# Socratic Piety and the Universality of Virtue

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 7th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 3th – Saturday 5th January 2019.



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In the landscape of ancient Greek ethics, there are two conspicuous manifestations of commitment to the idea that virtue is universal or the same everywhere and for everyone. The first is Plato's response to the relativism of Protagoras, and with it the notion that justice is conventional rather than natural. This is a central theme of the *Republic* and developed at length in the *Laws* through the derivation of an elaborate system of natural law, from where it descends less conspicuously into Aristotle's conception of ethical science (Curren 2019). The second conspicuous manifestation of universalism about virtue in Greek antiquity is Stoic natural law theory, which reappears transformed in Kant's natural law constructivism (Westphal 2016a, 2016b). Socrates has meanwhile been widely conceived as entertaining a eudaimonistic form of virtue ethics, "centered on the question of what happiness is and how best to achieve it" (Annas 1999: 37). Virtue ethics is seen as compatible with eudaimonism to the extent that virtue is an internal (psychic) necessity for happiness, but it is characteristic of (orthodox) virtue ethics that it excludes any role for duty and moral law. Plato and the early Stoics took themselves to be developing Socratic ideas, however, and – quoting Joseph DeFilippo and Philip Mitsis – "it is hardly an exaggeration to place the origins of natural law theory . . . firmly within the framework of the Socratic movement" (DeFilippo and Mitsis 1994).

The thesis I will advance is that the moral and theological commitments attributable to Socrates on the basis of Plato's dialogues concerning Socrates' trial and death – the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo* – and Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, suggest an understanding of virtue informed by natural law and a related understanding of piety associated with an *ethic of fidelity to reason*.

The motivational core of piety is proper regard for what is divine, and what is divine in Socratic theology is *nous* and *logos*, or rational intellect and its intellectual products. Socrates purifies the gods – Zeus, above all – into creatures of unalloyed rational intellect, holds that human beings are part beast and part god (rational intellect), and endorses the traditional Greek view that true kings administer laws that codify divine wisdom and are communicated by Zeus or Apollo. While committed to honoring the deliverances of his own reasoning, he also honors laws and signs he has reason to think are emanations of divine intellect or *logos* more perfect than his own limited wisdom. Proper regard for what is divine will consequently manifest itself not only in reverence for gods and the wisdom they dispense, whether through universal laws or specific signs, but also in respect for the reason in oneself and other human beings, and for the deliverances of one's own best reasoning. I take all of this to yield the view that virtue involves a proper valuing of rational beings, both perfect and imperfect, and wisdom, expressed both in universal laws and in judgments and signs tailored to specific circumstances. This is a conception of virtue in which fidelity to the demands of reason and categorical imperatives play a role.

John Cooper writes that,

> *On the Stoic theory virtuous persons always act, first, for the sake of their own happiness . . . ; second, choosing virtuous acts for their own sake, as parts of their happiness; and, third, choosing them as conforming to the universal law, that is, to the will of Zeus. . . . The Stoics, like other Greek philosophers of their time and before, equate honoring and following Zeus with honoring and following reason. In that sense, as with Kant, this universal law is our law qua rational beings for ourselves, and not only Zeus's for us (Cooper 1996: 262, 263).*

He goes on to explain that this universal law that is our law qua rational beings for ourselves is much wider than moral law, and that the universal reason it embodies is both common to all human beings and "more fundamentally, the single reason that governs the unified world as a whole" (278). As such, it provides no scope for lesser rational beings determining their own ends or claiming the rights of

autonomy that Kant and other moderns accord them. The transformation of natural law in the modern period involves, first, an abandonment of the idea of unified rational governance or law written into nature, and, second, a shift to a constructivist mode of justification in moral theory that sidesteps debates about moral realism or the truth of moral propositions (Westphal 2016a).

My concern is not with this subsequent history, however, but with the structure of Socratic ethics prior to its transformation by Chrysippus and his fellow Stoics. I shall begin with a brief summary of DeFilippo and Mitsis' reconstruction of the Socratic materials on which the Stoics built, show how the ethical commitments attributed to Socrates in the *Apology* and *Crito* can be explained as manifestations of a unifying ethic of *fidelity to reason*, and examine the relationship between this ethic and Socratic piety.

