The Secularization of Revelation from Plato to Freud

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Die Botschaft hör’ ich wohl, allein mir fehlt die Glaube
(I hear the message but I lack the faith)

– Goethe, Faust Part I

Introduction

This paper will attempt to sketch a historical outline of ideas relating to revelation by tracing the development of a concept or *topos* which has preoccupied Western thinkers since antiquity and which became crucial during the Romantic period — the concept of the Daemon, and the general mode or sensibility referred to as the “Daemonic.” In Classical thought, the term “Daemonic” is associated with revelation in that it refers to a kind of conduit or nexus between the secular and the divine. Etymologically, the term comes from the Ancient Greek word *daïomai* — meaning to distribute and divide.\(^1\) In this context, the Daemonic refers to the processes by which the Gods allot divine ‘revelations’ or ‘moments of inspiration’ to humans. Related to this notion of the Daemonic is the term Daemon (δαιμόν), which can refer specifically to the fate of an individual, or more generally to a kind of hidden or numinous “force” which shapes a person’s life. It is also in this sense that one speaks of an individual being “possessed” by his or her Daemon as by an alter ego or “other self.”\(^2\)

I wish to suggest that the notion of the Daemonic and the idea of revelation are connected, and that this connection is most visible when we investigate the way in which both terms have undergone a historical process of secularization, or immanentization: that is to say, a historical development in which the source of revelation, and the location of the Daemon, have both moved from the divine and

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transcendent to the natural and the immanent. The ambivalent location of the source of revelation is inherent in the word itself: the first two definitions of “revelation” given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* are:

1. The disclosure or communication of divine knowledge by a divine or supernatural agency and…
2. A source of enlightenment

In the first definition the source of revelation is clearly divine or supernatural. In the second definition, the term ‘enlightenment’ appears, and its appearance raises a question: By what means are we enlightened? One of the answers to this question, offered by the philosophical movement known as the Enlightenment, is that we should turn away from superstition, religion and the belief in numinous spirits, and turn towards the rational and objective study of the laws of nature, or what we commonly understand by the term “science.” The word “revelation” has two possible equivalents in German: the first — *Offenbarung* — refers to the communication of divine knowledge by a supernatural source. The second, *Enthüllung*, means “uncovering,” “unveiling,” “discovering” or “revealing.” This second sense of revelation as discovery or uncovering is, I will suggest towards the conclusion of this paper, crucial to the interpretation of the Daemonic adopted by a man who saw himself as the epitome of rational, scientific research and methodology, and a man who likened his so-called “science” of psychoanalysis to the task of the archaeologist: the figure who uncovers and reveals successive layers of hitherto concealed material.

I speak, of course, of Sigmund Freud, who discusses the Daemonic in his famous essay on the uncanny, and in his late book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

What I intend to do is briefly trace the history of the Daemonic, from its origins in Plato, through its treatment at the hands of Continental rationalism — particularly Leibniz — and its subsequent resurgence in German Romanticism and Goethe, into the thought of Freud. At another level, the development of the Daemonic will be seen to run parallel with the different, secular understandings of revelation to be found in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

**Plato and the Daemonic**

For Plato the Daemonic is a force, mode or sensibility which is able to bridge the gap between the material world and the divine realm of the Ideas or Forms, and as such it functions as a conduit of revelation in the religious sense of the term. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato outlines the various daemonic agencies which he refers to as the “mantic” arts — “mantic” meaning “of divination” (244b-244d). Among these are prophecy, poetry or “possession by the Muses,” and erotic intoxication (265a-265b). These daemonic modes are seen as types of divine possession or madness which bring humans into contact with the divine. But I do not intend to suggest that Plato simply associates the Daemonic with the irrational, as in some ways it is more like the hyper-rational or extra-rational. This is seen most clearly in Plato’s references to Socrates’ *daimonion*, which is a specific manifestation of the Daemonic peculiar to the experience of Socrates. The *daimonion* is a divine sign or voice that assists Socrates in making important decisions.
In *The Apology*, Socrates describes it as a “kind of oracle or sign which comes to me...[which] ...always forbids but never commands me to do anything which I am going to do” (31c-31d). The *daemonion* is perhaps most famous for the role it plays in *The Apology* (31c-d) in dissuading Socrates from involving himself in politics.

