The poet thus distinguishes between himself and the personages that he brings in as speaking, in that these ordinarily do not recognize the personality of the intermingling divinity, while he himself constantly knows exactly whether Athena or Hera performed the miracle concerned.” The choice of words is determined not by an abstract difference in meaning but by differences in the speakers. Narrative principles determine whether gods are called by their proper names or by the words *daimôn* and *theos*. Twentieth-century authors

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39 Carl Friedrich Nagelsbach, *Die homerische Theologie in ihrem Zusammenhange dargestellt* (Nuremberg: Johann Adam Stein, 1840), 68; and Eduard Gerhard, “Über Wesen, Verwandtschaft, und Ursprung der Dämonen und Genien,” in *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* (Berlin: Besser, 1852), 238. While *daimôn* in some cases functions as the name of a divine essence, we cannot logically conclude that this function is the essence of the word.


22 Erland Ehnmark, in *The Idea of God in Homer* (Uppsala: Almquist and Wiksell, 1935), takes the rhetorical approach further when he suggests that *daimôn* is a “special stylistic device” (p. 65). As Ehnmark observes, “the vague terms employed by the ordinary man in attempting to describe the gods are due to his limited knowledge of their real
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thus decline to limit daimôn to definite meanings and instead concentrate on its force. Daimôn operates like natural forces, both within the narrative world and as a narrative practice: “An essential characteristic of daimôn is, on the whole, the actual power, the power being exerted, the dynamic power.” Daimôn and theos suggest two different conceptions of power. The initial distinction between daimôn and theos as the “divine efficacy” and the “divine persona” turns into a distinction of mechanisms in two disparate rhetorical modes.

One specialized rhetorical function of daimôn pertains to the interpretation of Socrates’ daimonion from the standpoint of the Latin genius: “The hypothesis that daimôn might signify a spirit or a génie... appears acceptable in II. XV, 468, Od. V, 421 and XIX, 201; it even imposes itself in Od. XI, 587, where we see a supernatural power that

nature” (p. 70). In contrast, it was Homer’s “right and duty as a poet to supply definite information on those points that were left vague and indefinite in the popular conception of the gods” (ibid.). But Ehnmark does not explain the different uses of daimôn and theos. Gerald F. Else’s “God and Gods in Early Greek Thought,” in Proceedings of the American Philological Association, 80 (1949), also refers to “differences in usage” between theos and theoi: “They arise not from differing opinions as to the basic assumption, but from different kinds and degrees of knowledge in the speaker. The gods know each other and each other’s names and activities and have no occasion for the indefinite theos or theon tis except when talking to men. Neither does the poet, whose knowledge is accredited as coming from the gods. Both the gods and the poet, then, are correctly polytheistic in their language. And so are men when they have the guidance of cult or prophecy. But they are not always so precise. Not only do they not always know what god or gods they are dealing with, and whether it is one or more; it does not always matter very much” (p. 28). Indefinite expressions may thus arise from the ignorance of men as to what divinity influences their lives. Represented characters refer to mysterious powers as daimôn; gods and Homer, whose knowledge is supposed to be divine, do so only rarely. Else argues, furthermore, that the use of daimôn instead of theos may be determined by metrical considerations (p. 30). Indeed, daimôn does frequently occur either at the end of a line or in fixed phrases such as daimoni isos. Greek theology apparently develops in conjunction with stylistic compulsions, including the demands of oral composition.

23 Elisabeth Brunius-Nilsson, DAIMONIE: An Inquiry into a Mode of Apostrophe in Old Greek Literature (Uppsala: Almquist and Wiksell, 1955), 133. Brunius-Nilsson lists the number of occurrences of daimôn in Homer, as follows: nom. sing., 40; gen. sing., 3; dat. sing., 11; acc. sing., 3; nom. pl., 0; gen. plur., 0; dat. plur., 2; acc. plur., 1. Daimôn is thus clearly linked to the singular form, unlike theos, which occurs more frequently in the plural.

applies itself to drying up the lake in which Tantalus wishes to quench his thirst. 25 Several Homeric passages, including those that involve the agency of Athena, constitute prototypes for the guardian spirits that attend to men in later literature. 26 Yet Socrates' daimonion should not be equated with a familiar spirit, for it has no stable identity and only acts to oppose certain false steps.

