

SOCRATES' DAIMONION IN PLATO'S *PHAEDRUS*

When Socrates completes his first speech in the *Phaedrus*, he expresses abundant haste to finish the topic and to leave. "You'll hear nothing more than that from me", he tells Phaedrus, "please let my speech end here" (241d2-3). Socrates resolves to cross over the river and return to the city "before you force me into something worse" (242a1-2). Phaedrus bids Socrates to remain and discuss (*dialechthentes* a6) the two speeches in spite of the noonday heat, prompting Socrates to marvel at Phaedrus' *philologia*. It is unexpected to find Socrates tired of conversation before his interlocutor. Just as unexpected, Phaedrus gets more than he bargained for. Instead of conversation, Socrates goes on to produce another speech, one that is three times longer than his first. What is more, the second speech appears to be sharply critical of the first. What accounts for Socrates' change of heart? What are we to make of this second speech, Socrates' "palinode"?

Let us call this the problem of the palinode, for the abrupt shift in the dramatic and philosophical orientation of the *Phaedrus* calls for an explanation. Plato's explanation, I argue, emerges from two distinct moments in the dialogue, the appearance of the divine sign and Socrates' elaborate response to it. Each device works in different ways to resolve the problem of the palinode by explaining the oddity of Socrates' sudden rekindling of his interest in giving speeches, and the oddity of the speech he gives. In this way, the interlude of the *Phaedrus* (241d-243e) records Plato's effort, first, to place another long speech in Socrates' mouth and, second, to establish a context for interpreting the speech. In short, the divine sign keeps Socrates from leaving, and his curious response to the sign's appearance suggests a way to understand the relationship of the speech the sign prompts to the speeches preceding it.

Why should one attempt to separate these aims in the interlude? I believe many readers mischaracterize the purpose of the interlude by confusing the significance of the divine sign's appearance with the interpretation Socrates gives of it. This move lends credence to the

view that Socrates' first speech is flawed and must be repudiated. Indeed, some have gone so far as to suggest that Socrates' first speech represents a "Socratic" viewpoint from which Plato is eager to distance himself; the repudiation, then, is not merely of a speech but of a whole host of doctrines and mode of inquiry of which the speech is an example¹. This is not the case. On the contrary, Socrates' first speech and the larger second speech are more philosophically connected than is generally appreciated. For this reason, there is need for critical examination of the role of the divine sign and its impact upon our reading of Socrates' two speeches and their relationship.

In this paper, I set out an interpretation of the intervention of the divine sign that addresses the motivation and context for the palinode. I argue that the traditional interpretation of this part of the dialogue has failed, first, to distinguish one of Plato's responses to the problem of the palinode from the other and, second, has supplied a mistaken interpretation of the divine sign as evidence of Socrates' repudiation of the early speech². In order to avoid this mistake, I shall first recall the passage in which the divine sign appears. I show that

1. Most notably Nussbaum (1986), though Santas (1988) largely agrees. Nevertheless, see Rowe (1986), pp.155-156 for one instance of the already Platonic features of the first speech.
2. In this respect, I agree with Hackforth (1952) and Rowe (1986), who argue that the interruption of the divine sign is motivated by literary demands. Nonetheless, each goes on to provide a mistaken philosophical interpretation of the sign, believing that the sign is prompted by the faulty substance of Socrates' first speech. So too Griswold (1986), who finds that the function of the divine sign "seems more positive (for example, to make atonement before returning to the city)" (256, n.17). His claim is made less persuasive when he draws support for this function of the divine sign in the *Phaedrus* from that described in the spurious *Theages* at 128d. If this interpretation of the sign's function in the *Phaedrus* was correct, then the sign operates by reminding Socrates of a mistake already made. However, this is a use of the divine sign to which Plato nowhere else puts it. Such expansions of the role of the *daimonion* are common in Xenophon and in other Socratic writers (such as the author of the *Theages*). Thus, Hackforth's claim that the sign "in effect ... commands him to make an atonement" (54) and Rowe's contention that "the mistake is already committed" (165), require some explanation of this new use of the sign as offering retrospective counsel. Neither provides such explanation, nor do they reconcile their view with Socrates' round rejection of this interpretation; he after all reminds the reader of the role played by the divine sign, namely that of forbidding him from doing something (242c1). Thus, it is not possible that the sign could cross some action already taken any more than it could turn one *toward* some action one ought now to take (the latter is explicitly discounted in *Ap.* 31d 2-4).