The Daemon as Entelechy, and as Nous or Reason

Following the example of Plato, later interpreters of the Daemon like Aristotle, the Stoics and Neo-Platonists tend to associate it with elements of divinity located immanently within humans. In the case of Aristotle, this ‘divinity’ has two manifestations: the first being the *entelechy*, the second the faculty known as *nous* or reason.

The term *entelechy* or *entelechia* (ἐντελεχεία) refers to the ‘first actuality’ of any particular organism. Airing out of a combination of two key words in Aristotle’s philosophy — *energeia*, meaning “functioning,” “activity” or “actualization,” and *telos*, a synonym for “goal” or “end” — *entelechia* refers to an indwelling form or essence which determines the organism’s activity and development, while at the same time containing within itself the organism’s complete potential. The metaphor which perhaps best approximates the *entelechy* is the seed of a plant, which is the cause of the plant’s existence, growth and characteristics, and which also holds the biological prototype or imprint of its full development.

The *entelechy* is perhaps the closest thing in the Aristotellean corpus to the Platonic Daemon. In contradistinction to Plato’s notion of the Daemon, the *entelechy* is immanent and substantial, rather than transcendent and insubstantial. Common to both terms, however, is an element of “fate” or “predestination.” Like the Platonic Daemon, which on one level functions as the soul’s “lot” in life, and which Heraclitus also specifically associates with the individual’s fate or destiny, the *entelechy* is a kind of essence which determines the future development of the organism, in what amounts to a kind of biological determinism.

The second portion of divinity located within humans can be found in the concept of *nous* or reason, a concept which extends from Plato and Aristotle into Stoicism and Neo-Platonism. The relevant passage comes from Plato’s *Timaeus* at 30b, where we are told of how God:

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6. For Aristotle’s comments on *nous* as a divine faculty immanent in humans, see *De Anima* 413b and *De Generatione Animalium* 736b 20-30.
…when he was framing the universe...put intelligence [nous] in soul, and soul in body, that he might be the creator of a work which was by nature fairest and best.

Of interest for our purposes is the extent to which, in Stoic interpreters of Plato and Aristotle like Posidonius, the rational part of the soul traditionally associated with the concept of nous begins to be called one’s ‘Daemon’. Posidonius describes the Daemon as an indwelling fragment or portion of the transcendent “One.” The “One” is essentially concomitant with God; it is the underlying principle from which all phenomena emanate, while also being a kind of force that regulates and directs the universe. As a fragment of the One, the Daemon is thus seen as the seat of god-like rationality and goodness within the soul, and accordingly Posidonius argues that one should rigorously follow the dictates of one’s Daemon. This, he says in Fragment 187, is because the:

… cause of the emotions, that is of inconsistency and of the unhappy life is not to follow in everything the daimon in oneself, which is akin and has a similar nature to the one which governs the whole universe, but at times to deviate and be swept along with what is worse and beastlike.7

Commentators on Posidonius suggest that he views the Daemon as being an internal, congenital and immanent faculty which, when followed, places the soul in tune with the order and rationality of the universe. This characterization of the Daemon shares some common features with the Aristotelean entelechy, which is likewise indwelling and present at the organism’s birth, and which also leads the organism to its highest “actuality” — an actuality which is a microcosmic manifestation of the universe’s inherent rationality.

