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**Plotinus on the Daemon as the Soul’s Erotic Disposition towards the Good**

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**Abstract:** The idea that the soul has a guardian daemon was a common topic among Platonists, informed by different readings of Plato, especially *Symp.* 202e and *Resp.* 620e. In his philosophically dense interpretation, Plotinus describes the daemon as the ‘pole of attraction’ or the erotic disposition that keeps the core of one’s personality directed towards the Good. In this way, the daemon promotes the soul’s ascent to higher levels of reality through a transition from unconsciousness into consciousness that, across different incarnations, will eventually flow into the disembodied self. In order to unpack this view, this article brings together *Enn.* III.4 and III.5 with *Enn.* VI.7, where Plotinus discusses the difference between soul (ψυχή) and the expressed principle (λόγος) belonging to soul. This difference if fundamental to fully understand the role of the guardian daemon in the soul’s πρόοδος and ἐπιστροφή.

**Keywords:** Plotinus; guardian daemon; reincarnation; eros; freedom of agency

1 **The Problem**

It is well known that daemonic nature holds an important place in the Platonic universe. In a metaphysics grounded on two apparently opposite realities which are nevertheless connected by a continuity of life and being, daemons, as intermediate natures, embody this continuity. Among Platonists, discussions on daemons were informed by different interpretation of Plato, especially his famous and oft-quoted claim, in *Symp.* 202e, that a daemon is an intermediary between gods and men. As Apuleius (paraphrasing Plato) put it, daemons are “ambassadors and goodwill messengers for both [gods and humans]”¹ and without them Nature would be “gaping, discontinuous, and as it were disabled.”² Gregory Shaw, speaking of Iamblichus’s daemons, describes their action as both ‘centrifugal’ and ‘convertive.’ On

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the one hand, daemons channel the divine into the fabric of the material world and, on the other, they help the soul to return to its causative principle.3 In other words, daemons are the “in-between” (μεταξύ) that ensures the systematic unity of the metaphysical hierarchy; they facilitate both the flowing derivation of the complex from the unqualifiedly simple (πρόοδος) and the soul’s return to its lost position within the divine (ἐπιστροφή).

From the Middle Platonists to Henry More, Platonists seem to have been fascinated with these middle natures, but an important exception is Plotinus, who showed little or no philosophical interest in daemons as an ontological category distinct from the soul. The reason for this lack of concern is to be found at the core of his metaphysics, in the idea that our highest part – that is, the disembodied intellect (our real self) – never descends into the physical world,4 and our heads remain “firmly set above in heaven.”5 If our real self never becomes embodied, we do not need chaperones to escort us to the divine or to show us the way, for the divine is our natural abode, from which we never truly depart. It was Iamblichus who moved “Platonic philosophy towards magical ritual”6 and assigned the task of facilitating the descent and ascent of the (fully embodied) soul to daemons.

Plotinus’s lack of interest in daemons, and in theurgy in general, has been vigorously debated.7 Though already in 1989 Georg Luck considered the whole controversy closed,8 the issue still attracts a great deal of attention.9 I think that magic and daemons, understood as intermediary agents, are irrelevant for Plotinus, or at least philosophically irrelevant. The cycle of μονή (permanence), πρόοδος, and ἐπιστροφή described in the Enneads is the soul’s own business and is carried out entirely without recourse to external means. In other words, salvation is all about the inward turn of the soul. Nevertheless, despite his lack of interest in daemons as an independent class of beings, Plotinus is concerned with daemonic nature as a psychological power, which he discusses most notably in Enn. III.4.3, on the soul’s guardian daemon. In this paper, I shall argue that this daemon, notwithstanding its strictly psychological nature, its irrelevance to magic, and the fact that it belongs to an undescended soul, plays a crucial role in the dynamics of πρόοδος and ἐπιστροφή. For by acting as one level of consciousness, it facilitates the continuity between the

3 Shaw (2003) 133.
4 Plotinus, Enn. IV.8.8.6–7.
6 Finamore (1999) 84.
7 See especially Armstrong (1955); Dodds (1963) 289–91; Merlan (1953) 341–8.
8 Luck (1989) 205.
9 See, for example, Brisson (2013); Helleman (2010); Mazur (2003) and (2004).
embodied and the disembodied selves, and ultimately promotes the annihilation of the former.

In *Enn.* III.4, Plotinus attempts to answer the thorny question set out by Plato in the myth of Er: if our fate is woven by Necessity’s daughters and we are ‘led’ by a guardian daemon as the “fulfiller of the things chosen” (ἀποπληρωτὴς τῶν αἰρεθέντων, *Resp.* 620e1) how can we still be said to have any free agency and power of self-determination? *Enn.* III.4 has received significant scholarly attention only recently. The reason for this long neglect might be, as John Dillon has observed, that its main idea is “more than usually difficult for modern minds to relate to.” This idea is that the soul’s guardian daemon, in the myth of Er but also in *Phd.* 107d and *Ti.* 90a, corresponds to the faculty of the soul that is immediately superior to the one by which we live and which Plotinus defines in Greek as τὸ ἐνεργοῦν (“that which is active”).

