

Philosophy and the Daimonic in Plato

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1 Introduction

The ancient Greek word *daimon* (δαίμων) is notoriously ambiguous and difficult to interpret. In Greek literature before Plato, it had such an exceptional range of meaning that it could refer to: a specific divinity; something divine in a more undetermined sense; fate or destiny in a general sense; some individual's particular fate or curse; a spirit of some kind, either vengeful or beneficial, haunting or guarding; a spirit in the sense of the soul of a deceased hero or important individual. Attempts at general definitions convey that *daimon* expresses the divine in as far as it actively plays a part in human life but remains unknown, and that its actions tend to transgress boundaries, between man and god or between the internal and the external.¹

It is only appropriate, perhaps, that a word with such exceptional semantic potential comes to play an important role in the then newly established and innovative tradition of philosophy. It appears in some of the writings of the Presocratics, notably in Empedocles.² But it achieves full prominence as a philosophical category in Plato. He was to lend the category of the daimonic more specificity, although this specificity consists merely in its *being in between* (μεταξύ) the specified things: man and god, ignorance and wisdom,

1 For some of the classic discussions see: Wilamowitz (1959) 356–363; Burkert (1985) 179–181; Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1990) 34–38; for an excellent recent overview, including further references, see Timotin (2012) 13–36. More specific definitions are generally dependent on the kind of writing we are concerned with; for instance, *daimon* could be said to have a more specific meaning in some tragedies, see Geisser (2002) on Aeschylus; Schlesier (1983) on Euripides; Winnington-Ingram (1980) 173 ff. on Sophocles.

2 There is the famous fragment of Heraclitus, ἦθος ἀνθρώπων δαίμων, see Kahn (1979) *Fr.* CXIV and commentary; in Parmenides we find mention of a *daimon* in D4 and D14b ed. Laks and Most, which may or may not be identified with the goddess of his poem; with Empedocles' 'wandering *daimon*' we find many Platonic themes anticipated: it seems that the being of the *daimon* is the result of something gone wrong, and restoration must be sought through the acquisition of knowledge under the aegis of love. See D4–20 (particularly D10), D38–40, 51–3, 73–77, 149, and R47–55 ed. Laks and Most; See Detienne (1963) and, building on his work, Jensen (1966) on demonology in Pythagoreanism.

self and world. It becomes, as it were, the name for the space philosophy is supposed to traverse. One could say that the philosophical life, for Plato in particular and for much of Greek philosophy in general, consisted in bridging the gap between the self and the divine. That is to say, in transforming the self and its actions into something more than it is, into something divine. Bridging this gap between the self and the divine, also means bridging the gap between the particularity of the self and the rest of the world, the world which is conceived to be structured according to or by the divine. The daimon is the bridge of this gap, in Plato, as we shall see. The word 'daimon' comes to express the 'paradox of moral life' that is at the heart of the newly established adventure called philosophy: it expresses that the human self is something more than merely itself – that it is simultaneously itself and something more divine, transcending the self.³ As such, it is also the key to its potential for becoming a better, more beautiful being, which is what everything seems to be all about, for those ancient philosophers, in any case.

In this chapter, I set out the way in which Plato actualizes the philosophical potential of the term daimon, in three different but related ways.⁴ I start with an analysis of Socrates' daimonic sign and the role it played in his choice for the philosophical life. From there I move on to the depiction of Socrates as a daimonic man, and the mediating daimon of the *Symposium*. Third, I discuss the identification of the rational part of our soul with a daimon in the *Timaeus*. Finally, I present some concluding remarks.

2 Socrates' Daimonic Sign

In Plato's work, the daimonic is something having to do with the practice of philosophy from the very start, because of Socrates' so-called daimonic sign.⁵

3 Hadot (1998) 124.

4 I do not intend this essay to be exhaustive, there is more to say on the daimonic in Plato, particularly on the notion of the ruler as a daimon or daimonic man; see Timotin (2012) 62 on this theme and its roots in Hesiod.

5 There also was already, to some extent at least, a notion of the daimon as a mediator, in the Pythagorean tradition. It seems likely that Plato's account in the *Symposium*, in any case, is influenced by this tradition. Whether the same could be said for Socrates' daimonic sign, is more difficult to determine (partly because it seems to go back to Socrates, the historical figure, rather than merely to Plato's depiction of Socrates). See Detienne (1963) and Jensen (1966) on the Pythagorean tradition; Sfameni Gasparro (1997) on the daimon in traditional Greek religion; Timotin (2012) chapter 2 for an overview of precedents for the Platonic *daimon* in general.

Much has been written on this peculiar phenomenon, so it will suffice to reiterate the essentials here.⁶ If the current, tentative dating of Plato's work is more or less correct, the first appearances of this sign are found in the *Euthyphro* and *Apology*, in the context of Socrates' indictment and defence.⁷ It is clear that the indictment of Meletus refers to it, as Socrates himself points out:

τούτου δὲ αἰτίον ἐστὶν ὃ ὑμεῖς ἐμοῦ πολλάκις ἀκηκόατε πολλαχοῦ λέγοντος, ὅτι μοι θεῖόν τι καὶ δαιμόνιον γίγνεται, ὃ δὴ καὶ ἐν τῇ γραφῇ ἐπικωμωδῶν Μέλητος ἐγράψατο. (Pl. *Ap.* 31c7–d2)

You have often and on many occasions heard me explaining the reason for this, namely that something divine and daimonic appears to me, which Meletus also describes in his indictment, ridiculing it.⁸

Socrates had earlier set forth the indictment as follows:

Σωκράτη φησὶν ἀδικεῖν τοὺς τε νέους διαφθείροντα καὶ θεοὺς οὓς ἡ πόλις νομίζει οὐ νομίζοντα, ἕτερα δὲ δαιμόνια καινά. (Pl. *Ap.* 24b8–c1)

[it] states that Socrates violates the law, because he corrupts the youth and does not acknowledge the gods that the city acknowledges, but other, new daimonic powers instead.