The relationship between Hesiodic and Homeric daemonology is in part that of the plural to the singular. In Hesiod's writings, daimones are guardians (phylakes), like Athena in the Odyssey, but they number in the thousands. These protecting spirits recur significantly both in Heraklitus' fragments and in the account of daimones ascribed to Diotima in the Symposium 202e. Homer's sixty-odd uses of daimôn include only three instances in the plural.

By what transformation does daimôn displace daimones? Twentieth-century secondary literature encourages the view that through rhetorical change, the plural form cedes to the singular. No critic has yet pressed the point to its logical conclusion and asserted that Greek polytheism was displaced by abstract monotheism by means of transformations in the use of narrative modes.

Socrates' New daimonia

Like Homer in his narratives of daimôn, Plato swerves from the Greek polytheistic tradition through his representations of the Socratic daimonion. But while daimonion is the singular form of the divinities (daimonia) that Socrates is accused of importing, both this "something divine" and these "divine things" remain obscure.

Plutarch, Maximus of Tyre, and Apuleius project current Roman beliefs onto Socrates and regard his daimonion as a kind of guardian

25 Gilbert François, La polythéisme et l'emploi au singulier des mots "theos," "daimôn," dans la littérature grecque d'Homère à Platon (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1957), 333–34. Compare Walter Otto's "Juno," in Philologus, 64, 18 (1905): "A remarkable circle of ideas ascribes a genius to every Roman man, a semi-divine spiritual being which...stands in such a close connection to the visible human being, as only the soul is thought in connection with the body" (pp. 178–79). See also A. Brelich, Die geheime Schutzgottheit von Rom, trans. V. von Gonzenbach (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1949), and Thaddeus Zielinski's "Marginalien," in Philologus, 64, n.s. 18 (1905), 20.

26 See, for example, the encounter in book 13, esp. ll. 296–99; and compare Aeschylus' Eumenides, passim.
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spirit. Christian interpreters follow their example. The decisive battle between theological and psychological interpretations takes place in the eighteenth century, when critics increasingly view the daimonion as Socrates’ innate genius, according to the modern usage of this term. In his Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten, for example, Hamann explicitly links theological Genius with aesthetic or psychological Genie. Responding to this introjective tendency in the late eighteenth century, Robert Nares writes a monograph in defense of the daimonion as a form of divination. But Edward Young’s epithet describing genius as “that god within” apparently satisfied most readers.

What is Socrates’ daimonion? A rhetorical approach raises the more exact question: how does the word daimonion operate in Plato’s dialogues? Since Schleiermacher’s commentary, modern interpreters doubt that the daimonion is rightly conceived as a guardian genius. What must the daimonion be if it is linked to Meletus’ charge that Socrates is guilty of “not believing in the gods whom the state supports, but in other new divinities” (kaina daimonia) (Apol. 24b)? According to Plato’s account, contemporary Athenians thought that Socrates held novel theological beliefs. Thus Meletus’ condemnatory mention of “new divinities” (kaina daimonia) is of central importance even if the accusation against Socrates is not directly based on ac-


30 “Conjectures on Original Composition” (1759), in The Works of Edward Young (Edinburgh: C. Elliot, 1774).

31 See Plato, Werke, pt. 1, vol. 2, pp. 432–33. As Eduard Zeller argues in Die Philosophie der Griechen, 4th ed. (Leipzig: Fues, 1889), vol. II, pt. 1, the daimonion of Socrates was “no Genius, no personal being, but rather only indefinitely a daemonic voice, a higher revelation” (p. 78).

32 Plato’s version of the charge is slightly milder than that given by Xenophon in the Memorabilia I.1.1 and by Favorinus (Diog. Laert. ii.5.40). According to Plato, the graphē reads: “Socrates is guilty of corrupting the youth, and of believing not in the gods whom the state supports but in other new divinities [kaina daimonia]” (Apol. 24b). Xenophon and Favorinus report that the Athenians accused Socrates of publicly importing (eispheron) or introducing (eisagoumenos) novel “divine things”; Plato’s version mentions only a private belief in or observance of (nomizein) these daimonia. Much rests on this subtle difference, because the guilt of Socrates derives from public action, not from the private occurrence of the daimonion.
counts of the *daimonion*. How does Plato present the relationship between Socrates' *daimonion* and its plural form, *daimonia*? To what extent does the accusation against Socrates mistake his conceptions?