Despite enlightening discussions of this topic in recent years, I believe that Plotinus’s account of the personal daemon could benefit from further scrutiny, which can be done by integrating *Enn.* III.4.3 with III.5 and VI.7.6. Let us begin from the passage where Plotinus sets up his view:

Who then will become a spirit? He who was one here too. And who a god? Certainly he who was one here. For what worked in a man leads him [after death], since it was his ruler and guide here too. Is this, then, “the spirit to whom he was allotted while he lived”? No, but that which is before the working principle; for this presides inactive over the man, but that which comes after it acts. If the working principle is that by which we have sense-perception, the spirit is the rational principle; but if we live by the rational principle, the spirit is what is above this, presiding inactive and giving its consent to the principle which works. So it is rightly said that “we shall choose.”

Despite the notorious obscurity of these lines, Plotinus makes one point clear: the nature of our guardian daemon is determined by the psychic power that is most active in us. His aim here is obviously to show that daemonic guardianship is not a threat to our individual autonomy. His concern is the priority of the ἐνεργοῦν with respect to the daemon; thus, understanding the nature of one’s guardian daemon depends on understanding one’s character, for the latter explains the former. For Plotinus, the daemon, as the “fulfiller of the things chosen” and a “guard” (φύλακα, *Resp.* 620d8), watches over the soul but does not intervene in the soul’s choices.

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12 *Enn.* III.4.3.1–6, III, 149. See Pl. *Resp.* X 617e1.
Apparently, the daemon carries out its supervisory duties by sitting idle on its high lookout.

However, it is hard to believe that there is nothing more to this story. To anyone with some knowledge of Plotinus’s psychology, the idea of a split between two poles – activity and inactivity – seems to fit uneasily with the view that the soul has a unitary nature. Indeed, the daemon’s idleness is far from a lack of involvement in an individual’s patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving; on the contrary, the focal point of our personality is not the ἐνεργοῦν alone, but the ἐνεργοῦν in relation to the daemon, which, Plotinus says, gives its consent (συγχωρῶν) to the ἐνεργοῦν.\textsuperscript{13} Plotinus’s view, I take it, is that an individual who lives following reason is ‘rational’ not simply because his or her behaviour shows a wise understanding and practice, but also because he or she acts at an epistemological and moral level which is the closest possible to intellect and which intellect continuously certifies and preserves from decline. Intellect (alias the daemon) is not simply ‘present to’ the active principle, but acts as a ‘pole of attraction’ that keeps the core of one’s personality directed upwards. If this balance of forces is kept throughout incarnated life, after death the soul’s active principle will be upgraded, so to speak, from reason to intellect and its tutelary spirit from a daemon to a god. If we look at the matter from this perspective, it becomes clearer that the daemon described by Plotinus contributes actively to the soul’s life in at least two ways: (1) it keeps the centre of psychological gravity both unchanged and oriented upwards; and (2) it promotes the soul’s ἐπιστροφή through different cycles of incarnation.

Before discussing these concepts in detail, however, it will be useful to take a closer look at Plotinus’s understanding of the relation between the daemon and the soul. This relation must be read in the light of Plotinus’s views (1) that the soul is the locus of different activities, those we engage with and those we do not, and (2) that the soul’s goal is to reverse the self-alienation caused by embodiment. As mentioned above, it will also be useful to bring \textit{Enn.} III.4 together with both \textit{Enn.} III.5 and \textit{Enn.} VI.7.6, since Plotinus himself identifies the love of \textit{Enn.} III.5 with the guardian spirit of \textit{Enn.} III.4, and in \textit{Enn.} VI.7.6 he connects the idea of idle powers with daemons.

\section{The Daemon and the Dynamics of Inactivity}

In interpreting Plato’s famous myth of the birth of Love in \textit{Symp.} 203a–e, Plotinus defines Love as “a mixture of a rational principle (μίγμα ἐκ λόγου) which did not stay in itself but was mingled with indefiniteness.”\textsuperscript{14} He immediately specifies

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Enn.} III.4.3.8.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Enn.} III.5.7.16–17, III, 191.
that what was mixed was not the rational principle itself, but “what came from it” (τὸ ἐκ αὐτοῦ).\textsuperscript{15} In other words, love is not a direct product of the rational principle of what is in the intelligible – though mixed with indefiniteness – but of a sort of outflow which that principle produced while keeping its permanence (μονῆ) in itself. Moreover, the expressed principle \textit{qua} expressed has itself a derivative nature: having fallen from a higher principle (Intellect) to a lower one (Soul), it lost the fullness of being of Intellect and became “more diffused and, as it were, spread out.”\textsuperscript{16} However, as Plotinus makes clear, the \textit{λόγος}, i.e., the “expressed principle,”\textsuperscript{17} that begot love is not an image or a reflection of the intelligible, but existed before the physical world,\textsuperscript{18} for “is in Soul and comes from Intellect, flowing into his garden when Aphrodite is said to have been born.”\textsuperscript{19} Hence, love’s insatiable desire for the Good is explained and justified by its noetic lineage – by its being the expression of the activity of Intellect in Soul. The derivative nature of love, which is a longing to return to its source, embodies the narrative of πρόοδος and ἐπιστροφή that characterises Plotinus’s metaphysics.