the divine sign has a more restricted scope than generally supposed, insofar as it prevents Socrates from leaving and no more than that. Nevertheless, there is much more at work in this section of the *Phaedrus*; Socrates displays a deep and detailed awareness of himself and his actions that goes beyond what the divine sign does or even could provide. To anticipate, we find him employing means of introspection which are distinct from, but operate in conjunction with, the report of the divine sign. Taken together, Socrates knows what he has done wrong and how to set things right. If the divine sign can only hinder Socrates from doing something, then Socrates must have some other resource for determining what he has a positive duty to do. Normally we should expect this to be elenctic examination. But Socrates claims an unusual resource here. The resource is introduced when Socrates praises Stesichorus for recognizing his own offence against the god. He says that Stesichorus' ability to perceive the need for recantation is attributed to his being a true *mousikos*, a follower of the Muses (243a 4-7). Socrates will later describe philosophers as followers of Muses (259d 4-5; cf. 248d 3 and 243a 6). The suggestion is clear. Socrates, having determined by means of a hunch that he has done something wrong, relies upon his philosophical "musicianship" in order to take positive steps toward righting that wrong.

Let us turn first to Plato's initial explanation for Socrates' unusually protracted display of eloquence in his second speech, the divine sign. Plato has Socrates refer to his *daimonion* (242b 8-9) – which he calls his "customary sign" (*to eiôthos sêmeion* b9)³ – explaining how on each occa-

3. See *Euthd.* 272 e3-4: *to eiôthos sêmeion to daimonion* and *Ap.* 40a4: *hê gar eiôthua moi mantikê hê tou daimoniou*.

Socrates expands his description of the divine sign in the direction of this latter passage saying that the soul has a mantic aspect and he has divinatory powers which are adequate only, and only so for his own ends (242c 3-7). Does this not suggest that he can, by the *daimonion* alone, "see" his errors?

No. First the allusion to the mantic aspect of the soul, while in accordance with the *locus classicus* in the *Apology*, is better explained as foreshadowing of these ideas as they are developed at length in the palinode (esp. 244b6-d5). Second, the mantic power – in whatever it consists – is not identical with or a feature of the *daimonion* because this is explicitly rejected here and elsewhere. Third, the sense in which the *daimonion* may be considered mantic need only refer to its prospective orientation. Thus, as with any mantic, orionistic, or oracular event, interpretation is required.

sion (*aei*)⁴ it holds him back from something he is about to do (c1; cf. *Ap.* 31d 2-4). So much is consistent with his description elsewhere. Although the sign crosses Socrates when he is about to undertake some moral wrongdoing, it is just as apt to cross him over "very small matters" (*panu epi smikrois enantioumenē*, *Ap.* 40a 5-6), such as leaving the gymnasium before the appearance of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus (*Euthd.* 272e1-273a2, discussed below) or, as here, leaving his discussion with Phaedrus. The sign is said to prevent Socrates from doing something that is not good (e.g., as here, apparently, 242c3, c6, d2); and so Socrates has some confidence that, in the absence of the sign, his actions are good (*Ap.* 40c 2-4; cf. *Tht.* 151a 2-5)⁵.

In spite of Socrates' good fortune (cf. *Euthd.* 272e 1) at having such visitations from a divine source, Socrates is typically depicted as interpreting the meaning of the sign on particular occasions. These two features of Socrates' experience of the divine sign—namely that he has a private, divine source of knowledge (of some kind); and that its appearance regularly involves him in an interpretive and justificatory task—are at seeming odds with one another. Many commentators prefer to stress the second feature in order to "restore" Socrates' commitment to reason and to elenctic examination. Others, however, stress the first feature and attempt to show that it poses no threat to Socrates' commitment to reason. Among the latter is McPherran (1996), who provides an extensive account of the significance of the *daimonion*. He argues that the sign is a legitimate and independent "extrarational" source of knowledge whose content, nevertheless, must in general be interpreted if Socrates is to know why an action is forbidden (189-190). I am persuaded by this kind of compatibilist stance, and I am broadly sympathetic with his effort to integrate it into a coherent picture of Socrates' commitment to rationality. But this view leaves two questions

4. STOKES (1997) says of *Ap.* 40a " ... 'always' (*aei*) here probably means 'on every occasion when it occurred' ... Socrates ... need have had no guarantee that it would invariably stop him from doing anything whatever that was bad for him" (8). BRICKHOUSE and SMITH (1989), 238-257, agree, and I would claim that the same is true in the *Phaedrus*.

5. Indeed, Socrates once goes so far as to suggest that the sign permits him to do some things when it ceases from preventing him from doing them (*Tht.* 151a 3-4). This is surely an attenuated sense of permission, though it invites precisely the view that the sign has expanded functions found in Xenophon and the author of the *Theages*, who find it providing positive counsel and intercession on the behalf of others.

unanswered: first, what, precisely, the divine sign consists in –or, in other words, what is the scope of its informational content, and thus what constraints are placed on Socrates' interpretation of that content–, and, second, what in particular it indicates here in the *Phaedrus*.