The *daimonion* occurs in only six Platonic dialogues and in one pseudo-Platonic work, the *Theages*. Two of the most extensive discussions, in the *Apology*, are the basis for any rigorous interpretation. The other instances show that Socrates' experience of the *daimonion* is distinct from contemporary forms of prophecy and that it can serve a narrative function in Plato's dialogues.

Euthyphro, in the Platonic dialogue that bears his name, encourages an association of Socrates' *daimonion* with the "new divinities" of the indictment. When Socrates refers to the writ against him, however, he apparently misquotes: Meletus "says that I am maker of gods [ποιητὴν εἶναι θεόν] and so he prosecutes me, he says, for making new gods [καίνους ποιοῦντα θεοὺς] and for not believing in the old ones" (*Euthyphro* 3b). Perhaps to make the claim against him appear even more *atopos*, Socrates replaces the vague new "divinities" (*daimonia*) by new "gods" (theoi). In any case, Euthyphro understands the indictment as referring to Socrates' *daimonion* and responds, "It is because you say that your *daimonion* always occurs to you" (ibid.). The implication is, then, that Socrates is to be prosecuted for novelties concerning divinity (*peri ta theia*). Furthermore, Euthyphro notes that the multitude is unreceptive to all talk of the gods, even when Euthyphro himself tells of them and prophesies. For Euthyphro, then, the Socratic *daimonion* is indistinguishable from his own experiences of prophecy. But Plato does not represent Socrates as a prophet like contemporary prophets, and Socrates' *daimonion* probably has little in common with the prevailing daemonic beliefs and practices. In the *Republic* 496c, for example, Socrates considers that his *daimonion* (to *daimonion sêmeion*) has occurred to few others.

The *Euthydemus* and *Theaetetus* briefly refer to the *daimonion* in connection with Socrates' activities as educator. In the *Euthydemus* 272e, "as I was standing up, there came the customary divine sign [το εἰθὸς sêmeion to daimonion], so I sat down." As a result, he remains and discourses with a group of students. In the *Theaetetus* 151a, Socrates describes the *daimonion* as forbidding him to accept certain students: "These, when they come back requesting association with me and behaving in an incredible fashion, with some of these the *daimonion* that comes to me forbids [me] to associate." The *Theages*, a pseudo-
Greek Gods, daimōn, and Socrates' daimonion

Platonic work, exaggerates this aspect of the daimonion. When Socrates explains the grounds of his competence as a teacher, he includes the fact that his daimonion helps him to prevent his acquaintances from acting wrongly. But this positive approach to the daimonion denies Socrates his characteristic irony.33

In the Phaedrus, Socrates again refers to the daimonion as something that prevents him from making a false step. While delivering his speech, Socrates had already sensed something wrong, and he ascribes this sense to the power of prophecy (mantikon) of the soul. But when he is about to leave the place, "crossing the river, the daimonion, that is, the sign that customarily comes to me [to daimonion te kai to eiōthos sēmeion moi gignesthai] occurred" (Phaedrus 242b). This daimonion, the customary sign, manifests itself to Socrates as a voice: "On any occasion it holds me back from what I am about to do, and I seemed to hear a certain voice thence, which now does not allow me to depart before I purify myself." As the reason for this manifestation, Socrates suggests that he has "committed some fault toward the god [eis to theion]" (242c). Although the soul's prophetic power had already disturbed Socrates, his uneasy sense of having erred is not identical with the voice of the daimonion. As Hegel asserts, then, the daimonion is not simply "the voice of conscience." The daimonion operates as something beyond Socrates' awareness and shows itself within the represented setting of the dialogue as a voice that warns. There remains a subtle interaction between the external activity of the d aimonion and the soul's interpretive efforts.34

These passages suggest two preliminary observations concerning the daimonion. First, contrary to Hegel's belief, there is no explicit connection between the daimonion and Socrates' trancelike states described in the Symposium. One might interpret Socrates' crossing of the river in the Phaedrus as a symbolic passage to something rational, away from the enchanted spot in which the dialogue takes place and to which his daimonion calls him back, but there is no compelling reason to associate the daimonion with accounts of his trances. Second,

