

The Divergent Uses of Greek Philosophical Terms By Platonic Philosophy and Modern Psychology: Two Illustrations¹

By Robert Clark

While a number of Greek philosophical terms have been adopted by modern psychology, the manner in which they are utilized by psychologists differs considerably from what Platonic philosophers understood them to mean. Perhaps the most well-known example is the word *archetype*.⁽¹⁾ In this essay two other terms will be briefly considered: *daimon* (or *daemon*) and *psyche*.

At first glance, the use of the word *daimon* in modern psychology does not appear to be greatly different from the way in which it might have been understood in the Graeco-Roman world. For the ordinary man, the *daimon* was a driving power which brought about events in his life which were unforeseen and not consciously chosen.⁽²⁾ In a similar vein, Carl Jung stated that:

The Greek words daimon and daimonion express a determining power which comes upon man from outside, like providence or fate, though the ethical decision is left to man.⁽³⁾

For Plato and Socrates, the *daimon* was not a determining power, but rather a divine *guardian* and *guiding* power. In *The Apology*, after Socrates has been condemned to death, he addressed those who had voted to acquit him:

I think of you as my friends and I wish to show you the meaning of what has now happened to me. For to me, judges—and in calling you judges I am calling you rightly—something wonderful has taken place. For previously the familiar divinatory voice of the daimon always spoke to me quite frequently and opposed me even in very small things if I was about to do something I should not rightly do. And now there has happened to me that which might be considered and is generally thought to be the greatest of evils. But the divine sign opposed me neither when I left my home in the morning, nor when I was coming up here to the court, nor when I was about to say anything. And yet on other occasions it stopped me many times in the middle of speaking, but now, in this matter, it has opposed me in neither my deeds nor my words. What, then, do I suppose to be the cause of this? I will tell you. That which has happened to me seems to me to be good, and those of us do not conceive rightly who think that death is an evil. That which, to me, is a clear proof of this has occurred. For the familiar sign would surely have opposed me if I had not been about to do something good.⁽⁴⁾

There are marked points of agreement in these passages, including the recognition that the *daimon* is a power connected to, but distinct from, oneself and that, whatever the *daimon's* promptings, ethical or moral decision-making remains the province of the individual.

In another passage, however, Jung wrote:

On closer inspection one finds, however, that the civilized man of antiquity, such as Socrates, still had his daemon and there was a widespread and natural belief in superhuman beings who, we would suppose today were personifications of projected unconscious contents.⁽⁵⁾

This conception is given further exposition by the psychotherapist Dr. Rollo May, who considered that:

The daimonic is any natural function which has the power to take over the whole person. Sex and eros, anger and rage, and the craving for power are examples. The daimonic can be either creative or destructive and is normally both. . . . The daimonic is obviously not an entity but refers to a fundamental, archetypal function of human experience.⁽⁶⁾

In being thus possessed, Jung concludes that:

The daemon throws us down, makes us traitors to our ideals and cherished convictions – traitors to the selves we thought we were.⁽⁷⁾

Thus, in modern psychology, daimons are considered to be a natural function of a person which can take them over, a personification of one's own projected unconscious, certainly not an entity in itself, much less a divine guide, as Socrates considered his daimon to be. To a Platonist, on the other hand, the daimon is a metaphysical, ontological reality, not a projection of our unconscious. In modern terms, some might equate it with the guardian angel or spirit guide.⁽⁸⁾ Philo, indeed, equated daimons with angels, when he spoke of those

who are absolutely pure and excellent, who have received a greater and more divine spirit, having never craved for earthly things, but are lieutenants of the ruler of all, like ears and eyes of the great king, beholding and hearing all things. They are called daimons by other philosophers, but the Sacred Word is accustomed to call them angels.⁽⁹⁾

As was the case with Socrates, the daimon of Plotinus, the great third century Platonic philosopher-mystic, was a close companion and guide. Porphyry, one of Plotinus' disciples, recorded that:

From birth Plotinus had something more than did others. An Egyptian priest who had come to Rome and made his acquaintance through a friend wanted to give an exhibition of his wisdom and asked Plotinus to come see his own attending daimon evoked. Plotinus having readily consented, the evocation took place in the temple of Isis, for the Egyptian said that this was the only pure place in Rome. When the daimon was summoned before their very eyes, a god came who was not of the order of daimons and the Egyptian said: 'Blessed are you who have a god for a daimon and not a companion of a lower order!' . . . Plotinus thus had as a companion one of the more divine daimons, and he kept his divine eye continuously raised towards this companion.⁽¹⁰⁾

