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Mysticism in the Christian Tradition

Mysticism Term Paper

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Learning The Spiritual Life From People Who Today Would Be Considered Crazy

As a result of both the monastic anthropology and the monastic daemonology, monastic asceticism takes on another form, namely, to assist the monk in creating a new, angelic body which is stilled and transformed. This transformation can only occur with the help of the daemons who have become the monk's constant companion in a life of withdrawal.¹

We are never truly alone, even in solitude. There is no other way to make sense of the desperate struggles in which we daily find ourselves. Psychologically speaking, despite our consistent battles with depression, we come to speak of our still-operative “upbringing,” our socialization, our class. Sociologically speaking, we cannot explain the ubiquity of evil simply with malice, so we refer to “social forces.” Despite constant battles against our anxiety and anger, we are forced to confess our “baggage,” our ever-present “issues.” Regardless of psychotherapy’s aid, persistent troubles bring to mind our

¹ Valentasis, Richard, “Demons and the Perfecting of the Monk’s Body: Monastic Anthropology, Daemonology, and Asceticism” in *Discursive Formations, Ascetic Piety and the Interpretation of Early Christian Literature*. Semeia 58. Ed. by Wimbush, Vincent L. (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1992), 47.

psychosomatic tension, our “chemical imbalances.” Biblically speaking, we struggle not just with ourselves, but with this difficult other: our “sinful nature.”²

To divide from our “soul” the source of spiritual struggles we all face seems not to be an act of schizophrenia, but an empowering and fruitful turn in thought, language, and practice. To name these concerns as, in some way, *separate*, affords a greater opportunity for acceptance, not abrogation, of spiritual responsibility. For some 4th century desert contemplatives, especially here Antony and Evagrius, this pattern is evidenced in a significant reference to demons and evil spirits in their spiritual programs.

Demons do not hold much of a serious place in contemporary religion and culture. Movies like *The Exorcist* have maintained a popular progeny of film-descendants, but with little attention toward spiritual training or *praktike*. Likewise, within some Christian discourse we still see signs of aggressive demonology, but seldom accompanied by a spiritual program that might resemble anything like that of contemplatives.³ I bring our context to mind because the average modern reader, with a secular view of the world, is struck by the contrast present in Desert Fathers like Evagrius and St. Antony: they teach a spiritual path for which our culture is desperately hungry while also employing a demonology which our culture cannot take seriously. To navigate this variance, I wish to mine the demonology of Evagrius and St. Antony with a particular eye to their program of ethical purification (*praktike*). With attention to how the usage of “demons” in their language and cosmology served to empower spiritual responsibility in these monks, we might see how these authors were distinctly aware and able to advance in virtue and

² “Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it” (Rom 7:20).

³ E.g. Peretti, Frank E. *This Present Darkness* (Westchester, Ill: Crossway Books, 2003).

contemplation of the divine. Naming the demons did not placate them into a passive victim's posture, but aided their awareness on the path to becoming saints and witnesses.

Essentially this is an attempt to genuinely learn from those whose spiritual worldview is considerably different, to “critically retrieve” their spiritual path. But we must retrieve in such a way that is neither arrogantly condescending (to impose our demonology; e.g. “their demons are just social forces”) nor overly sympathetic (to be swamped by their demonology; e.g. “our social forces are really demons”)—both extremes may lead to a failure of sincere understanding as well as abrogation of spiritual responsibility. It has been said that Pope Benedict's (Ratzinger's) approach to inter-religious dialogue is to start with discussing *practices*; if we start with “beliefs” we quickly derail.⁴ This ought to be our approach in tradition-retrieval with the desert monks as well: their demonology is so wildly different from our own that we quickly derail by focusing only there; but if we ask what they *do* about their demons, *how* they organize their lives to resist demons, we are able genuinely say, “I have learned from you.” To that end, this paper will trace the two monks' demonology as related to their spiritual program, arguing that their approaches reveal skills (e.g. questioning and observation) that can be of utmost help to us today.

Antony's Basic Demonology

Antony's demonology is not as psychologically nuanced and intricate as Evagrius'. However, this is certainly not to ignore the powerful place in which demons hold in his spiritual program. Antony—or, at least Athanasius, his biographer—had a different focus. This focus was more Christologically oriented toward triumph over the demons through

⁴ Dr. Godzieba has referred to this notion a few times in our lectures in *Foundations of Christian Theology* course.

persevering in God's strength. The central theme of Antony's engagement with demons is victory.

But we all know that Christians have a different idea of triumph. Thus Athanasius, perhaps with a critical eye toward the increasing Constantinianism of his day⁵, reawakens the drama of the *martyr*. He uses language of the *arena* or the *contest* (*athlon*),⁶ as well as the preparation for ordeals in advance,⁷ going into the tombs,⁸ and training with discipline—all of which liken the monk to the early Christian going into the Coliseum for slaughter. Whereas the biographies of Athanasius' contemporaries often focused on the "winning team," Athanasius writes a "triumphant" biography of Antony as the neo-martyr.⁹ The new arena is the desert,¹⁰ the new gladiators are the demons—and, once again, God is portrayed as on the side of the struggler.

⁵ It is hard to resist attributing to literary works (that are befuddling to the modern mind) deeper motives than seem apparent in the text. Reff, for example, finds that the *Life of Antony* is partly a work "to reign in would-be ascetics and their anti-institutional reading of the Gospels" (Daniel T. *Plagues, Priests, and Demons Sacred Narratives and the Rise of Christianity in the Old World and the New* [Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 31), citing Michael A. Williams, "The Life of Antony and the Domestication of Charismatic Wisdom" in *JARR Thematic Studies* 48 (1982): 23-45. Carolinne White interprets Athanasius' agenda as a "tool for achieving unity" (citing David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* [Oxford: Clarendon Press 1995], 264) or as anti-Arian propaganda (White, Carolinne. *Early Christian Lives* [London, England: Penguin Books, 1998], 3ff).

⁶ Also, "throwing for a fall" (*katapalaiein*), "blows" (*plegas*), even "tortures" (*basanoi*) are present here (*Life of Antony* 5.3; 7.1; see Brakke, David. *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* [Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006], 30).