33Compare Hermann Gundert's "Platon und das Daimonion des Sokrates," in Gymnasium: Zeitschrift für Kultur der Antike und humanistische Bildung, 61 (1954), 522. Gundert emphasizes the ironic component of Socrates' discussions of the daimonion. Far from prompting us to dismiss the figure of the daimonion, however, this irony may only suggest Socrates' or Plato's doubts about the limited notion of divinity they accept.

the daimonion is neither determinately adjectival nor substantive in form. Resisting grammatical fixity, daimonion can function either as an adjective or as a noun. Euthyphro mentions to daimonion without any qualification, but generally it is called "customary" (eiōthos) and is linked to a sign (sēmeion). Furthermore, it can be like a voice when it occurs to Socrates. Søren Kierkegaard describes the elusive grammatical form of the "something divine":

The word to daimonion... is not simply adjectival so that one might render it complete by implying function, deed (ergon), or sign (sēmeion), or something of the kind; nor is it substantive in the sense that it describes a particular or unique being... this word signifies something abstract, something divine, which by its very abstractness is elevated above every determination, unutterable and without predicates, since it admits of no vocalization.

If not even the grammar of daimonion can be firmly established, we should not expect to be able to localize its "essential" meaning. Aware of the impossibility of establishing the essence of the daimonion, Kierkegaard identifies it with the unutterable Hebrew name of God (YHWH). But how does the daimonion function in Socrates' life, and what is the strategic place of the word daimonion in Plato's theology?

While passages in Plato's Laws, written in a less philosophical vein, repeat the Hesiodic tradition of daimones, Socrates characteristically reverts to the singular form. As he states in conversation with Euthyphro, he is being prosecuted "because I find it hard to accept such stories people tell about the gods" (Euthyphro 6a). Yet Socrates is not simply an atheist, and the daimonion represents some part of his own religious conviction, even if this is suffused with irony. For the polytheism of anthropomorphized gods, Socrates substitutes a vague divine power that acts only to warn him against errors.

Socrates refers to his religious innovation in the context of his trial. He offers diverse arguments, but against the religious accusation he ultimately has no defense: "The Platonic Apology vindicates Socrates

35 Following Schleiermacher, who notes that Socrates did not conceive the daimonion substantially, as "a particular being of a higher kind," Paul Friedländer writes in Platon (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1954), vol. 1: "One already obstructs access for oneself, if one says, 'the daemonion,' as if it were a thing, instead of naming it in the neutral mode of the Greek expression, 'the daemonic'" (p. 35).

triumphantly on the scores of ‘atheism,’ but silently owns that he was guilty on the real charge of unlicensed innovation in religion.” One should not hastily deny all importance to the daimonion in Socrates’ trial, for the problem remains: how does the accusation misconceive the innovation it names?

The decisive moment occurs in chapter fifteen of the Apology, when Socrates calls upon Meletus to explain his graphê. At this point Socrates shifts the burden of his defense to the irrelevant demonstration that he is not an atheist. Socrates asks: “Do you mean that I teach the young to believe in some gods, but not in the gods of the state? . . . Or do you mean that I do not believe in the gods at all myself, and that I teach other people not to believe in them either?” (Apol. 27bc). Socrates may be guilty of the first charge, but Meletus exaggerates his claim and responds, “I mean that you do not believe in the gods in any way whatever” (Apol. 27c). After this overhasty assertion, Socrates easily shows that Meletus’ charge is self-contradictory. Socrates’ refutation runs as follows: whoever believes in “divine things” (daimonia) must also believe in daimones, and whoever believes in daimones also believes in gods. If, therefore, as claimed in the indictment, Socrates believes in new “divine things,” he also believes in gods (Apol. 27ce).39

Thus free of the charge of atheism, Socrates does not confront the problematic novelty of the “divine things” he acknowledges. Even to the Athenians, the relationship between Socrates’ daimonion, Hesiodic daimones, and Homeric daimôn was unclear. Like daimôn in the Iliad and Odyssey, daimonion appears as an “indefinite mode of expression,” with a vague divine referent. How, then, can the daimonion be labeled an “innovation”?