Here, it seems there are two different accusations: (1) Socrates corrupts the youth, and (2) he does not acknowledge the gods of the city, but rather introduces new daimonic powers. In the *Euthyphro*, however, it is suggested that the two are related, namely that Socrates corrupts the youth *by* introducing new daimonic powers:

ΕΥΘ. ... καὶ μοι λέγε, τί καὶ ποιοῦντά σέ φησι διαφθεῖρειν τοὺς νέους;
ΣΩ. Ἄτοπα, ὦ θαυμάσιε, ὡς οὕτω γ' ἀκούσαι. φησὶ γὰρ με ποιητὴν εἶναι θεῶν,

6 See particularly: Hoffmann (1985–1986); Motte (1987); Smith and Woodruff (2000), chapter 10, which provides a rather technical, but informative discussion between Vlastos, Smith, Brickhouse and McPherran from around 1990; the edition by Destrée and Smith (2005) devoted entirely to the 'divine' sign, of which Destrée's chapter is particularly insightful, showing the relevance of the sign for Socrates' philosophical way of life; Long (2006); Timotin (2012) 52 ff.

7 For the dating, see Brandwood (1992) 90–120; and Cooper (1997).

8 Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own, but I have in many cases found the translations in Cooper (1997) very helpful.

καὶ ὡς καινοὺς ποιοῦντα θεοὺς τοὺς δ' ἀρχαίους οὐ νομίζοντα ἐγράψατο τούτων αὐτῶν ἔνεκα, ὡς φησιν.

EYΘ. Μανθάνω, ὦ Σώκратες· ὅτι δὴ σὺ τὸ δαιμόνιον φῆς σαυτῷ ἐκάστοτε γίγνεσθαι. (Pl. *Euthphr.* 3a8–b6)

Euthyphro: ... Tell me, what does he say you do to corrupt the young?

Socrates: Strange things, to hear him tell it, for he says that I am a maker of gods, and on the ground that I create new gods while not believing in the old gods, he has indicted me for their sake, as he puts it.

Euthyphro: I understand, Socrates. This is because you say that the divine sign keeps coming to you. (transl. Gruber)

From this, we can gather that, according to Plato's work, Socrates was indicted, and subsequently sentenced to death, because of his controversial preoccupation with some daimonic phenomenon. Of course, the accusation of a form of impiety towards the divine is a tried and tested formula, and may just have been the best way to get Socrates convicted, rather than the actual problem anybody had with Socrates. Indeed, in the *Apology* Socrates says that there had already been a prolonged slander campaign against him, on which his accusers draw for their current accusation.⁹ This campaign is due to a misunderstanding of his philosophical mission, as Socrates explains, given to him by the oracle of Delphi. Whereas Socrates himself interprets his famous questioning as a gift of Apollo to the Athenians, the gift of knowing that one does not know, his accusers rather think that arrogance, sophistry and atheism belie his questioning. It seems, then, that the real problem is the nuisance Socrates caused because of his conviction that 'the unexamined life is not worth living.'¹⁰ However, it would be short-sighted to see these two, the nuisance of philosophical questioning and the appeal to a daimonic phenomenon, merely as true cause and outward pretext of Socrates' trial respectively. As has been shown, they have a much more intricate relationship: this daimonic phenomenon plays an important role in Socrates' choice for and persistence in the philosophical life.¹¹

As Socrates explains, still in the *Apology*, the daimonic sign prevented him from taking part in politics:

9 Pl. *Ap.* 18a ff.

10 Pl. *Ap.* 38a5–6. Note that I am not concerned here with the real motives of the historical figures who indicted Socrates, but with the way this story and the role of the daimonic sign therein, is developed by Plato.

11 See particularly Destrée (2005) on this point.

τούτου δὲ αἰτίον ἐστὶν ὃ ὑμεῖς ἐμοῦ πολλάκις ἀκηκόατε πολλαχοῦ λέγοντος, ὅτι μοι θεῖόν τι καὶ δαιμόνιον γίγνεται, ὃ δὴ καὶ ἐν τῇ γραφῇ ἐπικωμωδῶν Μέλητος ἐγράψατο. ἐμοὶ δὲ τοῦτ' ἔστιν ἐκ παιδὸς ἀρξάμενον, φωνὴ τις γιγνομένη, ἢ ὅταν γένηται, αἰεὶ ἀποτρέπει με τοῦτο ὃ ἂν μέλλω πράττειν, προτρέπει δὲ οὐποτε. τοῦτ' ἔστιν ὃ μοι ἐναντιοῦνται τὰ πολιτικά πράττειν, καὶ παγκάλως γέ μοι δοκεῖ ἐναντιοῦσάι.' (Pl. *Ap.* 31c4–d6)

But you have often and on many occasions heard me explaining the reason for this, namely that something divine and daimonic appears to me, which Meletus also describes in his indictment, ridiculing it. This started when I was a child, some kind of voice appears, and whenever it does, it always turns me away from what I am about to do, but it never encourages me [to do anything]. This is what prevented me to take part in politics, and I think it was quite right to do so.