I will argue that we find in Socrates the doctrine that there is a divine part of human beings, the intellect or reasoning part of the *psyche*, and that the greatest good for human beings is for this rational *psyche* to be developed and expressed as fully as possible. The flourishing of a human being just is the flourishing of our best or divine part, on this view, and the achievement and expression of wisdom is what constitutes this flourishing. If piety is, or entails, proper regard for the divine, then it requires respect for the reason or rational intellect in ourselves and others. This is one sense in which Socrates' efforts to promote rational self-examination and fidelity to the conclusions of rational deliberation seem to qualify as *substantively* pious. The upshot of conventional readings of the *Euthyphro* is that if piety is truly a virtue there must be some such substantive aspect to it, independent of what a god may desire or command. Yet, what is independently good and just – proper regard for what is best in human beings and the flourishing or living well it facilitates – is what a benevolent or true god would desire and command, as gods were said to in communicating laws (*nomoi*) or deliverances of divine intellect that enable human beings to live well together (Lloyd-Jones 1983). So the Socratic conception of piety may involve in relation to human beings both a *patient-regarding* substantive aspect, concerning regard for the reason in oneself and others, and a *directive-regarding* aspect concerning fidelity to the deliverances

of perfect reason or divine logos, to the extent that it has been discernibly communicated. This *directive-regarding* aspect of piety is (similarly) only pious insofar as it is substantively motivated by due regard for a god conceived as unalloyed intellect possessed of perfect wisdom

I will develop this view, using Panos Dimas's reading of the *Euthyphro* as a foil (Dimas 2006). While his reading strikes me as in many respects correct, I argue that it does not deliver the unifying account of Socratic ethics that a more Stoic conception of piety as fidelity to reason does – a conception of "honoring and following Zeus" that equates it with "honoring and following reason" (Cooper 1996: 263), as an aspect of due regard for rational intellect and the guidance it provides.

***The Socratic Roots of Stoic Natural Law***

DeFilippo and Mitsis hold that the Socrates portrayed by Plato and Xenophon "never explicitly formulates a theory of natural law. Bur the presence in Socratic texts of the basic components of such a theory enabled the Stoics to construct their own account on a recognizably Socratic foundation" (DeFilippo and Mitsis 1994: 255).

With regard to the rationality of nature, they rely on the first book of Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, where Socrates is presented as arguing that the existence of human beings, and human reason (*nous*) in particular, can only be explained by reference to a rational power in nature analogous to the material elements (earth, air, water) from which human bodies are constructed (255-257, relying on *Mem*. 1.4.8-9). This suggests a view according to which each person's rationality is "a portion of rationality in the world at large," a portion of divine rationality, that is. And it suggests that human beings are products of a rational power that governs nature much as the human psyche governs the body, hence the idea that divine rationality orders nature (257). The context is an attempt by Socrates to persuade the atheist Aristodemus that piety is essential to happiness, so the larger picture that emerges is one of Socrates both affirming the ethical importance of piety and associating it with regard for the divine rationality of

which our own rationality is a part. DeFilippo and Mitsis note the evidence that both early and later Stoic philosophers relied on the presentation of Socrates' views in *Memorabilia* 1.4, in developing and defending their own position on the divine rational ordering of nature (260-265).

Turning to the matter of divine moral principles, DeFilippo and Mitsis observe that a divine ordering of nature as such does not entail the claim that "nature provides guidance to individuals in the form of moral laws or rules" (265). However, they argue that Plato's *Crito* and *Phaedo*, and Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 4.4, provided the Stoics with Socratic starting points for this aspect of natural law theory as well. *Memorabilia* 4.4.19-21 finds Socrates arguing that there are unwritten laws, established by gods and observed everywhere, that direct human conduct and are backed by inescapable sanctions:

> *"I think that the gods established these laws for men; for among all men, the primary law is to honor the gods," he [Socrates] replied.*
>
> *"So, then, it is also a law everywhere to honor one's parents?"*
>
> *"Yes," he replied (4.4.20; transl. DeFilippo and Mitsis 1994: 266-267).*

These are categorical imperatives of morality applicable to all human beings, everywhere, and at all times, and Socrates is portrayed as committed to them in Plato's dialogues no less than in *Memorabilia*.

Following David Sedley (1993), DeFilippo and Mitsis focus on two matters in the *Crito* and *Phaedo*. One is the fact that Socrates reasons in the *Crito* from a moral principle from which he will not waver, that one should never commit and injustice, even in return for an injustice (*Cr*. 49b-c). Such reasoning from overriding principles is congenial to the standpoint of Stoic natural law, and evidently central to Socrates' conception of virtue. A second notable starting point for the Stoics, identified by Sedley and endorsed by DeFilippo and Mitsis, is Plato's portrayal in the *Crito* and *Phaedo* of Socrates' calm acceptance of his impending death. The Stoics evidently accepted this as a "model of the sage's affirmation of the rational and providential order of nature" (DeFilippo and Mitsis 1994: 268),

communicated through divine signs, such as the dream Socrates evidently took to signify his death two days hence (*Cri*. 44a-b). Taken together, Socrates' argument from principle and acknowledgement of a divine sign, provided the Stoics with a model of "the absolute convergence, of moral principle and nature's divinely rational plan . . . a paradigm for the sage whose attitudes and actions most precisely embody the dictates of the *koinos nomos* [cosmic or natural law]" (DeFilippo and Mitsis 1994: 270).

