

On daemons and the principle of mediation in the Platonic tradition

As is the case with most theological matters in Plato and his tradition, the understanding of the nature and place of daemons in the scheme of the universe is profoundly misunderstood in the modern age. In both Christianity and the modern imagination, daemons are almost always malignant - if, that is, their existence is even accepted. But in the Platonic tradition they are seen as essentially good and as playing an important role in the divine drama that is perpetually enacted throughout the manifested universe. To the modern ear talk of daemons as a reality seems outlandish, but this is because our view of science is coloured by a mechanistic worldview: the primary question has become “how?” rather than “why?” For Plato all creative action centres on *intelligence* contemplating *purposes* and *paradigms*; those who assist in the creative process must, therefore, share that ability in the appropriate degree.

In this philosophic tradition the whole of reality is considered as an overflowing of the Good - the First Principle which is both source and goal of all things. This overflow of goodness produces secondary and tertiary entities, each of which receives the causal power of the principles which precede them, and which subsequently pass on whatever goodness the succeeding entities are capable of receiving. Thus the universe is really a great chain of goodness, stretching from the first cause down to the last recipient, matter itself.¹ In this communication of goodness it is necessary that no vacuum interrupts but that every possible link is complete, making the whole both good and beautiful.

The passing of goodness from one level to another rests upon the principle of similarity: for when the recipient is most similar to the giver then there is a minimum loss of causal power in the act of transmission. An obvious parallel exists between this and the act of passing understanding from one person to another: clearly a student whose understanding of a particular subject is close to that of her teacher will more easily take hold of what is being passed on than someone whose grasp is more elementary and who is unlike the teacher in terms of understanding.

Thus we can trace the passing of goodness from the highest to the lowest (in other words from the greatest to the least) through a series of orders: as each order adorns the metaphysical “space” which it is capable of filling, it starts with the singular and most powerful of its kind and gradually outworks towards a greater multiplicity of the least powerful of its kind. For the unfolding always multiplies in number, but diminishes in power. Once the order has reached its fullness it will cease to produce further members of its own order (since its causal power has diminished) but instead it will bring forth a new order of reality, less powerful than itself, but more manifest. The highest member of the new order will be most similar to the lowest of the original order, which will then repeat the pattern of unfolding from the singular most powerful to the most numerous but least powerful of its kind, until, yet again the second order will cease to generate within its order but produce another (third) order.

Perhaps at this point an example will help illustrate this concept.

The order of intellect is an order which is understood by the Platonic tradition to be entirely eternal in nature - that is to say, every true intellect is essentially above the processes of

¹ Matter is the last of things because by itself it has no active power to produce further things, it being entirely passive.

time and its acts are also above time. Everything in the order of intellect *knows* without transition from one state to another - one might say that an intellect is in eternal contemplation of itself as one complete thing. The first of this order, the first intellect, knows itself and all the causes within itself in the most universal way, having all possible perspectives as its vision. Subsequent intellects will also contemplate their own natures but in increasingly particular ways.² When all necessary intellects have filled eternity with their activities, they will pass on their goodness to souls which then form an order of soul. Soul has been described as³ “eternal in essence, but having its activity in time” - so that although the soul has an interior possession of eternal ideas, it requires time to bring these ideas into full consciousness, and time to apply them to its own creations. The first soul will be most similar to intellect, knowing itself with the minimum of the limitations brought about by time, while the most individual⁴ and lowest form of soul possesses intellectual powers which are the most variable. Thus the order of soul fills a metaphysical layer of reality which sits between things eternal in essence and activity and things temporal in essence and activity, by comprising things eternal in essence and temporal in activity.⁵

Within each order are a series of members each interacting with those in that order which are higher (and therefore more universal and more like intellects) and those which are lower (who will be more particular and more like the things of physical nature). All these grades within an order play a similar role of passing their goodness onwards and outwards as do the great orders which make up whole of reality.