It was this essentially Aristotelean/Stoic understanding of nous or reason, as a divine or semi-divine faculty immanent in humans, which became central to the systems of seventeenth and eighteenth century rationalist thinkers, in particular: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Likewise, it was also Leibniz who revived Aristotle’s notion of the entelechy in his Monadology, where he observes that:

Simple substances, or created monads may all be named Entelechies, because they have in them a certain perfection.8

For Leibniz, the Monad is at once immanent (in the sense of indwelling, being located within the organism) and transcendent, in that, like Aristotle’s entelechy, it functions as the organism’s divine law, the seed or essence which determines its development or ‘fate’.9 Monads arise, says Leibniz, from “the continual fulgurations of

the divinity from moment to moment.” Being divine, monads are also, according to Leibniz, inherently rational. When located in humans, they are not just essences or *entelechies*, he says, but also rational souls:

> Each human monad is a rational soul or mind, capable of reflexion, and we now proceed to consider the nature and mode of working of reason in man.\(^\text{11}\)

In the philosophy of Leibniz, we begin to see the extent to which the two distinct senses of revelation found in German — *Offenbarung*, as the communication of divine information from a transcendent source, and *Enthüllung*, as uncovering, revealing, or discovering — begin to cross over and interact with one another. The Monad, being located within the organism yet also emanating from a divine source, is susceptible of revelation in both senses. In its ‘secular’, immanent and organic guise it may be ‘researched’ or ‘uncovered’ in the sense of *Enthüllung*, while at the same time carrying within itself a measure of external transcendence in the religious tradition of *Offenbarung*. This is due to the fact that, for Leibniz, to know God, and thus to experience revelation, was to uncover the secrets of divine nature through the deployment of an essentially secular tool: *nous* or reason. In effect, this meant that, outside of orthodox Christian theology, revelation and reason became closely related, if not one and the same. Towards the end of the eighteenth century a philosophical and aesthetic movement which objected to the Continental rationalism of figures like Leibniz, and which emphasized the non-rational faculties in humans, and the non-rational aspects of divine inspiration, began to arise in Germany, and it was this movement — a movement that looked back to ancient Greece as the origin of Western culture — which was responsible for the resurgence of the theme of the Daemonic in German literature.

**The Daemon of the Sturm und Drang**

The *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) movement of early German Romanticism valorized the emotions and sensitivities of the creative individual over the rational systems of Enlightenment thinking, and attempted to protect human creativity from rational analysis by endowing it with a sense of numinous mystery. Perhaps the most virulently anti-rationalist influence upon the *Sturm und Drang* movement can be found in the thought of Johann Georg Hamann, the German religious mystic whose book *Socratic Memorabilia* was explicitly conceived as a refutation of the values of the German Enlightenment, and, in particular, the thought of Immanuel Kant. In *Socratic Memorabilia*, Hamann focuses upon the *daimonion* or “divine voice” experienced by Socrates, and attempts to characterize it as the mysterious source of Socrates’s genius, a source which is more extra-rational and divine, than rational and human.\(^\text{12}\) In effect, Hamann attempts to revive the notion of revelation as *Offenbarung*, a process through which humans may be divinely inspired, while at the same time having little or no

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understanding of the source of their inspiration. For Hamann, there can be no Enthüllung — that is, uncovering, unveiling or explaining — of phenomena like Socrates’ daimonion. Rather, the daimonion serves only to heighten the sense of mystery, negativity, and transcendence which surrounds the romantic notion of the “genius”: the individual who is endowed with an excess of creative force and sensitivity.

Goethe’s Conception of the Daemonic

It was this conception of the Daemonic as a mysterious, fateful, sometimes frightening, and yet often inspiring and productive force which comes to the fore in the late works of Goethe: particularly in the twentieth book of his autobiography, Dichtung und Wahrheit, and in the Conversations with Goethe recorded by Eckermann. In 1828, four years before his death, Goethe tells Eckermann that the Daemonic is a kind of numinous and extra-rational force which yields up “unexpected gifts from above” to inspired artists. Goethe presents artistic creativity as a kind of revelation in Hamann’s sense of Offenbarung, a notion which also recalls the ancient Greek view of art as possession by the Muses. The genius, Goethe tells us, is able to harness divine or numinous forces which issue from beyond the limits of human rationality, and which produce great works art.