***The Ethic of Fidelity to Reason***

Moving beyond these Socratic starting points for Stoic natural law theory, I want to tease out a more detailed picture of the structure of Socratic moral principles and argue that they are best explained as coming to rest in a conception of rational intellect as divine and a related conception of piety.[1] This makes the divine – both in and beyond human beings – a defining object of moral regard, and it connects human reason, moral law, and divine signs in a coherent understanding of virtuous choice and action.

I will try to show in what follows that the conception of piety I have suggested generates a set of principles that shape Socratic ethics. A central and striking feature of this is Socrates' symmetrical treatment – which seems to have gone unnoticed, and therefore unexplained – of the state's duty to put persuasion before force, and the citizen's duty to obey good laws voluntarily and "persuade or obey" the state's commands.

Let's begin with the state's duty to put persuasion before force. In pleading his own defense in the *Apology*, Socrates argues that it is absurd to suppose that he would have knowingly corrupted his associates, and inappropriate to punish him if he did so unknowingly:

[1] I rely on arguments first presented in Curren 2000, but in the service of a more nuanced account of Socratic ethics and piety than I presented in that work.

> *If I corrupt them unwillingly, the law does not require you to bring people to court for such unwilling wrongdoings, but to get hold of them privately, to instruct them and exhort them; for clearly, if I learn better, I shall cease to do what I am doing unwillingly. You, however, have avoided my company and were unwilling to instruct me, but you bring me here, where the law requires one to bring those who are in need of punishment, not of instruction (Ap. 26a).*

The setting for this remark is a legal system in which charges for many kinds of offenses were brought by volunteers, rather than by a public prosecutor acting in the name of "the people," so it is Meletus, Socrates' accuser, and not the city itself, who Socrates says should bear a burden to instruct him, rather than seek punishment. This falls short of arguing that the city has an obligation to instruct its citizens in what they need to know to lead just and law-abiding lives, but it does seem to imply that the city can never be in a position to punish unless this educational burden is discharged by *someone*, and this in turn implies that the city cannot establish a general claim to punish whomever may break its laws *unless it makes some general provision for educating everyone*. Whatever burden of instruction the individual prosecuting the case may bear, the jury will presumably be bound by the same principle that instruction is the appropriate response to ignorance, and will be in no position to impose a punishment on one who has not been appropriately instructed.

In this passage Socrates allows that punishment may sometimes be appropriate, and it would seem to follow from this that he assumes that in some instances the burden of instruction will have been adequately borne. It is not entirely clear how he intends to reconcile this qualified approval of the use of punishment with his doctrine that no one does wrong willingly, but it would be natural for him to assume that there will be cases in which the futility of further educative efforts will become evident and the city will have to use other methods to protect itself. A city must put instruction and persuasion before force, on what is best identified as the principle that *instruction is the appropriate response to ignorance that has not proven impervious to instruction*, but to deny it the use of force in the face of

unyielding ignorance and wrongdoing would be to deny it the means to defend itself and preserve the good order on which the well-being of its citizens depends.

This is somewhat speculative, but it reconciles Socrates' statements about punishment and ignorance in a way that conforms to the general pattern of his principle of putting rational persuasion and instruction before force and violence. This principle seems to be itself only one aspect of a more general principle of putting reason and wisdom first in every way, which seems to rest on the axiom *that the rational soul (to logistikon) is the divine element in human nature, and thus worthy of respect and care.* This axiom, which I'll call the *principle of fidelity to reason*, suggests itself as the foundation of Socratic ethics. Showing proper regard for the divine in human beings would evidently involve cultivating and relying on rationality and reasoning to the greatest extent that one can. This would mean cultivating rationality both in oneself and in others, and relying on reasoning in action and in speech; in moving both oneself and others to act, and in judging what to say and what to believe of the opinions of others. Socrates' regard for reason is on display in all these ways in the *Apology* and *Crito*, and the strategy of his defense at trial is largely to explain that his fidelity to reason, annoying as it may be, is an expression of both piety and goodwill toward the city and its youth.

In its application to cities in their dealings with citizens, the *principle of fidelity to reason* generates corollaries pertaining to the *manner, aim*, and *substance* of rule. Thus in moving citizens to act in some ways and not others, the *manner* in which a city should rule, to the greatest extent possible, is through truthful instruction and rational persuasion, rather than through force; and it should listen to the arguments offered in return by its citizens and endeavor to judge those arguments on their rational merits. In the *Crito* the laws of Athens are made to address Socrates and Crito and say "we only propose things, we do not issue savage (*agriôs*) commands to do whatever we order" (52a). They speak repeatedly of persuading Socrates (53a, 54b, 54c), and they present him with philosophical arguments and instruct him to observe what follows from those arguments (51c). Their mode of persuasion is truthful and philosophically reasoned. In saying their commands are not savage, these laws imply that

they are reasonable, and they seem to intend this not simply as a point about their substance and aims, whose merits are invoked at 50d–e, but about their manner.