In the *Symposium* Socrates calls to mind the initiatory teaching he received from the priestess Diotima in a speech to the assembled company who are exploring the theme of Love.⁶ At the beginning of her teaching she calls Love a “great daemon” because, she says, it is positioned between the lover and the beloved as a connector, which is the primary characteristic of daemon-kind. What kind of creature is a daemon, and what does it do, asks Socrates: he reports her reply with these words:⁷

To transmit and to interpret to the Gods, said she, what comes from men; and to men, in like manner, what comes from the Gods; from men their petitions and their sacrifices; from the Gods in return, the revelation of their will. Thus these beings, standing in the middle rank between divine and human, fill up the vacant space, and link together all intelligent nature. Through their intervention proceeds every kind of divination, and the priestly art relating to sacrifices, and the mysteries and incantations, with the whole of divination and magic. For divinity is not mingled

² Parallels exist in the world around us: the architect of a great building knows the layout of it in the most universal way; when this layout is passed to the foreman of the carpenters, she will know the whole thing, but from the perspective of the building’s use of wood; the foreman of the electricians will know the same thing, but from the perspective of the building as an electrical installation, and so on.

³ For example, in Proclus’ *Elements of Theology*, proposition 191.

⁴ The first soul is universal, the last souls are most particular. Some translators like Thomas Taylor will translate the Greek term for this “individual” as *partial* - meaning “inclining towards a particular or a specific activity” - and the student should avoid thinking of a partial soul as being a part.

⁵ In fact Proclus lists eleven characteristics of soul which place soul between the two orders of eternity and time - see his *Commentary on the Timaeus*, book III, 128-129.

⁶ In so doing, Socrates himself becomes an intermediary receiving from Diotima and giving to those gathered at the symposium.

⁷ Symposium, 202e-203a.

with man; but by means of that middle nature is carried on all converse and communication between the Gods and mortals, whether in sleep or waking.

Switching to a mythical mode of explanation, she says that the great daemon, Eros, was conceived on the celebration of the birthday of Aphrodite (hence, Love is especially concerned with beauty) from the union of Poros (Wealth or Resourcefulness) and Penia (Poverty or Want). His nature reflects the resulting middle state - for example that he is “not mortal, in the common way of mortality, nor yet is it immortal, after the manner of the immortal Gods.”

So daemons are understood in the tradition as being intermediaries between the immortals and mortal kind: what does this mean, and how far do their powers extend?

Accompanying the view that the whole of reality is an overflowing of the Good is the idea of divine providence - that an intrinsic element of the distribution of goodness is the guidance of intelligence which seeks to give to every creature all that it needs in order to underpin its existence and to accomplish its purposes. It is clear that each being in the universe requires goodness adapted to its nature: after all, one creature’s goodness could be another’s destruction. So the communication of goodness includes a necessary diminution in power in order that particular creatures are not overwhelmed by the down-flowing gifts. The first distinction and diminution of power is begun by the Gods - rather than the Good itself:

The ineffable principle of things, however, as it is more excellent than every power, so likewise it transcends Providence. But if someone should dare to assert, that it providentially attends to all things, it must be said that this is in no other way than as desirable to all things, and as that for the sake of which all things subsist, and as the cause of Providence. For the providential energies of the Gods, and of all the beings posterior to the Gods, are on account of good; and this both things themselves manifest and also Plato . . .⁸

The distribution of goodness to all things as initiated by the Gods is made more and more specific through the intermediary action of their attendants, the host of daemons. We will note that not only the human level of activity is guided and supported by daemons, but also those levels of mortality which run below us in nature.⁹ For the whole universe is full of *intelligence* and *life* and daemons of various kinds ensure that nothing lies beyond the reach of providence in terms of both.

