

Daimonic Men

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MICHAEL POLANYI argued that the scientist's "passionate impulse"¹ was an extremely important aspect of scientific reasoning and that Western science was an artifact of Western European culture. Learning to become a scientist, therefore, requires learning science from men for whom science has become an integral part of their personal being.

The regions of Europe in which the scientific method first originated 400 years ago are scientifically still more fruitful today, in spite of their impoverishment, than several overseas areas where much money is available for scientific research. Without the opportunity offered to young scientists to serve an apprenticeship in Europe, and without the migration of European scientists to the new countries, research centres overseas could hardly ever have made much headway.²

It should not surprise us Americans, therefore, that as we reflect upon the influences on our professional development, we can point to a European mentor. Without the influence of those persons our lives would have been substantially diminished. At the highest levels of attainment of science and philosophy, Michael Polanyi and Eric Voegelin, respectively, have analyzed the sources of this phenomenon

and its origins in Greek experience. To understand what it is in human character that brings power of influence on others—and the reciprocal experience of gratitude—we must go back to ancient Greece and the philosophic revolution that led to the discovery of the soul.

Differentiated human consciousness is not something that men have always had, but was the result of the discovery of philosophy by the ancient Greek philosophers as a mode of consciousness of "existence-in-truth."³ Thus the discovery of the soul is intertwined with the new truth or consciousness of the divine that is the center of philosophy. Even the term "theology" was the creation of Plato (*The Republic*, Book II), who used it to distinguish the new truth about the God of philosophy from the untruth of the myths.

Before philosophy, men came to know themselves only by reference to acts of the gods or by acts of men who were both mortal and immortal. Voegelin called this consciousness "cosmological,"⁴ by which he meant that man understood himself by reference to the actions of intracosmic gods. This hegemony of the intracosmic gods had to be broken before humanity, as we know it, could

be discovered. Prephilosophic man could neither see nor understand himself as uniquely human as long as the only ones with individuality were gods or men who were nearly gods. Bruno Snell's seminal essay, "Homer's View of Man,"⁵ traces the revolution from Homeric man that commenced with Heraclitus' discovery of the psyche and how that discovery in turn transformed the depiction of man in Greek art.

Voegelin remarks that men such as Heraclitus, who started this movement, were called "daimonic men" by Plato.

Plato recognizes the historical field constituted by the event, and he articulated its structural points through symbols. In the *Symposium*, the philosopher who moves in the realm of the spirit (*pan to daimonion*) receives the name of a *daimonios aner*, for the man who lives in the older, more compact form of the myth he preserves the *thnetos*, the mortal of the epics; and the man who has become familiar with the new insight but resists it, he simply calls an *amathes*, an ignorant man. Though the term *thnetos* and *amathes* were previously in use, they now acquire a new meaning through the relation of the existential type of the *daimonios aner*. A new field of meaning thus emerges, when the older or resistant types are made intelligible as compact or deformed in the light of noetic consciousness.⁶

To appreciate the power of this insight, we need only reflect that one of its consequences was the death of the man who was its chief representative. From the perspective of traditional cosmological culture, a man such as Socrates who would argue an anthropological perspective that placed man at the center of the universe, rather than focus on the gods of the cosmos who mediated the fortunes of man, was considered both impious and a source of corruption

in the community.

This philosophical anthropology was not an impious atheism; it was the attempt of the philosophers to articulate their experience of the divine in non-mythic terms. For philosophy to discover the human psyche as the locus of order and disorder in society, it had first to discover the divine *arche* beyond the process of physical genesis, growth, maturity, senility and death and the substance of order as a right relationship of the psyche to the divine.

The experience of the sacred that is contained in myth was not rejected by the philosophers, but differentiated from the untruth of the myths and the truth of philosophy. That is the significance of Plato's myth of the cave.

