

‘Inspirations of which we are not capable of judging’: Coleridge’s View of the *Daimonion* of Socrates and its Unitarian Context ¹

James Vigus

‘NOTHING IN SOCRATES has been more perplexing to posterity than his *daimonion*.’ ²

When he came to discuss Socrates in his 1819 *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Coleridge could not avoid commenting on what had throughout the eighteenth century been one of the most controversial legends surrounding the ancient philosopher: Socrates’s ‘daimonion’, or divine sign. In Coleridge’s seemingly hesitant words: ‘I should be thought to have omitted a very important or at least interesting part of the disquisition if I did not say a few words on the daemon of Socrates’ (LHP I 143). The phenomenon is attested by both Plato and Xenophon, the two writers who provided the most detailed and sympathetic eyewitness accounts of Socrates’s life and teachings. The clearest account attributed directly to Socrates appears in the *Apology*, where he explains that ‘I am subject to a divine or supernatural experience [*daimonion*], which Meletus saw fit to travesty in his indictment. It began in my early childhood – a sort of voice which comes to me, and when it comes it always dissuades me from what I am proposing to do, and never urges me on.’ ³ As this quotation indicates, the daimonion was controversial from the beginning: one of the charges against Socrates at the trial in which he was condemned to death was that he invented new gods. ⁴ In the same speech, Socrates gives an example of the negative injunctions he received from the daimonion: it forbade him from entering public life as a politician. In the *Phaedrus*, the daimonic sign intervenes at a dramatic moment, apparently rebuking Socrates for the unworthy speech he has begun about the divinity *eros*. The daimonion is a form of divine

¹ This article is based on a paper given at the seminar ‘Diffractions: Researching into Sources, Influences, Interactions in Literature and Philosophy’ at the Italian Department, University of Warwick, 11 March 2014. I am grateful to the participants, especially Graham Davidson, Martina Piperno (the organiser), and Fabio Camilletti (the chair), for helpful discussion.

² Gregory Vlastos, *Studies in Greek Philosophy, vol. 2: Socrates, Plato and their Tradition*, ed. Daniel W. Graham (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 29.

³ *Apology* 31c-d (tr. Hugh Tredennick). Translations from Plato are taken from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters*, ed. by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Bollingen, 1961), and referenced using the standard Stephanus pagination. In Xenophon’s account, the daimonion works the other way round, giving positive advice and urging Socrates to act in particular ways. Michael J.B. Allen provides a complete list of the relevant passages: Plato, *Euthydemus* 273a; *I Alcibiades* 103a, 105e, 124c; *Euthyphro* 3b; *Apology* 31c, 40a; *Republic* VI, 496c; *Theaetetus* 151a; *Phaedrus* 242c; *Theages* 128d (now considered inauthentic). Xenophon, *Apology* 12; *Memorabilia* IV, 8, 1. Michael J.B. Allen, *Synoptic Art: Marsilio Ficino on the History of Platonic Interpretation* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1998), 130. The daimonion remained topical in later Platonism: Plutarch, Apuleius, Maximus and Proclus all wrote treatises on it.

⁴ Diogenes Laertius reports the charge (the original of which has not survived): ‘This indictment and affidavit is sworn by Meletus, the son of Meletus of Pitthos, against Socrates, the son of Sophroniscus of Alopece: Socrates is guilty of refusing to recognize the gods recognized by the state, and of introducing other new divinities. He is also guilty of corrupting the youth. The penalty demanded is death.’ ‘Socrates’, in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972; first published 1925), I.171

possession, but, crucially, a more rational one than the frenzy that Socrates disapprovingly attributes to the poets in dialogues such as *Ion* and *Republic*.⁵ Although Plato seems to have used the term 'daimonion' (as opposed to the more usual 'daemon') in order to indicate its uniqueness to Socrates, subsequent writers tended to assimilate it to a more general daemonology;⁶ so that, as Angus Nicholls puts it, '[t]he daimonion appears to be a singular instance or effect of the general sensibility or conduit of the daemonic, a sensibility that mediates between the secular and the divine.'⁷