The most extensive passages concerning daemons and their nature that survives from antiquity are to be found in Proclus’ *Commentary on the First Alcibiades*. Here is his summary of the general nature of daemons:¹⁰

Our enquiries must always start from the more general and from this proceed as far as the individual: this is both natural and more suited to scientific knowledge. The

⁸ *Ten Doubts concerning Providence*, 66. Proclus.

⁹ Proclus lists six classes of daemons: the fourth class of daemon “are those that transmit the active influences of complete natures to what is generated and perishable...” The last class are concerned with matter, “ever guarding and watching over the illusory representations of the forms therein.” *Commentary on the Alcibiades*, 72.

¹⁰ Proclus, *Commentary on the First Alcibiades*, 68-78, the translation is William O’Neill’s with some minor amendments.

daemons, receiving their primary substance from the life-giving goddess Rhea¹¹ and flowing therefrom as if from a spring, have been allotted an *essential nature of the order of soul*, more intelligent in those superior and more perfect in existence, inferior and more like reason in the midmost and those assigned the second rank: variegated, more unreasoning and involved in matter in the third kind, who make up the end of the daemoniac order.

We must pause here to note the fact that a daemon is a soul: what is the difference between the human soul and the daemon soul? The short answer is that human souls are more variable both in terms of gnostic and vivific powers and experiences - that is to say, our knowing is marked by periods of forgetfulness and recovery of knowledge, and our lives are marked by profound changes of condition as we pass from a terrestrial state to a Hadic state and back again in a long cycle of incarnations. Daemons are more stable - knowing without forgetting and living with a consciousness that transcends the boundaries of Earth and Hades. The more technical answer is that the composition of soul, as described in the *Timaeus* (at 35a) is from a mixture of *essence*, *sameness* and *difference* - but that different ratios of these were used for different kinds of soul (*Timaeus* 41d). Proclus suggests¹² that divine souls have *essence*, daemons *sameness* and humans *difference* predominating in their soul mixture - and thus each acts and experiences according to their differing nature. Proclus continues:

Since they have established themselves on such a level of reality, they are classed together with the Gods inasmuch as they have been assigned the function of service and assistance towards them, in one class with the Liberated Gods¹³ who govern the universe prior to the world, in another with the Cosmic Gods,¹⁴ who immediately rule over the portions of the cosmos. The one division of them is according to the twelve gods above the heavens, and the other according to all the individual characters of the Gods in the world; since every Cosmic God rules over some order of daemons, on which he immediately bestows his own function, the creative god the function of creation, the unchangeable god the function of purity, the perfective god the function of perfecting. About each of the gods is an untold multitude of daemons, priding themselves on the same names as the gods who govern them; for they rejoice in being called “Apollo” and “Zeus” and “Hermes” because they represent the peculiar characteristics of their own gods.

The idea that souls are profoundly related to their particular God is explored (albeit more from the perspective of the experiences of the human soul) in the palinode of the *Phaedrus*: the words of Socrates here do indicate that some souls *always* follow the Gods, and that other souls *sometimes* do so and this is taken to exemplify the differing constitutions of daemoniac and human soul - the former centred on sameness, the latter on difference. The

¹¹ Rhea is a Goddess of the intellectual order: she connects Kronos (her spouse) with Zeus (her son): the first abides, she proceeds, the latter returns. Thus they align with the Platonic triad of being, life and intellect within the intellectual order - so it is not surprising that soul, the life-bearing and gnostic emissary to the world of time is seen as springing from Rhea.

¹² Proclus' *Commentary on the Timaeus*, book II, 139.

¹³ These are the Gods who produce and rule over the realm of incorporeal nature with which souls engage in order to produce manifestations of beauty and truth in the material world.