The ontological dynamics that define the daemonic nature of love become even more interesting if we consider that in \textit{Enn.} III.5 Plotinus unequivocally identifies love with the other daemons that populate the world of generation. There he says that the daemons share “one single nature and substance”, for “otherwise they will merely have the name in common.”\textsuperscript{20} They come from the same parents as love, for every spirit is able to provide himself with that to which he is ordered,\textsuperscript{21} but “impelled by desire for one of the partial things which he regards as goods.”\textsuperscript{22} In short, all daemons are loves, for all daemons are desiring. When a daemon ceases to be desiring, it is no longer a daemon, but becomes a god. It no longer desires good things, for it already has the Good. The soul’s guardian daemon is no exception to this rule. In fact, Plotinus identifies love not only with daemons in general, but also specifically with the personal daemon of \textit{Enn.} III.4.3, as becomes clear in the following passage:

For this reason we must consider, too, that the love which good men in this world have is a love for that which is simply and really good, not just any kind of love; but that those who are ordered

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Enn.} III.5.7.19, III, 191.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Enn.} III.5.9.2, III, 199.
\textsuperscript{17} I follow Lloyd Gerson’s translation of \textit{λόγος} as “expressed principle”, as found in Gerson (2018). See also Gerson (2012). However, all quotations from Armstrong’s translations of the \textit{Enneads} have Armstrong’s “rational principle”, “forming principle”, or “rational forming principle”.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Enn.} III.5.7.3.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Enn.} III.5.9.8–10, III, 199.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Enn.} III.5.6.5–7, III, 185.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Enn.} III.5.7.27–31, III, 193.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
under other spirits are ordered under different ones at different times, leaving their love of the simply good inoperative, but acting under the control of other spirits, whom they chose according to the corresponding part of that which is active in them, the soul.23

Here the love for what is unqualifiedly good can be identified with the daemon-intellect of *Enn.* III.4.3, stationed inactive above those who live according to their rational part. Plotinus’s claim is that we all possess this love/daemon, even when by choosing to live according to our sense-perception we dismiss it as our life-guardian and appoint reason instead. For the soul is a unity which, as a bond, holds together different faculties. It is the locus of all activities we are capable of, even those in which we are not active in the present life. In fact, Plotinus stresses that “love for the unqualified Good” (alias ‘intellect’) is the personal daemon which the soul *qua* soul has by nature. In *Enn.* VI.9.9.25, for example, he defines this love as the love that is congenital to the soul (*τῆς ψυχῆς ὁ σύμφυτος*), for the soul comes from the Good and loves it of necessity (*ἐξ ἀνάγκης*), and “before it is spoilt it wills a man and is a man.”24

It is on account of the turbulences that come with its “shedding of wings”25 that the soul drifts away from the love that it is congenital to it and places itself under the guardianship of less noble daemons. However, this does not make the soul lose the love for the Good, which simply goes dormant. “Everything in me seeks after the Good,” Plotinus writes, “but each attains it in proportion to its own power” and “all animals and plants and whatever there is in me (if there is anything) which is thought to be without life.”26

In *Enn.* VI.7.6.13–37 (which is surprisingly absent from previous scholarship on Plotinus’s view of daemonic nature), Plotinus connects the idea of the human being as a psychological continuum comprising active and inactive principles with that of daemon. The passage is too long to quote in full, but I shall quote and discuss some of its most salient parts. Here Plotinus says:

> And one of us is active according to the last and lowest man [i.e. sense-perception], but another has something also from the one before him [i.e. reason], and another’s active actuality comes even from the third [i.e. intellect], and each is the man according to whom he is active, though each of us has all of them – and again does not have them.27

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23 *Enn.* III.5.7.31–36, III, 193.
24 *Enn.* VI.7.6.25–26, VI, 105.
26 *Enn.* III.2.3.33–36, III, 53. See Gerson (2012) 24: “The digestive system in an animal, say, or a tropism in a plant, are non-conscious expressions of the desire for the only true object of desire: namely, the Good.”
27 *Enn.* VI.7.6.15–19, VI, 105.
The last sentence in this passage (“each of us has all of them and again does not have them”) reminds me of *Enn.* V.3.3.27–29, where Plotinus claims that intellect “is ours and not ours,” and that “we use it and we do not use it.” Both sentences bear a striking resemblance to *Enn.* III.4.5.21–23, where Plotinus says that the daemon “is ours to speak in terms of soul, but not ours if we are considered as men of a particular kind who have a life which is subject to him.” Implicit in the three passages is the difference between the soul as the agent of all the powers of which we are capable and the soul as the agent of the powers of which we are conscious. As is known, Plotinus claimed that not all human beings, and not always, become aware of the activity of intellect in Intellect. At *Enn.* IV.3.30.13–15, for example, he says that “the intellectual act is one thing and the apprehension of it another, and we are always intellectually active but do not always apprehend our activity.”