One might expect Coleridge's interpretation of the daimonion of Socrates to be interesting for various reasons. His early poems, 'Kubla Khan' and 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', play with the notion of daemons, presences between the divine and the human, of which the 'demon lover' in the former poem and the 'Polar Spirit' in the latter are two memorable examples. Indeed, Coleridge agreed during his initial collaboration with Wordsworth on the *Lyrical Ballads* that he would write 'supernatural' poems, which would evoke an atmosphere of daemonic agency. He had been stimulated to this project in part by reading the Platonic translations of Thomas Taylor, in which he would have discovered material about the daimonion of Socrates.⁸ Further, in his prose, Coleridge regularly uses silence-formulae reminiscent of the abrupt pauses of Socrates. Breaking off a discussion of the nature of the Day of Judgment in *Biographia Literaria*, for example, Coleridge states that he is 'warned from within and from without, that it is profanation to speak of these mysteries' (BL I 114). Here, the equivocation of 'within and... without' bears comparison with the private, yet apparently external voice that Socrates heard. More loosely, another reason why Coleridge would be likely to take an interest in the daimonion of Socrates lies in the fact that one tradition linked it to the notion of genius, as emphasised in the title of Plutarch's dialogue, *De genio Socratis*. Given that Coleridge took care to present himself as a philosopher of genius, this is one of the possible sources for the sense of affinity with Socrates that he displays in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.⁹ Fashioning himself as a poet-critic, a writer whose creativity was balanced by a 'notion of his notions' (BL I 251), Coleridge (for instance) published a preface to 'Kubla Khan' that has the effect of truncating the verse by explaining in psychological terms why it was impossible to complete it. The notorious 'person on business from Porlock' is daemonic to the extent that (s)he is neither clearly part of the poet's persona

⁵ On this matter in relation to Coleridge, see James Vigus, *Platonic Coleridge* (Oxford: Legenda, 2009), 63-92.

⁶ Mark Joyal, *The Platonic Theages: An Introduction, Commentary and Critical Edition* (Stuttgart: Frank Steiner, 2000), 70-71, 102.

⁷ Angus Nicholls, *Goethe's Concept of the Daemonic: After the Ancients* (Rochester, New York: Boydell and Brewer, 2006), 57. Plato, *Symposium* 202e focuses on the daemons' role as intermediaries.

⁸ On Coleridge's reading and critique of Taylor, see Vigus, *Platonic Coleridge*, 26-30.

⁹ For a stimulating account of the strategies by which Coleridge attributed genius to himself as a philosopher, see Monika Class, *Coleridge and Kantian Ideas in England, 1796-1817* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 151-68. David Ferris compares the story of Timarchus's experience in an oracular crypt (where he was attempting to discover the secret of Socrates's daimonion), as told by Plutarch, with the fictitious 'letter from a friend' that Coleridge inserts to break off *Biographia Literaria* chapter 13 – the 'friend' has a gothic experience of 'palpable darkness', and so on (BL I 301). David Ferris, 'Coleridge's Ventriloquy: The Abduction from the *Biographia*', *Studies in Romanticism* 24: 1 (Spring 1985), 41-84 (83, note 64).

nor fully distinct from it.¹⁰ In these comparative respects, the daimonion of Socrates would seem to be a Coleridgean presence.

In fact, as his dutiful approach in the lecture might already indicate ('I should be thought...'), Coleridge's direct comments on the *daimonion* are relatively few, and limited in scope. In my view, however, they propel the providential narrative of the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. Further, in the context of the longstanding controversy on the daimonion, Coleridge's remarks reveal the extent to which his religious concerns in 1819 retained continuity with his youthful period as a Unitarian radical in the 1790s. As I will show, the direction of Coleridge's interpretation in 1819 onwards is consonant with his rejection of Unitarian (or Socinian) theology and culture, which had become emphatic by the time he delivered the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. There is, however, a twist in this apparently straightforward tale: Coleridge's view of the Socratic daimonion bears more resemblance to that of Joseph Priestley, the foremost Unitarian theologian of the 1790s, than to those of any of the other participants in the longstanding debate on this topic.

My focus on what might seem on first reading a minor detail – a particular section of the third of the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, and one in which Coleridge speaks with a somewhat uncertain voice – requires a methodological justification. The *Lectures* remain under-read, even in J. R. de J. Jackson's splendid edition published in 2000, in part because of the taint of unoriginality – and plagiarism – that continues to be associated with Coleridge's philosophical thought. The arraignment of Coleridge reached its apotheosis in Norman Fruman's substantial but sensational book *Coleridge: The Damaged Archangel*. In Fruman's view, the drug-afflicted disorder of Coleridge's personal life resulted in a kind of literary kleptomania; and Fruman responded to passages in Coleridge's prose such as the above-quoted silence formula ('warned from within and from without') with irritated impatience.¹¹ Fruman's zest for the prosecution led him to even label as plagiarised passages from other authors in lecture notes which Coleridge did not prepare for publication.¹² At the other extreme, Thomas McFarland, while agreeing that Coleridge's compositional habits were 'neurotic', presented a value judgment the reverse of Fruman's: McFarland claimed that Coleridge wrote in 'mosaic' style, constantly piecing together fragments from other writers. McFarland regarded this method not as culpable but rather as a heroic endeavour at

¹⁰ Gregory Leadbetter, *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), argues that the mystery poems dramatise 'self-realization in daemonic form' (185). Leadbetter describes how Coleridgean psychology 'combines activity and passivity, in the willing exposure of the self to forces greater than it could control' (167). Graham Davidson has pointed out to me that Coleridge also 'daemonizes' poetic presences such as Sara Hutchinson and Charles Lamb.