The *aim* of a city's laws and rational persuasion should be to produce not fidelity to commands and conventions as such, but fidelity to reason, and through it a grasp and pursuit of what is truly, and not just apparently, good. The city should aim at the highest good of its citizens, in short. This is essentially what Socrates asserts in suggesting at *Apology* 36b-37a that it would be appropriate for Athens to subsidize his philosophical examination of his fellow Athenians, and in saying at *Gorgias* 521d-e that his speeches make him a practitioner of the "true political craft."

In its *substance* the laws, commands, and verdicts by which rule is transacted should strive to embody reason, which is to say divine reason (*logos*) or laws (*nomoi*). Two passages where Socrates commits himself to the existence of divine laws are *Apology* 30d and *Crito* 54c. Socrates says in the first of these passages that he believes "it is not allowed by the laws of god (*ou... themiton*) that a better man be injured by a worse one." In the latter he has the laws of Athens speak to him of their "brothers, the laws of Hades (*adelphoi oi en Haidou nomoi*)," thereby identifying themselves as the laws of Zeus (those that would apply "in the air" or neither underground nor at sea). This suggests not only that Socrates believed in divine or natural laws that codify and communicate divine or perfect wisdom concerning how human beings can live well and harmoniously, but that he regarded such laws as communicated to at least some human lawgivers, as Greek tradition held.

Similarly, in its application to the conduct of citizens towards the city, the *principle of fidelity to reason* generates corollaries pertaining to the *substance* and *aim* of individual conduct, and to its *manner*, both in *compliance* and in *defiance* of law.

In the *substance* of their conduct citizens should do what is right, just, or demanded by reason (*Ap*. 32a; *Cri*. 48c, 49a, etc.), and they should *aim* at the good (*Ap*. 29e–30a, *Cri*. 54b). To the extent that the laws of actual cities are not divinely inspired or grounded in systematic moral knowledge, those laws

will sometimes demand the right thing and sometimes demand the wrong thing. When they demand the right thing, fidelity to reason demands that citizens comply in a voluntary manner, for in this case what the law demands is what reason demands. To fail in this is to behave not in the manner of a citizen, but of a slave who is unable to govern himself in accordance with reason and must be forced to cooperate with it (*Cri*. 52d). On the other hand, when the laws demand the wrong thing, what fidelity to reason demands in the *manner* of their defiance of law is that they make a reasonable effort to persuade the city that what it demands is wrong. Here again, instruction is the appropriate response to ignorance which has not proven impervious to instruction. Socrates reasons that in a good city a citizen's consent to the laws and debt of gratitude for the benefits conferred by those laws creates an obligation to "persuade or obey" (*Cri*. 51b, 51b–c, 51e–52a), and that to fail in this obligation is to do violence to the city (51b-c). One way to avoid doing the city violence is to obey, but when obedience is precluded by the wrongness of what the law demands, the citizen must avoid doing the city violence by making a reasonable effort to persuade it that what it expects is wrong. If the city has already shown itself to be unmoved by reason, an acceptable course may be to simply ignore the law, as Socrates himself seems to have done by defying the unjust orders of the Thirty oligarchs "not in words but in action" (*Ap*. 32c–d). Otherwise, the citizen should attempt to instruct and persuade the city through truthful and rational means, but if he fails to convince it that its law is unjust he must nevertheless do the right thing, even in defiance of its instructions (*Ap*. 29d, 32a–d, 37e–38a; Kraut 1984: 54-114). Having put instruction and persuasion first as much as possible, his fidelity to reason does the city no violence.

On the interpretation I am offering here, the demands of justice on citizens in their relation to cities are thus interestingly symmetrical with the demands of justice governing cities in their relations to citizens, and this symmetry is explained by the common origin of these demands in the *principle of fidelity to reason*. Principled defiance of bad law by citizens and punishment of wrongdoing by the city are both acceptable on Socratic principles, but both are subject to the constraints of fidelity to reason and the primary reliance on instruction and persuasion it entails. The burden of instruction and

persuasion that the city and citizen both face is a responsibility to encourage rationality and provide reasons that a reasonable person would accept as sufficient. For the city's part, it is not a duty to endure injustice when reasonable efforts to instruct and persuade unjust individuals fail, for fidelity to reason entails striving to be exhibit rationality ourselves and encourage it in others, and the creation and preservation of good order through good law is essential to doing that. Nor, for the citizen's part, is it a duty to undertake futile and potentially dangerous efforts to reason with rulers who have already demonstrated their disregard for reason, nor ever to persist beyond giving reasons that a reasonable person would be moved by. By ascribing an ethic of *fidelity to reason* to Socrates, we can thus make coherent good sense of what might otherwise appear to be unrelated or conflicting Socratic doctrines.