¹⁴ The cosmic Gods are sometimes called the mundane Gods (or intra-mundane or encosmic); their order is that of the visible realm proper in which the actions of intellect, soul and nature reach their final outworking.

view that daemons delight in being addressed as their presiding God or Goddess rests on the conception of the outer and lower being a representative of the inner and higher, and the same conception holds in human hierarchies where a minor officer acts “in the name of the law” or “in the name of the queen” when exercising a power which ultimately derives from the authority of the leading principle of that hierarchy. As Diotima says, the prayers of humankind are directed through daemons, and therefore they are addressed to the presiding deity. Proclus continues:

It remains after this that even mortal things partake of the divine emanations; in this manner animals and plants are created, bearing the images of different gods; and the daemons supply these with the reflections of their own rulers immediately, but ultimately the Gods who transcend the daemons from above. On this account the last and the first entities are in sympathy: there are reflections of the first in the last, the causes of the last are precontained in the first, and the middle classes of daemons complete the universe and bind and hold together its association, sharing in the gods and shared in by mortals. So if one were to assert that the creator of the universe has fixed the centre of the arrangement of the whole world among the daemons, he would not miss the truth concerning them since Diotima also has assigned them this rank that binds together divine and mortal, transmits the streams from above, elevates all secondary beings to the gods, and completes the whole by the continuity of the medium. We shall not, then, admit the opinion of those who assert that the daemons are souls of men who have exchanged their life here: we must not account what is daemonic *by relation* the same as what is daemonic *by essential nature* nor constitute the everlasting medium of all the encosmic from a life that undergoes many changes of form. For the daemonic guard that holds together the universe has ever stood the same. “But there is no fixed place of [human] soul” as Socrates observes in the *Republic*,¹⁵ “since it adopts different kinds of life at different times.”

There are several ancient texts which speak of men becoming daemons, but by late antiquity the view was that these are referring to those human souls which, being elevated beyond the usual condition of humankind were living the kind of providential life which might be compared to that of daemons, in much the same way as we speak of film stars as “gods of the silver screen.” Proclus suggests that there are three ways in which we might call something a daemon: *essentially*, when it is an actual daemon; by *habitude* when it is living as if it were a daemon; by *analogy* when it functions as some kind of intermediary - for example Hermes, the messenger of Zeus, although a God is called a daemon; or again, when the highest reasoning power of the soul acts as a guide to human life (cf. *Timaean* 90a). But clearly Proclus is quite right to reject the supposed change of a human soul to a daemonic soul, since the very nature of the latter is established as resting on the domination of *sameness* in the ratios of the soul - a stability which would be undermined by the act of change in essential nature. Proclus continues:

Neither shall we praise those who make some of the Gods daemons, as, for example, the planetary gods, like Amelios; but we shall follow Plato, who asserts that the Gods are rulers of the universe, and who subordinates to them the bands of daemons, and at all points we shall maintain the account of Diotima, which assigns to the daemon a middle rank between all the divine and the mortal.

¹⁵ *Republic* 618b: “But that there was no disposition of soul among these models [lives], because of necessity, on choosing a different life, it [the soul] becomes different itself.”

Proclus now turns to those daemons who are our tutelary or guardian daemons (he will follow this with a discussion concerning Socrates' own tutelary daemon in sections 78-83): first he lists a number of grades of daemons, beginning with the highest:

Of these daemons, [all] stationed in the middle rank, as we said, the foremost and highest are divine daemons and often appear as gods on account of their exceeding likeness to the gods; for generally speaking the highest in every rank preserves the form of what precedes it... Next after these are daemons partaking of intelligent characteristics and presiding over elevation and descent, and in general manifesting and giving out to the universe the creation of the gods.¹⁶

Before we follow Proclus' examination of these two kinds of daemon we should review the cycles which the soul follows, as described by the dialogues of Plato. In dialogues such as the *Republic* and the *Gorgias* a cycle which is symbolically known as "a journey of a thousand years" is shown to be one in which the soul chooses a terrestrial life fated to run in a particular form and which begins with that choice; the soul then lives that life, is judged according to how that life has been lived - whether virtuous or not - and is then recompensed by appropriate experiences in Hades. As the cycle completes, the soul finds itself again standing before Ananke (Necessity) and her three daughters the Fates, in order to make its next choice.