¹¹ 'The reader who has been laboring after Coleridge may well feel both cheated and insulted by this declaration.' Norman Fruman, *Coleridge: The Damaged Archangel* (London: George Braziller, 1970), 79.

¹² See the chapter on 'The Philosophical Lectures', Fruman, pp. 108–120. Andrew Keanie, who has appraised Fruman's work very judiciously ('Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel', *Essays in Criticism* 56: 1 (2005), 72–93, nevertheless echoes this approach in another essay in which he declares that 'Spoken plagiarism is more difficult to detect than written plagiarism': Andrew Keanie, 'Coleridge and Plagiarism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Frederick Burwick (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 435–454 (436).

systematicity.¹³ Yet most of Coleridge's prose does not readily fit either the Fruman-model or the McFarland-model. The passages on the daimonion of Socrates are in this sense a typical case in point, in that they invite excavation without being an instance either of plagiarism or of sublime synthesis. An approach to this topic should, then, involve moving beyond the old models. Rather than think in terms of plagiarism or 'reticulation' (McFarland's evocative word), it is necessary to reconstruct a complex intellectual setting in which writers established and rejected allegiances through various levels of quotation and allusion.

In the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* Socrates and Plato feature as leading figures in the struggle against sophistry, which Coleridge by this time identifies with the materialism and scepticism he considered characteristic of eighteenth-century thought. In Lectures three to five Coleridge offers a very sympathetic view of Socrates, though he is constrained by his Christian agenda to rank Socrates below the level of perfection; he accordingly criticises Socrates for indulging in a kind of reasoning that outmanoeuvres opponents yet without producing inner certainty:

At all events, by his example he gave currency to a mode of argument which may be as easily, perhaps more easily, adapted to delusion than sound conviction. It has the misfortune at least, by entangling a man in a number of questions the answers to which he does not anticipate, of leaving a final conviction as if the man were cheated in the conclusion though he could see no mode afterwards to escape from it. (LHP I 142)

This passage, with its suggestion of 'cheating' in Socratic argument, reveals Coleridge's radical lack of sympathy with Socratic irony. Coleridge proceeds to argue, however, that Socrates's unique value lies neither in the rigour nor the drawbacks of his philosophical procedure. Rather it is his *religious* sense that renders him a pivotal figure in the history of moral thought. Socrates had

... a deep, nay what our enlightened men of the present day would perhaps call a superstitious and earnest piety which disposed him to the reverence of the unknown whatever it were, nay even to a reverence of the best signs of it (however he might disapprove of them) which secured his fellow creatures from being merely as the beasts that perish. He was in every sense of the word a religious man... (LHP I 142-3)

This emphasis on mystery, on the 'unknown' as the object of Socrates's piety, provides a vital basis for Coleridge's discussion of the ancient philosopher. It is in this context that Coleridge comments on the daimonion of Socrates – or daemon, as Coleridge calls it, reflecting its Neoplatonic assimilation to more general speculations concerning the spiritual world. Coleridge offers several

¹³ Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); McFarland, 'Coleridge's Plagiarisms Once More', *Yale Review* 62 (1974), 252-86.

thoughts, some of which may be traced to a precise source, but others not. First:

[Socrates] thought himself, and he asserted himself to be, accompanied by a daemon as he called it; it gave him no light, no insight; it was as evidently not [conscience], for it never decided on the right or wrong of any action, but it was a [preventive warning or] presentiment which, whenever he was about to do that which would be injurious either temporally or morally, withheld him. (LHP I 143)

Coleridge gleans this first point from his principal source for the whole lecture series, Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann's history of philosophy. Tennemann quotes the dialogue *Theages*, which is of unknown authorship, but was in the early nineteenth century still considered to be a work of Plato.¹⁴ Tennemann, as a follower of Kant, takes up from *Theages* the conviction that the daimonion cannot be conscience. This is evident in the dialogue from the fact that Socrates relates instances in which it occurs merely to prevent him and his companions from acting in a way that would be contrary to their own best interests.¹⁵ For Tennemann, the Kantian, it was important to underline this point given that moral conduct stems from the human will, and the Socratic daimonion appears to operate independently from the will. Coleridge, in sympathy with Tennemann's Kantianism even as he felt exasperated by its more inflexible manifestations, clearly agrees.

Second, Coleridge emphasises the effect that the daimonion had on others around Socrates, and the fact that Socrates was apparently unable to offer an explanation for this effect. He cites a story that witnessing this phenomenon convinced a hardened sceptic that 'there was something divine' (LHP I 144). The source for this is unclear, but it may be a passage of *Theages*,¹⁶ according to which Aristides found his philosophical ability increase as long as he remained with Socrates, but it drained away thereafter – this after a series of stories in which failure to heed the daimonion's warnings led to disaster. That Coleridge adds the 'something divine' indicates the direction of his own narrative.