While it has been observed that daimon is a vague word in the long history of Greek literature and culture from before Homer well into the early centuries of Christianity,⁽¹¹⁾ it was given much clearer and exact expression by philosophers in the Platonic tradition. Thus Apuleius defined daimons as follows:

Indeed, to comprehend them in a definition, daimons are in the class of living beings, rational in nature, passive⁽¹²⁾ in soul, aerial in body and eternal in time. Of these five properties which I have mentioned, the first three belong to us as well as them, the fourth is peculiar to them, and the last they have in common with the immortal gods.⁽¹³⁾

Daimons were generally understood to be beings hierarchically posterior to the gods and prior to heroes and men.⁽¹⁴⁾ The Pythagoreans exhorted one to

Honor first the immortal gods, in the order established by custom. Revere the oath. Pay reverence next to the benevolent heroes and the daimons of the underworld.⁽¹⁵⁾

For a Platonist, the daimon was a protector and guide, acting not from without, but from within. This interior guidance and aid could bring about a great illumination and upliftment to one who was receptive to it. As Proclus wrote:

It must be said that Socrates primarily in his own discursive reason and in his knowledge of reality benefited from the inspiration of his daimon, who awakened him to divine love; and secondarily, that even concerning the things of life it restored and regulated his providential care for those less perfect; and, as far as the daimon's own activity is concerned, that he received the light proceeding from it not only in his discursive reason or in his opinionative power, but in his subtle body,⁽¹⁶⁾ the daimonic illumination spreading suddenly through every part of his life and then moving sense perception itself. For it is evident that although the activity of the daimon is the same, reason benefits from it in one way, imagination in another, and sense perception in another, and each of the elements which constitute us is affected and moved by the daimon in a distinct way. Therefore the voice did not act on Socrates from without, as an impression, but from within, the inspiration, having traversed his whole soul and penetrated as far as the organs of sense perception, finally became a voice, discerned by the consciousness rather than by sense perception; for such are the illuminations of good daimons and of the gods.⁽¹⁷⁾

The conception of psyche or soul is also quite different in modern philosophy and Platonic philosophy. For Jung, the psyche is "the totality of all psychic processes, conscious as well as unconscious."⁽¹⁸⁾ In fact, Jung made a distinction between soul and psyche:

By soul, on the other hand, I understand a clearly demarcated functional complex that can best be described as a 'personality'.⁽¹⁹⁾

While, as it has been pointed out,⁽²⁰⁾ Jung's use of Greek terminology was intended to delineate the area of interest for analytical psychology, rather than philosophy, no true Platonic philosopher could accept this interpretation of psyche as representing the reality which the word should convey. To the Platonist, psyche or soul is not a compendium of processes, but the substanding principle (*hypostasis*)⁽²¹⁾ which allows psychic processes to occur. It is not a personality, but the principle which substands personality.

From a Platonic perspective the psyche—the soul—is a unity or oneness,⁽²²⁾ a principle of life,⁽²³⁾ self-vital,⁽²⁴⁾ self-motive,⁽²⁵⁾ immortal,⁽²⁶⁾ participating in eternity by reason of its being (*ousia*) and in time by reason of its activity (*energeia*).⁽²⁷⁾ Indestructible and imperishable, incorporeal and separable from body,⁽²⁸⁾ it is soul which makes us what we are—human beings.⁽²⁹⁾

Thus the meaning of the Delphic maxim "Know Thyself" is know your soul.⁽³⁰⁾ As souls, we have the capacity to ascend beyond the corporeal and limited to that which is truly spiritual, lasting and real. The vista which unfolds before us is as beautiful as it is real, if we but look within.

As Plotinus wrote:

What then is the way? What are the means? How may one behold this ineffable beauty which remains within its holy sanctuaries and does not come without where the profane may see it? Let whoever is able arise and follow within. Close your eyes and exchange this way of seeing for another, and awaken that vision which all possess but few use.