Intellection, however, is not the only activity to pass unnoticed for the majority of human beings. For example, we do not have apprehension of the work of the vegetative faculty which is responsible for the maintenance of organic life, yet the vegetative faculty is *ours* inasmuch as it is *we*, as incarnated selves, that grow, digest, breathe, sweat, etc. There are cases in which even reason can pass unnoticed, for despite the fact that it is man’s signature faculty, reason can be inoperative and act as the soul’s guardian daemon, as in those people who live following only the senses. In other words, reason is “ours to speak in terms of soul,” that is, if we are talking about the totality of psychic powers, regardless of whether we have access to them or not. It is “not ours if we are considered as men of a particular kind who have a life which is subject to him,” that is, if we are talking about the psychic power which is consciously acted.

Plotinus’s narrative around the daemon points to the possibility of accessing the unconscious, or better said, to access a higher level of consciousness by making our guardian daemon the ἐνεργοῦν that will lead our next incarnated life. This is the ideal trajectory in the dynamic between the ἐνεργοῦν and its guardian daemon. Things can go wrong, however, if the upward attraction exercised by the daemon is not strong enough to keep the ἐνεργοῦν uninterested in the lower levels of psychic life. Indeed, Plotinus says that the daemon does not always succeed in its role as keeper of the psychological status quo. If the soul is weighed down by its desire for

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28 *Enn.* V.3.3.27–29, V, 79.
30 *Enn.* III.4.5.21–23, III, 155.
31 See, e.g., *Enn.* I.4.9 and *Enn.* I.4.10.
33 See *Enn.* I.4.9.18–30, where Plotinus compares the activity of intellect with the vegetative activity.
34 *Enn.* III.4.3.6–7.
what is worse, after death it will return to earth as an animal and its daemon will be a wicked or stupid one. When this happens, “one wonders how it does it when it is the forming principle (λόγος) of man.”

But what seems to be a startling ontological transfiguration is actually only a change of status within the same nature – a shift in dominance from the higher to the lower.

At the core of this discussion is the distinction between soul (ψυχή) and the expressed principle (λόγος) belonging to soul and, more specifically, the belief that the human being is “a rational forming principle other than soul.” Plotinus's view is that the individual soul contains all the λόγοι of individual beings existing in the cosmos, including those of non-human individuals:

If the soul of each individual possesses the rational forming principles of all the individuals which it animates in succession, then again on this assumption all will exist there; and we say that each soul possesses all the forming principles in the universe. If then the universe possesses the forming principles, not only of man but of all individual animals, so does the soul.

This may seem to be carrying the speculation far astray from the daemon, but this is not the case. For in Enn. VI.7.6.34–37 Plotinus himself intertwines the soul’s expressed principles, the daemon, and transmigration. After making a further point on the difference between daemons and gods, he says:

But when, having chosen the nature of an animal, the soul that was associated with that nature even when it was a man, follows [it, i.e., that nature], it [i.e., the soul] gives (ἔδωκεν) the forming principle (λόγος) of that animal, which it possesses within itself. For the soul possesses this principle, which is its lower activity.

We have seen that the embodied soul’s ‘congenital’ daemon is the love for the ‘unqualified Good’ and that this daemon coincides with intellect. This suggests that its ‘congenital’ ἐνεργοῦν is discursive reason, which is adjacent and inferior to intellect. Likewise, the λόγος which is more congenital to the soul is the rational informing principle that produces a human (rather than a non-human) being. For just as by

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39 See Henry and Schwizer (1951–1973) III, 219–20: “Ὅταν δὲ συνέπηται τὴν θάρειον φύσιν ἐλομένη ψυχῆ ἢ συνηρτημένη σαῦ τῇ ὑπὲ ἀνθρώπῳ ἤ, τὸν ἐν αὐτῇ λόγον ἐκείνου τοῦ ζῴου ἔδωκεν. Έχει γάρ, καὶ ἐνέργεια αὐτῇ χείρων.” Here I follow the MSS and have modified only τῇ into αὐτῇ. For the textual history of this obscure passage, see ibid., 219.
nature the soul loves the Good, so by nature it “wills a man and is a man.”  
However, if the soul cannot produce a human being, “it makes what it can.”  
The λόγος of an animal is not the truest to the human soul’s nature, but it is nevertheless part of it. The “principle which made horse or ox,” Plotinus explains, is “a lesser [than the expressed principle of a human being] thing,” but “certainly not an unnatural one.”