The daimonion is one decisive source of trouble, at least to the fictional Socrates in Plato’s narratives. Euthyphro’s opinion supports this view; and when Socrates first refers to the daimonion in the Apology, he says that it is what Meletus “satirized” (epikômôdôn) in his indictment (Apol. 31c). This passage is Socrates’ most extensive dis-

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38 Compare Antonio Camarero, Socrates y las creencias demónicas griegas (Bahia Blanca: Cuadernos del Sur, 1968): “It is quite clear that in the Socratic defense, Plato did not consider the daimonion a personal being, when in an ironic manner Socrates makes the accuser Meletus recognize that whoever believes in ‘the daemonic’ by force believes in ‘daemons’ and, therefore, in the gods” (p. 27).
39 Compare Aristotle, Rhetoric 1398a.
discussion of the *daimonion*. Whereas Socrates elsewhere only mentions it in passing, here he gives an explanation: “Something godly [*theion*], that is divine [*ti kai daimonion*], comes to me. . . this is a kind of voice [*phône*] that came to me beginning when I was a child, which whenever it comes, always turns me away [*apotrepei*] from what I am about to do but never turns me toward [*protrepei*]. This is what stands in the way of my participating in public life” (Apol. 31cd). Overtly, Socrates is here concerned to justify his abstention from politics. But at the same time, he suggests his theological and political convictions. He generalizes the importance of avoiding politics in a way that threatens the “democratic” foundations of Athens: “It is necessary for him who is really going to fight on behalf of what is right, if he is going to survive for even a short period of time, to act privately [*idioteuein*] and not publicly [*demosieuein*]” (Apol. 32a). This is a strong expression of the individualistic origins that Hegel finds in Socrates. The modern quest for an “idiolect” may also originate in an interpretation of Socrates’ wish to concern himself with private things [*idia*] rather than with things political [*demosia*] (Apol. 31c).

Throughout the *Apology*, Socrates emphasizes his theological commitments. Not only is he in great poverty as a result of his skeptical “service to the god” (23c); he is concerned with what is “pleasing to the godly” (*ti theî philon*) and acts according to the god’s interest (*to tou theou*) (21e). He asserts that only the god is wise (23a). He considers himself as a “gift of the god” (3od), “stationed by the god” (28a) to preserve Athens; for the good of Athens, “the god attached me to the state” (3oe). Christian interpreters have observed that Socrates’ statements concerning “the god” may suggest a monotheistic tendency. But Socrates’ singular “god” (*theos*) resists personification and instead points to a vague divine power, or an indefinite way of referring to the divine, like *daimôn* and *daimonion*. Following the command of “the god,” then, Socrates claims that it is his duty to act as a gadfly and arouse Athens, a sluggish horse (Apol. 30e–31a). In contrast to Hegel’s conception of the *daimonion* as “something unconscious,” Socrates conceives of a god that leads him to awaken heightened consciousness in others.

Some commentators believe that Plato represents a Socrates who exaggerates his piety in order to defend himself. More likely, Plato includes this strong theological dimension to vindicate Socrates, who may or may not have held the views that Plato attributes to him.
Whether or not Socrates actually spoke of the *daimonion* as he does in Plato's *Apology*, the theological turns of phrase ascribed to Socrates are literary constructs. To achieve its vast influence, the Platonic turn did not require a real Socrates at all.

Socrates' final words in the *Apology* are not part of his legal defense. Already condemned to death, Socrates addresses his judges. To those who voted to acquit him, Socrates explains "an amazing thing" that has occurred. Now Socrates takes the *absence* of the *daimonion* to be significant:

The customary prophecy of the *daimonion* was quite frequent throughout my entire life until now, and has opposed me even on very minor matters, if I was on the point of doing something improperly. And now, as you yourselves perceive, there have befallen me these things which a man would think to be, and which are reckoned, the most extreme of evils. But neither as I was going out in the morning from my home did the god's sign oppose me, nor when I came up here to the court, nor at any point in my speech when I was on the point of saying something. In other speeches in other places, however, it would hold me back in the midst of speaking. But as it is, at no point concerning this matter, in no deed or word has it opposed me. [Apol. 4oab]

For the first time, the *daimonion* appears to offer positive information, yet only by virtue of its absence: "The chances are that this thing that has befallen me has come as something good . . ., because it is not possible that the customary sign would have failed to oppose me, were I not about to do something good" (4obc). Does the *daimonion's* failure to occur mean that Socrates' death is not an evil? Socrates is aware that the *daimonion* has diverted him from evils, but he cannot reason with any certainty that the *daimonion* will warn him whenever anything evil is about to happen. Socrates knows that, if the *daimonion* occurs, he is endangered, but it does not follow that whenever he is endangered, the *daimonion* will occur. In connection with the *daimonion*, Socrates' beliefs reveal illogic.