What does this inner vision see? When it is but newly awakened it is not able to look at that which is too bright. So the soul itself must become accustomed first to look at beautiful pursuits, then at beautiful works, not those which the arts produce, but those of men of good repute. Then look at the soul of those who produce the beautiful works. How, then, may one see the

beauty of a good soul? Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not yet see yourself as beautiful, just as the maker of a statue which must become beautiful cuts away, smoothes, polishes and cleans until beauty is revealed in the face of the statue, so too must you cut away the excess, straighten the crooked, brighten that which was dark, and never cease working on your statue until the godlike splendor of virtue shines out on you, until you see temperance seated on its stainless throne.

If you have become this, and see it, and dwell within yourself in purity, having no hindrance to becoming one, with nothing else mingled inwardly with yourself, wholly yourself, nothing but true light, not measured by size, nor circumscribed into limitation by shape, nor increased by magnitude into boundlessness, but unmeasured in every way, because greater than all measure and superior to every quantity— if you see that you have become this, then you have now become vision. You may be confident then, for you have already ascended and need a guide no longer. Gaze intently and see!⁽³¹⁾

FOOTNOTES

- (1) In Jungian psychology an archetype is not considered to be an innate idea. "What above all stultifies understanding is the arrant assumption that 'archetype' means an inborn idea." Rather, "archetypes are typical forms of behaviour which, once they become conscious, naturally present themselves as *ideas* and *images*." C.G. Jung, *Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, 2nd edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 226. It has been claimed that "Jung's concept of the archetype is in the tradition of Platonic Ideas." Andrew Samuels, et. Al., *A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 27. However Ken Wilber, the well-known author of works on Transpersonal Psychology, concludes that "the Jungian *archetypes* are not the transcendental archetypes or Forms found in Plato, or Hegel, or Shankara, or Asanga and Vasubandhu. These latter Forms—the true archetypes, the ideal Forms—are the creative patterns said to underlie all manifestation and give pattern to chaos and form to Kosmos. . . .The Jungian archetypes, on the other hand, are for the most part the magico-mythic motifs and 'archaic images'. . . collectively inherited by you and me from past stages of development, archaic holons now forming part of our own compound individuality (they come from below up, not from above down). And coming to terms with these archaic holons—befriending and making conscious and differentiating/integrating these prototypes—is a useful endeavor, not because they are our transrational future, but because they are our prerational past." Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), pp. 247-48.
- (2) Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), pp. 180-81.
- (3) C.G. Jung, *Aion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 27.
- (4) Plato, *The Apology* 31-32. Translation © 2005 by Robert K. Clark. All rights reserved.
- (5) C.G. Jung, *Civilization in Transition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 446.
- (6) Rollo May, *Love and Will* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1969), p. 123. See also Stephen A. Diamond, *Anger, Madness and the Daimonic: The Psychological Genesis of Violence, Evil, and Creativity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).
- (7) C.G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation* (New York: Pantheon, 1956), p. 357.
- (8) "Spirit guide: A nonphysical entity, usually perceived as the Higher Self, an angel, a highly evolved being or group mind, or a spirit of the dead. The purpose of a spirit guide is to help and protect an individual, assist in spiritual development, or provide a source of inspiration." Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *Harper's Encyclopedia of Mystical & Paranormal Experience* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 562.
- (9) Philo, *On Dreams I* 138-141. Translation © 2005 by Robert K. Clark. All rights reserved.
- (10) Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 10. 14-30. Translation © 2005 by Robert K. Clark. All rights reserved.
- (11) Herbert Jennings Rose, "Nvmen Inest: 'Animism' in Greek and Roman Religion", *Harvard Theological Review*, Volume XXVIII, October 1935, Number 4, p. 247. The present essay is not intended to address the entire history of the use of the word daimon. It is also not intended as a critique of modern psychology or to in any way suggest that its use of Greek terms is not valid or valuable within its own frame of reference.
- (12) That which is passive is subject to passion, able to be moved, as by prayer. Apuleius specifically notes that daimons are passive, but that the gods are not. The reason for this is set forth by Sallust: "If anyone thinks, in accordance with reason and truth, that the gods are not subject to change, and then wonders how they rejoice in the good and reject the bad, how they are angry with sinners and become propitious when appeased, the answer is that deity neither rejoices (for that which rejoices also feels sorrow), nor is angry (for anger is a passion), nor is appeased