It was right, says Socrates, because the philosophical life, being concerned with justice, cannot be maintained in a public function – one would not survive for long.¹² As Socrates explains in this passage, the sign is apotreptic, it deters him from certain things. In this case, it deters him from involving himself in public affairs. As such, it seems to be coordinated with Socrates' philosophical mission as he had explained it earlier. Sanctioned by the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, he is to go around questioning people's alleged wisdom, stirring up the city like a gadfly stinging a sluggish horse.¹³ Apparently, his daimonic sign made sure that he did not ruin his potentially philosophical life prematurely by becoming politically active. And indeed, scholars have suggested that Apollo must be the source of Socrates' daimonic sign – a suggestion that has some plausibility, although the text is too vague about this to simply accept it.¹⁴ The link between the daimonic sign and Socrates' philosophical mission, as well as the possible role of Apollo therein, is no invention of modern scholarship, but can already be found in Proclus. For Proclus, the apotreptic quality of the sign corresponds to Apollo's *kathartic* aspect. It purifies Socrates by deterring him from the realm of becoming, rather keeping him focused on philosophical contemplation.¹⁵ For Socrates to become a philosopher, some rupture with a normal course of life needed to occur.

12 Pl. *Ap.* 31c–33b.

13 Pl. *Ap.* 21a ff.

14 Cf. Burnyeat (1997); Reeve (2000); Sedley (2004) 84 ff.

15 Procl. *in Alc.* 82–83.

The daimonic sign also supports Socrates' decision to go to court and face the consequences of his choice for the philosophical life (despite the apparent possibility, as we gather from the *Crito*, to do otherwise):

ἡ γὰρ εἰωθυῖά μοι μαντικὴ ἢ τοῦ δαιμονίου ἐν μὲν τῷ πρόσθεν χρόνῳ παντὶ πυκνὴ αἰεὶ ἦν καὶ πάνυ ἐπὶ σμικροῖς ἐναντιούμενη, εἴ τι μέλλοιμι μὴ ὀρθῶς πράξειν... ἐμοὶ δὲ οὔτε ἐξιώντι ἔωθεν οἴκοθεν ἡναντιώθη τὸ τοῦ θεοῦ σημεῖον, οὔτε ἠνίκα ἀνέβαινον ἐνταυθοῖ ἐπὶ τὸ δικαστήριον, οὔτε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ οὐδαμοῦ μέλλοντί τι ἐρεῖν... (Pl. *Ap.* 40a4–b3)

For at all previous times and on many occasions my customary prophetic [voice], the daimonic one, always opposed me even in small matters, when I was about to do something that was not right ... but the sign of the god did not oppose me this morning when I left my home, nor when I came here into court, nor at any time when I was about to say something during my speech...

From this absence of the daimonic phenomenon, Socrates deduces approval: it must be as it should then, what is happening. He continues to hypothesize that it may be a good thing for him to die, or even that death in general may be a good thing. It is important to realize that Socrates is here, while he is speaking on death, directly addressing his friends. He is always portrayed by Plato as being concerned with his young friends' well-being, making sure that they do not despair about his death but stay on track to live a philosophical life. This is a central theme in the *Phaedo*, which picks up the story of Socrates' trial from the *Apology*, and emphasizes the need to adopt some uncertain beliefs about the immortality of the soul, because they may have a positive impact on one's ability to live a philosophical life.¹⁶ On a literal reading, in any case, the idea that the daimonic sign approves of Socrates' trial because death is better than life strikes me as hopelessly banal. A more interesting interpretation – though one that Socrates does not bring forth himself – would be that the daimonic sign did not oppose him, not because death in general is better than life, but because *his* death is the inherent consequence of *his* commitment to the philosophical life ('the unexamined life is not worth living'), as he had already explained to the jury himself. As such, his trial and death is the proper end of his life, and the establishment, as we shall see, of the philosophical life as a possible life-model.

¹⁶ Pl. *Phd.* 114d1–115a6.

But first, let us summarize our findings from the *Eutyphro* and *Apology*, and have a look at the other places in Plato's work where the daimonic sign appears.

Socrates' appeal to a daimonic phenomenon was, according to Plato's testimony, the main reason for his trial and subsequent death. It is something that has accompanied him throughout his life, appearing to him since his childhood. It manifests itself to him as a voice ($\phi\omega\nu\eta$).¹⁷ It acts apotroptically, and deters him from certain actions or decisions. Notably, it deterred him from getting involved in politics, which would have been irreconcilable with his philosophical life. Finally, it consented to his trial and death.

These characteristics agree with other passages in Plato's work concerned with the daimonic sign. In the *Euthydemus* (272e2–4), it appears to Socrates just as he is about to leave the Lyceum. Socrates obeys the sign, without question, and sits back down. It quickly becomes clear why it appeared: two figures cunning in sophistry, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, come in with a following of young students, and claim to be able to teach knowledge of virtue faster and better than anyone else. Socrates, of course, sets them straight in front of their audience, adhering to his philosophical task as he describes it in the *Apology*.

In book VI of the *Republic* (496a11–c5), Socrates and Adeimantus discuss the type of person suitable for becoming a philosopher. Not only must they be of noble and talented nature, but they also need some form of circumstantial support: there must be something that prevents them from being drawn into public life. The examples Socrates gives include that of someone who is exiled, someone who is living in a small town and disdains the affairs of the city, or someone whose physical illness makes them unsuitable for political affairs. What about Socrates himself, one might ask at this point, how did his circumstances help him to live the philosophical life? Socrates answers as follows:

τὸ δ' ἡμέτερον οὐκ ἄξιον λέγειν, τὸ δαιμόνιον σημεῖον· ἢ γὰρ ποῦ τινι ἄλλῳ ἢ οὐδενὶ τῶν ἔμπροσθεν γέγονεν. (Pl. *R.* 496c3–5)

My own case is not worth mentioning, my daimonic sign: for it has hardly appeared, as it seems to me, to anyone before me.

