

The *daimonic* and the Good

The philosopher Socrates bore within him a voice which guided his actions towards just and good outcomes. He named this voice his *daimonion* – his little *daimon* – and had utter faith in its goodness, accepting even death if unimpeded by it. How did Socrates become so certain of the *daimon* and its intentions? What does the *daimon* tell us about the nature of goodness, and the Good?

Much of Socrates' life and thought is related in the works of Plato, who is known to have studied under Socrates in his youth, and have spectated or heard from close secondhand of the events which befell him. The *daimon* is present throughout those texts which chronicle the arguments and inclinations of Socrates. A conclusive summary of its nature and the mechanics of its interaction with Socrates is given in Plato's *Apology*: the *daimon* is "something divine... I [Socrates] have had this from my childhood; it is a sort of voice that comes to me, and when it comes it always holds me back from what I am thinking of doing, but never urges me forward." (31c) To understand the *daimon*'s relationship to goodness, and the reason it inspires Socrates' true faith, we must examine all three aspects here mentioned: that it is divine; that it "comes to him"; and that it never dictates his actions, but only obstructs them.

In *Theaetetus*, Socrates describes how the *daimon* discriminates between students who have left his tutelage too early: "When such men come back and beg me, as they do, with wonderful eagerness to let them join me again, the spiritual monitor (*daimonion*) that comes to me forbids me to associate with some of them, but allows me to converse with others, and these again make progress." (150e-151a) The same thread continues in *Alcibiades*, when Socrates says: "In your younger days... the god (*theos*), as I believe, prevented me from talking with you, in order that I might not waste my words: but now he has set me on; for now you will listen to me." (105e-106a) This recurrence sets up a relationship between the *daimon*, a small, personal deity, and *theos* – God. The *daimon* is situated as the herald of a God who favors those that are receptive to him. Socrates learns of his students' receptiveness through the *daimon*,

and can measure his resources accordingly, to address only those open to persuasion: "This spiritual power that attends me (*daimonion*) also exerts itself to the full in my intercourse with those who spend their time with me. To many, indeed, it is adverse, and it is not possible for these to get any good by conversing with me, and I am therefore unable to spend my time in conversing with them." (*Theages* 129e) The *daimon* allocates Socrates' time only towards the fulfillment of the good, and so constrains Socrates' behavior in service of goodness. Since the *daimon*'s constraints are also those of *theos*, the goodness served derives from a good God, or from the irreducible Good.

This Good is divine because it is absolute: in *Phaedo*, Socrates testifies that "there is an absolute beauty, and goodness, and essence in general, and to this, which is now discovered to be a previous condition of our being, we refer all our sensations, and with this compare them." (77a) This "idea or essence, which in the dialectical process we define as essence of true existence – whether essence of equality, beauty, or anything else," is contrasted with the "many beautiful," which are the material manifestations of the essence of beauty. (78d-e) In the visible world, this invisible Essence takes body in "men or horses or garments or any other things which may be called equal or beautiful." (78e) The bodied good is subject to change, whereas essences are "unchanging things you can only perceive with the mind – they are invisible and are not seen." (79a-b) The unchanging realm is that of the divine, inhabited by the gods and by the godly parts of men.

The godly part of man is his soul, which "is in the very likeness of the divine, and immortal, and intelligible, and uniform, and indissoluble, and unchangeable." (79d) For this reason, "when the soul and the body are united, then nature orders the soul to rule and govern, and the body to obey and serve." (80a) Within the soul also there is such a hierarchy: if, for instance, "there was something in the soul bidding a man to drink, [there would be] something else forbidding him, which is other and stronger than the principle which bids him... and the forbidding principle is derived from reason, and that which bids and attracts proceeds from passion and disease." (*Republic* 439c-d) This is reminiscent of the operation of the *daimon*, casting it as the "forbidding principle" which "always holds [Socrates] back". (*Apology* 31c-d)

Therefore the appetitive and passionate parts of man's soul must be ruled by his reason, and the *daimon* must incline this reasoning towards Reason in its essence, in its ideal form.