Before turning more directly to Socrates' conception of piety itself, I will close this section by illustrating Socrates' commitment to these corollaries to the *principle of fidelity to reason* by examining a passage in the *Apology* where Socrates explains to the jury why he offers a reasoned defense and refrains from the customary appeals to pity (34c) and "pitiful dramatics" (35b):

> *Quite apart from the question of reputation, gentlemen, I do not think it right to supplicate the jury and to be acquitted because of this, but to teach and persuade (didaskein kai peithein) them. It is not the purpose of a juryman's office to give justice as a favor to whoever seems good to him, but to judge according to law, and this he has sworn to do. We should not accustom you to perjure yourselves, nor should you make a habit of it. . . .*
>
> *Do not deem it right for me, gentlemen of the jury, that I should act towards you in a way that I do not consider to be good or just or pious, . . . clearly, if I convinced you by my supplication to do violence to your oath of office, I would be teaching you not to believe that there are gods, and my defense would convict me of not believing in them. This is far from being the case . . . (35b–d).*

The first thing of great importance that is evident in this passage is that Socrates understands teaching and persuading to be truthful and reasoned, since he contrasts them explicitly and at length with appeals to the emotions that might induce an unsound judgment. This is important, for without such evidence one might doubt that his expressed preference for teaching and persuading expresses a commitment of fidelity to *reason*. Both here and in his explanation to Crito of how he will judge the arguments for escape, when he awaits death after his conviction (*Cri*. 46b–48a), he displays and praises a reliance on truth and reasoned argument, whatever perils one may face. In the *Apology* he encourages the jury to judge the arguments impartially, and in the *Crito* he holds himself to the same standard. Judging the arguments impartially and heeding those which prove the strongest upon examination seems to be at the core, then, of how citizens and cities should determine what to do, say, and think; compliance with perfect or divine reason is what the good of all human beings rests on, and this seems to be the principal and fundamental means by which Socrates thinks progress toward that end can be made.

A second important feature of this passage is that Socrates advocates teaching and persuasion not only because he does "not think it right" or "good or just or pious" to use more manipulative methods of having his way with the jury, but because using those methods would encourage the jurymen to violate their vow to "judge according to law." Socrates clearly thinks it would be wrong to induce them to violate that vow, and he also clearly thinks that to "judge according to law" entails judging in a way that is reasoned and respectful of truth and evidence. It is reasonable to infer from this that he assumes there is *a natural standard of impartial reason* which should govern the administration of justice, that he thinks piety and justice demand that the city embrace that standard, and that citizens encourage it to do so. Socrates suggests that to acquit out of pity, in violation of the oath one has taken to "judge according to law," would be to perjure oneself, to make the oath one has sworn false after the fact, or "do violence to it." Here as elsewhere, violence is contrasted with fidelity to reason, and fidelity to reason is understood to be essential to justice.

***Socratic Piety***

In Plato's dialogues, Socrates speaks of becoming wise as becoming "like God" (e.g., *Phaedrus* 248a ff). This most divine and happy state is not possible without virtue, and so it is in the interest of human beings to be virtuous. But I take it that virtuous conduct is, so far as it is virtuous, not *motivated* by self-interest, but by proper regard for what is good, what is best in human beings, and what is supremely good or divine. What would piety toward the gods be without a proper valuing of the gods themselves, and what would the virtue of justice be without a proper valuing of the best in human beings? What seems to motivate Socratic social virtue and determine its content is respect for reason, which is to say the divine or reasoning part of human beings (*nous* or *to logistikon*, as Plato calls it when he distinguishes the parts of the soul in *Rep*. IV, 440E-441E), and the demands of reason (*logos*), which is to say both the deliverances of our own reasoning and any perfect or divine reason that may be discernibly communicated to us. The respect for the divine, which animates Socratic piety, can thus be seen to motivate and guide morally virtuous action in general, including both pious conduct towards the gods and just conduct towards human beings.

I'll offer some further explanation of this view, contrasting it with the eudaimonistic account of Socratic ethics defended by Gregory Vlastos.

Vlastos remarks, in his seminal work on Socrates, that

> *The Ionians had rationalized deity by making it natural. From within the supernaturalist framework which they reject, Socrates makes a parallel move: he rationalizes the gods by making them moral. His gods can be both supernatural and rational so long as they are rationally moral (Vlastos 1991: 162).*

This seems right. The life of a god had always amounted in the Greek popular imagination to the best life imaginable for a person, and in Socratic thought the gods also become exemplars of goodness or *aretê* to be emulated. I think the Greeks found it natural to assume that a thing's *aretê* enabled it to do what it does well, which means in the case of a god or a human being to live well. And I think Socrates too assumed that the most divine or flourishing life would be possible for a human being by becoming as much like a god, which is to say virtuous and wise, as possible. On this assumption, the identification of a part of us as divine yields the proposition that the way to live well is to cultivate the divine in ourselves as much as possible. We encounter this cluster of ideas in the *Theaetetus*, not itself a Socratic dialogue admittedly, in the remark that,

> In God there is no sort of wrong whatsoever; he is supremely just, and the thing most like him is the man who has become as just as it lies in human nature to be.... There are two patterns set up in reality. One is divine and supremely happy; the other has nothing of God in it, and is the pattern of deepest unhappiness (176c-e).