The difference between ψυχή and λόγος can be explained also in terms of the difference between agent (ἐνεργοῦν) and activity (ἐνέργεια), as Plotinus himself does in Enn. VI.7.5.4–5, where he defines the principle as “a sort of particular activity”, which is unable “to exist without that which acts.”

43 Hence, the soul informing a horse is not different from the one that once informed a human being; it is the same soul/agent acting at a lower ontological and epistemological level. The soul is thus the locus of different activities that can stretch not only from discarnate to incarnate life, but also from human to animal life. In fact, even though human nature is the soul’s most congenital λόγος, it is by no means its only or “irrevocable specialization.”

With embodiment there comes the risk for the soul of being lured down into the abyss of matter and never seeing the Good again. The daemon, I take it, is essential for preventing this fall or reversing it.

3 The Daemon and the Soul’s πρόοδος

From what has been said above, the daemon’s task is to keep the centre of psychological gravity from fluctuating downward. Hence, the daemon is needed by the soul that has already succumbed to the lure of the mirror of Dionysus to prevent it from disappearing completely into that mirror. In fact, as Plotinus makes clear, in the intelligible world there are no daemons but only gods, and “even if there is an Idea of daemon [it is better] to call this a god.” Hence, the daemon belongs only to the soul that, driven by its “audacity” (τόλμα) and by the will to belong to itself, comes

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40 Enn.VI.7.6.25–26, VII, 105.
41 Enn. VI.7.7.7, VII, 107.
42 Enn. VI.7.7.2–3, VII, 106. See also IV.7.14.1–3, IV, 391: “As for the souls of other living things, those of them which have been failures and come into animal bodies must also be immortal.”
43 Enn. VI.7.5.3–5, VII, 101.
45 See Enn. IV.3.12, 1–4. On the metaphor of the mirror of Dionysus see Wildberg (2011) 227–32 and Vassilopoulou (2021). The latter challenges the traditional interpretation of the mirror as matter and identifies it with the soul instead.
46 Enn. III.5.6.20–21, III, 187.
47 Enn. V.1.1.4, V, 11.
48 Enn. V.1.1.6, V, 11.
down as by a “natural spontaneous jumping.” Those souls that by practising intellectual contemplation have become impervious to the lure of matter and have escaped the cycles of reincarnation do not need a guardian daemon. In fact, even incarnate souls that have divested themselves of all (or almost all) attachments to the body have a god as their tutelary spirit, not a daemon:

What, then, is the nobly good man? He is the man who acts by his better part. He would not have been a good man if he had the guardian daemon as a partner in his own activity. For intellect is active in the good man. He is, then, himself a daemon or on the level of a daemon, and his guardian daemon is a God.

The virtuous man is a ‘daemon’ inasmuch as he is still incarnate. After death, however, this man is expected to abandon daemonic nature forever, to look at Intellect and, as Lloyd Gerson puts it, to say “this is me,” in this way overcoming the natural attraction to matter, embodiment, and the need for guardians. This was the case with Plotinus himself, whose guardian spirit, summoned by an Egyptian priest in the temple of Isis in Rome, stunned the onlookers when he revealed himself to be a god and not an ordinary daemon.

Daemonic guardianship thus depends on the soul – more precisely, on the embodied or embodying soul. In fact, Plotinus says that the daemon does not simply depend on the soul but is made by the soul. In Enneads III.5.6 the daemon is defined as the “trace” (ἴχνος) left by the soul that enters the universe and only by a soul “in the universe” (ἐν κόσμῳ), for “the pure soul produces (γεννᾷ) a god.” Again, a few lines below, he says that the loves (i.e., daemons, or, in this case, gods) who are undefiled by matter are generated (γεννῶνται) by the soul that desires the good and beautiful, and that “all the souls in this universe produce (γεννῶσι) this daemon.” Plotinus says of love that it is a daemon “produced from soul (ἐκ ψυχῆς γεγενημένος) insofar as soul falls short of the good but aspires to it.” After all, the souls described by Plotinus have a poietic power – not only Soul and the World Soul, but also individual souls. These not only give life, organize, connect, and rule; they also make. In Enn.

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49 Enn. IV.3.13.18–19, IV, 79.
50 Enn. IV.4.6.31–33, III, 159: “But those which have come to be outside have transcended the nature of daemons and the whole destiny of birth, and altogether what is in this visible world.” See Pl. Phd. 114b6–c5.
51 Enn. III.4.6.1–6, III, 155. See also III.5.4. 25–26, III, 183: “The love which belongs to the higher soul is a god, who always keeps the soul joined to the Good, but the love of the mixed soul is a daemon.”
53 See Porph. Plot. X.
54 Enn. III.5.6.24–26, III, 187.
56 Enn. III.5.9.56–58, III, 203.
57 On the individual soul’s poietic power see Rist (1967) 121–4 and Wilberding (2011).
I.11.13 for example, the body is said to be made (ποιωθέν) by an image of the soul and in Enn. III.4.6.43–44 the soul’s productive power is said to persist in the body even after the soul has departed, as when new living beings are generated from rotten corpses. In Enn. VI.7.7.6, Plotinus even says that the soul is “foreordained to make” (ποιεῖν προσταχθείσα) and that “it is like the craftsmen who know how to make many forms and then they make just this one, for which they had the order or which their material by its particular characteristics required.”