⁷ *Life* 8; Athanasius, trans. Robert C. Gregg. *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*. The Classics of Western Spirituality [New York: Paulist Press, 1980], 37.

⁸ *Life* 8; Gregg 37.

⁹ Driscoll, Jeremy. *Steps to Spiritual Perfection: Studies on Spiritual Progress in Evagrius Ponticus* (New York: Newman Press, 2005], 6). Equating self-denial with martyrdom is not new in Antony but inherited also from Origen (Brakke 4, 25). See also Reff 17.

¹⁰ Why go to the desert to battle? "Since society no longer appear to have a center (e.g. city, gods, myths, or temple) that functions to provide a structure within which Anthony's life can proceed meaningfully, all that appears now are the outward motions of village life. Anthony's response, in many ways, is similar to that of the typical Mediterranean personality. The irrelevancy of the existing social structures moved the center away from the city, temples, and their myths to the individual soul. The freedom that could not be found in society could now be found by transcending the world via a flight to the inner person" (Neal Kelsy, ed. Wimbush, Vincent L. *Discursive Formations, Ascetic Piety and the Interpretation of Early Christian Literature*. Semeia 57. [Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1992], 142). Might the desert then be a geographic representation of self stripped of those crumbling societal elements? Brakke, drawing from *Life*

Another layer of this triumph is the victory over death. Fear of death is a center of human infirmity; and overcoming demons is an act of casting off death's terror¹¹, thereby appropriating the complete drama of Jesus' death and *resurrection*. Contempt for death is the monk's reigning spirit—for we need not fear demons, but only God.¹²

Antony's story does not start with demons (but rather Christ's teachings about riches); "Antony at first pursues his ascetic calling without any interaction with demons."¹³ Our interpersonal relationships and our *own* "thinking" (that precede the demonic battle) keep us plenty busy.¹⁴ Nevertheless engagement with "temptations" (whether or not we equate that term with demons) seems to be thoroughly essential to salvation for Antony. "Whoever has not experienced temptation cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven... Without temptations no one can be saved."¹⁵

After Antony's casting off civilization and settling in the desert, demons are indeed *real* and troubling at almost every turn for him.¹⁶ What Evagrius might outshine in

(12:3-5) argues that part of the desert drama is the reclaiming of a space that had been abandoned to Satan (33).

¹¹ Brakke 32; also *Against the Arians* 3:57.

¹² *Life* 30; 43; 74:3; Gregg 54f, 64, 84f.

¹³ "Struggle with demons is evidently not essential to the formation of a virtuous self, for Antony achieves enough success through his discipline of 'paying attention to oneself' and imitating others that he can be called 'lover of God' (*Life* 3:2; 4:4)" (Brakke 28).

¹⁴ Perhaps this pre-demonic battle can be related to a dualism created within Antony's theology of the body. "Antony's ascetic practices serve to create a sense of increasing distance between his outer body and inner person by making the body appear more and more alien. In this way, a stark boundary is established between his inner person and outer body.

Paradoxically, the thematization of the body via ascetic practices tends to create a positive feedback loop in which the alien quality of the body is increased, rather than decreased. This positive feedback loop is established mainly because the body functions as both the object of ascetic practice and the instrument through which ascetic goals are accomplished" (Kelsy, *op. cit.*, 141).

¹⁵ John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), 38. See also Benedicta Ward, ed., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, the Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), Antony 5.

¹⁶ By the fourth century C.E., Christianity was a religion preoccupied with Satan. In narratives such as *The Life of Saint Antony*, Satan seemingly 'is everywhere you want to be,' obstructing the work of holy men" (Reff 19).

With regards to how "external" these demons are, Ferguson writes a historical note: "Justin Martyr maintained a perspective in which the demons were objective beings working from outside human beings

psychological nuance, Antony makes up with a thick phenomenology of demon encounter. *Life of Antony* demonology has a two-part structure: 1) a drama of Antony's battles with demons and 2) ascetic discourse (which is also thoroughly strewn with demons).¹⁷ At one point, within that larger structure, we are offered a sort of hierarchy of demons (or the experience of encounter with them)¹⁸: 1) thoughts, 2) bodily encounter, and 3) visions. We will here draw out those three categories.

Within that first category, in Antony's inaugural bout, the devil "suggests" "thoughts" in his "thinking."¹⁹ Contrary to the blurry line between demons and thoughts we will find in Evagrius, we find here a fairly clear distinction of the devil from the thought. Nevertheless, the thoughts listed resemble many of Evagrius' demons (especially *acedia*):

First the [the devil] attempted to lead him away from the discipline, suggesting memories of his possessions, the guardianship of his sister, the bonds of kinship, love of money and of glory, the manifold pleasure of food, the relaxations of life, and finally, the rigor of virtue, and how great the labor is that earns it, suggesting also the bodily weakness and the length of time involved.²⁰

The overall agenda of this "dust cloud of considerations" in this account is to "detach the monk from his righteous intentions."²¹ *Intention*, in all Christian life, seems absolutely

in order to influence them. Origen added to this a psychological dimension by which the demons worked also from within through human impulses (Origen, *On First Principles* 3.3.4). This tendency was carried further in the monastic literature (notably Athanasius, *Life of Antony*), ... according to which the demons are almost exclusively internalized" (Ferguson, Everett. *Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries*. Vol 2. [Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2002], 149).

¹⁷ Ascetic discourse: *Life of Antony* 16-43; Gregg 43-64. See Brakke 27. He cites Placido Alvarez, "Demon Stories in the *Life of Antony* by Athanasius," in *Cistercian Studies* 23 (1998): 101-118, at 104-105.

¹⁸ *Life* 23; Gregg 48 .

¹⁹ *Life* 5; Brakke 28. Respectively, *hupoballein*, *logismoi*, *dianoia*.

²⁰ *Life* 5; Gregg 33.

