

Socrates As Prophet

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It might seem odd to call Socrates a prophet. Yet Socrates called himself a prophet in the *Phaedrus* and the *Phaedo*. But by calling himself a *mantis*, Socrates was calling himself a seer, one who could exercise occult powers. That is not what I mean by calling Socrates a prophet. I aim to compare him to the biblical prophets. It is telling that when the Hebrew Bible was first translated into Greek, the rabbis had to decide how to translate the biblical word for prophet (*nabi*). They could not use the word *mantis*, because divination and fortune-telling are condemned by the Bible. Instead, they chose a rare Greek word “*prophetēs*,” which means to speak on behalf of another, because a biblical prophet claims to speak on behalf of God. In today’s English, a

prophet can mean someone who foretells the future or someone who forth-tells God's message. Socrates claimed to deliver a message from the god Apollo about the limits of human knowledge.

In my book, *The Third Sword: On the Political Role of Prophets*, I develop a theory of prophetic politics illustrated by chapters on the Hebrew prophets, Socrates, Jesus, Joan of Arc, Thomas More, and Martin Luther King. In this list, Socrates stands out because he is the only figure who did not consciously model himself on the example of the Hebrew prophets. Yet, he played a role in Athenian politics strangely parallel to the role played by Jeremiah in the politics of ancient Israel. I will briefly outline the political role of the Hebrew prophets and their successors before considering whether Socrates plays a comparable role.

Western societies are often said to be governed by both the political sword of state power and the religious sword of the churches. As rival powers, states and churches have come to resemble each

other: each has its own bureaucracy, laws, courts, and sanctions. These institutions give both state and church their staying power, but power tends to corrupt the politicians and priests who exercise it. Even in ancient Israel, the corruption of monarchical and sacerdotal power created the need for the Hebrew prophets, who rebuked both kings and priests in the name of God.

Prophets play an essential political role, even though they lack the established power of kings or priests. Prophetic power is personal and charismatic rather than institutional or routinized. Beyond the familiar swords of state and church, prophets wield a third sword. In the Isaiah and in Revelation, prophet is sometimes depicted with a sword coming out of his mouth.

Contrary to the prevailing ideology of the two swords, Western societies have always been ruled by three swords: the regal, the sacerdotal, and the prophetic. A just society needs stable political and religious authority *as well as* prophetic challenges to that authority.

Prophets cannot rule us or create good institutions; they can only remind us of the moral limits of states and churches.

What is a prophetic sword? Unlike the coercive swords wielded by church and state, the prophet wields only the sword of the spoken word—a word, however, of such power that it threatens both thrones and altars, politicians and clergy. The “sharp sword” of the prophetic word cleaves the soul, dividing good from evil. A prophet demands that we decide about how to live: the sword of his word divides before and after.

Prophets are wild cards in the game of politics. They force us to confront evils we would prefer to ignore. Claiming to speak directly for God, they make the usual kind of discussion, debate, and bargaining all but impossible. The voice of God is a conversation stopper, a standing threat to normal politics, sometimes even an existential threat to the polity itself. Some of the ancient Hebrew prophets demanded that Israel surrender to Babylon; later prophets insisted that Israel rise up

against the Romans. The result was the same: the repeated destruction of ancient Israel as a political community. The prophetic cure for the body politic can be more dangerous than the disease. If prophecy can be justified, it is only when normal politics is otherwise irredeemable.

Prophetic witness is a form of politics that is both important and neglected. The volcanic moral passions that periodically upend our politics usually stem from some prophetic condemnation. We get the language of our politics mainly from the ancient Greeks and Romans—as reflected in words such as *democracy*, *tyranny*, *citizen*, *demagogue*, *constitution*, and even *politics*. But we get our moral crusades—against slavery, against alcohol, against Jim Crow, against abortion—from the example of the biblical prophets.

