Given what we hear from him in The Apology, it is not clear why Socrates “follows” his God, Apollo. There is evidence to support three explanations: 1) because he is compelled to; 2) because he wants to enable goodness; and 3) out of self-interest.

At least in The Apology, Socrates never says he “follows” God. Instead, he characterizes himself as God’s gift to the Athenians. He says, “I am really one given to you by God” (437), and as such he is not so much someone who follows Him as he is an extension or a key possession of His. He argues that it is because he is a gift of God’s that he possesses a capacity to neglect “all [his] [. . .] own interests” (437), and why an affront to him amounts to an offence against his god. It is a self-conception that makes him seem most like a puppet, most like someone who follows God because He is, so to speak, pulling his strings, and explains why he argues that he “cannot” “disobey the god” (443; emphasis added).

But there is also evidence in “the Apology” to support understanding him as not compelled to follow God but as drawn to follow Him. When Socrates says that through “oracles and dreams” (439) his “God commands” him “to wake [. . .] up” (436) his fellow Athenians, when he says that he was “posted” by God with a specific “duty to be a philosopher” (434-35), we sense he feels strongly obligated but not compelled to follow his god’s plans for him. The prophetic voice he hears “checks” him, it “opposes” (445) him. It is or has an “influence” (439) he strongly registers and which impedes his actions, but is not unequivocally presented as something which cannot be resisted. That is, we are left room to believe the primary reason he heeds its directions is because he “trust[s]” (441) its source, Apollo. He trusts Apollo because he believes Him “wise” (429) and good. Alone, though like everyone he would want to be good, he would never be sure what goodness was. But following the directions of his god makes him sure “there is no greater good for [his fellow Athenians] [. . .] in the city in any way than [his] [. . .] service to God” (436).

But his defense also provides evidence for understanding Socrates as following his god because servility has its (considerable) benefits. Socrates argues that following His commands has meant an arduous life, but also a life of hearing from a “familiar prophetic voice [. . .] even in very small things” (445). Unlike Oedipus, who felt abandoned by the gods, Socrates keeps constant company with his god—a god, who, yes, commands him to live a life which leaves him materially poor, but one who also
leaves him feeling certain he is important both to Him and to most important Athenians. Socrates suggests he has little or rather no interest in “title[s]” (429) or honor, but if we doubt his sincerity, he would have had to have done more than just point to his material poverty to prove he does not follow his god for riches.

Socrates may not be proud or self-interested, but we know that even if he was he would be very unlikely to admit this to himself, for he has much riding on his being thought good by his god. Socrates playfully imagines spending his time joyfully conversing with heroes such as Odysseus in his afterlife. He says that only God knows what awaits him after death; but the reason he might be thinking of an ideal ultimate fate for himself is because he feels sure “no evil can happen to a good man either living or dead, and his business is not neglected by the gods” (446).

We have evidence, then, to support several hypotheses as to why Socrates “follows” his god. Socrates would disavow the latter, and possibly the latter two, but all three explanations are backed by evidence. We might at least agree that Socrates follows God because he believes gods exist whom one might follow—but his accusers are given reason in The Apology to consider otherwise. Socrates constantly refers to his god in his defence, but one of the reasons he is on trial is because he is accused of being a dangerous atheist. In this position, a self-preserving atheist as much as a reverent follower of God, would be sure to intersperse his defence with references to Him.

Work Cited