In time the ritual participation in the myths of cosmological order could not be sustained among men for whom a new consciousness of existence-in-truth led them to see the truths of the myths as lacking. These daimonic men sought a first principle that expressed the sacred *arche* in terms that were, by varying degrees, non-mythic. Still very close to the myth, for example, Thales suggested that the origin of the process of coming into being, growth, maturity and death was water, a symbol of generation in all mythic cultures. Anaximenes, perhaps more revolutionary, said that it was air; and Anaximander made the complete break with the formulation that the *arche* was infinite (*to apeiron*) and that the infinite *arche* of being was divine (*to theion*). That single statement constituted a philosophic revolution. No longer from that point could the question of the origins of existence be answered in terms of a mythic god. Anaximander had abstracted the essence of the genderless divine reality from the mythic gods and chose the neuter article (*to*) to express a new insight absent of myth. The origin of nature is not a god (*theos*), he said, it is

the divine (*to theion*) reality. If the reader doubts this, recall Werner Jaeger's observation: "As far as I have been able to discover from the remaining evidence, the concept of the Divine as such does not appear before Anaximander."⁷

Socrates stood in this constructive, but revolutionary, tradition of criticism of myth that was founded on a new consciousness of the divine as differentiated from the previous mythical form. That put Socrates in a difficult spot, as the death of Socrates suggests.

Voegelin sees that death reflected in Plato's Myth of the Cave.

There Plato lets the man who is fettered with his face to the wall be dragged up (*helkein*) by force to the light (*Republic* 515e). The accent lies on the violence suffered by the man in the Cave, on his passivity and even resistance to being turned around (*periagoge*), so that the ascent to light is less an action of seeking than a fate inflicted. If we accept this suffering of being dragged up as a realistic description of the movement, the parable evokes the passion of the Socrates who tells it: his being dragged up to the light by the God; his suffering the death for the light when he returns to let his fellowmen have their share in it; and his rising from the dead to live as the teller of the saving tale.⁸

In an earlier dialogue, *Euthyphro*, Plato attempted a statement about this conflict. The title character of the dialogue is representative of the public confusion concerning the basic questions of how one can live a virtuous life and what the standards are by which one is to live the life of a good citizen. The scene is depicted against a canvas of social and personal disorder.

Socrates meets Euthyphro in the Lyceum, a place in Athens near the temple of Apollo designated for legal transactions. Socrates is there to prepare for his own criminal prosecution on the charge that he has corrupted the youth, intro-

duced new gods, and, in general, threatened the stability of the political community by acts of impiety.

Euthyphro, on the other hand, is not there to be prosecuted, but to prosecute his father. An employee of the family estate became drunk and murdered one of the servants. Euthyphro's father captured him, bound him, and threw him into a ditch, while he sent a servant to Athens to find a priest to advise him what to do. Before the servant could return with the information, however, the man died from exposure. Traditional Greek worship, we infer, had calcified into ritual practices that led to personal tragedies such as the death of the employee. It had ceased to express a living experience of order, but, rather, became the pretext for unjust acts.

Plato was sensitive to this corruption of traditional myths and used the example as an indictment of their failure to effect right action in the lives of those who adhered to them. Euthyphro himself was not only corrupt, to the extent that he was fanatically devoted to the belief that he was acting out of great holiness in prosecuting his father; he was also arrogant, in feeling that he was above the common sort of men because he believed he knew with certainty what the gods required.

Though it is Euthyphro's ignorance that is the overarching issue of discussion, in the background of the dialogue lurks the fact that Socrates will soon be the victim of an upside down society, a society in which the most devout prosecute their fathers for murder, and whose fathers, in turn, neglect persons in their charge while they await information from oracles—a society that kills its most pious citizen on a charge of impiety.

The men of the ancient world, who

looked upon their society as a microcosmos, experienced themselves as dependent upon the gods. Political order, represented in myth and ritual as an extension or analogue of cosmic order, was understood to be dependent on a continued good public relationship with the intracosmic gods who were the source of public order. Social order was not independent of cosmic order. All aspects of existence were participants in a greater cosmic drama. Political community, therefore, was a partnership in the greater cosmos that included the gods, society, man, and physical nature. Socrates' predicament, however, was understood in philosophic terms.

The intracosmic gods were not responsible for his tragedy, nor were they the holders of his fate. Socrates himself would act and choose justice or injustice and thus was conscious that man himself, in openness to the divine and not the intracosmic gods, was the source of public order and disorder. He was both free and responsible for his actions. His decision was his own, not an arbitrary action of the gods.