Appealing to divine authority, prophets dedicate their lives to setting moral limits on human authority. Prophets have been called “divinely-authorized whistleblowers.” Prophets chasten the pretensions of politics, reminding us that there are values that transcend politics.

Without institutional power, these anti-politics-as-usual naysayers have repeatedly transformed our politics. Prophets wage a two-front war against statesmen, for their amoral realpolitik, and against priests for focusing on rituals rather than on righteousness. Prophets are usually condemned as both traitors and heretics.

Like the poets, prophets are the unacknowledged legislators of our lives. Prophets do not tell religious and political leaders what to do but only what cannot be done. Prophetic politics is the politics of the veto, the politics of setting moral limits on what is permissible in religious and political life.

How well does Socrates fit into this tradition of prophetic politics? Certainly, Socrates thought of himself as entrusted with a divine message about the limits of human knowledge. Socrates described himself a soldier of the god Apollo, stationed on the streetcorners of Athens.

Socrates must already have had a reputation for cleverness when his friend Chaerephon consulted the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, asking the god: “Is there anyone wiser than Socrates?” The Pythian priestess delivered the divine oracle: “There is no one wiser than Socrates.” Upon hearing the pronouncement of the oracle, Socrates was puzzled because he was painfully aware of his own ignorance.

Socrates himself certainly did not claim to be wise—that is why he called himself a “philosopher,” which means a “lover of wisdom.” Socrates insisted that only the gods are truly wise. To claim to be wise was to invite divine retribution: the gods were jealous of their wisdom. Philosophical hubris could trigger a divine nemesis. By calling himself not wise but merely a lover of wisdom, Socrates hoped to escape the jealousy of the gods. We are still suspicious of those who seem too clever. Early Greek philosophers were widely suspected of intellectual sorcery, of meddling with demonic powers, of transgressing human

limits. They were seen as alchemists or mad scientists rather than as sober thinkers.

To test the oracular message, Socrates questioned many Athenians with a reputation for wisdom; surely there must be someone wiser than Socrates. Socratic examination cannot in principle disprove the moral beliefs of his interlocutors nor prove Socrates's own favorite beliefs. But that is not Socrates's aim. His aim is simply to show his conversational partners that they do not know as much as they claim to know. By getting them to contradict themselves in public, Socrates humiliates and shames them. And, indeed, Socrates deploys public shaming with gusto, causing even the toughest, most macho of professional orators, such as Thrasymachus, to blush in humiliation. The infamous Athenian general and traitor, Alcibiades, confessed: "Socrates is the only man in the world who has made me feel shame." The wonder is that Socrates was not killed much earlier. Socrates's service

to his god, he says, led not just to his own unpopularity, but also to his own poverty.

After searching and failing to find a truly wise person, Socrates came to realize what the oracle meant. No one was wiser than Socrates because he alone was aware of his own ignorance. To say that “no one is wiser than Socrates” does not imply that Socrates is wise. To be the wisest child or the wisest monkey is not to be wise. Socrates was the prophet of human ignorance.

The Delphic oracle was inscribed with the saying “know yourself,” which in context means “know that you are not a god.” Socrates was entrusted by Apollo with the mission of showing people just how little they shared in divine wisdom. Like the Hebrew prophets, Socrates contrasted divine wisdom with human ignorance, divine goodness with human wickedness. Like the Hebrew prophets, Socrates claimed that a god spoke to him. But Socrates’s god vetoed only his own private

decisions, not those of others. The God of the Hebrew prophets, by contrast, tells kings, priests, and the people what not to do.

At his trial, Socrates summed up his message by saying: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” But Socrates never explained what it means to examine our own lives. By what measure do we assess ourselves? This question takes us to the heart of Socratic philosophy. Socrates is widely regarded as the founder of Western humanism because he devoted his life to teaching us how to become better human beings—not by submitting to the will of some god but by developing our own rational powers. Socrates wanted his fellow citizens to understand the limits of their knowledge and virtue. Nothing can be a measure of itself. The only way to take the measure of human ignorance and vice is to compare ourselves to divine wisdom and virtue. Socrates described himself as a prophet of Apollo because he had one foot in the divine world and one foot in the human world.