What is it like to experience Socrates' divine sign⁶? Some commentators hold that the divine sign offers something that is nondiscursive, like a "twinge," which can do no more than encourage Socrates to determine a meaning for why it occurred⁷. This is Vlastos' view, according to which the sign simply occasions a particular Socratic investigation; it offers "a pat on the back in the dark" to rationally interpret the sign's meaning. Indeed, the sign of itself provides nothing which should be called knowledge (Vlastos 1989, 29); on the contrary, whatever knowledge is to be gained is wholly the work of "his own, highly fallible, human resources" (Vlastos 1991, 283). Against this view are the views of McPherran (1996) and Brickhouse and Smith (1994). The

6. The difficulty of this question is, of course, that it is in principle unanswerable. So we might ask instead, what or how does it "signal" anything? Sadly, Plato's dialogues do not give us enough to obtain a firm answer to this question. Socrates' reports about the divine sign are generally brief and lacking in the relevant details; also, as we shall see, he has the tendency to have the experience and then interpret its meaning roughly within the same moment. What we can do, however, is examine how Socrates responds to these visitations in order to see what we must suppose about the divine sign and its informational content. This will then enable us to determine, as far as we are able, in what sense Socrates knows something –and in virtue of what, precisely, he knows it– when the divine sign appears.

7. "So his *daimonion* is his susceptibility to certain peculiar subjective states he takes to be signs from the god. These signs are not self-interpreting. They call for interpretation which is left *entirely* for Socrates to supply, allowing him to use his reason to his heart's content in the process" (Vlastos 1989, 29, emphasis added). Compare elsewhere: "What the voice brings him is a message. For the true interpretation of that message he must rely *entirely* on his own, highly fallible, human resources" (Vlastos 1991, 283, emphasis added).

Vlastos is worried to show that the *daimonion* could never "trump" the independent claims of elenctic reason, so he marks the dependence of the sign's meaning on Socrates' reasoning process. But Brickhouse and Smith and McPherran all argue convincingly that this dependence is not attested in the text, but that the *daimonion* has a limited epistemological role. Thus, the *daimonion* is no rival to the *elenchus* as such as a source for knowledge, even as it provides knowledge which, in a given instance, may be more secure than the knowledge, in a given instance, provided by the *elenchus*. This is the way in which McPherran can claim that the "informational content of the *daimonion* is generally minimal" while holding that it bears sufficient epistemic significance to challenge the "exclusive authority of secular reason" (1996, 194).

latter argue that the sign does provide knowledge, but that the knowledge is limited and, moreover, is nothing like the knowledge provided by reason. This should not be taken to suppose, however, that the specific knowledge provided by the sign is inferior to knowledge arrived at by elenctic examination. On the contrary, though it provides "no rules of conduct, no general principles, and no moral definitions" (Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 194) and therefore it is importantly "uninformative" (Brickhouse and Smith 1989, 253), since it cannot tell him *why* what he is doing is wrong, the divine sign does provide Socrates with certainty *that* what he was about to do, "under these precise circumstances, at least" (1994, 194), was wrong. Thus, both McPherran and Brickhouse and Smith agree that the divine sign provides knowledge, but that reason's role of interpreting the divine sign can expand or deepen that knowledge. Still, according to Brickhouse and Smith at least, reason does not do all of the work of delivering information:

Reason certainly assists Socrates in assessing the significance of, or reason for, his *daimonion's* alarms; but reason does not exhaust or fully explain the *daimonion's* significance. The experience must itself tell part of the story. And the part it plays is to convey to Socrates at least this much information: he must desist from what he was about to do. This much is not a matter of interpretation (Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 195).

This is an enigmatic passage, for it does not say in what way the experience, necessarily and of itself, tells part of the story. Indeed, they say nothing about what the experience of the sign consists in, nor what the sign itself consists in. Nevertheless, though they do not argue this point, I believe they are on the right track in suggesting that there are features of the circumstances in which the sign appears, *independent of the sign itself*, that work, *independent of reason*, to settle the meaning of the sign.

Since Vlastos believes that the Socrates' divine sign is forever underdetermined, he is committed to the implausible view that interpretation of the sign is, in principle, unconstrained by the sign itself. Brickhouse and Smith, by contrast, believe that the appearance of the sign in and of itself limits our freedom to interpret its meaning. This

constraint, the suggestion goes, is grounded in some part of the experience of the sign. In what way, then, is the "experience" itself telling?