²¹ *Life* 5:2; Gregg 33.

crucial—for the battle is more about *will* than skill or sophistication. In Augustinian terms, maybe the demon’s point here is to cause the monk to pray, “Lord make me pure...but not today.” Through the encounter with (or, in modern terms, “reification of”) demons, the heart is no longer trapped in that apathetic self that says, “I lack the will to love God”; for demonology opens a pathway to proclaim, “no! I *do want* God, but it is the outside attacks holding down my will.” This recognition is a cause to persevere, not give up. From this first encounter with demons attacking Antony’s “righteous intention” (and many like it following), the monk can suffer from various vices and disorders—which will create a basis from which Evagrius will years later build in more detail.²²

From this [temptation of the devil] come immediately terror of soul, confusion and disorder of thoughts, dejection, enmity toward ascetics, listlessness, grief, memory of relatives, and fear of death; and finally there is craving for evil, contempt for virtue and instability of character.²³

While thoughts and “considerations” act as weapons of demons in Antony’s first battle, they can also act as shields. Thoughts are “concepts on which the monk concentrates in order to cultivate a disposition resistant to demonic attack.”²⁴ Thoughts are not inherently bad, but they are corruptible and useful for demons.

Within the second category of bodily encounter (the least sensible to our modern minds), we sometimes see the visitation of animals.²⁵ My favorite such encounter is with the “beasts of the wilderness”—which often seem to blur the line with “demons”—which were ruining Antony’s few crops. “But gently capturing one of the beasts, he said to all of

²² *Life* 36:2; Brakke 28.

²³ *Life* 36; Gregg 58.

²⁴ Brakke 45.

²⁵ *Life* 9:7-8; 39:3-51.5; 74:7; Brakke 31.

them, ‘Why do you hurt me, when I do you no injury? Leave, and in the name of the Lord do not come near here any longer.’²⁶ Physical, bodily encounters, psycho-sociologically speaking, might be seen as a distancing of demons through projection and reification. A confounding strain in desert demonology is demonic appearance as a woman and, at other points, a black, Ethiopian boy. Modern social science (especially the discourse about “othering”) has rich material for deconstruction here. Brakke spends long chapters on the socio-psycho-political inner workings of such apparitions. We cannot go down that deep rabbit-hole here.

After the more physical and visible demons pass from temptations, more subtle visions and aural rackets arise. While slightly more mellow and tame, the demons causing these are relentless and stuck with Antony for twenty years. At one point, the demon’s attack is audible, but not visible—a characteristic shared with Evagrius’ demons. He responded by calling them “apparitions” (which, being aural, seems to awkwardly fit into this third category) and used the “sign of the cross” as a ritual to fortify his resistance.²⁷ Some of these apparitions go by the name *phantasiai* which are unlike “thoughts” in that there is no such thing as a good or bad ones—they are “uniformly deceptive illusions of demons. There are no beautiful and noble *phantasiai* to set against false ones, for an illusion is precisely not something ‘actual’ (*alethinós*).”²⁸ Some exceptions might be the visions of bread and gold.

²⁶ *Life* 50; Gregg 69.

²⁷ *Life* 13, 35; Gregg 41, 57f. See also. Vivian, Tim, and Rowan A. Greer. *Four Desert Fathers Pambo, Evagrius, Macarius of Egypt, and Macarius of Alexandria : Coptic Texts Relating to the Lausiatic History of Palladius*. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press "Popular Patristics" series [Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004], 84.

²⁸ Brakke 40.

Strategy of Resistance

Antony's strategy of resistance is breathtakingly simple (however difficult), making him appear as a powerful holy man. When one demon came to Antony in the form of thoughts, he plainly told the demon to identify himself, asking, "who are you?"²⁹ The mere question sent the demon into a frenzy. That story is perhaps the bumper sticker slogan to Antony's demon resistance program. But some more detail, beyond initial identification interrogation, is given in *Life* 43. He adds to the previous question another: "*and where are you from?*" After this question, if the "vision" in question is in fact a holy angel, the monk's fear would turn to joy, but if it is a demon, the mere question, as a sign of the monk's serenity,³⁰ would weaken the demon's resolve.³¹ Another way to discern the spirits is to remember that a holy presence is not disturbing, "he will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will any one hear his voice."³² Though not as rich as Evagrius' subtle observations, this plain question is perhaps the premiere golden nugget to mine from Antony's demonology. What might our lives be like if we posed such a question to our thoughts, temptations, and visions? *Who are you and where are you from?*

Interrogating the demons, however, is not the only means to resist. Antony was granted, at times, special visions of assistance. Antony, through no special virtue of his

²⁹ *Life* 6; Gregg 35. A similar story is when he told the demons, "If you are able, and you did receive authority over me, don't hold back, but attack. But if you are unable, why, when it is vain, do you disturb me? For faith in our Lord is for us a seal and a wall of protection?" (*Life* 9; Gregg 39).

³⁰ Gregg (64) uses "calmness." Might Greek exegesis here reveal *apatheia*?

³¹ For modern minds wary of demonology, Athanasius offers a more expansive summation of Antony's spiritual program, making no specific mention of demons:

"For all the monks who came to him he unfailingly had the same message: to have faith in the Lord and love him; to guard themselves from lewd thoughts and pleasures of the flesh, and as it is written in Proverbs, not to be *deceived by the feeding of the belly*; to flee vanity, and to pray constantly; to sing holy songs before sleep and after, and to take to hear the precepts in the Scriptures; to keep in mind the deeds of the saints, so that the soul, every mindful of the commandments, might be educated by their ardor. But he especially urged them to practice constantly the word of the Apostle, *Do not let the sun go down on your anger*, and to consider that this had been spoken with every commandment in mind—so that the sun should set neither on anger nor on any other sin of ours" (*Life* 55; Gregg 72)

³² *Life* 35; Gregg 58.

own, receives providential instruction. “He was the blessed one becoming, as it is written, *taught by God.*”³³ At one point Antony saw a fierce, ugly and humungous being, with out beings ascending around it:

That great one gnashed his teeth over those latter, but over those who fell back he rejoiced. And immediately a voice came to Antony: ‘Understand what you have seen?’ And his understanding was opened, and he comprehended that it was the passage of the souls, and that the huge figure was the enemy who envies the faithful.³⁴

Antony would share these accounts with other monks for the sake of their advantage, so they could “learn that the discipline yields good fruit, and that the visions frequently take place as an assuagement of the trials.”³⁵ (When Athanasius refers to the “discipline,” we are, it seems, meant to associate this with the standard program of fasting, praying, poverty, and so forth—elements that are always presupposed and at times explicated as essential to Antony.)

