

## Rulership and the Soul in the Platonic Tradition

by Soror Diotima

In his political philosophy, Plato (427–347 BCE) asserts a fundamental symmetry between the ordering of the city and of the individual. Each possesses a three-fold structure. Even as the individual soul is composed of *epithumiai* (desires), *thumos* (will), and *logos* (reason), so is the city composed of workers, guardians, and rulers.<sup>1</sup> For both, justice is achieved by having the better parts rule over the worse.<sup>2</sup> In the self-controlled soul, reason rules over will, and will over desire. In the just city, the workers obey the guardians, and the guardians obey the rulers.

This social rulership can be understood as fulfilling his tenet, “before one acquires virtue it’s better to be ruled by somebody superior than to rule; this applies to men as well as boys.”<sup>3</sup> But as Plato expands upon this scheme in the social realm, he comes to certain conclusions that seem startling to modern sensibilities. For instance, he endorses the selective breeding of the populace for the sake of the common good, but realizes the difficulty of enforcing this on the public.

Because our rulers will then have to use a lot of drugs. ... I mean that it looks as though our rulers will have to make considerable use of falsehood and deception for the benefit of those they rule. And we said that all such falsehoods are useful as a form of drug.<sup>4</sup>

The specific deception recommended in this case is for the rulers to rig a lottery determining who will breed with whom. The people will believe that they are paired up on a random basis, but the results will in fact be covertly dictated by the rulers. This example is fairly typical.<sup>5</sup> In sum:

This is what we must practice in peacetime, right from childhood—the exercise of authority over others and submission to them in turn. Freedom from control must be uncompromisingly eliminated from the life of all men, and of all the animals under their domination.<sup>6</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising that the application of Plato’s views to the individual have been more widely embraced by succeeding generations than have his political ideas.

For Plato the individual soul is properly ruled by reason, *logos*, but *logos* for him is not simply calculation and thinking (although it is those, too). *Logos* includes innate memory of eternal and transcendental truths, as Socrates demonstrated when he elicited knowledge of geometry from an uneducated slave.<sup>7</sup> The Platonic reverence for the *logos* comes to take on a kind of religious dimension:

Now we ought to think of the most sovereign part of our soul as god’s gift to us, given to be our guiding spirit.<sup>8</sup>

This sentence from the *Timaeus* ties the doctrine of the *logos* to Plato’s abundant and often fanciful references to the guardian spirit, or *daimon*. Although later Platonists did not make this same association, the notion of the guardian *daimon* has remained a source of fascination to this day.

From Plato we learn that each individual chooses his guardian *daimon* before birth.<sup>9</sup> These *daimons* were originally crafted as seeds by the demiurge from the materials left over after the creation of the World Soul, and divided into a number equaling the number of stars in the heavens, with each one assigned by him to a particular star. They are immortal, and woven into mortal flesh—specifically, into the head—by the gods who are the children of the demiurge.<sup>10</sup> These gods also open a channel from the lower body to the head, so that this seed may vent out through the body as semen, thereby producing the love of procreation.<sup>11</sup> (Women, apparently, possess reason and guardian spirits only vicariously.) One nurtures one’s *daimon* by bringing one’s understanding into conformity with the harmonies and revolutions of the universe—the study of philosophy and astronomy/astrology.<sup>12</sup> This ultimately results in ‘that most excellent life offered to human kind by the gods,’<sup>13</sup> a return to one’s companion star to live happily in a way that agrees with one’s character.<sup>14</sup> If this is not accomplished in one’s lifetime, one chooses another guardian *daimon* in the afterlife, and tries again.<sup>15</sup>

The most significant philosopher to follow Plato was Plotinus (204–270 EV), “the founder of Neoplatonism.” His grasp of Platonic doctrine was aided by his visionary experiences outside of the body.

<sup>7</sup> *Meno*, 82b–85b.

<sup>8</sup> *Timaeus*, 90a, trans. Donald J. Zeyl.

<sup>9</sup> *Republic X*, 617d.

<sup>10</sup> *Timaeus*, 41c–42b.

<sup>11</sup> *Timaeus*, 91a–b.

<sup>12</sup> *Timaeus*, 90a–d.

<sup>13</sup> *Timaeus*, 90d.

<sup>14</sup> *Timaeus*, 42b.

<sup>15</sup> *Republic X*, 617d–621b. The above summary could be faulted for combining Plato’s more rigorous reasoning with the speculations of the *Timaeus* and *Republic X*. But these accounts were similarly conflated by later Platonists. Cp. Albinus, *The Platonic Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1991), §16.

<sup>1</sup> *Republic IV*, 434d–441c.

<sup>2</sup> *Republic IV*, 431a–b.

<sup>3</sup> *Alcibiades*, 135b, trans. D. S. Hutchinson.

<sup>4</sup> *Republic V*, 459b–c, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve.