On my view, the timing of the divine sign—appearing when Socrates is about to undertake some course of action—is centrally important to his ability to understand it, and respond to it, as immediately as he routinely does. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates' action is leaving Phaedrus and their early speeches and returning to the city. The sign's appearance cuts Socrates short as he is about to perform this action; we might imagine him suddenly standing stock-still with one foot in the Ilissus. Socrates is certain *that* the sign has appeared, and thus he should stop what he is about to do. If Socrates is correct in reporting that the divine sign checked him right as he was about to cross the river, however, and if the sign is no more than a nondiscursive twinge, then Socrates might have reason to wonder what in the action he is performing, or in the way he is performing it, is wrong. This doubt might, in these circumstances, render the information provided by the sign almost useless. For perhaps the sign is warning him away from some bodily harm that looms under the surface of the river, and it in effect is "recommending" that Socrates discover a better route home. Or perhaps the danger consists not so much in leaving the countryside but in returning to the city at that time; he is free to leave, but should take his time returning to the city. If the sign is a twinge, then Socrates cannot know which of these interpretations is correct. Nothing in the sign itself tells Socrates precisely what he ought to refrain from doing.

But if the timing of the sign is essential for Socrates to determine *that* he must stop, notice that, in principle, it does nothing to help Socrates determine *what* he must stop doing. It is clear, then, that on Vlastos' twinge-theory, interpretation is all. But if he is right about the information provided by the sign, McPherran argues, Socrates' interpretive work must have *something* to latch onto, and thus the sign must have more than minimal "twinge" content. I don't believe that the conclusion follows because the *something* that the interpretation latches onto need not be furnished by the sign alone. Let us see why. Suppose that in the *Phaedrus*, the following deliberative model was in place: Socrates has a desire to leave and takes this to be sufficient motivation for doing so; as he begins to act on this desire, the divine sign restrains him. If this is even approximately correct, then it shows how the timing of

the divine sign –which is surely part of the experience of it– can in fact help to determine its informational content. Notice that Socrates could receive a mere twinge or “jolt” in this instance, which would be sufficient for his confidence in what he takes the sign to be indicating⁸. That is to say, so long as Socrates is sufficiently aware of his deliberative process –such that after forming the clear intention to leave, he then consciously acts on that intention– then this “experience”, in which the sign interrupts this process at a decisive moment, would make absolutely clear what is he to refrain from doing (namely, *exactly* what he was, at that very moment, consciously setting out to do). Socrates’ prior deliberation and formation of an intention, then, specify exactly that which he is about to do. Thus it is the deliberative process, including the formation of an intention, that supply the “content” to the experience such that the divine sign need do no more than buzz in its disapproval. (Here, then, the relevant intention is “to leave,” not “to cross the river,” even though Socrates can accomplish the former by performing the latter).

If my proposal is correct, it may invite the following objections. First of all, it would not rule out of hand the above worries –that the Ilissus harbors some unseen menace, or danger awaited Socrates at the city gates. Nevertheless, these would become much less plausible explanations if Socrates can be said to have a clear and conscious intention to act prior to attempting to perform that act, only to be interrupted at the crucial moment within the performance of the act. Besides, the justification of the sign’s meaning is something for reason to work out –on this all of our commentators agree. Second, my proposed deliberative model is not attested by the *Phaedrus* itself, so it remains a speculation. However, there is a text (examined in detail below) in which Socrates uses something like this deliberative process; to the extent to which the circumstances of the divine sign’s appearance there are very similar to those here, I argue that we have a *prima facie* reason to suppose that Socrates employs something relevantly like that deliberative

8. McPherran rightly believes that many texts in which the sign appears gives the impression that the divine sign has “more phenomenological content than a mere twinge” (204, n.62). My argument here is that Socrates, given a certain measure of clarity about his deliberative process, would require nothing more than a twinge from the divine sign in order to obtain the immediate interpretation of its message and his confidence in it.

model in the *Phaedrus*. Finally, some might object to the plausibility of the model on its own terms; that is, for various reasons the model mischaracterizes intentional actions generally and Socrates' actions in particular. To them I would respond by claiming that we need not suppose that this model holds for all action, nor even for all intentional action, but that if it is at all possible for humans (and, thus, Socrates) to deliberate in this way, then we can see how the divine sign can appear, without any content, and yet bear the kind of definitive and fixed meanings Socrates assigns to it⁹.