This same argument that the divine "is that which naturally orders and rules, and the mortal that which is subject and servant," requires that the divine realm rule over the mortal. (*Phaedo* 80a) In *Timaeus*, we learn that "God has given to each a *daimon* which inhabits the summit of the body," a summit which has been identified as our reason, or the highest part of our being.¹ (90a) Then the means of God's rule over us is the *daimon*: since it derives from divinity, from essential Reason, the *daimon* governs reason as it lives in the mortal mind. Being divine, it tends towards its own nature – towards divinity – and therefore, having attached to our higher being, it "[lifts] up what is heavenly in us to heaven, away from the earth, being as we are heavenly creatures, not earthly ones." (*Timaeus* 90a)

The invocation of a singular God suggests that there is also a hierarchy of divinity, that among the essences, there may be a highest Essence which, by its nature, is so exalted that it is better than any other. If the nature of the highest Essence is to be the most good, then in a world of pure natures, the highest would be goodness itself. The ruler or orderer of the divine world would then be a good God, the essential form of the good which is the Good. Since the good things of heaven and earth are known by their eternity, the best essence would be, in a sense, the most eternal. Then we might suppose that the realm of the unchanging is ruled by the Essence of Eternity, of Purity, of Incorruptibility and therefore of the highest Good, which is the inclination of other essences. As reason rules the well-ordered soul, so does Reason order the world of forms, and sets even "the true Hades, which like [the soul] is invisible, and pure, and noble, on her way to the good and wise God." (*Phaedo* 79d)

In *Symposium*, the priestess Diotima describes Love as "neither mortal nor immortal, but in a mean between the two... [he is] a great spirit (*daimon*), and like all spirits he is intermediate between the divine and the mortal." (202e) The power of the *daimon* is to "interpret... between gods and men, conveying and taking across to the gods the prayers and sacrifices of men, and to men the commands and

¹ This translation belongs to Jacob Dvorak and is sourced from his paper "The Philosopher Within: The daimōn in Plato" (2019).

replies of the gods; he is the mediator who spans the chasm which divides them, and therefore in him all is bound together, and through him the arts of the prophet and the priest, their sacrifices and mysteries and charms, and all prophecy and incantation, find their way." (203a)

Prophecy, and incantation as the welcoming bed of prophecy, are necessary for these mysteries to be revealed to man; for the divine and mortal worlds relate only by a dark and narrow passageway. In the *Republic*, Socrates describes the condition of those who live in the mortal world, possessing no divine knowledge, as "living in a underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den... above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way." (514a-c) If he should somehow follow this way, he would emerge into "the presence of the sun himself... [and] then proceed to argue that this is he who gives the season and the years, and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the cause of all things which he and his fellows have been accustomed to behold." (516a-b) Yet darkness obscures the physical senses of man, and he cannot tell what lives in the upper world. He must then accept a sense which lies beyond the physical to attain "knowledge [which] may be truly called necessary, necessitating as it clearly does the use of the pure intelligence in the attainment of pure truth." (517c) This *daimonic* sense is the "instructor" Socrates invokes when he says, of the man who apprehends for the first time the "true objects" which live in the light, that one "may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them." (515d)

It is "true philosophy", the love of wisdom, which permits "the turning round of a soul... to the true day of being." (518d) Therefore the way to truth, to the land of true forms, is discovered and walked with the assistance of the *daimon* which is Love, and using knowledge brought down by the *daimon* of the soul. Without *daimonic* mediation, those mysteries which inhabit the godly world, and whose shadows live on in the eyes of men, remain completely incomprehensible to those who wish to apprehend them. "For God mingles not with man; but through Love all the intercourse and converse of God with man, whether awake or asleep, is carried on. The wisdom which understands this is spiritual; all other wisdom,

such as that of arts and handicrafts, is mean and vulgar. Now these spirits or intermediate powers are many and diverse, and one of them is Love." (*Symposium* 203b)

The *daimon* is the source of prophecy also about things on earth. In his *Apology*, Xenophon describes Socrates' divine gift explicitly as the power of divination, as "God's foreknowledge of the future and his forewarning thereof to whomsoever he will." (12) On various occasions, Socrates divines the presence of danger with the help of the *daimonic* voice. Plutarch relates in *De genio Socratis* that when "Pyrilampes... had been wounded with a javelin and was taken prisoner... and was told that Socrates had reached the coast at Oropus with Alcibiades and Laches and come home safe, he often invoked the name of Socrates, and of those of certain friends and members of his company who had... been killed by our cavalry, as they had (he said) disregarded Socrates' sign and taken a different way, not following where Socrates led, in their retreat from the battle." (581d-e, tr. De Lacy & Einarson)

This warning mechanism extends to others: Xenophon states in his *Memorabilia* that "many of his companions were counselled by him to do this or not to do that in accordance with the warnings of the deity (*daimonion*): and those who followed his advice prospered, and those who rejected it had cause for regret." (1.1.1-5) For instance, it is related in *Theages* that when Timarchus makes to leave a wine-party to assassinate Nicias, Socrates exclaims "No, no, do not get up; for my accustomed spiritual sign (*daimonion*) has occurred to me." Timarchus is unsettled, yet still commits "the deed which was the cause of his going then to his death. And hence it was that he spoke those words: ['I tell you I am going to my death now, because I would not take Socrates' advice.']" (128d-129e)

