

Socrates' Philosophy as a Divine Service in Plato's *Apology*

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The aim of this paper is to present Socrates' philosophy as a divine service. The following considerations are based mainly on Plato's *Apology* which clearly links the activity of Socrates and his famous „I know that I know nothing” with the oracle of Delphi. The paper begins with some remarks about the Delphic Oracle. Socrates might have been holding one of his typical conversations with some of his closest friends, before Chaerephon brought the news from Delphi. Now, the question arises whether or not the Delphic oracle exerted any influence on Socrates' relations with the Athenians and his view of himself. If a positive answer to the question is given, then we need to explain how this affected Socrates' conduct.

1. Chaerephon and Delphi

Plato and Xenophon unanimously confirm that Chaerephon asked the Delphic Oracle the famous question concerning Socrates. In Plato's *Apology* (21 a), we read that Chaerephon asked Pythia whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates. He was given a negative answer to his question. Xenophon relates that there were many witnesses, when

the oracle was consulted (*Ap.* 14). Nevertheless, scholars still disagree whether this was a historical fact or rather some literary fiction. Those researchers who view the oracle story as fictitious point to the difficulty of determining its exact date (Montuori 1981; Fontenrose 1978). Stokes notices that chronological difficulties are typical of the fifth century BC Greece and Plato in particular was anything but a careful chronologist (Stokes 1992: 53). Scholars who consider the oracle story to be a historical event cannot agree on its accurate date. The most popular is the late 430s before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War (Taylor 1953; Reeve 1989; Guthrie 2000). Following the latter group of researchers I will try to reconcile the testimonies of Plato and Xenophon and to explain the motives which might have inspired Chaerephon.

The accounts of Plato and Xenophon are not mutually exclusive. Rather, both authors emphasize different aspects of the event. Plato informs us about the content of the question put forward by Chaerephon and the answer that he received. At no place in the *Apology* do we encounter any suggestion that Pythia was prophesying in ecstasy inspired by Apollo. Such prophesying was employed only in either various „important cases” or when the questioner had a special privilege called προμαντεία, i.e., was somehow connected with the Delphi through the ties of friendship known as προξενία (Oświecimski 1989: 172). Thus, it seems fair to assume that Chaerephon might not have belonged to such a group of people and that his question was not treated as an „important case”. Xenophon in his *Apology* puts the emphasis on questioning the Oracle in the presence of numerous people. This suggests another kind of divination that was very often used in the Delphi. While Oświecimski calls it *kleromancja*, it involved drawing lots from a tripod or some other container and was more public than the inspired prophesying of Pythia (Oświecimski 1989: 171). Hence, we may note that the testimonies of both ancient writers complement each other. The question put forward by Chaerephon needed a simple „yes-or-no answer”. Such form of answering was offered by *kleromancja* which was believed to be *the main kind of artificial divination in Delphi* (Oświecimski 1989: 174). The fact that a large number of people were present when Chaerephon asked Pythia can be explained by reference to the Delphic calendar. It is common knowledge that the number of days when Pythia was giving responses increased gradually. This was directly connected with the growing prestige of the Delphic Oracle from the early 6th century BC onwards. Thus, the annual system of consulting was transformed into a monthly one with the exception of the three winter months. As a result, there were nine ceremonial months and Pythia was prophesying more often. Great crowds of people would visit the temple. There was a unique atmosphere, characteristic of all places of a religious cult during ceremonial or festive days. During that time, responses were given by Pythia without any decisive role of the Oracle’s priests. As Oświecimski elucidates *a city would perform a common sacrifice* in the name of its inhabitants to guarantee them the possibility of receiving oracles (Oświecimski 1989: 171). If Chaerephon came to Delphi during that time, the enormous number of people mentioned in the Xenophontine *Apology* should not be perceived as surprising. Chaerecrates, who was Chaerephon’s brother, might have been among them and this could be one of the reasons why Socrates mentions him (*Pl. Ap.* 21 a).