Let us now consider this internal context—the mental environment, so to speak—in Socrates' deliberation. In the *Euthydemus*, Socrates blindly takes instructions from the sign which he takes to consist in a command not to leave the dressing-room of the palaestra where he is, at that time, sitting alone. In fact, the meaning of the sign is so uncontested that Socrates takes no pains whatsoever to justify the "command." In what way is its command obvious? Socrates invites the reader into his deliberation and, in so doing, I argue, settles this question. Socrates does not report on his desire to leave, still less on whatever weaker desires to remain (or to do something else) that he

9. McPherran's own admittedly "speculative" account of the informational content needed for the divine sign to provide Socrates with the degree of assurance in it that he displays, does not place much confidence in the reading I am putting forward. This is partly due to his unfortunate tendency to examine Xenophon and other non-Platonic sources of the divine sign alongside the Platonic sources. Indeed, the former do seem to require that the sign possess a richer informational content than I am arguing for. Of course, these same sources (e.g., *Xen. Mem.* 1.1.4, 4.3.12, and 4.8.1; and *Ap.* 12) find the divine sign giving precisely the sort of retrospective counsel that we have already ruled out. Indeed, the same sources feature the sign dispensing its advice regarding the conduct of persons *other* than Socrates (e.g., *Mem.* 1.1.4, *Ap.* 13; *Thg.* 128d-131a), so it is perhaps not surprising when one interlocutor seeks to propitiate the sign with prayers and sacrifices (*Thg.* 131a). Although McPherran says at the outset that none of his "main claims hinge on" the authenticity of the *Theages* (186, n. 26), he later relies on it and Xenophon's *Memorabilia* when he argues for the richness of the informational content of the sign. The only other source he examines in this context (*Euthd.* 272e2-273a3), however, does not require his interpretation. For his part, McPherran argues that this text leaves unclear whether the sign is a mere twinge. This concedes my point, namely that if it is a twinge, it could provide clear and certain knowledge that what he was about to do was wrong. In fact, the *Euthydemus*, the only genuinely Platonic source he considers here, gives us good reason to argue for less rather than more informational content, so long as I am right to suppose that Socrates' deliberative process can be factored in as part of the "experience itself".

might have had. What he does claim for himself is this: "I already had <it> in my mind to get up", that is, to leave (*kai ēdē en nōi eichon anastēnai*, 272e 2). Nothing in the formulation of the intention attracts the appearance of the divine sign. Nevertheless, it may be important to notice that Socrates is not considering multiple courses of action before settling on one action that is chosen all things considered; on the contrary, Socrates unambiguously decides that he will do some one action. Socrates' next words report that he then attempted to get up, and it was here (that is, while getting up or just at the point of having got up) that he was interrupted. "But when I got up, the customary divine sign came to me" (*anistamenou de mou egeneto to eiōthos sē meion to daimonion*, e2-3). Thus the divine sign intercedes at the moment of the attempt to do something, or within the attempt to perform the action. Whatever the case, Socrates' reaction to the sign is immediate, and he does not leave¹⁰. Some part of the action –be it the attempt to perform, or the performance (in part) of, the action– triggers the divine sign. Socrates immediately refrains, and elsewhere of course, knows that there is some feature of the action that constitutes harm, even if it is a very small matter¹¹.

10. His actual words here, however, may indicate that he did get up, or was somewhere between getting up and sitting still, for he says, "therefore I sat back down" (*palin oun ekathezomen*, e3). Nevertheless, what is important is that the divine sign arrived at some point after the clear and unambiguous intention to act is made.

11. Such as is the case here, we are to suppose, since the "good fortune" (272e1) of the sign consists in its preventing him from missing out on the opportunity to discuss virtue with two sophists. Socrates does not say, however, what about the conversation with those sophists was beneficial to him, and there is much irony in his praise of them. We might then wonder in what the harm consists, but I doubt very much that Socrates would harbor such doubts: any opportunity for discussion of virtue is valuable, no matter how ill-suited for the topic his interlocutors might be, such that missing this opportunity constitutes a harm. If this is right, however, it might be objected that this appearance of the divine sign is not one of those "very small matters" that Socrates refers to in the *Apology*; insofar as a chance to discuss virtue is on the table, then this is, by Socrates' lights, as good as it gets. Against this claim, we should recall first that Socrates has no idea at the time of the divine sign that such a discussion might be around the corner. Second, and more important, the sign prevents Socrates' leaving and, only in an attenuated sense, "permits" him to converse with Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. This attenuated sense of the meaning of the sign, then, falls out of Socrates' retrospective judgment of his good fortune to receive these visitations generally and on this particular occasion especially. Strictly speaking, the sign prevents him only from the very small matter of leaving the gymnasium.