Socratic humanism rests on the premise that the god is the measure of all things.

Socrates is the most famous philosopher in world history, yet he claimed to know nothing; he is the most famous teacher in European history, yet he claimed not to teach anything. At the heart of Socrates's divine mission was his irony. Socrates's irony exploits his awareness of the gap between the human and the divine. Socrates was haunted by his discovery that human knowledge and virtue were a mere shadow of the knowledge and virtue of the gods.

Socratic irony is available only to a person who can occupy two perspectives—who can grasp enough about both the divine and the human to see the ironic contrast. From the god's perspective, said Socrates, human beings are like children or apes—meaning that our pretensions to wisdom or virtue are laughable. When Socrates avowed that he knew nothing, he was speaking ironically: compared to the gods, he knew nothing; but compared to other human beings, he knew

something very important. From a human perspective, Socrates was no doctor; but from a divine perspective, he was the only real doctor, because he treated the soul, not merely the body.

Although Socrates is the one true doctor in Athens, he is indicted for malpractice. The contrast between a divine and a human perspective could not be sharper here. Socrates sees himself as the only person who improves the youth of Athens but is charged with being the only person who corrupts the youth. From Socrates's perspective, the whole city of Athens—its poets and rhetors, orators and statesmen, parents and priests—all conspire to inculcate false beliefs in its youth. Compared to all these teachers, what possible influence could Socrates alone exercise? Yet, Socrates alone is condemned for corrupting the youth.

From a human perspective, Socrates was no politician; but from a divine perspective, he was the only real politician, because he sought the truth about justice. Although Socrates often claimed that he was

forbidden from engaging in politics by his divine voice, he also claimed to be Athens's leading public servant. By eschewing politics, Socrates became a true statesman.

Socratic irony is virtuous because it avoids two extremes that tend to dissolve irony into mere hilarity or pure contempt. When Socrates noticed the gap between human and divine wisdom, he did not conclude that human aspirations were absurd or contemptible. Rather, he laughed at human pretensions without being hostile to human aspirations. Socrates did not despise his fellow Athenians for claiming to have the wisdom they lacked: he honored their aspiration to wisdom while mocking their pretensions to actually possessing it. Socratic irony saved him from either misanthropy or cynicism in relation to the human comedy.

Socrates would often ironically jest that he knew nothing and that he hoped to become the pupil of the people he interrogated. But his urbane wit created widespread mistrust. It was obvious to everyone

that this demonically clever wise guy knew more than he let on. In every situation of irony, there is an ironist and a victim: that is certainly true of most Socratic conversations. Socrates's reputation for being less than candid about himself became a major liability at his trial, when he found himself forced to say to the jury: "You will not believe me and will think I am being ironical." There is something sadly ironic in Socrates's desperate attempt to persuade the jury that he is being sincere: "Perhaps some of you will think I am jesting, but be sure that all that I shall say is true." Once someone is thought to be ironical, claims of sincerity appear to be just another ruse.

Why was Socrates so unpopular? Most people do not like having their ignorance revealed—especially not in public. At his trial, Socrates explained to the jury the bitter irony that having received the favor of the god, who entrusted to Socrates alone the mission of discovering the limits of human wisdom, Socrates had now earned the disfavor of his

fellow Athenians. In the world of Socratic irony, divine favor necessarily means human disfavor.

Just as Nathan confronted David and Elijah confronted Ahab, so Socrates confronted the political leaders of Athens. When the democrats wanted to summarily punish the naval generals during the Peloponnesian War, Socrates alone voted against them on the Council. And when the oligarchs asked Socrates to help them to arrest Leon of Salamis, Socrates simply went home. Both Socrates's contemporaries and many modern scholars refuse to believe that he was neither a democrat nor an oligarch, as if those two factions exhaust the possibilities of politics. As a prophet, Socrates was concerned above all with setting moral limits on politics—no matter what the regime. Socrates followed the Hebrew prophets by practicing the politics of just saying no.