Now, we should turn to the question why Chaerephon asked the god whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates? The philosopher must have already distinguished himself somehow¹ and it must have intrigued Chaerephon so much that he, as Socrates says, *dared to consult the oracle about this* (Pl. *Ap.* 21a).² Chaerephon was, as it is well known, the oldest and one of the staunchest followers of Socrates. In the *Memorabilia* (II 3), Xenophon has Socrates praise him as sensible (φρόνιμος), ambitious (φιλότιμος) and noble (ἔλευθέριος). While Plato has Chaerephon appear in such dialogues as the *Apology of Socrates*, *Charmides* and *Gorgias*, he is not portrayed there as an active interlocutor. Plato focuses rather on his character and devotion to Socrates. At the very beginning of the *Charmides* (153 b), we read how Chaerephon, on seeing Socrates, jumps up, runs to him, seizes his hand and asks the philosopher about the siege of Potidaea. Such an untypical way of greeting shows Chaerephon to have been incapable of controlling his emotions. In Plato's *Apology* (21 a), Socrates calls him ἑταῖρος ἐκ νέου, i.e., an acquaintance of youth, adding also the adjective σφοδρός, i.e. vehement, or impetuous. Furthermore, we read that Chaerephon behaved in this way only when he was moved by something. This accords with his image in the *Charmides*.

What made Chaerephon act so impetuously was the sight of Socrates whom he had not seen for quite a long time. It is very difficult to ascertain what exactly guided Chaerephon in Delphi. We do not know whether he already went to Delphi with the intention of asking Apollo about Socrates or whether his question was caused by an impulse, i.e., some euphoria or enthusiasm. Such feelings were certainly not uncommon during the ceremonial days in Delphi. Any hypothesis concerning the latter possibility is problematic, as it cannot be confirmed or rejected. Consequently, such a hypothesis is hardly of any use for our considerations. The first question put forward here enables us to accept that Chaerephon was motivated not only by Socrates' wisdom as such but also by the willingness to persuade his master to share it with a larger group of people. A justification for such an assumption comes from the *Laches*. Nicias reproaches there Lysimachus that he does not know the typical behaviour of Socrates in the following words:

It is quite clear to me, Lysimachus, that your knowledge of Socrates is limited to your acquaintance with his father and that you have had no contact with the man himself, except when he was a child – I suppose he may have mingled with you and your fellow demesmen, following alone with his father at the temple or at some other public gathering. But you are obviously still unacquainted with the man as he is now he has grown up [...] You don't appear to me to know that whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and associates with him in conversation must necessarily, even if he began by conversing about something quite different in the first place, keep on being led about by the man's arguments until he submits to answering questions about himself concerning both his present manner of life and the life he has lived hitherto.

¹ The idea that Socrates must have gained some reputation for his activity before receiving the Delphic oracle is discussed by Brickhouse & Smith, 1990: 94–95 and Colaïaco 2001: 57.

² All quotations from Plato's *Apology* appear in the translation by Thomas G. West (1989).

And when he does submit to this questioning, you don't realize that Socrates will not let him go before he has well and truly tested every last detail (Pl. La. 187e–188a)³.

The passage cited describes aptly Socrates' method. When carefully read, this passage makes it possible to surmise when the philosopher started using it. The adjective *πρεσβύτερος* (older) and the expression *παιδὶ ὄντι* (in the boyhood) suggest that Socrates began to employ his dialectical method soon after he ceased to be a boy. *Πρεσβύτερος* means here „older than he was in the preceding sentence” and should not be taken out of its context (Stokes 1992: 53). If the oracle is usually dated from 439 to 429 BC, then the passage of the *Laches* clearly shows that Socrates started his dialectical activity not after he received the Delphic oracle but much earlier. Chaerephon is his oldest disciple and someone who knows him since his youth – clearly, he would be impressed by Socrates' new method and its effects.