It is important to find in the *Life of Antony* stories of Antony serving *others* through the casting out of demons—this is not only a struggle for his own piety. “Through him, the Lord healed many of those present who were suffering in body and freed others from evil spirits.”³⁶ A sociological reading here might emphasize how the decline of previously functional societal institutions in the Mediterranean in their day

³³ *Life* 66; Gregg 80.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Sister Mary Emily Keenan, S.C.N., trans., “Life of St. Antony by St. Athanasius” in *The Fathers of the Church*, Volume 15, Early Christian Biographies, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1952), 127,148, 216. See also Reff 35.

begged for intervention and salvation through *persons* and not the “system.”³⁷ Either way, this outward focus is quite clearly a reenactment and emulation of Jesus’ Galilean ministry (especially here with regards to his exorcism of demons and with the “translating supernatural power into *social* power”).³⁸ Another Christ-parallel is the narrative that describes Antony’s upbringing as quite similarly to Jesus’.³⁹ Athanasius’ point, however, is not to replace Christ with Antony but simply echo Christ’s story through him and encourage readers to continue to spiritually persevere against temptation. “Christ’s triumph continues on,” seems to be the message. *Jesus* remains the triumphant one who enables (and will never be separated from) Antony and all who battle the demons.⁴⁰ The refrain that “nothing can separate us from the love of God” (and that “Christ is unchanging”) acts as a call for the monk’s stability and perseverance, not necessarily “spiritual growth.”⁴¹ The general impression in these regards is that, no matter how terrible the trials and demons, God is always there to sustain us in love.

The clearest link between Antony and Jesus in their struggle with demons is the stage of the *desert*. It was in the desert that Jesus went out to battle the temptations of food, riches, and glory and Athanasius wants his readers to view somewhat of a re-embodiment of this battle in Antony. A new twist is brought onto the desert scene: it gets deeper and fiercer. As Antony gains further distance from “civilization”—which entails a move toward the “inner mountain” (an allusion to Sinai)—the demons come in waves of

³⁷ Reff 85. See also Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 148-149.

³⁸ Reff 105. That Athanasius depicts Antony as “*forced* to adopt the role of a spiritual advisor and healer” doesn’t seem to completely harm this Christ-mimicry (White, *op. cit.*, 3).

³⁹ *Life* 4; Gregg 32f. “He grew in wisdom and stature...” (Lk 2:52).

⁴⁰ “Working with Antony was the Lord, who bore flesh for us, and gave to the body the victory over the devil, so that each of those who truly struggle can say, It is *not I, but the grace of God which is in me*” (*Life* 5; Gregg 34). Also, “I was not the one who stopped them and nullified their actions—it was the Lord” (*Life* 40; Gregg 61).

⁴¹ *Life* 74:6-10; 93:1-2; Brakke 37.

visual/aural attacks, hyenas, and finally a donkey-human.⁴² The defeat of the latter signaled the fall of the demons, a sort of echoing triumph of Christ's temptation resistance in the desert, if not death and resurrection.⁴³

Apart from reenacting Jesus, Antony also acts as a Job type.⁴⁴ Demons attack with God's permission (though this should not be confused with *God* attacking), and Antony uses this knowledge to cut the root of fear, knowing that we are always under God's providence. That God allows the demons onslaught is a notion that is as befuddling as demonology itself. But the demons cannot know our thoughts or ultimately harm us; they can only observe our body and words.⁴⁵ We are to learn from this that there is no need to fear—the demons are weak.⁴⁶

Perhaps the most provocative aspect of Antony's basic demonology is his anthropological phenomenology of demons—that the monk, when entertaining the *logismoi*, acts as *the body of the demon*. The demons are energies, thoughts, passions, but they take true shape and reality when taken up into the person.⁴⁷ There may be no process more grievous, upon reflection, than *becoming* a demon. We are here reminded that part of our self is demonic.⁴⁸

In sum, we receive from Antony a demonology that can act as a pedagogy for the soul in that it consistently calls us toward Christ, not the demons. In the midst of the

⁴² *Life* 53:1-3; Brakke 35. A suggestion of an Egyptian god Min (or Pan).

⁴³ Brakke 35. Also, particularly the chapters 28-43 in *Life* are devoted to a reflection of Christ's triumph.

⁴⁴ See *Life* 24:2-5; 29; Brakke 30. Cf. Job 40,41.

⁴⁵ Brakke 74. "The demons, however, *unable to effect anything*, play parts as if they were on stage, changing their forms and striking fear in children by the illusion of the hordes and their shapes" (*Life* 28; Gregg 52f).

⁴⁶ Brakke 42.

⁴⁷ Rubenson, Samuel. *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis, 1995), 1:35-45, 72; 5:40-42; 6:19-20, 27-29,49-51,55. Cf. Brakke 17.

⁴⁸ Brakke 7.

temptations we are to question the spirits, hope in God, rejoice, remember demon impotence, and recall how matters are in God's triumphant hands.

Evagrius' Basic *Praktike* Structure and Demonology

The intricate link: the blurry search for definition

Evagrius' demonology is intricately woven into his path of spiritual progress. Indeed it is difficult to talk about one without the other. Two thirds of his *Praktikos* and much of his *Chapters on Prayer* reference demons. Overall, much of Evagrius' spiritual program is marked by precise knowledge of the demons: their identities, strategies, interrelations, origins, and natures. A helpful place to begin understanding the link between his demonology and his *praktike* is with language. "Demons" are often seamlessly used alongside and equivalent with the words "evil thoughts," "passions," and "evil spirits."

Evagrius introduces the demons to readers as "thoughts" (*logismoi*): "There are eight general and basic categories of *thoughts* in which..."⁴⁹ These eight basic categories, however, are not all thought-like in the traditional sense of the word; rather, many of these "thoughts" come from the irrational (or passionate) part of the soul (*angering* and *desiring*⁵⁰), a part of the soul nearly undetectable to the rational part. Demons are also readily equated with "thoughts" in Evagrius' grammatical structure; one *Praktiko* opens with "The *thought* of gluttony..." while the next begins with "The *demon* of impurity..."⁵¹ That Evagrius refers to the demons as "thoughts" is not to call *all* thoughts evil. We should not confuse the goal of *imageless* prayer with *thoughtless* prayer. At a

⁴⁹ Evagrius, *Praktikos* 6; Evagrius, trans. John Eudes Bamberger. *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*. Cistercian Studies Series, No. 4 (Spencer, Mass: Cistercian Publications, 1970), 16.