We can neither stabilize nor even identify the divine nature of the *daimonion*, which never advises a course of action. For Socrates, the meaning of the *daimonion* is that he must establish his own principles of self-determination while acknowledging that rational ideas of the good and of oneself are ultimately insufficient for this purpose. Reason may retrospectively confirm the validity of what the *daimonion*
motivates; where self-determination falls short, the daimonion takes its place, or acts as its corrective.\textsuperscript{40}

Modern thought strives to reduce this extrarational "voice" to the workings of conscience or of the superego, but for Socrates the daimonion is indeed "something divine." Socrates' piety involves a moment of rectification from beyond the immanence of reason, a turn that, reinterpreted as the call of conscience, profoundly influences the Christian tradition of self-correction. If the subject is unable to decide adequately, something divine, manifesting itself as voice or sign, may give negative counsel. For Plato, reason becomes the basis of subjectivity, but Socrates denies that he is master of himself, and his daimonion transcends the workings of conscience.

The daimonion has no substantial existence, yet it acts as a double-edged turn in the life of Socrates as Plato represents it. When Socrates is on the verge of error, the daimonion turns him away (apotrepi). For the later history of genius, this turn is a decisive trope: Socrates, despite extreme rationalism, cannot master all situations. The daimonion is a mysterious, extrarational force that opposes false steps. For Socrates, politics appears as one such false step, and so the daimonion acts to turn Socrates inward. What Hegel terms a "turning back of consciousness into itself" is the decisive meaning of Socrates as moment in the development of subjective self-determination. To the extent that the daimonion is Socrates' own customary sign (eiothos sêmeion), it also represents his individuality as a swerve from customs of the dêmos. Socrates' daimonion makes his life a prototype of mystical transcendence and of a modern master trope, the idiolect. Daimonion is a trope that turns inward; Hegel exaggerates this turn and makes it appear pathological.

The daimonion also acts as Plato's turn away from his precursors' daimones. While the daimonion does not explicitly stand at the center of Plato's theological statements, it performs a decisive revision of previous daemonology. Hovering between grammatical forms, the

\textsuperscript{40}Even Socratic reason is unable to guide all action. See Edward Zilsel, \textit{Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffs} (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1926): "The completely irrational way in which, for the otherwise so rational philosopher, the daemonic voice separates itself from all rational considerations, easily became a point of contact when the advancing Renaissance went about emphasizing the irrational nature of poetic production, even exalting it into the supernatural" (p. 12). According to Thomas Meyer, in \textit{Platons Apologie} (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1962), the daimonion stands "in exact logical opposition to Socratic self-discovery" (p. 73).
daimonion eludes all hierarchy of divine beings and suggests a theological belief based either on vague divine power or on vague intuitions. Plato’s Socratic allegory suggests that this innovation threatens contemporary Athenians and contributes weight to Meletus’ accusation, which associates his daimonion with “new divinities” (kaina daimonia).

If the daimonion subverts coherent theological systems, how can Socrates be so certain that, when the customary sign does not occur, his death is not an evil? And what convinces him that “no evil can happen to a good man” (Apol. 41d)? Socrates’ conception of fate, developed elsewhere in Plato’s dialogues, excludes the elements of irrationality and futile destruction that characterize the Homeric universe. The absence of the daimonion during the trial cannot, however, secure the positive assurance Plato sought. When there is no certainty that divinity governs the world, the execution of Socrates is as potentially threatening to theology as Job’s suffering or the command that Abraham sacrifice his son.

Plato’s Socrates is the victim of an inevitable conflict between theological systems. In general terms, the figure of Socrates is the place in Plato’s work where competing beliefs vie for domination. Greek myth depends on the plurality of gods, while Socrates’ daimonion enhances the monotheistic tendencies at which the Iliad and Odyssey have already hinted. Abstract daimôn displaces plural daimones; the Socratic daimonion unsettles any recourse to the established divinities. The Athenians condemn Socrates for “importing new gods” only because they do not grasp his more radical challenge that questions the plurality of the gods.