Similarly, in the *Phaedrus*, it is the soul "that follows a god most closely, making itself most like that god," and nourishing itself on truth (248a ff.) that secures the best fate for itself. In the *Timaeus* what is said of a man who devotes himself "to the love of learning and to true wisdom," is that "caring for his divine part, as he does,… he must indeed be supremely happy" (90b-c).

In the *Alcibiades* (a dialogue whose authorship is disputed) it is the part of the soul "in which knowing and thinking take place" that is said to be most divine, to resemble the divine, to be divine, and to be made good by wisdom (133b-c). Plato has Socrates say there that, "Someone who looked at [the thinking part of the soul] and grasped everything divine – god and intelligence – would have the best

grasp of himself as well" (133c).[2] This is a remarkable passage, and it hints at a conception of God not unlike that of the Stoics, a God identified with *logos* and *nous*. On this conception of God, the divine part of human beings is divine in the sense of being made of the very same stuff as God, albeit in a less powerful and complete form.

I *would* agree, too, with Vlastos's claim that it is Socratic piety that "brings a release from [the] egocentricity which is endemic in Socratic eudaemonism" (Vlastos 1991:177), except that I am not able to detect in Socratic ethics the egocentricity he discerns. Julia Annas comes closer to grasping the nature of Socratic piety and its place in Socratic ethics in her book, *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*, which goes a long way toward restoring divinity to the central place in Socratic ethics that the ancients regarded it as having (Annas 1999). She performs a useful service in clarifying the meaning of the Platonic assertion that our final end is to become like God, but I think there are important further questions to ask about the role of proper regard for the divine in determining the content of virtue or justice in the Socratic tradition. If respect for the divine means in part respect for divine or perfect reason, then it entails respect for divine wisdom (*logos*) and the principles or laws (*nomoi*) it lays down for human conduct. In this sense one can say that the virtue of *piety entails respect for moral law, and thereby shapes the content of the other virtues*.

Vlastos's account of the fundamental elements of Socratic moral theory and their relationships to each other are as follows. Socrates begins, he says, with a "Eudaemonist Axiom," according to which "happiness is desired by all human beings as the ultimate end (telos) of all their rational acts" (Vlastos 1991: 203). From this axiom, he then derives the principle of the "Sovereignty of Virtue," the principle that one should always do what is just or virtuous. "Virtue being the sovereign good in our domain of

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[2]. Hutchinson makes a gratuitous substitution of *thean* (vision) for *theon* (god) in his translation of this passage, in Cooper, ed., 1997. The sense of the unaltered text is clear enough, and is echoed in Aristotle, *NE* I.4 1096a25 where he says that "good" may be predicated of "whatness" (substances), "as in the case of God and of the intellect."

value, its claim upon us is always final," writes Vlastos (211). The key to the derivation of the sovereignty of virtue from the eudaemonist axiom is the thesis that virtue is sufficient for happiness, which he dubs the "Sufficiency Thesis" (217). On this thesis, there are non-moral goods which can add small but significant increments of happiness to a life of virtue, though they could never enable a person who is not virtuous to be happy (216). The derivation is supposed to go as follows: (1) "happiness is man's good" and the object of all rational action (204n20); (2) virtue is necessary and sufficient for happiness, because it is necessary and sufficient for the psychic health on which happiness depends; therefore (3), in order to attain our highest good, namely happiness, we should always do what is just or virtuous and never what is unjust.

Variants of this eudaimonist interpretation of Socratic ethics are widely embraced, but they leave us with an incomplete account of Socratic ethics. They are incomplete in the sense that they are concerned essentially with the relationship between virtue and happiness, and provide no account of reasoned choice, *nomoi*, or the responsiveness to things of value beyond our own happiness that would make the virtuous acts essential to our happiness genuinely virtuous.

Eudaimonist virtue-ethical readings face difficulties in explaining how moral principles and laws referred to by Socrates can gain any foothold, and if they cannot what, if anything, could define the boundaries between just and unjust acts, courageous and cowardly acts, and properly self-restrained versus indulgent and licentious acts. The moral theories of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics concern themselves with the question of how to live a good life and are built, in some sense, around the virtues as definitive of human goodness, but they also incorporate accounts – more or less articulated – of natural moral law and the conduct it demands. One must never do wrong, even in return for wrong; one should be truthful; one should refrain from undermining the rational judgment of others, even when one's life is at stake; one should deal with others as much as possible through truthful and reasoned persuasion and as little as possible through force and violence; and so on. One detects no sense of *struggle* in combining these seemingly diverse elements in one ethical framework, and in the