We see that in most instances, the *daimonion* intervenes to prevent harm to its favored, and in the extreme prevents death. Since Socrates' *daimon* is the translating agent of the Good, this might imply that harm to the body is bad, and its tenure in life is good. However, the same *daimon* permits Socrates to attend the trial where he is condemned to die: "the divine sign did not oppose me either when I left my home in the morning, or when I came here to the court, or at any point of my speech, when I was going to say anything," he says, "and yet on other occasions it stopped me at many points in the midst of a speech; but now, in this affair, it has not opposed me in anything I was doing or saying." By this lack of

opposition he concludes that "this which has happened to me is doubtless a good thing, and those of us who think death is an evil must be mistaken. A convincing proof of this been given me; for the accustomed sign would surely have opposed me if I had not been going to meet with something good."

(*Apology* 40a-c)

The *daimon* not only allows Socrates' death to come about, but sanctions those actions which have led Socrates to be accused in the first place. Because he is so aware of his *daimon*, Socrates is wisest of all men; this is revealed by prophecy to the oracle of Apollo, which itself is a *daimonic* revelation. To verify the truth of this claim, Socrates attempts to "find a man wiser than myself... I went to one man after another, being not unconscious of the enmity which I provoked, and I lamented and feared this: but necessity was laid upon me - the word of God, I thought, ought to be considered first." (*Apology* 21b-e) The *daimon* does not impede his questioning of men in the *agora*, and even by its relation to God and to the word of God necessitates these interactions. Further, the accusation that Socrates "does not believe in the gods of the state, and has other new divinities of his own," is made directly because of his invocation of the *daimon* as an influence over him. (24b-c) Socrates anticipates this accusation in *Euthypro*, at the time of his first hearing: "[Meletus] says I am a maker of gods; and because I make new gods (*theoi*) and do not believe in the old ones, he indicted me for the sake of these old ones." Euthypro answers clearly that "it is because you say the divine monitor (*daimonion*) keeps coming to you. So he has brought the indictment against you for making innovations in religion, and he is going into court to slander you." (3b, tr. Fowler) Then we see that the *daimon* does not categorically protect Socrates from death, but that throughout his life, it has been preparing him for death at a certain time; for that time is directly brought about by Socrates' interpretation of the *daimon's* will, and by his honesty about its presence and divine provenance.

Thus is earthly life not the same as the good. Death which comes at the right time may be better than life, and this time is divinely ordained; as Socrates says at the end of Plato's *Apology*, "We go our ways - I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows." (42a) The better way is presented forever by the same *daimon*, which guides us into the underworld. "For after death, as they say, the genius

of each individual (*daimonion*), to whom he belonged in life, leads him to a certain place in which the dead are gathered together, whence after judgment has been given they pass into the world below, following the guide, who is appointed to conduct them from this world to the other: and when they have there received their due and remained their time, another guide brings them back again after many revolutions of ages." (*Phaedo* 107c) The correct time for death is that when the soul is so pure that it may part cleanly from the body. For "the soul which is pure at departing draws after her no bodily taint, having never voluntarily had connection with the body, which she is ever avoiding, herself gathered into herself... And what does this mean but that she has been a true disciple of philosophy and has practised how to die easily? And is not philosophy the practice of death?" (80e-81a)

The cycles of death and life must meet each other at only that time when each have run their course; meaning that they have each relieved the soul of what it is not like. Remaining in one cycle longer than is required for purification is a corruption of the soul. Although his *daimon* ceases to cry out its warning at the time of departure, a soul might cling to the body out of love of earthly life; such a soul "has been polluted, and is impure at the time of her departure, and is the companion and servant of the body always, and is in love with and fascinated by the body and by the desires and pleasures of the body, until she is led to believe that the truth only exists in a bodily form." (*Phaedo* 81c) In death, such souls "are compelled to wander about such places in payment of the penalty of their former evil way of life; and they continue to wander until the desire which haunts them is satisfied and they are imprisoned in another body." (81d-e) When their deathly cycle is to end, it breaks only into lowly life, into existence as "asses and animals of that sort... or wolves, or hawks and kites". (82a) However, the life which is lived exactly according to the *daimonic* voice, at the furthest degree of abstraction from carnal desire, leads to clean parting from the body. And when the soul is sufficiently pure, it emerges in a sense from the den of darkness. This is a true philosopher's soul, which may join the gods in their lit realm. For "he who is a philosopher or lover of learning, and is entirely pure at departing, is alone permitted to reach the gods." (82b-c)