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough treatment of the totalitarian thread in Plato’s work, see Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, volume 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, rev. 1966), especially chapters 6–9.

<sup>6</sup> *Laws*, 942b, trans. Trevor J. Saunders.

Often I have woken up out of the body to my self and have entered into myself, going out from all other things; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all I belonged to the better part; I have actually lived the best life and come to identity with the divine; and set firm in it I have come to that supreme actuality, setting myself above all else in the realm of Intellect. Then after that rest in the divine, when I have come down from Intellect to discursive reasoning, I am puzzled how I ever came down, and how my soul has come to be in the body when it is what it has shown itself to be by itself, even when it is in the body.<sup>16</sup>

This further informs his doctrine of the soul:

Now when the soul is without body it is in absolute control of itself and free, and outside the causation of the physical universe; but when it is brought into body it is no longer in all ways in control, as it forms part of an order with other things.<sup>17</sup>

In his treatise "On the Allotted Guardian Spirit" (*Ennead III. 4*), Plotinus attempted to reconcile the contradictions of Plato's teachings regarding the personal *daimon*. He was also concerned to make sense of an incident when an Egyptian priest attempted to conjure Plotinus' own guardian spirit to visible appearance. What appeared was not a *daimon*, as expected, but a god.<sup>18</sup> Plotinus concluded that each of us has a "working principle," that is, the level of being that is dominant in our lives. Our guardian spirit is the level of being within us that is immediately above our working principle. However, if one disciplines oneself to constantly follow the dictates of that higher level, one becomes an entity of that order after death, and into the next life, continuing from life to life, until one "reaches the heights."

The summit of Platonic teachings regarding the *daimon* came from the Syrian Neoplatonist, Iamblicus (c. 240–c. 325 EV). For him, the *daimon* is derived, not from a particular star, but from the whole cosmos, and is established within us before birth. This *daimon* is to be discovered through acts of theurgy, or ritual and contemplation toward the divine.

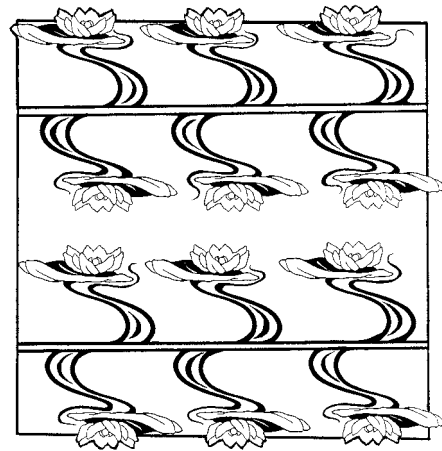
There is, therefore, of each of us one peculiar presiding daemon... the invocation of him is effected through one God, who is the lord of daemons; who from the first defined to every one his peculiar daemon; and who, in sacred operations, unfolds to every one his proper daemon, according to his own proper will... Hence, when the peculiar daemon is present with each of us, he then unfolds the worship which is proper to be paid to him and his name, and likewise delivers the proper mode of invoking him.<sup>19</sup>

Theurgy then becomes, not only the means of discovering the guardian *daimon*, but also the way of responding to the presence of the *daimon* in our lives, and even of transcending it:

We also perform such things as he suggests to our intellect, and he continues to govern us till, through sacerdotal theurgy, we obtain a God for the inspective guardian and leader of the soul. For then the daemon either yields or delivers his government to a more excellent nature, or is subjected to him, as contributing to his guardianship, or in some other way is ministrant to him as to his lord.<sup>20</sup>

Such an advanced theurgist is described as being "superior to all law."<sup>21</sup>

In this way, Iamblicus became the first to clearly set down the doctrine of the higher genius as we know it today. This idea spread from him to the later Platonists, the alchemical tradition, and Islamic mysticism, and thence to the syncretic theurgic technology eventually known as High Magick.



## Great Sea

O Great Sea endless in expanse, dark night  
 Of this soul's burden of ancient delight  
 All these rivers of my own thoughts so bright  
 In their own light drowned now beyond any sight  
 Their streams join course in your ocean of bliss  
 Down slope of time worked free of ego's blind  
 Distraction from your pure and present kiss  
 And whom is it to yourself you bind?  
 What gift of Grace prospers this wedding great?  
 Them only whose own truth burns clean of smoke  
 Them only are fit for their final fate  
 Beneath the shade of the sacred Oak  
 The Magus lay sore wounded with a spear  
 And took the Runes as Gnosis without fear

—Nathan W. Bjorge

<sup>16</sup> *Ennead IV. 8. 1.*, trans. A. H. Armstrong.

<sup>17</sup> *Ennead III. 1. 8.*

<sup>18</sup> Described in Porphyry's *The Life of Plotinus*, chapter 10.

<sup>19</sup> *De Mysteriis*, 283-284, trans. Thomas Taylor.

<sup>20</sup> *De Mysteriis*, 280.

<sup>21</sup> *De Mysteriis*, 231.