⁵⁰ Also, irascible and concupiscible, respectively.

⁵¹ *Praktikos* 7, 8 (respectively); Bamberger, 17.

one point Evagrius refers to prayer as essentially the “bringing of the *best thoughts* before God.”⁵² Demons are *evil* thoughts, not simply thoughts.

But it is not so easy to always identify Evagrius’ demons *as logismoi*, because sometimes the demons *send* or *evoke* the thoughts—that is, one might speak of them as ontologically separate. One might speak of the “*logismoi* of the demons”⁵³ or that the temptation is the *thought*, not the demon.⁵⁴ Often demons are said to “lead,” “suggest,” or “drive” the monk to “reflect” or “desire” *for themselves* certain thoughts or memories. Or, for example, the demon of avarice *suggests* thoughts *to* the mind. If they are not ontologically equivalent, demons *send* evil thoughts. It is certain thoughts that are *lingered upon* that *stir up passions*.⁵⁵

Passion, as the next identifier of demons, is near equivalent with the *logismoi* above. Passions are untamed emanations from the passionate (i.e., irrational) part of the soul.⁵⁶ That sentence is obscure because “passion” comes in noun and adjective form. The noun form is like the *logismoi* in that they are things, energies, while the adjective form modifies the part of the “soul,” differentiating it from the rational part of the soul. Passions, like *logismoi*, entail a slight ontological blur with demons because the passions might be considered *fuel for* demons.⁵⁷ Evagrius grammatically runs “thoughts” together with “passion,” as *Praktiko* 11 is introduced in a manner similar to 7 and 8: “The most fierce *passion* is anger.”

⁵² *Praktikos* 126; Bamberger 76.

⁵³ Driscoll 59.

⁵⁴ *Praktikos* 74, 75; Driscoll 151.

⁵⁵ *Praktikos* 6; Bamberger 16.

⁵⁶ Brakke terms passions the “distorted energies of the irascible and concupiscible parts.” (76). Whereas *logismoi* might relate more to the “mind,” passions, on the other hand, relate to the passionate part of the soul (*Praktikos* 74; Bamberger 35). “Thoughts” in this account, *arise* from the *latter* part. Elsewhere thoughts can be “tinged with passion” (*Chapters on Prayer* 53, 54; Bamberger 63).

⁵⁷ Brakke 76.

Lastly, when Evagrius uses “evil spirit” (a rarer term) or sometimes “impure spirits” the words are used in such a way that is nearly indistinguishable from the *logismoi*, passion, and demon.⁵⁸

In sum, Evagrius’ demon naming structure can be seen as intricate and nuanced, or, from a different perspective, inconsistent. This ought not bother us—for Evagrius’ program is not focused on the ontological *definition* of demons, but on the monk’s process of observing and resisting their workings. That demons might be considered as thoughts or effectors of thoughts, passions or feeding off passions, seems to only enrich the discernment process. There is more room within these differences to see demons from various angles; more observations can be made.

But, as obscurity in definition is unbearable for our modern minds, Brakke makes an attempt for denotation: a demon is a rational nature that, due to an excess of irascibility, has fallen from the service of God.⁵⁹ Why *irascibility* and not concupiscibility? Begging circular logic, it is part of their basic created nature. Between God’s three rational creatures, Brakke notes each having a certain categorization within the basic elements⁶⁰:

Humans = Concupiscibility + Earth

Angels = Rationality + Fire

Demons = Irascibility + Air⁶¹

Consistent with Greek cosmological ontology, the demons, these “natures,” were once in union with God, and it is their pluriformity⁶² that bespeaks their fallenness. In line

⁵⁸ Driscoll 66. *Chapters on Prayer* 49; Bamberger 63.

⁵⁹ Brakke 74.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ This triplet definition may seem as arbitrary as it is peculiar. We’ll simply note the pattern.

with their diversity, the demons aim to fragment the monk through vice and interpersonal strife.⁶³ The true monk, on the other hand, stands in contrast as *one* and as growing in united harmony with the parts of the soul and ultimately God, a theme Antony shares with Evagrius.⁶⁴

The Telos of the Soul and Its Parts: apatheia and its different types

Having mentioned the connection between thoughts and demons, self and not-self, one must also understand Evagrius' structure of the soul to understand his demonology. The lower, passionate/irrational parts of the soul (angering and desiring) are to serve as a basis for the higher, rational part of the soul.⁶⁵ The way in which they serve is that the irascible part is to convert its normal task of being angry toward other people into the task of being angered at the demons. "Anger is given to us so that we might fight against the demons and strive against every pleasure."⁶⁶ The virtues associated with this irascible part are courage and patience (which means not fearing and eagerly enduring).

Likewise, the concupiscible part, instead of desiring union with other bodies, is meant to desire God. The associated virtues are continence, charity, and temperance (which means refusing temptations with joy, reflecting God's love, and observation).⁶⁷

⁶² Beyond the eight demons, Evagrius sometimes invokes the image of a "multitude of demons in the sky" that derange the mind of the monk (*Praktikos* 14; Bamberger 20). See also Brakke (14, 18) and Driscoll (154).

⁶³ *Chapters on Prayer* 137; Bamberger 77. Brakke 19. The demons also aim to dull the spirit, preventing prayer (*Chapters on Prayer* 50; Bamberger 63).

⁶⁴ Brakke 16, 22.

⁶⁵ This three part structure is indebted not just to a vague trinitarianism but also to Aristotle, the Stoics, Platonists, and Origen (Brakke 49). See also *Praktikos* 89; Bamberger 38.

For ways in which Evagrius' program operates contrary to Origen's, Reff (104) argues that Evagrius' presupposition on becoming "insensitive to the world" is an inversion of Origen's worldview. He cites Thomas M. Gannon, S.J., and George W. Traub, S.J., *The Desert and the City: An Interpretation of the History of Christian Spirituality* (London: Macmillan, 1969).