Socrates's conversations with Euthyphro and with Thrasymachus illustrate the two-front war he waged against the religious and the

political authorities of his day. Just as Isaiah and Jeremiah denounce the priests of their day for turning the temple into a “robbers’ den,” so Socrates accuses Euthyphro of promoting “commerce with the gods.” Like the Hebrew prophets, Socrates endorses prayer and sacrifice, but only when they are subordinated to righteous living.

Socrates’s god, like the biblical God, reveals his holiness primarily as righteousness. Isaiah and Jeremiah denounce their kings for pursuing an unprincipled realpolitik, just as Socrates demolishes Thrasymachus’s claim that might makes right. Like the Hebrew prophets, Socrates stands up for moral limits on politics.

Socrates’s indictment for impiety was specified into three separate charges: 1) That Socrates did not recognize the same gods that the city recognized; 2) That Socrates had introduced new divinities or new ways of relating to the gods; 3) That Socrates had corrupted the youth of Athens. These charges clearly reflected Socrates’ unique gift for alienating both the political and religious authorities of his day.

Socratic divination through the Delphic oracle and through dreams certainly fits within conventional Athenian religious beliefs. These practices made Socrates unusually intimate with the divine will, but they would not shock his contemporaries. What was shocking was Socrates's claim that ever since childhood he had been guided in many decisions, large and small, by a personal and private divine voice that told him not to do what he was sometimes intending to do. Because Socrates calls his divine voice a *daimonion*, many people have thought that Socrates was claiming to be possessed by his own personal divinity or *daimon*. After all, Socrates does claim to believe in the existence of divinities (*daimones*). But when Socrates refers to his personal *daimonion*, he is not referring to a personal divinity but to his own personal sign or voice coming from "the god" (probably Apollo). Socrates's divine voice not only warns him what not to do, but through its silence it reassures him when he is acting rightly. Most dramatically, after the jury has condemned him to death, Socrates tells the jurors that he has no regrets about his life or his defense of it. The silence of

his divine voice, he says, assures him that he has acted rightly and that his own death may well be a good thing.

Socrates was accused and convicted of impiety because of the shocking novelty of his personal divine voice. Plato claims that this divine voice was unique to Socrates. And when Socrates tells the seer Euthyphro that he has been indicted for impiety, Euthyphro says: “This is because you say that the divine sign keeps coming to you. So, he has written this indictment against you as one who makes innovations in religious matters.” Here Euthyphro is referring to one of the specifications of the indictment for impiety: Socrates is accused of “introducing new divinities.” But if Socrates’s divine voice comes from Apollo, as most scholars now think, then in what way was Socrates introducing new divinities? Socrates was accused, not of creating new gods, but of creating new kinds of dealings with gods—of “making innovations in religious matters,” as Euthyphro said. Socrates dangerously innovated, not by believing in Apollo or even in divination, but by claiming a uniquely intimate personal relation to the god.

Many modern philosophers find this scandalous. That Socrates, the great rationalist, should allow a divine voice to overrule his own deliberate decisions seems like a betrayal of the philosophical life. Instead of being the Athenian Voltaire, Socrates sounds more like Joan of Arc. Perhaps, though, Socrates's divine voice is just a symbol of his conscience. Our conscience often speaks to us most clearly about what *not* to do, just like Socrates's divine voice. Many people today believe that the voice of their conscience *is* the voice of their god. So perhaps Socrates invented the idea of a conscience, or at least the idea that to obey our conscience is to obey a god.

The mystery at the heart of Socrates's trial was its timing. Socrates had been teaching the same lessons for decades. Aristophanes's play of 423 BC already reflects Socratic notoriety. Having tolerated this annoying gadfly for many years, why did the Athenians suddenly decide to indict him in 399 BC? The timing of the trial makes sense only in terms of the political trauma Athens had suffered. After

losing their nearly thirty years' war with Sparta five years earlier, and being stripped of their empire and navy, the Athenians awoke to find their democracy overthrown by oligarchs in 403.