This daimonic man became the representative man of philosophic consciousness, and his life and death became the subject of Plato's dialogues. The influence of Socrates on Plato was the origin of that uniquely Greek form of philosophic reasoning that was dialogue. Unlike the reification of man in the form of the Cartesian *cogito* or Hegelian mind, the men who engaged in Greek philosophy dealt with real crises of order and disorder, life and death, justice and injustice. So also the *daimonios aner* was and is a real man.

Aristotle saw this also when he called men *spoudaioi* who were the standard and measure of what is right.⁹ This uniquely Greek insight into the texture of truth—objectified in the insight of men attuned to the divine—not objec-

tive in a way that can be possessed with certainty—has always perplexed men who, in Voegelin's phrase, lust for a massively possessive experience.¹⁰ The truth of the philosophers is not a fixed piece of information, "but the event in which the process of reality becomes luminous to itself."¹¹ This event is historical in the sense that consciousness of history is a process shaped by theophanies. History "is the In-Between where man responds to the divine presence and divine presence evokes the response of man."¹²

It was Aristotle who saw that human action at its highest level was the immortalizing act of human contemplation of the divine. That is the context in which he says in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that our desire would be empty and vain if there were no highest good that gives meaning to all our other desires and upon which all others depend.¹³ The symbol that Aristotle uses to describe this dependence is "participation" (*metalepsis*).¹⁴ We participate with our human mind (*nous*) in the divine reality (*nous theion*) through noetic activity. The image of the *daimonios aner*, this uniquely influential man, takes on more detail.

Aristotle tells us that "the reasonable man, at least, always acts for a purpose, and this is a limit; for the end is a limit."¹⁵ Human action is rational because it is limited, contained, as Voegelin says, in the "In-Between." Living in tension towards the divine shapes the character of daimonic men and makes them mature. Even the unproved assertions of these men, Aristotle says, are as deserving of as much attention as those statements they make whose truths they demonstrate.¹⁶ Their words have authority and their judgment as to what is right is as close to the truth as man will come in this life: "[I]f virtue or excellence and the good man, insofar as he is good, are the measure of each thing, then what

seem to him to be pleasures are pleasures and what he enjoys is pleasant.”¹⁷ The movement of the divine moves the soul of the *daimonios aner* and shapes his judgments on matters of importance. That judgment of the mature man of what is right, Aristotle called “right by nature”¹⁸ and was later formulated as natural law. Though reducing “objective” truth to the judgment of daimonic men may test the sensibilities of many of us who were taught ethics in dogmatic and reified terms, the truth must be told: truth is not a thing that can be

dealt with as if it were an object. And, yet, it has a texture that we can virtually touch. Or, to put it another way, it touches us forcefully and verifiably because it is real. In the field of ethics and morality, the judgment of mature men is the way to reality and truth. For that reason, as we reflect on the influences on us during our lives, if we see one or possibly two men who caused us to turn around, it is because our souls responded to the reality transparent in their character. For these men, we can never be grateful enough.

1. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 256. 2. *Ibid.*, 53. 3. For an examination of Classical philosophy as a mode of “existence-in-truth” see James Wiser, “Political Theory, Personal Knowledge and Public Truth,” *The Journal of Politics* (1974) 36:661-674. 4. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, Vol. I, *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956). 5. Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind* (New York: Harper and Row Torchbooks, 1960), 1-22. 6. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, Vol. IV, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 187. 7. Werner Jaeger, “The Theology of the Milesian Naturalists,” in *The Theology of the Early*

Greek Philosophers (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1964), 31. 8. Eric Voegelin, “The Gospel and Culture” in *Faith and Political Philosophy. The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1964*, Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper, trans. and eds. (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 150-51. 9. *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1166a14. 10. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics. An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 122. 11. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 217. 12. *Ibid.*, 242. 13. *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1094a19-26. 14. *Metaphysics*, 1072b19. 15. *Metaphysics*, 994b8-16. 16. *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1143b10. 17. *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1176a15. 18. *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1134b16-1135a5.