But there is another ‘rational’ or ‘scientific’ side to Goethe, a side which sees revelation as natural discovery, as unveiling or Enthüllung. This is the Goethe who collaborated with Schelling in a movement which came to be known as Naturphilosophie, the Goethe who wrote the Farbenlehre [Theory of Colour], who claimed to have discovered an intermaxillary bone in the human jaw, and who attempted to design a universal “Primal Plant” (Urpflanze) which he hoped would function as a prototype or “Platonic form” for all plants. Inherent in all of these projects was the desire to uncover universal laws which would provide insight into the system of nature. In this regard, Goethe was following the Continental rationalist traditions of Spinoza and Leibniz, traditions in which Offenbarung and Enthüllung are scarcely distinguishable.

Freud and the Daemonic

Goethe’s preoccupation with the project of Naturphilosophie anticipates the search for organic explanations to the mysteries of nature, and the mysteries of human behaviour, which characterizes much of nineteenth century German thought, particularly the work of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Eduard von Hartmann. Outside of religious doctrine, revelation was increasingly characterized in an anthropological or scientific light as a subjective and psychological phenomenon. Revelation as Offenbarung (the communication of divine knowledge) was thus gradually superseded

by revelation as immanent discovery, unveiling or *Enthüllung*. Likewise, the Daemonic also became less associated with numinous, fateful, or supernatural sources, and was increasingly understood as a manifestation of individual subjectivity. A good example of this transition can be found in the works of Nietzsche. When Nietzsche turns to the subject of Socrates’ *daimonion* or ‘divine voice’ in *Human, All Too Human*, he dismisses it as a “disease of the ear” — an auditory hallucination which he views as having nothing at all to do with numinous forces, and everything to do with Socrates’ decadence and illness. For Nietzsche, the only thing revealed by the so-called “visions” or “revelations” of saints is the underlying pathology which he associates with all institutionalized religions.\(^{14}\)

In this regard, Nietzsche’s views on religion and revelation are not at all far from those of Freud. Freud’s opinions on religious matters are easily gleaned from the title of his book on the subject: *The Future of an Illusion*. Religion, says Freud, is a kind of mass delusion created by humans as a metaphysical consolation or “palliative remedy” for the hardships of life. The only kind of revelation possible for Freud is *Enthüllung*: the unveiling, uncovering or “bringing to light” of unconscious contents. Freud’s aim was to cure humanity of its erroneous belief in numinous or supernatural notions like fate and destiny, notions which are central to Goethe’s understanding of the Daemonic. In 1925, after having read the Austrian literary critic Stefan Zweig’s study of the Daemonic in Kleist, Hölderlin and Nietzsche — *Kampf mit dem Dämon [Struggle with the Daemon]* — a book which Zweig dedicated to him,\(^{15}\) Freud wrote the following to his friend:

> On the fundamental problem, the struggle with the Daemon, there would be much to say, which would take far too long to write. Our rational manner of struggling with the Daemon consists in describing it as a comprehensible object of science.\(^{16}\)

Freud “struggles” with, or attempts to account for, daemonic phenomena in two sources: his essay on the uncanny, and his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud defines daemonic events as those that appear to be inexplicable and therefore “fateful” in some sense. He contends that such events can:

> …be observed in the lives of some normal people. The impression they give is of being pursued by some “daemonic” power; but psychoanalysis has always taken the view that their fate is for the most part arranged by themselves and determined by early infantile influences.\(^{17}\)

Here we see that Freud regards psychoanalysis as being a kind of solution to, or explanation of, those forces which Goethe describes as “daemonic” in the sense of


“mysterious” or “fateful.” Freud tells us that it is the patient, not the analyst, who is under the misapprehension that he or she is cursed by some numinous, daemonic power. For Freud, the term daemonic thus refers to a kind of primitive and erroneous mysticism, the sources of which psychoanalysis seeks to investigate and overcome. In this regard, Freud follows the tradition of revelation as Enthüllung, a tradition partly bequeathed to him by the “scientific” side of Goethe, a figure who Freud regarded, along with Shakespeare, as an anticipator of many aspects of psychoanalysis. 18