Though their rule was short-lived, and democracy was restored before the year was out, these "thirty tyrants" imposed a reign of terror that led to the death or exile of thousands of Athenian democrats. The most notorious Athenian traitor to Sparta, Alcibiades, and the leader of the oligarchs, Critias, were both former students of Socrates. As soon as democracy was restored, Socrates was probably living on borrowed time. A general amnesty proclaimed by the democrats made it impossible to prosecute anyone except the tyrants themselves for the crimes committed during their misrule. Because Socrates could not be indicted for sedition based on his association with the criminal tyrants, many people have thought he was indicted for impiety as a cover for the real charge of sedition.

In such a time of agonizing political turmoil and fear, Athenian democrats no doubt developed a heightened, if not hysterical, insistence on signs of loyalty to Athens, to its democracy, and to its public cult. Athenian religion was a wholly owned subsidiary of the Athenian state: all the gods and rituals were subject to approval by the assembly of citizens. Proper respect for the gods of Athens was an expression of patriotism, and patriots were expected to worship only the gods of Athens.

That is why it makes no sense to ask if the prosecution of Socrates was motivated by religion or politics: in Athens, religious and political loyalty were inseparable. Socrates's unorthodox religious teachings, especially his personal divine voice, were always regarded as un-Athenian; what changed in 403 was the willingness of his fellow citizens to tolerate Socratic dissent. In addition to his close association with many of the villains of Athens's recent political tragedies, Socrates was a notorious critic of democratic excesses, as when he opposed the exile

of the Athenian naval generals. That Socrates was also a critic of the oligarchy did not endear him to many democrats, who took the view “if you are not with us, you are against us.” During the terror of the thirty tyrants, for example, Socrates did not leave Athens, as did most prominent democrats.

Upon being sentenced to death, Socrates was free to speak his prophetic condemnation of Athens. Here is what he said:

Swans are said to prophesy just before they die, which is why they are sacred to Apollo. Like the swans, I am a fellow servant of the god, and now it is my time to prophesy, to sing my final song.

Philosophy, you see, is the highest music.

My dear jurors, you have done a grievous harm—not to me, but to yourselves. Far better to suffer an injustice than to commit one. You can harm only my body, but you have harmed your own souls. Moreover, you have harmed our beloved Athens, which will forever be known as the city that put to death a wise man,

Socrates. You may think that you have stopped me from philosophizing, but if the stories about Hades are true, then I look forward to questioning Agamemnon, Odysseus, and all the dead heroes. Perhaps they will find me as annoying as you do. But at least they cannot kill me if I am already dead! You do me the honor of sending me to my true divine judges, where I am confident of being acquitted. This I know for certain: the gods do not neglect the affairs of a good man. Now we must part: I go to die; you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god.

Just as Socrates had prophesied, Athens soon came to regret his execution and erected a statue to honor his memory. The Athenians discovered that they could not live with Socrates—but also that they could not live without him. As a young man, Socrates planned to embark on a career in politics. But his divine voice vetoed Socrates's decision—and no wonder. As Socrates admitted during his trial, he

would have been killed much earlier had he been a politician. Socrates, like Jesus and Martin Luther King, but unlike Joan of Arc or Thomas More, realized early in his life that being a political leader was not compatible with being a prophet. Not only did Socrates avoid public life—except when required by law to serve in the army and certain other offices—he even avoided taking sides in the brutal contests between Athenian oligarchs and democrats. A prophet is not a partisan, but someone who sets moral limits on the politics of any regime—as Socrates did when he defied the immoral orders of both democrats and oligarchs. Socrates’s understanding of the demands of his own prophetic vocation is matched only by the Hebrew prophets and by Jesus.