With the help of this passage, we can see more clearly what was already suggested in the *Apology*. Socrates' philosophical life and his appeal to some

17 Of course, Socrates also calls it a $\sigma\eta\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$, which has predominantly (though not exclusively) visual connotations. In any case, it cannot involve any of the senses in a straightforward way, as it would then have been perceived by others as well. On this issue, cf. Long (2006); Roskam (2014).

daimonic phenomenon are related, as the latter is a condition for the former. Without this daimonic sign, says Plato's Socrates in the *Republic*, this very Socrates, our philosophical archetype, would not have been able to live the philosophical life.

In the *Theaetetus* (150b6–151a4), Socrates famously describes his philosophical engagement with others as an art of midwifery.¹⁸ He helps others give birth to their wisdom, but does not provide them with any wisdom of his own. Occasionally, one of the youngsters he associates with becomes arrogant, and leaves him, thinking that they can improve their souls without further guidance. When these persons wise up and attempt to come back to Socrates' midwifery, it is the daimonic sign that determines whether Socrates continues to work with them or not.¹⁹ This passage contains many echoes of the *Apology*, and expands the understanding of Socrates' philosophical activity as a service to Apollo, with the daimonic sign as his aid.

Finally, there is a remarkable passage in the *Phaedrus*. Socrates has just delivered his ode to Eros, love, to his companion Phaedrus and is about to go back to the city, when the sign appears.²⁰ From its appearance, Socrates derives that the ode was inappropriate and that he should purify himself by delivering a new and better ode. He had presented Eros in a vulgar way, as a form of base desire opposed to reason. In his *Palinode*, as it is called, Socrates rather develops a philosophical notion of love as the memory of and longing for the form of beauty, which manifests itself in mutual admiration and education between philosophically inclined souls. Needless to say, this idea of Eros reminds of the *daimon* Eros from the *Symposium*, and it is tempting to see the appearance of the daimonic sign in the *Phaedrus* as a kind of point of transition between the conceptions of the daimonic as an apotreptic sign (in Plato's earlier work and in passages concerned with Socrates' life in particular) and a stimulating force (in the *Symposium*). After all, the sign does not merely function in an apotreptic manner in the *Phaedrus*, it does not merely not allow Socrates to leave (οὐκ ἐξ ἀπιέναι), but it does not allow him to leave *before he has purified himself* (πρὶν ἂν ἀφοσιώσωμαι) by giving an inspired *Palinode*.²¹ After having received the sign, Socrates calls Phaedrus 'divine' (θεῖός) and 'truly amazing' (ἀτεχνῶς θαυμάσιος). As opposed to when he delivered his earlier speech, Socrates has become truly inspired now. The sign showed him that the previous ode to Eros was lacking, by deterring him from leaving their

18 See Sedley (2004) for a brilliant analysis of the *Theaetetus*, with 84 ff. particularly on the daimonic sign.

19 Pl. *Tht.* 151a3–5.

20 Pl. *Phdr.* 242b8–c3.

21 *Ibid.*

idyllic place away from the city, making him stay with the 'divine' Phaedrus to engage in philosophical conversation. After the appearance of the daimonic sign, Socrates has become inspired in a way that prefigures the notion of love as divine inspiration he is about to develop.

3 The Guardian-Daimon and Socrates as Paradigm

Socrates, who is to become the archetype of the philosopher, is a philosopher, according to our most important testimony, *because he experienced some daimonic phenomenon*. According to Plato's writings, at least, it is questionable whether the philosophical tradition as we know it would have come to be at all, if it were not for this daimonic phenomenon. So, if we have any interest in the philosophical tradition at all, we should be asking ourselves, what is this daimonic something? Assuming we are not concerned with mere hallucinations here, as Nietzsche would have it, what is the meaning of this sign?²²

The language used by Plato to describe it is vague. Among other things it is called 'something divine and daimonic' (θεῖόν τι καὶ δαιμόνιον), probably the vaguest possible phrase to describe something supra-human in ancient Greek. It is also referred to as a voice (φωνή) and a sign (σημεῖον), or simply as το δαιμόνιον, which can be read as a noun, meaning something like 'the daimonic something,' or as an adjectival with ellipsis of σημεῖον. One way to explain this vagueness on Plato's part, is simply to understand the phenomenon as something that was actually vague to Socrates himself and to his followers. In effect, it guides him in living the philosophical life, by intervening or not intervening, that much is clear, but what it is itself, where it comes from and why it aids him to live the philosophical life, could well have been as unclear to Socrates and Plato as it is to us.

In the *Apology*, Socrates tells us that 'the god'²³ made him a model (παράδειγμα) of human wisdom. He is the first to grasp the tragic situation of the human intellect, by looking out beyond the limitations of his own knowledge. That is to say, he sees his knowledge appear against an infinite background, that of perfect or complete knowledge, so that his knowledge – and that of his fellow-citizens – appears to him as *human*, as opposed to divine. Socratic *aporia* is the rupture in coinciding with oneself, and therefore it is the cathartic prerequisite for the recognition of this gap between

²² Nietzsche (1976) 4.

²³ See Burnyeat (1997), for an excellent discussion of this issue.