Third, the most important point for Coleridge is that the daimonion is mysterious and as impossible for him to explain as he believes it was for Socrates. He repeatedly avers (without clear textual authority) that Socrates declared it inexplicable; and he argues further that Socrates's character did not dispose him to the self-deception of which, say, Gibbon accuses him.¹⁷ In the

¹⁴ Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann, *Geschichte der Philosophie*, 11 vols (Leipzig: 1798-1819), II, 32f. Modern scholars generally concur with Schleiermacher's view that Plato was not the author of *Theages*.

¹⁵ Joyal, *Platonic Theages*, 66, 72. For the text, see Jacques Bailly (ed.), *The Socratic Theages: Introduction, English Translation, Greek Text and Commentary* (Zurich and New York, 2003), 73-86.

¹⁶ *Theages* 130d-e (cf. LHP I 144 note 91).

¹⁷ A space in the manuscript here suggests that Coleridge might have quoted a passage from Gibbon, and Jackson (LHP I 144 note 92) suggests the following: 'From enthusiasm to imposture, the step is perilous and slippery; the demon of Socrates affords a memorable instance, how a wise man may deceive himself, how a good man may deceive others, how the conscience may slumber in a mixed and middle state between self-illusion and voluntary fraud'. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 12 vols (London, 1818), IX, 321-2.

next paragraph of the lecture report, Coleridge invokes a religious context, suggesting that the example of Socrates shows how the Providence that guided the Israelites also influenced the Greeks:

I say I cannot pretend to limit the powers of Providence; I can on the contrary see very substantial motives for the supposition that while God acted directly upon the chosen nation, as preparing a receptacle for that religion which was to spread over all mankind, He did not in the meantime wholly abandon those who were hereafter to be taken into his church; but in other ways, so distinguishable from the truths of revelation and the miracles that accompanied it as not to hazard the least confusion, and yet a sufficient pledge that his Providence was universal and that wherever there was a heart that truly loved him, there His assistance was given, either by the means of nature or by inspirations of which we are not capable of judging. (LHP I 144-5)

It might be argued that in this new paragraph Coleridge has moved on from the topic of the daimonion to make an entirely general assertion. But in my view it is most likely that he considers the daimonion to be foremost among these ‘inspirations’. The evidence is partly textual, and partly contextual. First, in Coleridge’s own notes for the lecture, he writes that ‘it was not according to his own account Inspiration – nor was it Conscience’ (LHP I 158). The assertion here that it was not conscience is plain, whereas it is only according to the ‘account’ of Socrates (who did not have Christian concepts available to him) that it was ‘not inspiration’. This passage is thus consistent with the notion of ‘inspirations of which we are not capable of judging.’ The daimonion is the outstanding example of this super-natural element in Socrates’s ‘anticipation of some clearer knowledge which doubtless prepared greatly for the reception of Christianity’ (LHP I 146): for it is the daimonion’s ‘influence on those around [Socrates]’ that Coleridge has been at pains to emphasise (LHP I 143). Immediately after the mention of ‘inspirations of which we are not capable of judging’, Coleridge mentions Socrates’s ‘martyrdom’ upon charges that included that of inventing new gods, so the daimonion remains in his mind at this point.

Second, and contrary to J. R. de J. Jackson’s view that Coleridge’s ‘stress on Socrates’s piety and on his “daemon” is [...] unusual’ (LHP I lxxxix), Coleridge knows that the status of the daimonion had been crucial for Christian interpretations of Socrates at least since the Renaissance. The connection between the daimonion and the possibility of asserting that a salvific providence always operated in some way, even before Christ, appears clearly in Joseph Priestley’s book *Socrates and Jesus Compared*. Priestley, comparing the two lives point-for-point, argues in a notably similar way to Coleridge. He first defends Socrates’s integrity of character, then invokes his steadfastness at his trial. Next, just like Coleridge, Priestley refers to the mysteriousness of the daimonion (‘a question of great obscurity’); and concludes in rather hesitant

terms that it probably was a manifestation of providence:

In no other respect does Socrates appear to have been an enthusiast. On the contrary, he was a man of a calm and even temper, not distinguished by any peculiarity of behaviour, or extravagance of any kind. [...] Since, then, he persisted in his account of these admonitions to the last, and in the most serious situation that a man could be in, and his veracity was never questioned, though I am far from forming any fixed opinion on any subject of so great obscurity, I think it may admit of a doubt, whether they may not be supposed to have come, in whatever manner they were given, from God. [...] That in any manner whatever, and in what degree soever, it shall appear that the maker of the world gives attention to it, it is a proof of the reality of a providence in general, and of the divine interference out of the usual course of the laws of nature. [...] Thus do such supernatural suggestions as Socrates asserts that he had afford some obscure and indistinct evidence of a moral government of the world, and consequently of a future state of righteous retribution.¹⁸

The similarity between the line of argument and the summation of Coleridge and Priestley is striking, and it helps to indicate how central the daimonion was to Coleridge's interpretation of Socrates. It is not unlikely that Coleridge would have read Priestley's work, but I know of no record of his having done so; and there is no evidence that it was among his immediate sources for the lectures on Socrates and Plato. In other words, the similarity between Coleridge and Priestley is a 'genial coincidence' (to borrow Coleridge's phrase, BL I 160) rather than an instance of either plagiarism or sublime synthesis. It is an apparently surprising one, given that by 1819 Coleridge had firmly rejected the Unitarian theology of Priestley of which he had been a partisan in the mid-1790s. By tracing relevant portions of the eighteenth-century controversy about the daimonion, however, we can begin to see why the opinions of Priestley and Coleridge coincided.