It may be advisable to cite a passage from the *Theaetetus* where Socrates compares his philosophical method with midwifery and stresses that *God compels him to be a midwife* (150c)⁴. His way of philosophizing seems to be the result of some divine inspiration or intervention that he must have experienced long before Pythia said that there was nobody wiser. Thus, everything points to his childhood or early youth. In Plato's *Apology* Socrates discusses his way of communicating with god through the *daimonion*. Socrates' *daimonion* was a divine voice that only discouraged him from doing things and never encouraged him to do anything (*Ap.* 31 d). In the last passages of the *Apology* (40 b), we read that this voice or divine sign was always very district or strong (*πυκνή*). The frequency with which the *daimonion* appeared made Socrates recognize it as something ordinary. He describes it in the same way in two places of his „Defence” (40 a and 40 c). The phrase used in 40 a refers to his ability of prophesying, *μαντική ἢ τοῦ δαιμονίου*, and shows a strong association with the Oracle. It allows us to accept that Socrates took his *daimonion* to be his own private interior oracle. He may have even identified it with the voice of Apollo. According to ancient Greeks, Apollo had the greatest power of prophesying. The communication between Socrates and his *daimonion* must have been quite frequent before Chaerephon went to Delphi, but it never had a public character⁵. When Pythia, however, being the instrument of Apollo has finally given the response to the friend of Socrates, Apollo speaks also in public. Such an event could not have been ignored by Socrates. The problem was that he did not understand it fully.

³ Translation by Sprague (1992).

⁴ Translation by Benardete (1986).

⁵ A careful analysis of *daimonion* is offered by Pycka 2009: 18–28.

2. The interpretation of the oracle

When Socrates describes his reaction to hearing the oracle, he maintains that at first he did not understand what exactly Apollo tried to convey to him. He knew that the oracles were often riddles and that they should be appropriately interpreted by getting their hidden meaning. The oracle could not have been a lie because the gods are forbidden to act in this way. Socrates did not even consider such a possibility. He merely presented his way of thinking. The demonstration of the fact that Pythia could not have lied confirms, as a double negation, his conviction that the god told the truth which needed interpretation. The task was not an easy one. Clearly, Apollo implied that Socrates distinguished himself among other people. Plato writes that Socrates for a long time, *πολὸν χρόνον*, wondered what was it that exactly distinguished him from other Athenians. The understanding came with time and is presented in the passage 21c. When describing the purpose of his meeting with the first statesman, Socrates uses there the phrase *ἐλέγξων τὸ μαντεῖον*, to examine or to study the oracle. This means that Socrates discovered the hidden meaning of the oracle through his method, which suggests that he must have employed it earlier. Consequently, the difference between him and the Athenians consisted not only in his philosophical ideas but mainly in the way he examined them. The hidden meaning of the oracle could have been used with reference to people whom Socrates talked with. In Plato's *Apology* (21 e), Socrates himself mentions the need to investigate all with reputation for wisdom. The phrase *πάνυ μόγις*, with hard work or reluctance, testifies that he was satisfied with his way of living and did not deem it necessary to change it.

When visiting the first statesmen of reputed wisdom, he noticed that they all erroneously assumed to have knowledge in all matters, including the most important ones. Socrates' attempts to make them question the validity of their knowledge earned him hostility. Notwithstanding this, he continued his activity, because he believed that he was obliged to obey the god (22 a). In the final words of the passage, Socrates summarizes his observations concerning the conversations with the Athenian statesmen by using the phrase *κατὰ τὸν θεόν* (22 a). This means that he was questioning people *because of the god*. Consequently, the god is presented here as the main cause of Socrates' activity. The effect of all discussions was invariably the same: contrary to his interlocutors, Socrates did not think that he knew what he did not know (21 d).