by gifts (for it would be then be subject to pleasure). It is not right to think that deity should be moved to good or to evil by human affairs. The gods are always good and always give aid and never harm, being ever in the same changeless state. We, when we are good, are united to the gods through our likeness to them; but if we are bad we are separated from them because we are unlike them. And when we live according to virtue, we are close to the gods; but when we become evil, we cause them to become our enemies—not because they are angry, but because guilt prevents us from receiving the illuminations of the gods. If by prayers and sacrifice we obtain release from our guilt, we do not appease or change the gods, but by the acts we perform and by turning toward the divine we heal our evil and so again enjoy the goodness of the gods. To say that the gods turn away from the bad is like saying that the sun hides itself from the blind.” Sallust, *On the Gods and the World* XIV. Translation© 2005 by Robert K. Clark. All rights reserved.

⁽¹³⁾ Apuleius, *On the God of Socrates* 148. Translation © 2005 by Robert K. Clark. All rights reserved.

⁽¹⁴⁾ See, for instance, Plato, *Republic* 392a and 427b; Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras* 31, 37 and 100; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 8:23; Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras* 38.

⁽¹⁵⁾ *Golden Verses of the Pythagoreans* 1-3. Translation ©2005 by Robert K. Clark. All rights reserved.

I have translated καταχθονίους δαίμονας as “daimons of the underworld”. Hierocles, in his commentary, interprets this passage as referring to terrestrial (ἐπιχθόνιος) daimons. However, as it has been pointed out, “the adjective ‘cthonious’ has no other meaning than ‘underground’” (Noel Anjoulat, *Le Néo-platonisme Alexandrin d’Hiérocles d’Alexandrie* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), p. 182. This has been noted elsewhere, as in the translation of the *Golden Verses of the Pythagoreans* by N. Rowe included in M. Dacier, *The Life of Pythagoras* (York Beach: Weiser, 1981), p. 202. See also Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Eighth Edition, 1940) and A. Bailly, *Dictionnaire Grec-Français* (Paris: Hachette, 1950). The unusual order followed here, that of gods–heroes–daimons, is discussed in Johan C. Thom, *The Pythagorean Golden Verses* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 103-112.

⁽¹⁶⁾ πνεῦμα. While the general meaning of πνεῦμα is “air”, “breath” or “spirit”, it acquired special meanings in the Neoplatonic and Stoic traditions, eg G.R.S. Mead, *The Doctrine of the Subtle Body in Western Tradition* (London: Watkins, 1919), pp. 47 & 77; Robert Christian Kissling, “The ochma pneuma of the Neoplatonists and the *de Insomniis* of Syrenius of Cyrene”, *American Journal of Philology* 43 (1922), pp. 318-330; G. Verbeke, *L’évolution de la doctrine de pneuma du Stoicisme à St. Augustin* (Paris: Louvain, 1945); and E.R. Dodds, tr. Proclus: *The Elements of Theology*, Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), Appendix B, pp. 313-321.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Proclus, *Commentary on the First Alcibiades of Plato* 80. 4-22. Translation ©2005 by Robert K. Clark. All rights reserved.

⁽¹⁸⁾ C.G. Jung, *Psychological Types* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 463.

⁽¹⁹⁾ *Ibid.*

⁽²⁰⁾ Andrew Samuels, et. al., *A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 115.

⁽²¹⁾ Plotinus, *Ennead* v. 1, especially chapters 2 and 3.

⁽²²⁾ Plotinus, *Ennead* vi. 9. 1. 30.

⁽²³⁾ Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, proposition 188.

⁽²⁴⁾ Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, proposition 189; Plotinus, *Ennead* iv. 7. 9. 6-9.

⁽²⁵⁾ Plato, *Phaedrus* 245e-246c and *Definitions* 411c. (The latter work was probably not composed by Plato himself.)

⁽²⁶⁾ Plato, *Meno* 81; *Letters* VII 335A

⁽²⁷⁾ Plotinus, *Ennead* iv. 4. 15; Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, proposition 191.

⁽²⁸⁾ Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, proposition 186.

⁽²⁹⁾ Plato, *Alcibiades I* 130c.

⁽³⁰⁾ Plato, *Alcibiades I* 130e. See also Eliza Gregory Wilkins, “*Know Thyself*” in *Greek and Latin Literature* (New York: Garland, 1979), pp.60-77.

⁽³¹⁾ Plotinus, *Ennead* i. 6. 8. 1- i. 6. 9.24. Translation ©2005 by Robert K. Clark. All rights reserved.