the human and the divine. Before this recognition, there is no philosophy. Socrates' life, in other words, is the paradigm, the very model of the philosophical life. In the *Republic's* Myth of Er, we are told that each soul, before being incarnated again, must choose from among the models of lives (βίωv παραδείγματα) provided by Lachesis, after which a daimon is assigned to them as the guardian of their chosen life and fulfiller of their choice.²⁴ So, one might say, this is how we understand Socrates' *daimonion*: he chose a philosophical life-model, and it is the guardian of this model, it is his daimon. This interpretation, however, faces two major problems. The first is philological: we would completely neglect the difference between what is called, in Plato's work, δαίμων and δαίμόνιον. It has long been acknowledged in scholarship that this is simply unacceptable.²⁵ The second problem is of more philosophical nature: how could Socrates chose a philosophical life-model? There was no one like him before him. As he says in the *Republic*: the daimonic sign had not appeared to others before him. In other words, Socrates *is* the archetype, the paradigm. This may be a fruitful way of understanding the vagueness of Socrates' daimonic sign: after the death of Socrates, it becomes possible to choose the philosophical life as a life-model – in fact, in the *Apology* Socrates predicts that many young people will do so after his death²⁶ – but Socrates' very life itself, *is* the establishment of this possibility. Therefore, for Socrates himself, there is not yet the option of choosing a full-blown philosophical life-model with accompanying *daimon* guarding it. He is guided by something that is still less elaborated, by something less determined that precedes the guardian of the philosophical life-model, because his life is the very constitution of this model. He is accompanied by a vague daimonic something that belongs to him uniquely, and that can become the daimon of the philosophical life after him, because he has shown the way to those youngsters who can now become philosophers like him. Perhaps, we could even say that this is why the daimonic sign did not deter Socrates from facing the Athenian jury that was

24 Pl. *R.* 620d–e; cf. also Pl. *Phd.* 107d5 f. and 113d1 f., where it concerns the guidance after death.

25 See Destrée (2005) 63.

26 Pl. *Ap.* 39d: “There will be more people to test you, whom I now held back, but you did not notice it. They will be more difficult to deal with as they will be younger and you will resent them more. You are wrong if you believe that by killing people you will prevent anyone from reproaching you for not living in the right way. To escape such tests is neither possible nor good, but it is best and easiest not to discredit others but to prepare oneself to be as good as possible. With this prophecy to you who convicted me, I part from you.” (transl. Grube).

to sentence him to death: it only truly came to be itself, when Socrates died a martyr for philosophy.

And in fact, when Plato develops the notion of the philosophical *daimon* further in the *Symposium*, he does so with continuous reference to Socrates' life and character.

4 Socratic Atopia and the Daimon as in Between

As is well-known, in the *Symposium*, the daimon is defined as a being that is in between (μεταξύ) man and god, mediating between the two.²⁷ This general definition of the daimon follows from Diotima's consideration of Eros, love, who is portrayed as the philosophical love for the good and the beautiful.²⁸ Eros, in turn, is also identified with Socrates, in an ongoing comparison across Diotima's speech on Eros and Alcibiades' speech on Socrates. Both are poor, ugly, shoeless and used to spending the night outside;²⁹ both are also resourceful schemers capable of enchanting others.³⁰ These complementary aspects of lack and resourcefulness are mythologically expressed in Eros' heritage from Penia, 'lack' or 'poverty' and Poros, 'way' or 'resource.' They are mirrored in Socrates' professed lack of knowledge, on the one hand, and his resourcefulness in argument as well his capacity to amaze and inspire wonder, on the other.³¹ The daimon moves and communicates between man and god, as Diotima explains, and Socrates presented himself as working in the service of 'the god,' as a gift to the city, in the *Apology*.³² Socrates is called a *daimonic man* by Alcibiades, echoing Diotima's previous description of the daimonic man as one who is wise about the communication between the human and

27 See particularly Pl. *Smp.* 202d13–203a8; the classic discussion of this subject is Robin (1964).

28 Pl. *Smp.* 204b ff.

29 For Eros Pl. *Smp.* 203c5 ff.; for Socrates: on his poverty Pl. *Ap.* 31c2–3; on his ugliness Pl. *Tht.* 143e8–9, and also the comparison with a satyr in *Smp.* 221d1; on him being shoeless: *Smp.* 220b6–7; and on him spending the night outside: *Smp.* 220c2 ff.

30 For Eros Pl. *Smp.* 203d; for Socrates especially Alcibiades' speech 215c f., 222b.

31 This quality of being amazing or causing wonder is everywhere in Alcibiades' speech on Socrates: 213e2, 215b8, 216c7, 217a1, 219c1, 220a4, 220a7, 220c6, 221c3, 221c6.

32 Pl. *Ap.* 22e6–23a5 particularly, cf. also *Ap.* 22a4: ... ζητούντι κατὰ τὸν θεὸν ...; 23b5: ... ζητῶ καὶ ἐρευνῶ κατὰ τὸν θεὸν ...; 23b7: ... τῷ θεῷ βοηθῶν ἐνδείκνυμαι ὅτι οὐκ ἔστι σοφός. 30a5–7: ταῦτα γὰρ κελεύει ὁ θεός, εἰ ἴστε, καὶ ἐγὼ οἶομαι οὐδέν πω ὑμῖν μείζον ἀγαθὸν γενέσθαι ἐν τῇ πόλει ἢ τὴν ἐμὴν τῷ θεῷ ὑπηρεσίαν. 33c4: ἐμοὶ δὲ τοῦτο, ὡς ἐγὼ φημι, προστέτακται ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ πράττειν ...; Socrates as gift of "the god": *Ap.* 30d9 f.: τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δόσιν ὑμῖν; 31b: ὅτι δ' ἐγὼ τυγχάνω ἂν τοιοῦτος οἶος ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ τῇ πόλει δεδῶσθαι.

the divine.³³ Both Socrates and Eros reside in between wisdom and ignorance: they are not wise, but because they realise what they *lack*, they long for what they miss, and are therefore not ignorant either.

This notion of a *lack* is central in the *Symposium*, or, to put it in Platonic terms: *aporia* is a condition for Eros:

αὐτὸ γὰρ τοῦτό ἐστι χαλεπὸν ἀμαθία, τὸ μὴ ὄντα καλὸν κάγαθὸν μηδὲ φρόνιμον δοκεῖν αὐτῷ ἱκανόν. (Pl. *Smp.* 204a4–6)

For this is really difficult about ignorance: while you *are* not beautiful, good or intelligent, you *seem* to be sufficient to yourself.