Knowing the nature of the *daimon*, and knowing that all which is good in life is in a sense *daimonic*, or related to the *daimonic* sense, we can assemble the virtues of life. Knowledge is good, because it is an apprehension of the truth; true knowledge describes the world of truths, of the divine forms, and is therefore knowledge of God. What the *daimon* brings, both as prophecy and as the voice of counsel, is essentially the word of God. Knowledge is to Truth as reason is to Reason; it is the earthly shadow of the absolute, and also the hand by which we may grasp that shadow, and the hand which points beyond the shadow to its Form. Temperance is good because it represses worldly attachment, so that we may hear the *daimon* above our physical senses. The release of temperance lets us heed *daimonic* admonishments even when they conflict with our desires, including our desire to live. And justice is good, because it is the harmony of our soul: by pulling its parts together under the divine mast of reason, it puts our behavior in accordance with what we know of endless Reason.

In *Phaedo* Socrates argues that by "beauty all beautiful things become beautiful... and by greatness [become] greater, and by smallness [become] less." Then also by goodness may we say things become good, and our goodness is that of us which partakes of goodness, which is the soul – since "all souls of all living creatures [are] equally good." (72-76) The soul "does not admit of death", and "whatever the soul possesses, to that she comes bearing life." (106a-107a) Since this vessel and eminent star of goodness cannot die and brings life, we can say the Good is Life, and Death is evil. Yet the death of the body, the mortal aspect of death, can be good if it allows essential Life to persist.

Love inclines us towards Life. To explain the goodness of love, Diotima constructs a ladder of purifying feeling. Standing still at its beginning, the mind is tempted only by aesthetic beauty; yet as it matures in virtue, man will ascend to understand the love-feeling as directed towards goodness; and finally, "when he looks upon beauty's visible presentment, and only then [will] a man will be quickened with the true, and not the seeming, virtue—for it is virtue's self that quickens him, not virtue's semblance. And when he has brought forth and reared this perfect virtue, he shall be called the friend of God, and if ever it is given to man to put on immortality, it shall be given to him." (*Symposium* 210-211) Thus it is once again shown that by practicing these virtues indicated by the *daimon* and implied also by the

daimon's existence, one orders his soul and begins to love, at the end, wisdom itself: he becomes a true philosopher. And the love of wisdom is the love of Life – of eternal Life.

Our devotion to virtue renders our soul receptive to *daimonic* power. To devote ourselves in this way, we require a fundamental belief in the sensed "Heaven [which] seems to have attached to Socrates from his earliest years as his guide in life a vision of this kind, which alone showed him the way, illuminating his path in matters dark and inscrutable to human wisdom." (*De genio Socratis* 10, tr. Perrin) We require belief in eternity, in the world of absolutes. And with this belief, the *daimon's* existence is not only acceptable but necessary, since there must be a mechanism of transition between the mortal and the eternal worlds. Life comes to us from the *daimon* and parts from us by him, while the *daimon* alone stands eternally, together with our eternal soul. On earth, we do not sense or truly know of this eternity through any means but the *daimonic*. The *daimon* reveals those of our thoughts and actions which point towards eternity, towards "release of the soul from the chains of the body", and the eternal joy it may share with the gods. (*Phaedo* 65c) The true and virtuous acts of Socrates, the ones which imply eternity, are marked by the "frequent concordance of the sign with his own decisions, to which it lent a divine sanction." (*De genio Socratis*, tr. Perrin)

Although the *daimon* may accord with Socrates' decisions, most accounts agree that it does not compel him to action. By never urging him on, the *daimon* leaves space for Socrates' free will. It is Socrates himself who chooses how to act, and the way he makes these choices allow him to more easily hear and obey the *daimon* when it does intervene. He is not told by the *daimon* what the good way is unless the goodness of it could not be known by Socrates. The *daimon* gives him mysterious knowledge, illuminates to him what he as mortal man could not know: the fates of others – allowing him to warn them, as he did; the hearts of others – such as their disposition to be taught or convinced; and most importantly, the good time to die – in other words, the time of greatest or even true purity.

The good is divine. The *daimon* inclines all our actions towards the divine good, bringing us mysterious knowledge which allows us to remain as long as we must in the mortal world, and no more. During this time, we may make a free choice to live virtuously, that our soul may split easily from our

body and travel with the same *daimon* into death. If we have been so virtuous that our life was crowned by the love of wisdom, we will achieve eternity in the company of true gods. If not, our soul will return to earth, to attempt again a surrender to the *daimonic* voice. For the Good is the eternal God, and the shadow of Goodness is justice in the soul, is the institution of a natural order and government of one by another in the parts of the soul. The *daimon* is listened to when this is done, and this is done by listening to the *daimon*.

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