⁶⁶ *Praktikos* 24; Bamberger 23.

⁶⁷ Brakke 52 and Driscoll 155. See *Praktikos* 86, 89; Bamberger 37, 38.

The work of taming these two parts is called the *ascetic* life, *akesis*, or *praktike*. Once these parts of the soul have been tamed and put to proper use, the soul has reached a condition of *apatheia*—that is, it has attained (however temporarily) a training of its passionate parts, it has overcome evil.⁶⁸

In this condition of *apatheia* (e.g. passionlessness or purity of heart) the rational part of the soul is then empowered and enabled to proceed with the greater task: the overcoming of ignorance through contemplation of God (*gnōstikos*) and theology.⁶⁹ The intellect, an aspect of the rational part, operates through thoughts (intelligible, propositional, spiritual) and representations (perceptible, material).⁷⁰ Because it is the mind in contemplation that reaches toward God in prayer, the *mind* (*nous*) is the center of the person for Evagrius, contrary to the “heart” as self’s center for some contemporary discourse. The virtues associated with this rational part of the soul are prudence, understanding, and wisdom (which means warring against demons and protecting virtue, harmonizing the self, and contemplation). The harmony of all these various parts is considered the virtue of “justice.”⁷¹

Apatheia is both perfect and imperfect. It is perfect in that it entails achieved success in the ascetic *praktike*, but it is imperfect in that demons continue to battle the

⁶⁸ Also, Driscoll 23, 79. Victory over the demons through *apatheia* is the basic subject of *Praktikos* 54-90.

⁶⁹ This progression from *praktike* to natural contemplation to theology is discussed by Driscoll (30, 85). Also *Praktikos* 1; Bamberger 15. *Praktike*, sharing the obscurity of definition like “demons,” also traces its connotation to the struggles for “purity of heart” (Driscoll 83) and “prudence” (84).

⁷⁰ Brakke 72.

⁷¹ *Praktikos* 89; Bamberger 38.

soul in *apatheia*: vainglory and pride.⁷² The first is, in some sense, achievable in this life, while the second certainly is a struggle until death.⁷³

Evagrius' dual sense of *apatheia* is echoed by two other peaceable states of the soul: one is the successful triumph over the demons through virtue, compunction, and humility, while the second is a thinner peace in which the demons have simply withdrawn for a time—they will soon be followed by vainglory and pride. The first is obviously preferable and more stable.⁷⁴ *Apatheia* is desirable not just for the elevation of the soul to knowledge but also for the attained embodiment of *agape*.⁷⁵

The demons That Attack Those Parts of the Soul⁷⁶

The assailants of the concupiscent part of the soul are *gluttony*, *impurity*, *avarice*. A demon that hinges between the two passionate soul-parts is *sadness*, which arises as the above desires are not fulfilled. I call it a hinge demon because it can be accompanied by the essential irascible demon: *anger*.

But the true hinge is not between the irascible and concupiscent demons, but between those two parts' demons (i.e. the passionate) and the more subtle rational demons. The pin in this hinge is *acedia* (listlessness, sloth), which has the most diverse skill-set of the demons, as it draws from all three parts of the soul. Lastly, the demons

⁷² Evagrius' account of the imperfect is slightly obscure; for he considers the challenge still present as "the power of the demon [singular] that meantime fights against [the heart]" (*Praktikos* 60; Bamberger 33). The obscurity is that there are *two* post-passionate demons for Evagrius. See also Driscoll 23.

⁷³ *Praktikos* 35, 36; Bamberger 25f. Cf. Driscoll 79.

⁷⁴ *Praktikos* 57; Driscoll 61.

⁷⁵ *Praktikos* 35, 81; Bamberger 25, 36. In the latter *Praktiko*, faith creates fear of God, which makes *asceticism*, which makes *apatheia*, which makes *agape*.

⁷⁶ I am refraining from exegesis on what the demons "mean" or "represent." But one instance provokes mention: in what seems to be a rare occurrence, "demons" represented to Evagrius a sort of Constantinian inquisition. Four demons interrogated Evagrius with questions of his day—keys questions of the Councils (e.g. un-begottenness, the Holy Spirit, Christ's human nature). See *Lausiac History* 38:11 and Vivian, *op. cit.*, 91-93. Evagrius is depicted as coming out clean, vindicated in his orthodoxy.

afflicting the rational part of the soul are vainglory and pride.⁷⁷ These last two operate through exploiting the monk's lack of humility. This order is not necessarily a chronological order of temptation; the "front line" of demons might be considered gluttony, avarice, and vainglory (a spattering from different parts of the soul, representing Jesus' battle in the desert with food, riches, and glory).⁷⁸

With that short introduction, we shall proceed to trace the true nature, "skills," and intersections of these demons. We shall start by offering a "who's who" of the demons, to allow Evagrius' high points to stand out:

*Most Subtle: Vainglory*⁷⁹

*Fastest: Blasphemy and Impurity*⁸⁰

*Most Visual: Fornication/Impurity*⁸¹

*Most Fierce: Anger*⁸²

*Most likely to gain marketing position at insurance company: Avarice*⁸³

*Most Damaging: Pride*⁸⁴

*Most Destructive and Deceptive*⁸⁵: *Unchastity*⁸⁶

⁷⁷ Evagrius also makes room for other demons at some points—e.g. resentment, blasphemy, and so on (Brakke 56).

⁷⁸ *Praktikos* 6,43; Brakke 58. See also Driscoll 69.

⁷⁹ *Praktikos* 13; Bamberger 19.

⁸⁰ *Praktikos* 51; Bamberger 30. Brakke (71) notes that pride is considered almost faster than the intellect—though no comparisons are made between the demons.

⁸¹ Brakke 59f. Also, a close look at *Praktikos* 8 reveals that impurity *precedes* lust as a more base passion (Bamberger 17).

⁸² Bamberger (22, re: *Praktiko* 23, 11) seems to confuse anger with *acedia* when he footnotes the connection that *acedia* is the "fiercest." *Acedia* may take first in other categories, but to be as precise as Evagrius, "most grievous" is not the same as "most fierce."