But, it may be objected, even if he knows that the divine sign appears, how does he know that the action he is intending or beginning to perform is what the divine sign is seeking to disrupt? I argue that the answer lies not in the informational content of the sign, at least not in this case, but in the features of the experience itself. Part of that experience must include Socrates' clarity about himself and, specifically, about his deliberation. We do not need to suppose that Socrates is always or even often possessed of this clarity; but that he is so possessed here is, I maintain, beyond reproach. And given this clarity, he can not do otherwise than know that something is wrong with *this* one action, rather than another, here and now. This is all that Socrates needs in order to understand what the sign is opposing, that is, sufficient awareness of and clarity about his intention to act. So long as Socrates forms a particular intention that possesses, we might say, some propositional content, then intervention of the divine sign, coming *exactly* when he goes to act on that intention, need not have any propositional content or discursive features whatsoever. A simple twinge will do it.

In the *Phaedrus*, our access into his deliberative process is not as straightforward because he is not directly narrating the dialogue. Also, it appears that within the temporal frame of the drama, Socrates goes through his deliberation privately and while Phaedrus is engaged in an effort to convince Socrates to remain. Although the case of the *Euthydemus* is clearly one in which we need not suppose a rich, informative content of the sign, McPherran still speaks against this interpretation. He argues that Socrates must "take the daemonic presentational context to be much more than just a hunch, since in many cases there is nothing in the immediate environment for elenctic reason to 'latch onto' to transform the hunch into something more substantive (e.g., at *Eud.* 272e1-273a3)" (205, n.64). By overlooking the way in which the experience of the divine sign includes the Socrates' deliberation antecedent to the act about to be performed, and the timing of the sign at a particular moment within that deliberation, McPherran is forced to suppose more about the divine sign than the text demands.

This quarrel over what the divine sign consists in might seem exceedingly otiose if it did not then spill out into the more substantive issues concerning the early speeches and their role within the dialogue. As we have seen above, Rowe and Hackforth believe that the

divine sign damns the early speeches, and this enables them to reject the view that eros is the unifying theme of the dialogue. But even the astute interpretation of McPherran runs the risk of getting the significance of the divine sign wrong here. I shall now briefly address the second main question about the divine sign, namely what in particular it indicates here¹².

Early in McPherran's account of the divine sign there is passing mention of its appearance in the *Phaedrus*. McPherran notes rightly that it does not arrive alone, so to speak, but in the midst of a variety of other events. These events, taken together, indicate to Socrates (1) what he must refrain from, (2) why he must refrain from it, (3) what he has done wrong, (4) why what he did was wrong, and (5), which is related to (2), what he must do to right that wrong. This is, very clearly, much more information than the divine sign alone could provide, so there must be alternative sources of the knowledge needed to address (2) through (5). Let us look at McPherran's account in full:

Another case of daemonic reliance where an interpretation quickly follows upon the heels of the *daimonion*, and where it both clarifies and gives rational backing to its warning, is *Phaedrus* 242b 8-243a 3. There the daimonion warns Socrates away from crossing the river Ilissus, and its interference is accompanied by the phenomenon of a voice declaring that Socrates has committed a sin at this spot that must be expiated (however humorous and ironical this may be, it hints at other similar, sincere cases). Socrates then claims to have modest skill, sufficient for his purposes, at divinatory interpretation—we all have this rational power in virtue of our *nous* he implies (cf. 244c 2 ff.)—and this allows him to connect his own rationally arrived at misgivings with the daemonic intervention; viz., that his previous speech offended divine *Erôs* (188, n.32).

McPherran navigates this passage well, and refuses to conflate the different sources of insight Socrates gains about his current situation.

12. A fully considered response to this question requires us to disentangle Socrates' report of the divine sign from some of the other reports of his unease and worry at this stage. Suffice it for now if we simply rule out some interpretations of the significance of the divine sign.

Indeed, McPherran even separates (rightly)¹³ the “voice” that Socrates “seems” to hear (242c 1-3), and his claims to have mantic abilities (242c 3-6, cf. c 6-7), from the claim to be visited by his divine sign (242b8-c1). He does this, then, in spite of the fact that in the *Apology*, the divine sign said to be a kind of voice (31d 1-3) and understood to be a mantic agency (40a 4). We might, of course, have reason to suppose that the same is going on here in the *Phaedrus*. But a closer inspection of the passage reveals that we follow the lead of the *Apology* at the risk of misunderstanding the precise function of the divine sign in the *Phaedrus*. These are the now familiar risks, namely of enlisting the divine sign to discharge duties it nowhere else performs (e.g., retrospective counsel, positive advice, etc.).