Generation (γένεσις) begins with the soul’s descent. In the bareness of noetic life the soul does not long for, need, or produce anything; it is only when it becomes enflamed with the desire for the body that new life begins to sprout from it. In its downward journey, it produces “encrustations” (προστεθέντα), that is, new forms of life that grow to wrap its original nakedness and make it as unrecognizable as the sea god Glaucus concealed under layers of seaweed and shells. For in the luminous purity of the undescended state, when the soul is identified with “essential soulness” (τὸ ψυχήν εἶναι), nothing is born as nothing is needed:

> The addition take place in the process of coming-to-be; or rather coming-to-be belongs altogether to another form of soul. We have explained how the process of coming-to-be takes place; it results from the descent of the soul, when something else comes to be from it which comes down in the soul’s inclination.

These additions or encrustations, I take it, include the daemon. For we have seen that the daemon is the trace left by the soul that enters the cosmos. Translated into psychological terms, this means that the soul “in the cosmos” develops, or if you will, makes, all those psychic activities that characterise the multi-layered nature of incarnate life, from embodied thought to digestion.

The daemon, as we have seen, is one of these psychic levels and is produced by the soul because it is needed in the new condition of being “in the body” and “in time”. All daemons, from the demigod watching over the wise man to the “wicked or stupid” daemons of animals are loves; that is, they are products of the soul that has become embodied. For by becoming embodied the soul becomes lacking and,

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58 Enn. I.1.11.13, I, 117.
60 Enn. VI.7.7.6, VII, 107.
61 Enn. VI.7.7.7–9, VII, 107.
64 Enn. I.1.12.7–8, I, 119.
66 See above, p. 322.
67 On daemons as loves see Vidart (2018) 15.
hence, desiring. The loves “of a lesser soul are less in worth and power, but those [of a better soul] are more;”68 however, “both are substantial loves.”69 The only loves/daemons that are not produced by the soul are of those who “are against nature.”70 These loves are “passive affections of the perverted and are not in any way substance or expressions of substantial realities.”71 I take this to mean that ‘unsubstantial loves’ that are not produced by the soul are those that are opposite to the soul’s congenital desire for the Good, that is, they are loves that seek evil things. These are the daemons of those “who have fettered all the loves in them,” not only reason, “with the evil passions that have grown up in their souls.”72 Contrary to what one might expect, the guardian daemons of animals, despite being defined as “wicked” (πονηρός), seem not to belong to this group. In fact, they too are produced by the soul and are part of that trajectory of consciousness which, through ascent and descent, begins and ends in the Good.

The daemon stems from a deep-seated need of the incarnate soul to remain true to the nature that it chose before incarnation. An example is the “virtuous person” of Enn. III.4.6, who, Plotinus says, was not virtuous from the beginning of his life “because of the disturbance that comes from birth.”73 What this means is that as a child this person was fully immersed in sensory exploration and, presumably, imagination. His soul was entirely occupied with the demands of organic development and with the need to satisfy bodily appetites. Even during childhood, however, there was in this person an “internal motion” (ἡ κίνησις ἡ ἐνδοθεν) which longed for what was “proper to itself”74 and which was stirred by the unperceived presence of the daemon. In other words, the daemon was there throughout childhood to ensure that this person’s longing for the virtuous life was kept alive. After all, Plotinus says that the daemon that sits above us

does not let us go down much lower into evil, but that alone acts in us which is under the daemon, not above him or on a level with him; for it is impossible for the spirit to become something else than [a being appropriate to the place] where he is.75

The daemon’s role as a ‘fulfiller’ is thus to preserve the incarnate soul’s innermost desire to belong to itself. This claim, I think, is true if we take ‘itself’ as both (1) the agent of the activity with which one person identifies the most (i.e., the ἐνεργοῦν of

69 Enn. III.5.7.42, III, 195.
70 Enn. III.5.7.42–43, III, 195.
71 Enn. III.5.7.43–44, III, 195.
72 Enn. III.5.7.36–38, III, 193.
73 Enn. III.4.6.6, III, 155. See Pl. Ti. 43a–44b.
74 Enn. III.4.6.7–8, III, 154.
75 Enn. III.4.5.26–29, III, 155.
Enn. III.4 and Enn. VI.7.6), and (2) the discarnate/true self. In the former case, the daemon’s fulfilling action is performed within the course of a single life, for both the ἐνεργοῦν and the daemon change from one life to another. In the latter case, the daemon’s action is, so to speak, long-term and aims at the ultimate emancipation of the soul from daemonic life, that is, from life in the cosmos. Case 2 requires one or more incarnations and different daemons; it is achieved by, as it were, the passing of the guardian’s baton to a daemon that is each time nobler until it ends up in the hands of a god. Case 2 relies on case 1, for one can upgrade from one’s previous daemon only if in the past life one has remained truthful to one’s ἐνεργοῦν, that is, if one has not sunk lower than the nature one chose before incarnation. Here lies the close relationship between the soul and its daemon, for it is precisely in order to promote the soul’s identification with its essential self that a daemon is produced.