⁸³ The bitter comedy here is that I have found no description more telling of our contemporary fears as related to the insurance-fear-retirement industry as in the demon of avarice: "Avarice suggests to the mind a lengthy old age, inability to perform manual labor (at some future date), famines that are sure to come, sickness that will visit us, the pinch of poverty, the great shame that comes from accepting the necessities of life from others" (*Praktikos* 9; Bamberger 17).

⁸⁴ *Praktikos* 14; Bamberger 20.

⁸⁵ I am aware that "damaging" and "destructive" are quite similar in denotation. But, given that "most" is a fairly exclusive category, and that I would like to assume Evagrius is not contradicting himself, I must

*Most Grievous and Most Troubling: Acedia*⁸⁷

What I find especially helpful, for our modern, materialistic minds is looking at this list and not scoffing at how some Egyptian hobo was way too serious about demons; we cannot escape the awkwardness—the demons are indeed external and real. Evagrius is not “monitoring his mind” but is learning the strategies of the demons. But if we can see past that initial offense, we might use his observations as an occasion to turn inwards, examine our *own* temptations and consider their distinct characteristics.

The Details of Demons and of the Resistance Strategy

To understand how or why Evagrius resists the demons, it must be noted the broader purpose which demons serve. Like Antony, temptations serve as a blessing; they are intrinsic to our salvation. Evagrius said, “take away temptations and no one will be saved.”⁸⁸ Chryssavgis takes this sensibility to clearly mean, “if my devils leave me, my angels will too.” The desert monastic identity is created through demonic conflict.⁸⁹ Because demons offer us an exercise of salvation, we pray not for the demons to cease their antics but for the will to withstand. We nobly receive our attackers.⁹⁰

Evagrius program of demon-resistance is to “recognize and guard against their wily devices through *observation, asceticism, and prayer*.”⁹¹ For a populous obsessed with Freudian psychology, this is not exactly a problem. Those three tasks are actually quite different from suppression. Observation, if anything, involves a genuine attention to

simply allow his language to speak for itself. Bamberger’s translation could also be visited for corroboration.

⁸⁶ *Chapters on Prayer* 90; Bamberger 70. To include broader monastic literature in general, Brakke (166) argues that fornication or the erotic temptation is the passion most frequently portrayed in *demonic* terms.

⁸⁷ *Praktikos* 12, 28; Bamberger 18, 24.

⁸⁸ Chryssavgis 38. See also, Valentasis, *op. cit.*, 47.

⁸⁹ Brakke 5.

⁹⁰ Brakke 155. Driscoll 151. *Praktikos* 28; Bamberger 24.

⁹¹ Driscoll 23. Particularly in mind is *Praktikos* 40-53.

the problems within—or outside—the self. Observation entails discerning what demons *do* (and *how*) through examination of our thoughts, mental images, and passions.

Awareness is intrinsically connected with skilled resistance. The other tasks, entailing asceticism and prayer (i.e. *praktike*), are basically the equivalent of casting out devils.⁹²

Observation, our first task, is indispensable. Evagrius' writes in his essential *Praktiko* 43 that, “we must take care to recognize the different types of demons and take note of the circumstances of their coming.” Attention to demon frequency and patterns, which demons are more vexatious, more yielding, more resistant, garners valuable information. The purpose of these observations is that the monk is equipped to “address effective words against them, that is to say, those words which correctly characterize the one present,” lest the demons drive the monk crazy. The skilled addressing of words against demons is almost like a sub-discipline of each of Evagrius' three categories; it is part of observation, ascetic practice, and in the struggles of prayer.⁹³ *Praktiko* 50 repeats this pattern, referring first, however, to close observation *of thoughts*, and “the demons which cause them.”

To this end, throughout the *Praktikos* Evagrius observes several basic patterns of the demons (or afflictive thoughts). First, a consistent trend with demons is that, upon seeing progress in the monk, they then focus in another part of the soul.⁹⁴ For example, when the passions are cut off in the monk (through asceticism or prayer) the demons feel threatened and move to the more vulnerable part (irascible) of the soul, possibly in even

⁹² Driscoll 33, 79.

⁹³ Evagrius details much of this work in his *Antirrhethikos*—or “Talking Back”—on speaking (Scripture) against demons, like Jesus in the desert.

⁹⁴ Driscoll 25. *Praktikos* 44, 73; a failed attack on the passionate parts warrants a new attack upon the rational part. Also, *Chapters on Prayer* 72.

greater numbers.⁹⁵ And by agitating this irascible element the demons can blind the mind.⁹⁶ In a similar manner Evagrius also talks about how demons can come in groups in which one strikes, causing the monk to call out for help, at which point other demons come to aid, disguised as angels.⁹⁷ Crafty! A likely influential source here seems *Life of Antony*⁹⁸, where demons not only re-engage attacks with more violence, but with a newly refined method. The lesson might be stated, “stay on your toes!” Do not relax but ward the demons off in struggle.

Beside broader demonic trends like the above, Evagrius writes numerous particular observations of demons. Avarice is accompanied by hints of shame regarding the reception of gifts⁹⁹; anger, if it persists will transform into indignation and possibly result in debilitation of the body¹⁰⁰; *acedia* involves a sense of hatred for *place*¹⁰¹; anger and sadness follow with the fall of pride¹⁰²; sadness is exceptionally complex¹⁰³; irascible provocations are really a function of sadness¹⁰⁴; anger leads to fear¹⁰⁵; success against vainglory usually re-invites that demon.¹⁰⁶ The intricate list could go on for quite some time!

⁹⁵ Demons might “feel threatened” because, as we said before, passions can be seen as demon fuel. Temptation resistance is cutting off their life source. Driscoll 24. *Praktikos* 59; Bamberger 33.

⁹⁶ Driscoll 24.

⁹⁷ *Chapters on Prayer* 95; Bamberger 71.

⁹⁸ *Life* 23; Gregg 48f.

⁹⁹ *Praktikos* 9; Bamberger 17.

¹⁰⁰ *Praktikos* 11; Bamberger 18.