But there is an additional problem that this conflation encounters, for Socrates mentions at 242c 7-8 an earlier unease, namely that occurring at 238d 1-2 (cf. c5-6), in which Socrates worries that he might be overtaken by nymphs during his speech. If this earlier unease is thought to be the original appearance of the divine sign, then there are several obvious difficulties. Either (a) Socrates does not fully understand at 238d that the sign is attempting to restrain him from a course of action, or (b) Socrates, aware of the sign at 238d, fails or refuses to interpret it rationally, or (c) Socrates is both aware of the sign and –rather quickly and privately– interprets it, but goes on to ignore it (perhaps due to the compelling force of *Phaedrus*, thus explaining why *Phaedrus* becomes identified as the author of the speech). None of the options is persuasive, however, if only because each is unprecedented; the latter two options, (b) and (c), share an additional, deeply

13. We expect that the voice that Socrates “seems” to hear is the divine sign. Yet it cannot be, for reasons explained already. So, what then is the voice he hears? I do not believe that it is any one thing, but rather a composite. The composite is the early, troubling unease (at 238c-d) –call it a hunch– added to the divine sign which stops him cold. To this we should mix in the bits of folk wisdom and relevant biographical information about the Ibycus and Homer along with, perhaps, the belief that the gods may strike down those who offend them.

All of these bits of insight, which McPherran believes are mutually confirming of one overall outlook, equip Socrates with the clear knowledge of what he must do. So confident is he that he reports that he seems to hear a voice not only telling him to perform these actions but also explaining to him why he must. Plato’s literary need to explain the continuation of the dialogue is satisfied by drawing from a deep well of Socratic self-understanding.

problematic feature: the supposition of Socrates' insouciance in the face of the divine sign.

The conclusion we should draw, then, is that the earlier troubles are not troubles prompted by the divine sign. Socrates in fact attributes the troubles to himself: "for something troubled me (*eme gar ethraxen men ti* 242c 7) some while ago as I was making the speech." He does not say that the voice troubled him; even though he does link the idea to mantic powers, these are powers possessed by the soul (242c 7), and not just his soul (as is the case with the divine voice, which is distinctively his own). The idea of Socrates being a prophet (*mantis*), albeit an unserious one, is here linked to his capacity to gather hunches about what he ought or ought not to do. It is not linked to his ability to receive the divine sign. In fact, his capacity to make this interpretation as quickly as he does derives from his rather generic ability to see that he might be doing something wrong, a capacity others share equally with Socrates. Socrates' open worrying at the outset of the dialogue is striking, although given the number divinities circulating around the environment it is understandable. But his pointed anxiety at 238d, to which he refers back at 242c 7-8, derives not from some divinity, but is best described as a kind of gut feeling or instinct.

We have, then, an instance in which Socrates' gut feeling precedes the appearance of the sign. It is reasonable to suppose that Socrates' quick interpretation of the sign is attributable in part to his matching the divine sign's prompts with the early gut feeling. In addition, Socrates avails himself of a piece of folk wisdom or poetical insight (at 242c8-d1). Socrates brings all of this to bear on his current situation and then just as quickly departs from it. That is to say, no sooner does he rely on three independent sources for determining his situation—gut instinct, divine sign, folk wisdom—does he then return to the terra firma of his characteristic philosophical investigation. What is interesting—aside, of course, from the remarkable fact that Socrates claims to have divine visitations—is that he routinely goes on to interpret them. This, I take it, tells us more about Socrates' character and his commitment to philosophy than it does about the sign and its informational content. Socrates, who sternly counsels us to lead examined

lives, can do no other than examine the meaning of the sign in his life on each occasion that it occurs¹⁴.

In short, the divine sign is in itself insufficient to account for the shift in the drama of the *Phaedrus* that the interlude records. It could only explain why the dialogue does not end there.

As we have seen, the divine sign announces itself at 242a 1-2 (cf. b 8-9), although Socrates does not report on it until a few moments later (242b 8ff.) by which time he has already determined the significance of the sign and what will be his response to it, namely another speech (b 4-5). Socrates appears to interpret the sign within the vocabulary of impiety and the attendant need for purification by means of recantation. Although it is natural to suppose that the divine interruption carried with it the worry about divine retribution, this has already been shown to be inadequate. Thus, when Socrates says that the sign "forbids me to leave until I have made expiation, because I have committed an offence against what belongs to the gods" (242c 2-3), we cannot take him exactly at his word. The divine sign itself, therefore, underdetermines Socrates' response to it¹⁵. It alone is insufficient to bridge the shift in

14. Precisely what McPherran thinks prompts the sign to appear is opaque, for he only discusses how the sign, in effect, "cooperates" with the other sources of information Socrates uses in order to determine what to do next. I agree that the sign plays a role in determining the action of the interlude of the *Phaedrus*, and that insofar as it does this it may be said to cooperate with the other sources of information. But the sign does nothing more than indicate to him the information in (1) above, namely that he refrain from doing something. The knowledge of (2) to (5) is, as Vlastos would hold, something that at best the divine sign encourages Socrates to discover. He discovers this information, as we have seen, by employing a range of insights—from hunches to the sort of dim "prophetic" ability available to anyone—and reminiscences. Inferring from these, Socrates is able to stitch together in what way he has gone wrong. This is something the divine sign is incapable of making clear to Socrates on its own.