4 The Daemon and the Soul’s ἐπιστροφή

Just like Plato, Plotinus was keen to emphasize that it is not the daemon who chooses us, but we who choose the daemon according to “our choice of life.”76 Hence, as we have seen, he describes the daemon as made by the soul in order to meet the specific need to keep the centre of psychological gravity from wandering astray from the faculty with which that soul most identifies. In an ideal trajectory, the daemon keeps the orientation upward. This was also Plato’s view in the Timaeus, where he claimed that God gave us a daemon to raise us “up from earth to our kindred in heaven” (Pl. Ti. 90a).77 The goal of each single life is to transform inactivity into activity, and unconsciousness into consciousness, that is, to transform the daemon’s unperceived presence into the ἐνεργοῦν.78 The goal of the whole cycle of incarnations, by contrast, is the abandonment of daemonic life and the attainment of divine life. The daemon’s guardianship, acting as an upward pole of attraction, facilitates the progressive misidentification of the soul with its incarnate activities and its identification with discarnate thought. In this way, the daemon can be seen as facilitating the psychological continuity between different levels of operation of the soul.

Why did Plotinus charge a daemon, and not a god, with such a key role in the soul’s ἐπιστροφή? Because of the daemon’s nature as ‘love’ or ‘desire’. As we have seen, for Plotinus, the soul is the locus of both embodied and disembodied activities, and conscious and unconscious ones. These antonymic adjectives do not refer to the activities of two different souls, but to different ontological and psychological states

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76 Enn. III.4.3.10, III, 149.
77 Trans. in Bury (1929) 245.
78 See Aubry (2014) 313.
of the same soul. Within the soul we can further identify two dimensions of the self, the incarnate individual, that is, “that which makes the choice of its identity”, and the subject of discarnate thinking. Even though they belong to the same soul, the two selves seem to be unrelated. For, as we have seen, the incarnate self never becomes aware of the activity of the discarnate self, and in the discarnate self the incarnate self is obliterated. Yet a bifurcation between two selves seems contrary to Plotinus’s idea of soul and to his metaphysics in general, in which reality is conceived of as a systematic unity. Moreover, Plotinus’s description of the psychological and moral ascent to the Good depends on the idea that the incarnate self aims for (or at least should aim for) the activity of the discarnate self. If the one aims for the other there must be a sort of psychological continuity between the two selves. In other words, the contemplator of forms must be the same ‘I’ that performs discursive thinking.

What guarantees the continuity between these two states of consciousness? The problem of psychological continuity has long vexed philosophers. Many, most notably John Locke, explained it in terms of autobiographical memory. For Plotinus, however, memory could account for the psychological continuity only of the incarnate self, for the discarnate self is outside time: in God, Being, and Intellect “there is no time, but eternity in which real being is, and there is neither before nor after.” Once the soul “flies from multiplicity, and gathers multiplicity into one,” it becomes ‘forgetful’ of its incarnate past. Hence, for Plotinus, memory cannot bridge the gap between eternity and time. If the incarnate self wants to become the discarnate self it is not because it remembers the discarnate self; nor, as we have seen, is it because the incarnate self perceives the discarnate self, for the discarnate self’s presence is unperceived. Consequently, not even consciousness can account for self-continuity across time and eternity.

What is it, then, that guarantees this continuity? It is desire. The incarnate self aspires to be identified with the discarnate self because it desires the discarnate self. This desire, I take it, is inspired by the daemon. As we said above, daemonic

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81 In fact, a strictly two-dimensional discussion of selfhood is inadequate to describing the complexity of Plotinus’s notion of self. See especially Aubry (2014) 310: “Situated rather than defined, it [i.e., the self] cannot be substantified.”
83 Enn. IV.3.32.18–20, IV, 135.
84 On the two selves and desire, see Gerson (1994) 123.
guardianship is needed to allow the soul to remain as truthful as possible to “the things chosen,” that is, to the ἐνεργοῦν that the soul selected before incarnation. Interestingly, Plotinus’s description of how specifically the daemon carries out this task relies on the imagery and language of craving and desiring. In Enn. III.5.4.5–9, after identifying the soul’s guardian daemon with the soul’s “personal love” (ὁ αὐτοῦ ἐκάστου ἐρως), Plotinus says that this daemon/love:

implants the desires appropriate to the nature of each individual soul; the individual soul longs (ὁριγωμένης) for what corresponds to its own nature, and produces a love which accords with its value (ἀξία) and is proportioned to its being (οὐσία).85