¹⁰¹ *Praktikos* 12; Bamberger 18f. *Acedia*’s effects are a provocative theme for our day, considering what some call capitalism’s *destruction of place*. See Leach, William. *Country of Exiles The Destruction of Place in American Life* (New York: Pantheon Books), 1999.

¹⁰² *Praktikos* 14; Bamberger 20.

¹⁰³ Sadness seems like a long terrible parade—from the deprivation of desires, to memories, to inducing pleasure through lingering thoughts, to self-humiliation through not remedying the process. *Praktikos* 10; Bamberger 17f.

¹⁰⁴ *Praktikos* 22; Bamberger 22.

¹⁰⁵ *Praktikos* 23; Bamberger 22. This seems somewhat contrary, though still similar, to Merton’s “The Root of War is Fear” from Merton, Thomas. *Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions), 1949.

¹⁰⁶ *Pratikos* 30; Bamberger 24. The only true way out of the circle is contemplative knowledge (*Praktikos* 32; Bamberger 24f.

The struggle of the night offers particular insight into observing the demons strategies, as this is the time when the irascible demons present horrible visions (particularly in their sleep¹⁰⁷). Upon the sight of these images (supposing the monk has a capacity to control their thoughts in sleep), the monk is simply to remain calm and serene, even upon the sight of vomiting demons. Antony’s Christ-based fearlessness is present here. Other false visions of the demons, given at any time of day, can include producing light (to fool the monk to think they are having a divine vision—thus inducing pride), appearing as Jesus or flattering their ego (inducing a sense that one no longer needs to take the Eucharist).¹⁰⁸ Evagrius advises the monk who takes in these various datum, these movements of the demons, to bring them before Christ, asking him to interpret them.¹⁰⁹

Beyond observation, ascetic practice is yet another scheme of demon resistance. While allowing space for the spiritual pleasures offered by the angels, Evagrius promotes a striving against “every pleasure.”¹¹⁰ Avarice, for example, is best fought through voluntary poverty and charity (which will lead to knowledge of the Trinity).¹¹¹ Taking cues from the Scriptures¹¹², Evagrius advises avarice to be thoroughly *rooted out* through those two methods.¹¹³ Anger is to be fought with singing the Psalms, patience, charity, meekness, and almsgiving—but only at the right times in the right measures.¹¹⁴ And with regards to the team of “front line” demons (gluttony, avarice, and vainglory), the monk is

¹⁰⁷ Apparently, part of Evagrius’ (and many other monks’) struggle against these night demons involved staying up all or part of the night in prayer.

¹⁰⁸ Driscoll 98-9; Cf. LH 25:1 (lines 4-5); LH 25:4-6

¹⁰⁹ *Praktikos* 50; Bamberger 29f.

¹¹⁰ *Praktikos* 24; Bamberger 23.

¹¹¹ Driscoll 66.

¹¹² The love of money is the root of all evil (1 Tim 6:10).

¹¹³ Discussed in *Eight Spirits of Evil 7 (Patrologiae Cursus Completes. Series Graeca, Ed. J.-P. [Migne. Paris], 79:1152c)*. cf. Driscoll 68.

¹¹⁴ *Praktikos* 15, 20, 38; Bamberger 20, 21, 26.

to strictly *despise* and hate them (and the thoughts they cause),¹¹⁵ another direct connection with Antony. (Despising demons, however, is not exactly an ascetic practice as much as a fruitful outcome of having an ascetically trained irascible part of the soul.) Other works like hunger, toil, and solitude work to extinguish the flames of desire.¹¹⁶

After ascetic practice we have resistance through prayer, which offers stability to the mind.¹¹⁷ Upon the instance of temptation, the monk should not pray immediately but speak out in anger against the demons.¹¹⁸ From that point, the monk can turn a few different directions. Sorrow (*penthos*) for one's sins might be seen as a form of prayer. Tears are a key antidote against the passions, particularly *acedia*.¹¹⁹ They can be used to split the soul up with tears, that one part might console the other part—yet another case of distancing within the self that enables the monk to strengthen resistance to temptations.¹²⁰ Apart from this division, the demon overcomes the monk. “The battle with this demon is a battle between tears and no tears.”¹²¹

Other than sorrow, another helpful practice is envisioning a triumphant future in which the monk has recovered from passion and united with God.¹²² This is the usefulness of the intellectual faculty of imagination and perception that, while not mingling within imageless prayer, assists the soul through the trials along the way. Another practice that I might rope into this category of “prayer” through the imagination is the numbering of one's days. The soul who knows their mortality resists the lies and

¹¹⁵ This despising is a refusal to give one's heart over to worries, which is considered a “chasing away the demons” (Driscoll 69). See also *Praktikos* 100; Bamberger 41.

¹¹⁶ *Praktikos* 15; Bamberger 20.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Praktikos* 42; Bamberger 27.

¹¹⁹ *Chapters on Prayer* 7, 9-12; Driscoll 56.

¹²⁰ *Prak* 27; Bamberger 23. A split between the mind and body is also advised in 52, not as an evasion or denial of the body, but as a way for the spirit/mind to assist the body to not serve what is unworthy of itself.

¹²¹ Driscoll 58.

¹²² Brakke 76. Cf. Phl. 2:9-11; Is 2:2-9.

visions of glory and pride. Lastly, Evagrius provocatively advises another method within prayer—if despising the demons has waned—is that a sense of being abandoned by God rekindles hatred for the demons.¹²³ The monk can then firmly pray Psalm 139:22 with Origen’s allegorical exegetical lens, equating the Psalter’s hated enemies with demons. Maybe then the monk can cry out, “My God why have you forsaken me?” to the end that God is glorified through the monk’s patient, suffering endurance through trials.

Conclusion

Through Antony’s demonology we retrieve his patience with which he can maintain in the midst of temptation, simply asking the demon’s origin. Again, the implication is profound: what can it mean to ask today of our temptations, “who are you and where are you from?” This question leads to victory. And Evagrius elaborates significant details with which the contemplative might look into the temptations, parse out the nuances through observation, and thereby empower their ascetic and prayer work. Risking oversimplification, Antony’s story urges us, “we can overcome our demons,” while Evagrius teaches, “and here’s how.”

¹²³ Driscoll 117.