In order to develop the daimonic desire for the divine, and the subsequent potential for producing beautiful thoughts and actions, one must first experience one's imperfection: the realization of *not* being good and wise, is a condition for becoming more so. This is the realization Alcibiades has because of Socrates. He likens Socrates to the satyr Marsyas, because of his ability to cast a spell on people, and complains – with clear reference to the *Apology* – that 'this Marsyas here often makes me feel like this, so that it appears to me that *my life is not worth living*.'³⁴ The problem with Alcibiades, though, is that he does not change his life, he lacks the resolve to become a philosopher, perhaps because he is, after all, a politician. He experiences the worthlessness of his life when he is around the daimonic Socrates, but the experience of this lack of worth does not make him strive for something better, he simply continues his vanity and feels shame when he sees Socrates again.³⁵

This, then, is in a more positive sense the aim of Socrates' philosophical life: not merely to cause *aporia*, the awareness of lack, but to cause *aporia* in order to create space for Eros, the longing to fill the lack by striving for the truly beautiful and good, divine wisdom. Not merely, if you like, to deter from ignorance, but also and at the same time to inspire towards knowing and producing something more akin to the divine. Socrates 'negative' philosophical mission of causing *aporia* was guarded and validated by his aporetic daimonic sign, and the subsequent 'positive' possibility of striving for what one has now experienced as lacking, is portrayed as daimonic as well. This is not

33 Pl. *Smp.* 219c; in Diotima's speech 203a5.

34 Pl. *Smp.* 215e7–216a2.

35 As he says in 216b–c: he does feel like Socrates is right, and he feels ashamed about his life, but the moment he leaves Socrates' company, he caves in to his 'desire to please the crowd.' He is not aloof enough to be a philosopher.

coincidental, as should be clear by now, the daimonic is the philosophical category *par excellence* in Plato. But besides the characteristics of lacking and being resourceful, there is another important aspect to the ‘daimonic identity’ shared by Eros and Socrates: strangeness.

The recurrent term here is *ἀτοπία*, meaning something like oddness or extraordinariness. Taken literally, it points to a being out of place. When Socrates remains standing outside of Agathon’s house, alone, insensitive to the repeated calls of Agathon’s slaves to come in and join the feast with the others, Agathon responds: *ἄτοπόν*, “how strange.”³⁶ Aristodemus explains to him that this is Socrates’ custom (*ἔθος*), and, indeed, Alcibiades later relates how Socrates, during a military expedition, once astounded the other soldiers by standing outside thinking, on the same spot, for an entire day and night.³⁷ It is customary for Socrates to be strange, or extraordinary, so we learn. Alcibiades’ speech is, explicitly, an account of Socrates’ *atopia*,³⁸ and he attributes a series of extraordinary features to him: he never gets drunk no matter how much he drinks, he is exceptionally brave in battle, he is completely insensitive to the formidable physical temptation offered by Alcibiades’ beauty, and he seems entirely unbothered by cold. These features have something in common: they show Socrates as unaffected by what goes on around him and with his body. As with the daimonic sign, we should not take this as something that simply happens to be characteristic of Socrates, who also happens to be a philosopher. Socrates is the archetype of the philosopher, so what is attributed to him is never just attributed to him, but to the philosopher as such. Indeed, in other places in Plato’s work, this kind of detached aloofness is considered to be characteristic of the philosopher as such:

... ἀλλὰ τῷ ὄντι τὸ σῶμα μόνον ἐν τῇ πόλει κείται αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐπιδημεῖ, ἡ δὲ διάνοια, ταῦτα πάντα ἡγησαμένη σμικρὰ καὶ οὐδέν, ἀτιμάσασα πανταχῆ πέτεται ...³⁹

... but in truth only his body resides and lives in the city, while his mind, having understood that all these things are petty and worthless, scorns them and flies off in all directions ...

36 Pl. *Smp.* 175a10; it is not coincidental that Agathon expresses himself in this way, just as it is not coincidental that, a few lines earlier, Aristodemus says that he too ‘wonders’ (*θαυμάζω*) where Socrates is: here we have, in the introduction of the *Symposium*, a demonstration of some of Socrates’ key qualities as a philosopher – his strangeness and his ability to cause wonder – and a recognition of them from the other characters.

37 Pl. *Smp.* 220c3–d5.

38 Pl. *Smp.* 215a2–3; he returns to this theme in the conclusion of his speech, 221d1–2.

39 Pl. *Tht.* 173e1–4.

Socrates, in this passage, continues to explain that the philosopher is concerned with escaping from earth to heaven, or, in other words: 'becoming as like god as possible.'⁴⁰ How does one become like god? By becoming virtuous and wise; that is to say, by acquiring more of the qualities to which the philosopher strives after having learned of their own imperfection.

Likewise, in the *Phaedrus*, the philosopher is depicted as being in between the human and the divine:

ἔξιστάμενος δὲ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων σπουδασμάτων καὶ πρὸς τῷ θείῳ γιγνόμενος, νοουθετεῖται μὲν ὑπὸ τῶν πολλῶν ὡς παρακινῶν, ἐνθουσιάζων δὲ λήληθεν τοὺς πολλούς. (Pl. *Phdr.* 249c8–d3)

... standing outside of human concerns and becoming close to the divine, he is reproached by the many as being outside of his senses, but his divine inspiration escapes their notice.

The *atopia* of the philosopher must be taken in the rather literal sense of being out of place. Socrates is not at home in the world of men, like the philosopher returning to the cave, but neither can he simply dwell in the divine realm – he remains a man, after all. Socrates is strange, extraordinary, out of place, because he is μεταξύ, in between, like the daimon. He is, as Alcibiades rightly observed, a *daimonic man*. Again, this applies not only to Socrates, but to the philosopher as such. What is more, since the philosophical life – as we shall see – is the only proper life for a human being, it applies to the human being as such: fully becoming a human being means becoming daimonic.