A double action is described here: the guardian daemon, which is itself love (in its purest form, love for the Good), implants in the soul the desire to be what the soul has chosen to be. I take ‘value’ and ‘being’ to be referring to the soul’s ἐνεργοῦν, that is, the activity with which the soul identifies the most. By following this desire, the soul in turn produces a love for its ἐνεργοῦν which makes it hold tight to the place it currently occupies in the metaphysical hierarchy and prevents the soul from sinking any further. For example, someone whose active principle is discursive reason and has intellect as its daemon does not merely employ ‘discursive reason’ but loves the rational life. This love produces an (incarnate) self-identity that is rational but is nevertheless subject to daemonic attraction, and, as a consequence, is oriented upwards. If this psychological balance is kept throughout life on earth, after death the soul’s ἐνεργοῦν will step up to a higher worth – and so on until it discovers its real worth and being, that is, its discarnate self.

5 Conclusions

As we have seen, for Plotinus, the soul’s πρόοδος does not entail a loss of the nobler levels of psychological operation, but only their deactivation; likewise, ἐπιστροφή is not the recovery of those levels, but their reactivation. The guardian daemon, as the erotic disposition towards the Good, promotes the turning (στροφή) of the soul towards (ἐπὶ) higher principles through a transition from unconsciousness into consciousness that will eventually flow into the discarnate self:

But if a man is able to follow the daemon which is above him, he comes to be himself above, living that daemon’s life, and giving the pre-eminence to that better part of himself to which he is being led; and after that daemon he rises to another, until he reaches the heights.86

85 Enn. III.5.4.7–10, III, 181.
86 Enn. III.4.3.19–22, III, 149.
Because of its ‘audacity’ and the pleasure it takes in its autonomy, the soul runs “as far away from home as possible”\(^87\) and loses its fixed centre of consciousness, becoming “many things, and all things, both the things above and the things below.”\(^88\) In this new condition, the soul is an ‘exile’ and a ‘wanderer’.\(^89\) In its wandering it can end up in a place where it does not belong and where it becomes oblivious of its deepest identity.

The daemon’s guardianship cannot prevent the soul from sinking to lower levels of life and being, but it can divert the soul’s attention away from wrong desires. In doing so, does the daemon limit the soul’s freedom and power of auto-determination? This was the question that remained unanswered in the dense narrative of the myth of Er. For Plotinus, the manifold nature of the exiled soul, the possibility of moving either upwards or downwards following opposite yearnings, is not a condition of freedom, but of captivity, not in the Sartrean sense that man is condemned to choose because not choosing is already a choice, but because the soul is free when it has but one choice, namely, the Good. The “involuntary is a leading away from the Good,” Plotinus writes, and the ‘enslaved’ is what “is no master of its going to the Good.”\(^90\)

Perfect freedom can be enjoyed only in the discarnate state. For “when it is without body it [the soul] is in absolute control of itself and free.”\(^91\) By contrast, “the soul that gives in at all to the temperament of the body, is compelled to feel lust or anger, either abject in poverty or puffed up by wealth or tyrannical in power.”\(^92\) But when the soul “holds its own (ἀντέσχεν) in these very same circumstances,”\(^93\) can these circumstances rather than being changed by them. I take this resilience and refusal to be changed to be the soul’s loyalty to its incarnate identity, that is, its ‘value’ (ἀξία) and ‘being’ (οὐσία), its ἐνεργοῦν. Of this choice only the soul is in charge, not the daemon. However, as the “fulfiller of the things chosen”, the daemon inspires the soul to love its incarnate identity and to remain faithful to it.

The journey of Plotinus’s undescended soul is not a journey in space, for the soul does not depart spatially from its abode. It is not even a journey through time (at least, not entirely), for it begins and ends outside of time. Rather, it is a journey through different levels of consciousness which are progressively deactivated and activated as the soul descends and ascends. Of the unconscious levels, the one that

\(^87\) Enn. V.1.1.9, V, 11.
\(^88\) Enn. III.4.3.21–22, III, 149. On the soul’s amphibious, or manifold nature, see also Enn. I.1.10.7–11; II. 9.2–4, and IV.8.4.32–34.
\(^89\) Inge (1918) I, 248. See Leroux (1996) 305.
\(^90\) Enn. VI.8.4.16–18, VII, 237.
\(^91\) Enn. III.1.8.9–10, III, 31.
\(^92\) Enn. III.1.8.17–19, III, 33.
\(^93\) Enn. III.1.8.17–20, III, 33.
stands at the threshold of consciousness is the daemon. Thus, its presence has an
unperceived yet direct influence on the ‘core’ of psychological life. As the desire for
what is above, the daemon prevents the psychological core from fluctuating down-
wards and the soul from wandering further away from its home. In so doing, it
promotes, through different lives, the identification of the soul with the discarnate
self, which is not metaphysically remote but is, and always has been, available to us.

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