The hint is there at the end of the above quotation from Priestley. 'Supernatural suggestions' in ancient times, such as that of the daimonion, tend to disclose 'a moral government of the world' – and 'consequently' the presence of heaven and hell: Christ was thus not the first who knew and revealed this. Although Priestley, always a faster and looser thinker than Coleridge, draws this equation in a cavalier fashion, he does identify the crucial point of the debate. It is a version of the medieval problem of the virtuous pagan (did God really damn to hell everyone who lived before Christ and so could not turn to him – even Socrates?), reconstituted for the Enlightenment. The question now runs like this: is it really possible that God left the ancient world in moral darkness prior to the coming of Christ? If Socrates's mysterious

¹⁸ Joseph Priestley, *Socrates and Jesus Compared* (London: J. Johnson, 1803), pp. 29–31, italics added.

daimonion was not purely delusional, then it may constitute evidence that providence was already lending a guiding hand. Yet this reasoning is double-edged, in view of the uniqueness of the revelation that Christianity claims. If Socrates's daimonion is genuinely divine, then we will find it difficult to distinguish it in kind from the supernatural events related by the gospels.

Coleridge's (and Priestley's) syncretistic solution to this dilemma echoes that of the Christian Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino. According to this view, if Socrates is allowed a certain limited level of divine illumination, then he can be understood as a forerunner to Christ and so an early instrument of providence. This claim was central to Ficino's interpretation: 'Socrates, though not a type (*figura*) like Job or John the Baptist, was yet perhaps a foreshadowing of Christ, the author of our salvation: he served as a preparatory signal, so to speak.'¹⁹ Such is precisely the consequence that Coleridge builds on the assertion of necessary ignorance about Socrates's daimonion. The tentativeness of Ficino's vocabulary ('perhaps...so to speak') prefigures the tangled syntax of Priestley and the more elegant but still less than decisive assertion of Coleridge regarding the daimonion's intimations of immortality.

Coleridge thus sides broadly with Ficino on this question, but more important to the immediate context is that he *opposes* an *anti-Ficinian* perspective. Ficino's view that Socrates, with his morally-charged daemonic intuitions, had anticipated Christ's revolutionary moral teaching, met with strong opposition in the Enlightenment. The founder of the discipline of the history of philosophy, Johann Jakob Brucker, was determined to find a naturalistic explanation for the daimonion, and this for a religious motive. If the daimonion were real, Brucker feared, then Christ's claim to uniqueness might be endangered, for in this case Christ would have the advantage neither of superior reason nor of a unique revelation.²⁰ This threat became reality in the interpretation of J.J. Zimmermann, for whom the daemonic interventions are miracles just like the Christian miracles, and at least as well attested as those of Christ; in both cases God found that reason alone was not sufficient to spread enlightenment, and so provided supernatural aid.²¹ The bedfellow of Zimmermann's interpretation, no less threatening from Brucker's viewpoint, was that of the French *philosophes*, who portrayed Socrates as a kind of 'secular Christ'.²² Zimmermann's holy heathen and Diderot's secular Christ would

¹⁹ Marsilio Ficino, letter to Paolo Ferobanti (mid-1480s), in Allen, *Synoptic Art*, Appendix 1 (p. 211; cf. p. 131). For a different and fully annotated translation of this letter, see *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, translated from the Latin by members of the Language Department of the School of Economic Science, London, 9 vols, vol. 7 (being a translation of Liber VIII) (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2003), 12-14. Ficino applies an elaborate daemonology to Socrates's divine sign, of a kind that would have appealed to the author of the 'Ancient Mariner': Ficino describes it in apparently paradoxical terms as fiery yet saturnian (Allen, 139, 203).

²⁰ Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, 'Sokrates im Dickicht der deutschen Aufklärung', in *Der fragende Sokrates*, ed. by Karl Pestalozzi (Stuttgart and Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1999), 132-151 (138).

²¹ See Benno Böhm, *Sokrates im achtzehnten Jahrhundert. Studien zum Werdegange des modernen Persönlichkeitsbewusstseins* (Neumünster: Karl Wachholtz, 1966), 141-2.