context of traditional Greek religion there wouldn't be. Socrates' revisions of Greek theology seem, on the whole, rather modest. He is in some respects clearly a defender of traditional Apollonian orthodoxy regarding human limitations (McPherran 1999), if also a revolutionary who challenged orthodoxy by morally purifying the divine (Vlastos 1991) and gesturing toward a "teleological monotheism, with a single god [Zeus] who is identified with Mind and Air" (Janko 2009). Given this, there is surely merit in reading his ethical views against the backdrop of traditional Greek religion, and its image of the laws of proper kingships as issuing from the mind of Zeus (Hugh Lloyd-Jones 1983: 6ff). Doing so makes it possible to formulate a more comprehensive account of how Socrates' various ethical commitments are related to one another.

Vlastos's account of the structure of Socratic ethics is also problematic in treating a claim about human motivation, that "happiness is *desired* by all human beings as the ultimate end (telos) of all their rational acts" (emphasis added), as the foundation of the "sovereignty of virtue" or the proposition that virtue's "claim upon us is always final." Derived in this way, it is not clear why virtue's claim on us would be more than prudential. One could take this in stride, arguing that Socrates has an internalist conception of moral reasons to the effect that nothing is a reason unless it is motivating, at least insofar as people are rational. But this would be a historically implausible attribution. The enterprise of trying to show that it is rational to be virtuous seems to have developed in Greek thought with the clear understanding that the claims of virtue have an authority over us that is independent of how we are motivated. What is asserted by Hesiod, Solon, and Socrates alike is that justice demands certain things of us. Each *also* provides an answer to the question, "Why would one want to be virtuous, if virtue involves self-restraint in the pursuit of one's own success?" Hesiod refers us to divine sanctions, Solon the lawgiver to legal sanctions. There can be no rational assurance that external sanctions of either kind will be reliably associated with violations of justice, however, and it is to Socrates that we attribute the innovative argument that there are internal sanctions that are inescapable. What we see here is not the

foundations of the authority or sovereignty of virtue, but a struggle by reformers to overcome popular resistance to an ethic of justice and self-restraint.

Vlastos attributes to Socrates the view that "the object of all rational action" is the actor's own happiness. Yet we see Socrates insisting in the *Crito* that he is the kind of person who always acts as reason directs him to. Is his object, in that case not to do what is reasonable or respect the demands of reason, choosing acts "as conforming to the universal law," as Cooper says in explaining the three-fold nature of what the virtuous person acts for, according to Stoicism? And are not virtuous acts chosen for their own sakes, not simply for the sake of one's own happiness? Is Socrates restraint in not undermining the rational judgment of the jurymen in his trial not for the sake of their integrity and out of respect for them as rational beings? He insists it is. The attribution to Socrates of an egoistic (Vlastos), or even hedonistic (Irwin), doctrine concerning human rationality is implausible. I am inclined to think that the error is in the phrase "*the object* of all rational action," or supposing that acts can only have one object or be for the sake of one thing.

Vlastos and many others have also overlooked an important aspect of Socratic piety, namely its inner aspect – the attitude of reverence or respect for the divine, which is the motive without which outward action "in the service" of the gods would not exhibit the virtue of piety. Socrates does not merely "[derive] from his new vision of human goodness norms binding on the gods themselves," as Vlastos writes (162). He transforms the gods into embodiments of what is best in human nature, namely the thinking, knowing, reasoning part of the soul – the part Plato sometimes speaks of as the real soul, the soul as it would exist unencumbered by the body – making the divine something that is present both in us, imperfectly and side by side with more beastly elements, and in a complete, unadulterated, and more powerful form in the gods. The deification of intellect is the heart of Socratic religion and ethics both, it pertains as much to human beings as to the gods, and it demands a reverence for the divine which motivates justice towards human beings no less than piety towards the gods.

It demands respect not only for the gods but also *for the reason (i.e., the reasoning part) in human nature*, and respect *for reasoning and the demands of reason*, which is to say above all the demands of divine or perfect reason and – as in Greek popular theology – the god-given laws which derive from it.[3] It is in this way that respect for what is supremely good entails a respect for moral law and thereby gives determinate content to the virtues. In this sense the attitude of respect at the heart of piety is the font of all true virtue; indeed, there is some reason to say that Socrates regards piety itself as playing this role. While it is *phronêsis* or a systematic moral knowledge organized by definitions of the virtues that completes and unifies the virtues, Socrates holds that human beings lack such knowledge or divine wisdom and cannot even make progress towards it if they are not first pious, or appreciative of the superiority of the gods (i.e., of the deficiency of their own wisdom) and dedicated to caring for or nurturing their own powers of reason, or what is divine in themselves.