When we look more closely at Freud’s conception of the Daemonic, it becomes apparent that it is concerned with a problem which also preoccupied Goethe and the tragedians of Ancient Greece: that is, the nexus between character and fate. Freud’s answer, of course, is that character creates “fate” or “destiny” as a kind of projection: events which appear to be fateful are seen by Freud to arise from those aspects of the self which are not readily observable, but which can exert a great influence upon the trajectory of one’s life: namely, the forces of unconscious, which are, for the most part, invisible. Freud accordingly views the Daemon, and so-called “daemonic” phenomena, as being “comprehensible objects of science” by seeing them as symptoms or effects of the unconscious. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, those apparently daemonic — in the sense of “mysterious” or “fateful” — events which recur throughout a person’s life are seen as a manifestation of an unconscious “compulsion to repeat,” a compulsion which Freud ultimately associates with the “Death Drive”: that part of the self which has as its regressive aim the cessation of life.

Freud’s paper on the uncanny, written in the same year as Beyond the Pleasure Principle, also associates the Daemonic with the unconscious. 19 The uncanny, says Freud, is “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and is long familiar.” 20 Freud’s concept of the uncanny refers to those things which are so familiar, so close to home, that they are in fact unfamiliar and frightening: the repressed contents of the unconscious. The Daemonic is a mode of revelation for Freud in that it manifests itself through symptoms which point to the dynamic operations of the unconscious, and as such it can only represent a revelation in the limited, secular sense of Enthüllung: the unveiling, uncovering or disentangling of unconscious contents.

If, in conclusion, we view the concept of revelation, and the idea of the Daemon, in the historical light presented in this paper, it becomes apparent that the sources of both phenomena can be spoken of in terms of an inversion. In Plato and Aristotle, the Daemon begins as the divine faculty, implanted by the Gods in humans, which mediates between the secular and the divine. Over time the Daemon becomes associated with reason (particularly during the Enlightenment), with subjectivity, creativity and genius.

18. In his autobiography, Freud reveals that it was on hearing a public reading of Goethe’s essay on “Nature” that he decided to take up a career in the natural sciences. See Freud, “An Autobiographical Study,” SE vol. 20. 8. The full title of the essay referred to by Freud is “Fragment über die Natur” [Fragment on Nature]. There is some evidence that this essay was in fact written by G.C. Tobler, a Swiss writer. For the purposes of this paper, it is only significant that Freud mentally associated the essay in question with the popular figure known as “Goethe.” Goethe makes many other appearances in Freud’s works: most notably, as a subject of Freud’s own dreams in The Interpretation of Dreams, and as an anticipator of some psychoanalytic theories in Freud’s “Goethe Prize” address. For Freud’s dreams about Goethe, see The Interpretation of Dreams, SE vol. 4. 326-327, vol. 5. 439-441, 448-449, 662-665. Freud’s comments on Goethe’s anticipation of some psychoanalytic theories can be found in his “Address Delivered in the Goethe House at Frankfurt”, SE vol. 21. 208-209.

19. Both Beyond the Pleasure Principle and “The Uncanny” were written in 1919, although Freud added some new material to Beyond the Pleasure Principle in 1920, the year in which the book was published. “The Uncanny” was published in 1919.

during the Romantic period, and finally, in the case of Freud, with pathological states associated with the unconscious. To generalize this process of inversion: what was once viewed as divine, transcendent and communicable only via divine inspiration or revelation as *Offenbarung*, becomes associated with the natural, the immanent and the elemental: the secrets of the self and of nature — secrets which can only be uncovered by the Enlightenment’s conception of revelation as unveiling, uncovering or *Enthüllung*. This is not to suggest that the project of secularization is complete in Freud, or even susceptible of completion by the forces of the Enlightenment, forces to which Freud’s work partly belongs. In this regard I agree with Charles Taylor’s comment that the term ‘secularization’ is “more a locus of questions than a source of explanations”21 — that is to say, the notion that secularization may open up just as many new problems as it resolves old ones. To make an ironic use of Freudian terminology: if the belief in Gods is comparable to a kind of neurosis, then there is little prospect of humanity being ‘cured’ of such a condition.

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