But this cycle is a part of a greater cycle - described as a journey of 10,000 years¹⁷ in the *Phaedrus* - in which the soul descends from the contemplation of eternal truths into the mundane world in which it strives for the recovery of the memory of those truths in the experiences of the temporal order, and in so doing returns to its true star of the divine world in the completion of the full cycle. The great cycle provides the soul with a divine guide - that is to say a daemon of the first grade - while the smaller cycle provides the soul with a guide for the self-chosen particular life. The choice made by the self-motive soul leads to the attachment of a daemon of the second grade, unless the choice made so aligns with the great cycle overseen by the primary daemon that a second guardian is not required. The choice of a terrestrial life, with all of its accompanying fate, is an expression of our self-motive nature which is not violated by an imposition of a tutelary daemon - indeed before the choice is made the prophet of Necessity announces to the assembled souls,¹⁸ "Souls of a Day! The beginning of another period of men of mortal race. The daemon shall not receive you as his lot, *but you shall choose the daemon*: He who draws the first, let him first make choice of a life, to which he must of necessity adhere: Virtue is independent, which every one shall partake of, more or less, according as he honours or dishonours her: the *cause is in him who makes the choice*, and God is blameless." In the soul's choice of a single terrestrial life, it is possible to make the decision based on the soul's essential nature (which is determined by the God from which it was brought into being) - should the soul be sufficiently insightful. Otherwise, the choice is made from a more partial and wandering

¹⁶ It is here that Proclus lists the six grades of daemons in terms of their functions at different levels - see footnote 9.

¹⁷ 248e. Although it can be completed in 3,000 years if three consecutive cycles of 1,000 years are lived by true philosophical activity.

¹⁸ *Republic*, 617d.

perspective and the life lived contributes but a minimum to the progress of the great cycle.¹⁹ Proclus continues:

The divine daemons, then, are those which are guardians of souls according to their essential nature and unite them to their appropriate rulers [ie. the God from which it sprung]; and every soul, even if it accompanies its own god, requires such a daemon. But the second class of daemons watch over the ascents and descents of souls, and from among these are the choices made by the majority of souls; since the most perfect souls, who associate with birth without defilement, as they choose the manner of life appropriate to their own god, so also they live according to the divine daemon, who also when they abode on high united them to the appropriate god; and for this reason the Egyptian marveled at Plotinus as possessing a divine daemon.²⁰ The souls, then, that live after a manner that returns to their origin have the same daemon on high and in this world, but for the less perfect the daemon that corresponds to the way of life they have set before them differs from the daemon who accords with their essential nature.

Whatever kind of daemon it is that attends to us during the living of the life, it is there in order to ensure that the choice made before that incarnation comes about amidst all the apparently accidental events which fate weaves around the soul while embodied, for this is the canvass upon which the soul has chosen to exercise its free-willed virtue. At the end of life, the daemon continues to guide the soul in the next phase of its experience for as Socrates says at the beginning of his inspired speech in the *Phaedo*,²¹ “For thus it is said: that the daemon of each person, which was allotted to him while living, endeavours to lead each to a certain place, where it is necessary that all of them, being collected together, after they have been judged, should proceed to Hades, together with their [daemonic] leader, who is ordered to conduct them from hence thither.” Hades²² is the realm in which what is visible becomes invisible, and what has been invisible becomes visible - so here the revelation of the true self and the nature of the actions we have assented to in our earthly life is the blessing towards which the daemon directs the soul.