²² Jeffrey L. High, "Rede über die Frage: Gehört allzuviel Güte, Leutseeligkeit und grosse Freygebigkeit im engsten Verstande zur Tugend?" Socrates as Secular Jesus in Schiller's First Karlsschule Speech', in *Reading Schiller: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Religion*, ed. Laura Anna Macor, special issue of *Philosophical Readings: Online Yearbook of Philosophy* 5 (2013), 7-49 (esp. 7-8), <http://issuu.com/philosophicalreadings/docs/pr2013/7>.

have been equally alarming to Brucker, the pietistic defender of Protestant religious feeling, who wanted clearly to separate Christ from Socrates. In his history, Brucker thus followed the Unitarian biographer of Socrates, Thomas Cooper, in downplaying the daimonion, by interpreting it as simply a prompt and refined moral sense. Cooper wrote of the daimonion:

[I]t was nothing more than that inward Feeling inseparable from the Hearts of all good and wise Men, which (excited at first by probable Conjectures of future Events, collected from a retrospective View of the past, and a Consideration of the invariable Connection of human Contingencies) works itself by degrees even into our Constitution, and gives the Breast an almost prophetic sensation of what ought to be done before the slower Faculties of the Mind can prove the moral Rectitude of the Conduct.²³

In Cooper's view, subsequently assimilated into Brucker's authoritative text, 'daimonion' is simply a metaphor for this normal faculty of moral prescience. Again, Coleridge is likely to have known Cooper's work, having read him back in the days of Pantisocracy; but it is not as a possible source that Cooper is of interest here, but rather as showing why Coleridge (following Tennemann) was so concerned to underline that the daimonion could *not* be equivalent to conscience. For Coleridge was by this time broadly opposed to the Enlightenment project of rationalising the teachings of Socrates, which the Unitarians pursued in parallel to the larger work of demystifying the history of Christian doctrine. Another source that Coleridge knew (and dismissed as a 'mere bookseller's *Job* Abridgement', CL IV 589) was the abridged translation of Brucker's history of philosophy by William Enfield, a Unitarian minister. Enfield evidently found Brucker's debunking of emphatic claims for the significance of Socrates congenial. Indeed, in Enfield's view, Brucker does not provide a sufficiently decisive rationalisation of the daimonion, and Enfield recommends the argument of Nare that Socrates's descriptions of his daimonion indicate that he had some traces of superstition:

Our author [Brucker] seems loth to give any decisive opinion in this affair [...]. A late writer advances a notion on this subject, which appears to merit attention. Socrates, he remarks, believed in the gods of his country, and was not free from the superstition connected with that belief...²⁴

The respectful and relatively cautious rationalisation provided by Cooper and adopted by Brucker thus becomes brasher in Enfield, who points to the

²³ John Gilbert Cooper, *The Life of Socrates*, 2nd edition (London: R. Dodsley, 1750), 92.

²⁴ William Enfield, *The History of Philosophy, from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Present Century, drawn up from Brucker's Historia Critica Philosophiae*, 2 vols (Dublin, 1792), I, 172-3 (note, citing Nare's 'Essay on the Daemon of Socrates', 1782).

opinion that Socrates was superstitious and thus not assimilable to true religion.

The Unitarian preference for a rational type of explanation in the spirit of the Enlightenment is even more marked in Joshua Toulmin's comparison of Socrates with Christ in his *Dissertation on the Internal Evidences and Excellence of Christianity*. In Toulmin's point-by-point presentation – directed against Ficino's syncretistic, Christian Platonist comparison – Christ emerges superior to Socrates in every respect. It is in the interest of Toulmin's argument to press further the insinuation of Socrates's superstition, and dismiss the daimonion as a completely natural phenomenon: it was, he writes, as natural as sneezing.²⁵ In this way, Toulmin – perhaps unconscious of the irony involved – sides with a rather limited character in Plutarch's dialogue *De Genio Socratis*: it is Plutarch's Galaxidorus who, wishing to defend Socrates from the charge of irrational superstition, proposes as most likely that 'a sneeze or chance remark' would be the decisive influence on the philosopher's reflections.²⁶ It is unlikely that Coleridge had this complex matrix of opinions at the forefront of his mind, but he knew what a vexed issue the daimonion was for both Unitarian thinkers and for the syncretistic Christian Platonism that they opposed.

As I have already mentioned, by 1819 when he is delivering his philosophical lectures, Coleridge has moved decisively away from the Unitarianism he espoused in the 1790s. He retains enough of the scholarly impetus he acquired in that decade to be wary of Ficinian Neoplatonism and desirous of clearing away aside swathes of historical commentary to grasp the original phenomenon, whether Christ or Socrates.²⁷ But given his new view of Reason as a higher faculty than the mere Understanding, it is not surprising to find Coleridge apparently returning to a pre-Enlightenment view of Socrates's daimonion. Hence he emphasises that Socrates's daimonion cannot be explained away in ordinary terms, being neither conscience nor an unusually developed faculty of understanding; and this preservation of a sense of mystery helps Coleridge to reinforce the notion that divine providence was providing a certain level of light already in the pre-Christian era.