But why, one might ask, is it fitting that we become daimonic? Why is it, that our development must start with the experience of a lack? In other words, why are we imperfect beings to begin with? To answer these questions, we must look at yet another way in which Plato develops the notion of daimon, in his *Timaeus*.

5 The Self as Daimon

Socrates' daimonic sign was a vague phenomenon, coming to Socrates from some divine realm, guiding him in the establishment of the philosophical life-model. It supported Socrates in his quest to make the Athenians aware of their lack of wisdom, it created the possibility of philosophy. The daimon in the

⁴⁰ Pl. *Tht.* 176b1–2.

Symposium, on the other hand, still departs from the figure of Socrates, but is also something each of us can find within ourselves, as our desire for becoming something more than what we are, something more beautiful, virtuous and wise. In the *Timaeus*, finally, our very own rational soul is depicted as a daimon:

τὸ δὲ δὴ περὶ τοῦ κυριωτάτου παρ' ἡμῖν ψυχῆς εἴδους διανοεῖσθαι δεῖ τῆδε, ὡς ἄρα αὐτὸ δαίμονα θεὸς ἐκάστῳ δέδωκεν, τοῦτο ὃ δὴ φαμεν οἰκεῖν μὲν ἡμῶν ἐπ' ἄκρῳ τῷ σώματι, πρὸς δὲ τὴν ἐν οὐρανῷ συγγένειαν ἀπὸ γῆς ἡμᾶς αἰρεῖν ὡς ὄντας φυτὸν οὐκ ἔγγειον ἀλλὰ οὐράνιον, ὀρθότατα λέγοντες· ἐκείθεν γάρ, ὅθεν ἡ πρώτη τῆς ψυχῆς γένεσις ἔφυ, τὸ θεῖον τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ ρίζαν ἡμῶν ἀνακρεμαννὺν ὀρθοὶ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα. (Pl. *Ti.* 90a2 f.)

We must keep the following in mind concerning the supreme part of our soul: that god has given it to each of us as our daimon. It is this part, of course, of which we said that it lives in the top of our bodies and that it raises us up away from earth towards what is akin to it in heaven, as if we are plants not of the earth, but of heaven. And it is most correct to say this, for it is from here, where the original becoming of our soul took place, that the divine suspends our head and root and thus keeps our whole body straight.

The daimonic part of our soul is a gift from god to each of us, a part of the divine in man. This part is naturally inclined to move towards its place of origin, stretching out the human being between earth and heaven. Thus, we now learn, the daimonic is a natural part of the human being, because the human being itself is in between, not completely at home on the earth, nor in heaven. Apparently, it is custom for the human being, as for Socrates, to be out of place, to be strange. But with Socrates we could see what was strange about him, Alcibiades vividly described his extraordinary features. How are human beings as such strange?

As *Timaeus* had explained earlier, this *daimon* is the only part of us that is actually made by the so-called demiurge (δημιουργός), the god who created the universe, including the other gods. This creative god makes our *daimon* from the same stuff (albeit somewhat less perfectly mixed) from which he made the soul of the whole universe (τὴν τοῦ παντὸς ψυχὴν), and then orders the lesser gods to finish the job and weave it into the mortal part of us. That is to say, we are the only beings in this universe that take part in both mortality and immortality – this is what makes us strange. Like the daimon of the *Symposium*, we are in between mortal and immortal, partly divine and partly of the earth. The Platonic philosophical project consists in realizing that this is what we are and,

following this realization, devoting ourselves to the development of our divine part as completely as possible.

Before the human being is completed by the lesser gods and planted into a body, the demiurge assigns each of the *daimon*-souls to a star, and shows them the nature of the universe. The natural desire of this better part of our soul is to return, after being incarnated, to this condition of knowing the entire universe. Therefore, the supreme goal and purpose (τέλος) of the human being, so Timaeus tells us, is to take good care of one's daimon and provide it with its proper nourishment, that is to say, to devote one's life to learning.⁴¹ This implies that happiness and fulfilment can only be found in the philosophical life, the *vita contemplativa*. If that might seem radical, Plato's work has been radical all along – remember Socrates' words in the *Apology*, echoed by Alcibiades in the *Symposium*: 'the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.'⁴²

Philosophy is the only option, because the human being is daimonic by nature. In as far as we are rational, we do not coincide with ourselves, but desire to go beyond ourselves, to 'fly off in all directions' and regain, noetically, the unity that we once belonged to by virtue of our substance:

τῷ δ' ἐν ἡμῖν θεῖω συγγενεῖς εἰσιν κινήσεις αἱ τοῦ παντὸς διανοήσεις καὶ περιφοραί· ταύταις δὴ συνεπόμενον ἕκαστον δεῖ, τὰς περὶ τὴν γένεσιν ἐν τῇ κεφαλῇ διεφθαρμένας ἡμῶν περιόδους ἐξορθοῦντα διὰ τὸ καταμανθάνειν τὰς τοῦ παντὸς ἀρμονίας τε καὶ περιφοράς, τῷ κατανοουμένῳ τὸ κατανοοῦν ἐξομοιωῶσαι κατὰ τὴν ἀρχαίαν φύσιν, ὁμοιωῶσαντα δὲ τέλος ἔχειν τοῦ προτεθέντος ἀνθρώποις ὑπὸ θεῶν ἀρίστου βίου πρὸς τε τὸν παρόντα καὶ τὸν ἔπειτα χρόνον. (Pl. *Ti.* 90c7–d7)

And the motions that are akin to the divine within us are the thoughts and circular motions of the whole universe. Each of us must, indeed, follow these, and correct the cyclical movements in our heads that were ruined with our birth, by studying the framework and revolutions of the whole universe, assimilating the thinker with what is thought, as in our original nature. When this assimilation is done, we will have reached the goal set out for human beings by the gods, the best life present to us now and in the time after.