As an amphibious creature, living both in eternity and in time, the soul is in need of intellect and a daemon, as Proclus explains:

Further, on this point, it should also be observed that souls enjoy intellect only when they turn towards it, receive the light therefrom, and unite their own activity with it; but we receive of the care of the (guardian) daemon as regards our whole existence and way of life, in all the decisions of fate and the provisions of universal providence. For he who guides aright our whole life, fulfilling both the choices we have made

¹⁹ Indeed, the symbolic length of 10,000 years indicates that the cycle can be almost endless, if the rational soul makes more or less arbitrary decisions regarding the direction of life. In Taoist, Greek and Christian writings the number is used to mean *countless*.

²⁰ See Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, (p. 35 in the Loeb edition of Plotinus vol. 1) where an Egyptian temple priest says to the visiting Plotinus, “Blessed are you, who have a god for your daemon and not a companion of the subordinate order.”

²¹ *Phaedo* 107d.

²² In popular imagination Hades is equivalent to the Christian hell, but this is not so. The God Hades, who possesses the cap of invisibility, rules over the underworld where the roots of things are gathered. Socrates in the *Cratylus* (403e) says of Hades, “he greatly benefits those who dwell with him; and that he possesses such great affluence as enables him to supply us with those mighty advantages which we enjoy; and from hence he is called Pluto [wealth].”

before our birth, the gifts of fate and of the gods who guide it, and further bestowing in due measure the illuminations of providence, such is our guardian daemon. As souls we are dependent upon the intellect alone, but as souls using a body we are in need of the guardian daemon. So Plato calls the intellect “helmsman of the soul” (for he says “visible only to the intellect, helmsman of the soul), but the daemon of men “guardian” and “overseer.” Nor would anyone, upon accurate examination, find any other single providence governing our affairs so closely as that of the (guardian) daemons. For intellect, as we said, is participated by the rational soul, but not by the body, and nature by the body but not by the discursive reason, and further, the rational soul rules anger [or the spirited part - *thumos*] and sense-desire [*epithumia*] but not chance incidences. The guardian daemon alone moves, controls and orders all our affairs, since it perfects the reason, moderates the emotions, infuses nature, maintains the body, supplies accidentals, fulfils the decrees of fate and bestows the gifts of providence; and this one being is ruler of all that lies in us and concerns us, steering our whole life.

Once the mediating function of daemons is understood, the reason why ancient texts speak about good and evil daemons can be seen: the human soul and the animated organism of the soul-body conjunction each have their appropriate level of activity and place of work. Should we direct our activities towards levels lower and more material than our natural emplacement requires, we are inviting the universe to treat us as part of those levels, with the result that we become scattered, separated, passive and limited in our consciousness and activity. Those daemons who rule over non-rational levels and pass on a certain power to the natural functions of those levels then may be perceived as evil - but the

. . . fault is not in our stars
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.²³

and therefore we can see that no daemon is essentially evil but accidentally made so by our own ignorance and vices. The fire, so useful when gathered in the hearth, is not to be blamed if we allow it beyond to burn down the house. As Proclus says,²⁴ “Daemons, however, without exception, always fulfil the function of daemons, and every single one of them always remains in its own rank.” The Platonic tradition strongly affirms that no God is the cause of evil (see especially the *Republic*, books 2 and 3) and so souls which faithfully attend to the Gods and which are characterized by sameness (and such are daemons) cannot reasonably be called essentially evil.

One further aspect of this subject might usefully be touched upon. Those souls which are superior to human souls are generally all called daemons, but within this broad denomination, Platonists sometimes divide these into three subdivisions - angels, daemons proper, and heroes. Angels are the highest of the three, being closer to the Gods, and heroes are the lowest, being closer to human souls. Again, the rule is that those that are essentially angelic, daemonic or heroic are not the same as human souls - so human souls which are called heroic are really heroic *by habitude* and not essentially so. Proclus in his *Commentary on the Timaeus* II, 139 fills in the scheme we touched upon on page 4, by suggesting that angels are souls where *essence* and *sameness* predominate; and heroes are those where *sameness* and *difference* predominate.

²³ *Julius Caesar*, I, iii.

²⁴ Proclus, *On the Existence of Evil*, 17.