Having found the difference between him and all other people, Socrates wondered what could be more expedient for him: to *be in no way wise in their wisdom or ignorant in their ignorance or to have both things that they have* (22 e). The question put forward by the oracle, *ὑπὲρ τοῦ χρησιμοῦ*, testifies that the philosopher still had doubts about expanding his activity. However, the answer which he gave to the oracle and to himself was that it would be better for him to remain the same person that he used to be and to continue questioning other people. This answer shows that he accepted the god's task with all humility.

From this moment on, Socrates began to perceive his activity as a divine service. In the next passage of the *Apology* (23 b), he describes himself as a person that helps and

serves the god by wandering and questioning people. His service and the ever evolving philosophy were so important to him that his entire defence built on them. Socrates' strong belief in the divine source of his philosophizing permeates the *Apology*. The most significant testimony here is the passage 28 e, where he claims that he *supposed and assumed* that it was the god who ordered him to *live philosophizing and examining himself and others*. The god of Delphi commanded him to perform the duty regardless of any threats. An act of disobedience would be an act of impiety (29 a) and evil, because injustice and disobedience are dishonourable (29 b). That is why he declares (29 d): *I, men of Athens, salute you and love you, but I will obey the god rather than you; and as long as breathe and am able to, I will certainly not stop philosophizing [...]*. Here, Socrates claims that he obeys the god. He puts it in no uncertain terms that he will not disobey, even in the face of a threat of repeated death (30 c). The proof of his obedience is his poverty and the fact that he has always neglected his own affairs.

Socrates was deeply convinced that it was the god who gave him a special task to fulfil in the Athenian society. In the following passages of *Apology* he reiterates that his philosophical activity is the result of the god's order (30 a). He insists that his divine service is the best thing that has ever happened to the Athenians (*ibid.*). Accordingly, Socrates portrays himself as a benefactor of Athens (36 c), a special gift from the god who bends over backwards to make them care for their souls rather than for their bodies or possessions (30 e).

3. Conclusions

When trying to understand Socrates' idea of philosophy as a divine service, it is worth emphasizing that the *Apology* is an expression of the philosopher's profound piety. It is rather obvious that he must have started his activity before the Delphic oracle was delivered to him, but he chose to confine it to a small group of people. Given the diversity of meanings that the word *wisdom* has, one may assume that the oracle was an impulse to philosophize in larger circle⁶. His initial reluctance to address larger groups of interlocutors disappeared when Socrates comprehended what distinguished him from other Athenians. At the same time, it also dawned upon him that awareness of one's ignorance was a prerequisite for any moral improvement and that his divine mission was to refute all false views. Socrates obeyed the command of the god (*Ap.* 19 a, 35 d) and, following Apollo's advice, expanded his activity. It was a turning point in his life, as from that moment on he performed his service irrespective of the disapproval of the majority of Athenians. And Apollo supported him with the help of divinations, dreams, and in every way that any divine allotment ever ordered a human being to practice anything at all (*Ap.* 33 c). The question whether Socrates' *daimonion* was the voice of Apollo or some other god is a matter of opinion. The afore-cited phrase ἐκ μαντείων, through oracles,

⁶ A similar view is presented by Pycka 2009: 10.

seems to suggest the first possibility. Socrates mentioned earlier only one oracle which Chaerephon received in Delphi. He used the plural of the noun *oracle*. This may suggest that he regarded his *daimonion* as his personal oracle, which he actually identified with the voice of Apollo.

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The aim of the present paper is to discuss Socrates' idea of philosophy as a service to the god. First the article investigates why Chaerephon went to Delphi and why he asked Pythia the famous question concerning Socrates. The investigation provides a basis for distinguishing two major periods in his activity. The one preceding the Delphic oracle consists in conducting inquiries in a group of closest friends. The one following the Delphic oracle consist in addressing a much larger audience. An analysis of both periods suggests that the oracle from Delphi greatly affected Socrates' relations with other Athenians. While the present article deals also with the issue of Socrates' daimonion, it hypothesizes that the voice of daimonion and the voice of Pythia could be regarded as Apollo's interventions.

KEYWORDS

Socrates, Plato, daimonion, the Delphic oracle