41 Sedley has provided seminal discussions of this ideal in the *Timaeus* and elsewhere (1997, 1999, 2017), to which the present analysis is strongly indebted; see also Berg (2003) for the later Neoplatonic interpretation of this ideal.

42 Pl. *Ap.* 38a5–6; *Smp.* 216a1–2.

Again, we are not concerned here with one among a range of various possibilities to fulfil human potential. This is the only form of existence that makes actual sense for a human being. What we are, essentially, is a miniature version of the world-soul set in a complex composite structure hindering our proper movements. If we do not free ourselves of our identification with this complex composite structure, realize what we are lacking in our current state, and attempt a life aimed solely at the care for our daimon, we will be unhappy. This life is the life of contemplation.⁴³ So, this is why we must first experience a lack and why we are imperfect beings: for Plato, what we really are, is only daimon, only the potential for returning to what we were through the noetic repetition of everything.

That is why daimon must be taken, after all, as more than merely 'an elevated name for each person's governing or rational faculty.'⁴⁴ Saying that the rational part of our soul is a daimon differs from merely saying that we have a rational part in our soul: 'we are daimon,' means that we are constituted in such a way that we are more than ourselves. It expresses not merely that we have a faculty of thought, but that thinking is the way for us to become what we ought to have been all along. This is brought out beautifully by Plotinus, in his analysis of Eros, in *Enneads* III.5. He understands the love of the soul of the entire universe as a god, that permanently attaches it to the Good, not lacking it at any time. But at the level of the individual soul, which is mixed with matter, this permanent attachment is not given. Hence, the love of this individual soul, experiencing a lack and striving for something lost, should be considered daimonic.

6 Concluding Remarks

It is clear that the category of the daimonic is of crucial import in Plato. It is also clear that there is some development of the notion going on in his work: it is tempting to see, based on the current, tentative dating of Plato's works, tendencies of *interiorization* (from a voice or sign, possibly coming from a god, that simply manifests itself to Socrates, to our very own faculty of thought), *generalization* (from something that is peculiar to Socrates, as his daimonic sign and his extraordinary character and likeness to the daimon

43 In as far as there was any doubt about this, Sedley (2017) has settled it.

44 Long (2002) 164, to be fair: Long writes this on Chrysippus' daimon, in the context of his study of Epictetus.

Eros, to something that we all have, or even something that we all *are*), and *substantialization* (from the vague phenomenon of the daimonic sign, which indicates something but is completely unclear with regard to its own being, to the *daimon* as the most substantial part of the human being, the leading part of the soul dwelling in the head). These are all interesting developments, which show a sustained interest on Plato's part in the daimonic as a category of philosophical potential. And perhaps this in itself is, indeed, most important: the daimonic is an essential category for Plato's thinking *about philosophy and the philosophical life*. Whether it is about explaining why Socrates is a philosopher (*Apology, Republic*), or why anyone experiences a desire for wisdom at all (*Symposium*), or why happiness consists in the philosophical life (*Timaeus*), every time something daimonic is key in Plato's explanation.

As Plutarch observed, the daimonic plays an important role in mediating between the divine and the human.⁴⁵ But that is not all. Plato found in his notion of the daimonic a way to express the exceptional position of the human being in the cosmos, the same position that gives cause to the wonder that is the beginning of all philosophy:

μάλα γὰρ φιλοσόφου τοῦτο τὸ πάθος, τὸ θαυμάζειν· οὐ γὰρ ἄλλη ἀρχὴ φιλοσοφίας, ἢ αὕτη, καὶ ἔοικεν ὁ τὴν Ἴριν Θαύμαντος ἔκγονον φήσας οὐ κακῶς γενεαλογεῖν. (Pl. *Tht.* 155d2–5)

For this is the experience characteristic of a philosopher: this wondering. There is no other beginning of philosophy but this, and it appears like the man who declared Iris to be the child of Thaumatas was no bad genealogist.

Iris, of course, is also a messenger between the human and the divine realms, as well as the rainbow, a bridge between earth and sky. It is the philosophical experience of wonder that gives birth to the daimonic possibility of ascension towards the heavens. It is notable that the only possible beginning of philosophy is said here to consist in a feeling or experience, a *πάθος*, rather than, say, a thought, an argument or even a question. From this we can also tell how, in Plato, the idea of the daimonic is not merely of 'metaphysical' import, something to bridge the gap between the human and the divine spheres – it is first and foremost a way to do justice to a very real and immediate human experience: the amazing fact that we, apparently as the only ones around, can relate

45 Plu. *De Def. Orac.* 415A.

to things, including ourselves, by thinking. This ability makes us potentially infinite, because it makes it possible for us to become everything, as we were when we were only daimon.⁴⁶ It also makes it so that we are, at least essentially, nothing in particular: becoming divine involves identifying *only* with our daimon.⁴⁷ This means abandoning – in as far as possible – one's physical existence, one's individual desires, interests, feelings and ambitions, even one's relations to others, which seem to all require the other parts of our soul, and becoming a kind of pure spectator of the universe.

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46 We could perhaps say that the notion of the daimon here expresses a general intuition of Greek philosophy, namely that we, or our soul, by virtue of its capacity for thought, is somehow infinite and capable of becoming everything. See, e.g., Heraclitus' aphorism about the depth of the soul (DK Fr. 45, xxxv Kahn), and Aristotle's remark that the "soul is in a way all things" (Arist. *De An.* 431b21–2).

47 See Sedley (2017).

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