"The god is wise," and "human wisdom is worth little or nothing" by comparison, says Socrates (*Ap*. 23a; cf. *Hp. Ma.* 289b), but wisdom is "the greatest good" (*Cri.* 44d), and those who wrongly believe themselves wise are guilty of "the most blameworthy ignorance" (*Ap*. 21b–e, 29a–b). Why the most blameworthy ignorance? Because they are guilty of failing to acknowledge the great gulf that lies between themselves and "the god," and thus fail to love and strive toward a wisdom measured not by man, but by god. Annas re-describes Socrates' disavowal of wisdom as a disavowal of "ideas of his own" and insists this "must be understood to be relative to the context of teaching" (Annas 1999: 21), but on this question Richard Kraut's interpretation is truer to the text and more in harmony with the theological dimensions of Socratic ethical theory. Kraut holds that Socrates does not deny that he has true ethical beliefs, but rather denies that he has the moral *knowledge* or wisdom that gods alone have (Kraut 1984: 230-231).

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[3]. Irwin says, by contrast, that the kind of knowledge that Socrates identifies with virtue is knowledge of what promotes the agent's own happiness. The aim of divine logos, manifested in law, is not the happiness of one person, however, but the good of all persons.

Vlastos and Mark McPherran have focused their analyses of Socratic piety on Socrates' conception of himself as a servant of god in his role as a street-philosopher, and hold that the logic of this self-conception is that devoting himself to provoking others to moral self-examination is an act of piety or service to the gods because it promotes human happiness in a way that the gods would themselves if they could (Vlastos, 173, 175, 177; McPherran 1996: 80).[4] This is plausible, but problematic. On my reading, Socrates' attempts to induce in others a paramount concern with the excellence of their souls, meaning above all their rational souls, is pious not only in the sense of doing work *for* the gods, but also and more importantly in the sense that it displays respect for the intellect or divine part of the people interrogated. As Vlastos says himself in commenting on the *Euthyphro*, Socrates assumes "that what piety *is* depends no more on what they [the gods], or anyone else, feel about it, than does the nature of fire depend on what anyone... happens to think that fire is. Piety, and by the same token, every other virtue, has an essence of its own which is as normative for the gods as it is for us" (Vlastos: 165). If this is the case, however, we must conclude that Socrates has a concept of piety which is not contingent upon the gods' wish that certain work be done. There must be something about the nature of the work itself that makes it a proper or natural expression of reverence or respect for what is divine. If this is so, however, I don't think we can we conclude that the work of promoting human happiness *per se* – the work that Vlastos says the gods require assistance with – is the work that Socrates conceives himself to be engaged in. Socrates' view is rather that the reasoning part of the soul is the divine part of human nature and his primary task is to induce respect for it. On the question of what makes Socrates' philosophical activity pious, then, there are advantages to my reading, for it satisfies the requirement that the activities of piety display an inherent reverence for the divine, and are not merely activities engaged in pursuant to what the gods happen to prefer or will.

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[4]. McPherran says there that Socrates' interrogations of people is pious "because it is productive of the virtuous happiness which good gods desire for us."

***Piety and the Euthyphro***

But perhaps I was too quick in holding that there must be something about the inherent nature of the work Socrates does in acting on the Oracle's directive that makes it a proper or natural expression of reverence or respect for what is divine. Panos Dimas has mounted a serious challenge to the "interpretive dogma" that in the *Euthyrpho* Plato has fully repudiated attempts to "account for piety in terms of the gods' wishes (Dimas 2006: 7), and if he is right this would diminish the unifying role of piety in the structure of Socratic ethics. We could still think that Socrates regarded the rational intellect of human beings as the literally divine best part of human beings and worthy of respect on that account, but attributing this to him would not solve the problem of how his questioning of interlocutors designed to provoke self-examination and psychic self-care could be substantively pious. If doing what gods wish out of proper regard for gods is all there is to being pious, then piety does not reach quite as far into the heart of Socratic ethics as I have suggested.

Dimas concedes that by Socrates' lights, a person could not be pious "by being attentive to the gods' wishes only, while at the same time ignoring the other virtues," but argues that

> Socrates believes that [the gods are moral agents], which puts beyond doubt for him that they want us to be fully virtuous. Ignoring this would amount to ignoring their wishes, which … would be impious [if what makes an agent pious is that he does things (actions) of the type the gods love (or will that he does) and does them for this reason]. Being pious, then, requires that the agent is properly responsive to the virtues out of appreciation for their own intrinsic value and that he *also* does so for the reason that this would please the gods (20-22).

I can happily concede, in response to this that for Socrates and the Stoics piety clearly consists *in part* of conforming to the will of Zeus, which is indistinguishable from conforming to the demands of universal or natural law or the deliverances of perfect reason. It is our own limited reason on which we must rely in discerning what perfect reason demands, so cultivation and reliance on our own reason is evidently as aspect of piety. But Dimas offers no account here of what Socrates would take an embrace and embodiment of virtue to be, and the ideal of fidelity to reason provides one.

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