And yet, we circle back to the remarkable fact that of all the opinions on the daimonion of Socrates that had been recently advanced, the one to which Coleridge appears closest is that of Joseph Priestley. 'Thus do such supernatural suggestions as Socrates asserts that he had afford some obscure and indistinct evidence of a moral government of the world, and consequently of a future state of righteous retribution', Priestley had written.²⁸ With a certain degree of caution, in other words, Priestley enlists the daimonion of Socrates

²⁵ Joshua Toulmin, *Dissertation on the Internal Evidences and Excellence of Christianity* (1785), 190.

²⁶ Plutarch, 'On the Sign of Socrates', trans. Phillip H. De Lacy and Benedict Einarson, vol. VII of *Plutarch's Moralia* (London: Loeb Classics, 1959), 409. As Paul Friedländer explains, in a seminal twentieth-century discussion of Socrates's daimonion, 'In Plutarch's dialogue... a childish crude confusion of the Socratic daimonion with such phenomena as sneezing or soothsaying "voices", used for the purposes of popular divination, is replaced by a more profound view probably originating in Poseidonios: as human speech affects the ear, so the *Logoi* (to retain this equivocal term) of the demons directly affect the human soul.' *Plato: An Introduction* (New York: Bollingen, 1958), 37.

²⁷ I have explored this aspect of Coleridge's thought further in *Platonic Coleridge*, 23.

²⁸ Joseph Priestley, *Socrates and Jesus Compared* (London: J. Johnson, 1803), 31.

for the central tenet of his theology, which he often summed up in that phrase ‘moral government of the world’. Priestley had long ago argued this conviction that the world is governed by a benevolent deity in, for instance, his *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*.²⁹ Coleridge continues to echo this very debate in *The Friend*, where he discusses complaints of ‘the incomprehensibility of the moral government of the world, and the seeming injustice and cruelty of the dispensations of Providence’ (Friend I 342). One of Coleridge’s aims in *The Friend*, and subsequently in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, is to justify the ways of God to men: to assert providence in the face of sceptical doubts. This had been none other than Priestley’s own project; and Coleridge’s polemic against Priestleyan Unitarianism, which he eventually considered to be a kind of trojan horse for ‘infidelity’, should not blind us to the extent to which he was still pursuing Priestley’s lines of thought in 1819. The ‘genial coincidence’ of the two writers’ treatment of the daimonion of Socrates is a case in point. Both Priestley and Coleridge find it difficult to assert very positively that Socrates received ‘inspiration’, yet both welcome this suggestion as sustaining the view that divine justice extends to all times and all places. In this way, Ficino’s view of the daimonion somewhat paradoxically re-emerges, in Priestley (who vigorously debunked Neoplatonic metaphysics) and then in Coleridge (whose attitude to it was ambivalent). This example indicates that Priestley’s philosophical system was more flexible and capacious than Coleridge – who had learned much from it before rejecting it – was prepared publically to admit. It also reflects the dissenting ideal of the candid exercise of private judgment: for Priestley was not influenced by the dismissive account of the daimonion in Toulmin, because, as he relates in his dedication to Toulmin, he stubbornly made it a matter of principle not to read the latter’s work until he had completed his own comparison of Socrates and Christ.

As I have suggested above, it would be unhelpful to turn to traditional categories to define the relation of Priestley’s text to Coleridge’s comments on the daimonion in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. It is evidently not a ‘source’, nor is it either ‘plagiarised’ or handled ‘originally’ by Coleridge. It is, rather, the most telling element of an extensive network of views on this controversial topic. By treating the daimonion as evidence of a higher kind of rationality in Socrates (rather than of irrational superstition), Coleridge casts aside recent naturalistic explanations, and instead takes up the Ficinian notion that Providence governs the whole history of philosophy, which he makes central to his *Lectures*. In so doing, however, he tacitly drops Ficino’s Neoplatonic daemonology – and thus reveals his continued affinity with Joseph Priestley, the rational dissenter.

After he delivered the Lectures, Coleridge continued to muse privately on this problem. In marginalia to Tennemann’s history of philosophy, he objects to the latter’s version of a rationalistic explanation. Tennemann proposes in a confident tone that the daimonion was a kind of unconsciously acquired skill

²⁹ Letter seven of Priestley’s *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, second edition (Birmingham, 1787), is entitled ‘Evidence of the moral Government of the World’.

derived from childhood experiences; but Coleridge cogently replies that this way of accounting for the phenomenon attributes such energy to the 'unconscious' as to be tantamount to admitting exactly what Socrates says about the daimonion:

As little am I satisfied with Tennemann's explanation of the Daemon or Daimonion of Socrates [...]. Grant, that it was no more than a peculiarly energetic Habit or Faculty of Presentiment developed at an unusually early period of Life—that which the Magnetists and Tennemann call *Ahnungsvermögen*: this does but shift the problem. Meanwhile the exceedingly contingent and accidental nature of the occasions, on which it was called forth, renders the solution of this Faculty from indistinct recollection of past minute, & perhaps at the time unconscious, experiences <very far from> satisfactory—At all events, <the explanation can be regarded as> sufficient, only where such an extent and importance are given to the term unconscious, in <its> combination with experiences, notices, and the like, as would amount to the assumption of an interior Man exercising higher powers than the Self-conscious Man or what each man calls *I*, is endued with. But if so, what is this less than a Daimonion (Divinum quid) or *theos oikeios*, domestic God, or Divine Familiar—in short, what Socrates believed it to be?

S.T. Coleridge.—1822. (CM V 723, Greek transliterated)

And so Coleridge remained in mysteries, doubts, and uncertainties respecting the daimonion of Socrates, which he in 1821 briefly linked to his conception of the 'symbol' in the context of Plutarch's *De Genio Socratis* (CN IV 4832 f61r), but otherwise refrained from interrogating further.

Coleridge's studied uncertainty contrasts rather comically with the serene confidence of religious radical of a different temperament, William Blake, in linking Socrates with Christ and both with himself. In conversation with Henry Crabb Robinson in 1825, Blake used the expression 'The Spirits told me', which led Robinson to ask: 'Socrates used pretty much the same language – He spoke of his genius Now what affinity or resemblance do you suppose there was between the genius which inspired Socrates and your Spirits?' According to Robinson, Blake now

...smiled, and for once it seemed to me as if he had a feeling of vanity gratified – Pretty much The same as in our countenances He paused and then said "I was Socrates[?]" – and then as if he had gone too far in that – ["Or a sort of brother I must have had conversations with him – So I had with Jesus Christ I have an obscure recollection of having been with both of them[?]."³⁰

³⁰ Henry Crabb Robinson, 'William Blake' (written 1852, recording events in the year 1825), in *Reminiscences*, MS, Dr Williams's Library, 4 vols, appendix to vol. 2. I thank the Director (David Wykes) and Trustees of Dr Williams's Library for permission to quote from manuscript material in the Henry Crabb Robinson collection.

Such was Blake's playfully literalistic view of Socrates and of his doctrine of recollection, or *anamnesis*.

More philosophical in his approach than Blake, Coleridge similarly wishes to link Socrates's 'inspirations' in some indefinite way with Christian revelation, and to hint in this context at his own standing as a thinker of genius; but his care to emphasise the inexplicability of the daimonion situates him (as we have seen) in proximity to Priestley, who in this respect swum against the Unitarian mainstream. As Blake's claiming of it might suggest, the Socratic daimonion was far from respectable in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. A *Quarterly* reviewer writing in the same year as Coleridge's Lectures, for instance, frowned at Socrates's 'belief in a supernatural agency, to an extent not precisely recognized by the religion of his country', and at his acting 'under the immediate direction of a supernatural being'.³¹ But Coleridge the London lecturer, though hesitant, perhaps due to this problem of respectability, continues to pursue his thoughts in an independent direction. What was at stake was Coleridge's attempt, which drives the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, to maintain the uniqueness of Christian morality and revelation while nevertheless gathering up the best of ancient philosophy. For, as he argued in *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, 'The history of all historical nations must in some sense be its [Christianity's] history – in other words, all history must be providential, and this a providence, a preparation, and a looking forward to Christ' (SWF II 1119).

Coleridge's interest in the daimonion, although by no means all-encompassing, is one of the key elements through which he maintains this providential view of philosophical history. At the same time, it reflects Coleridge's interest in the puzzle of the semi-daemonic inward voice of an agency that appears to be other than conscience. In Hegel's comparable terms, 'The daimonion... is something inward, but such that it is represented as a personal genius, as differentiated from the human will; not as his cleverness or wilfulness'.³² This last comparison is, like most of the texts I have surveyed in this essay, by no means a 'source' for Coleridge (indeed, Hegel's history of philosophy was composed after Coleridge's), but it helps to demonstrate the direction which European thought was taking on this topic. It was only after Coleridge's death that Søren Kierkegaard's thesis *On the Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates* (1841) would provide a completely new departure.

³¹ [Thomas Mitchell], review of *Lectures on the History of Literature, Ancient and Modern from the German of Frederick Schlegel* [trans. J.G. Lockhart], *Quarterly Review*, 21 (1819), 271-320 (315, 296).

³² G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, in *Sämtliche Werke, Jubiläumsausgabe in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. H. Glockner (Stuttgart, 1927-1940), vol 18, p. 99: 'Das Daimonion... ist etwas Innerliches, aber so, daß es als ein eigner Genius, als vom menschlichen Willen unterschieden, vorgestellt wird, - nicht als seine Klugheit, Willkür.'