15. FERRARI (1987) rightly calls attention to the underdetermination of the divine sign and how it "leaves to philosophy all the positive work of understanding what is proper ..., of winning that understanding through methodical discussion, and so justifying the decisions taken at the prompting of the daemonic voice" (116-17). Again, "... knowing what he will *not* do or tolerate, he can proceed with the slow attempt to spell out the truth" (181).

My claim about the underdetermination is, I believe, stronger still. I argue that the prompting of the sign motivates only Socrates' staying; the fault of the speech, if any, is Socrates' own discovery.

the drama of the dialogue and, thus, Plato must provide Socrates' protracted, ever-evolving response to the sign. This response, rather than the sign itself, imports a range of associations and images befitting the rites and rituals of Orphic cult and Mystery religions.

The divine sign, then, plays a more limited role than usually supposed in allowing the *Phaedrus* to go forward as it does. But it plays an even more restricted role when pressed into service as philosophical critique. Although many have thought that the divine sign marks the repudiation of the early speech, this is not so. Again, if it were to do so, it would interrupt Socrates before he gives it. And second, there is not a great deal of evidence that his first speech stands in need of the kind of turning-away that the sign typically provides; for the most part, it is adequate. The problem in a sense is that it does not go far enough. Its failure to respect the divinity of Eros, by alleging that evils come to those touched by him, means that the speech was, as Phaedrus complained, not long enough. However, as both soon realize, the part left out was not the benefits of the nonlover, but the benefits of the inspired lover. Unlike the ordinary lover whose eros is the miserly stuff of mere mortals, the divinely inspired lover sketched in the Socrates' second speech finds his passion for the beautiful beloved overflowing and inspiring his beloved in turn. The need for the palinode, as Socrates soon reveals, is to atone for a speech whose failure consisted not so much in saying what it said but in Socrates' thinking that what it said was sufficient. To put the point in a manner congenial to the latter half of the dialogue, Socrates' failure was a failure of the dialectical art. He did not collect all of the instances of eros before he began to discriminate between them and enumerate its causes and its nature¹⁶. Now the divine interrupts and, in so doing, provides Socrates with the space in which to be reminded of a divine perspective or the divinity of Eros.

In sum, the action forbidden by the divine sign is leaving. It is not the

16. Once the method of collection and division is explained, Socrates notices that his two speeches each discuss the unreasoning part of mind (*to men aphron tēs dianoias* 265e 3-4). The first speech cut on the "left-hand side" until it found a "left-handed" eros and "abused it with full justice" (266a 1-6); the second speech examined the right-hand side of madness wherein is located an eros which "shares the same name as the other, but is divine" (266a6-b1).

speech per se which prompts the sign. It is Socrates' giving up early¹⁷.

By examining the nature and role of the divine sign in the *Phaedrus*, we can remove some of the evidence in favor of the view that Socrates' two speeches are incompatible. Though it would require a separate study to show this, if the two speeches are connected substantially, and not just topically, then it is harder to dismiss the view that eros is a central and abiding concern of the *Phaedrus*. I have argued elsewhere in support of the view that eros informs the portrait of the idealized dialectician in the latter half of the dialogue¹⁸. Suffice it here to suggest another reason for thinking that eros casts a long shadow in the *Phaedrus*. Since we have seen Socrates' quick responsiveness to the divine sign depends on his self-knowledge, and since this self-knowledge is drawn from a diverse array of sources (including hunches and nagging worries), then the philosopher-*mousikos* is most effective when, as Griswold (1986) shows, eros is among the sources of insight into himself.

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17. Perhaps there is, finally, a further point to be made. If the sign crosses him because Phaedrus is now prepared to discuss the speech with him, even while he is about to leave, then Socrates is receiving counsel of sorts to associate further with Phaedrus. If this is correct, then Socrates' seduction of him is more successful, and successful more quickly, than we might otherwise have had reason to suppose. He is ready not merely to devour speeches but to examine them, together, in conversation. If this latter wish of Phaedrus is to be met, it requires divine intervention by the *daimonion*. Thus, the Phaedrus passage accords with *Tht.* 151a 3-5 (where the divine sign prevents Socrates from associating with some, and "permits" him – by no longer preventing him – to associate with others) and with the possibly spurious *Alc.* 105e 6-106 a 1 (where the sign first prevents him from conversing with Alcibiades before permitting him to do so now that Alcibiades will listen).

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