

# Visitors from beyond the Grave

## Ghosts in World Literature

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## DEMONS, GHOSTS AND SPIRITS IN THE PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

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**ABSTRACT:** It is widely accepted that philosophy started in the VI century BC as a transition from irrational thinking to the rational or philosophical thinking. This transition, however, did not take place overnight, but just the opposite. In the same way that Parmenides was a philosopher even though we only have a poem written by him, Plato used myths as a part of his explanations of several philosophical points. These situations already show what we try to demonstrate here: the so-called rational thinking –which usually belongs to philosophy - is not so pure nor rational. There are several important cases in which irrational concepts, such as demons, ghosts and spirits, were used in order to create philosophical arguments. The main figures of the philosophical panorama (i.e. Socrates, Descartes and Hegel) used these concepts that seem to belong to a different context rather than to philosophy. There is a pattern that repeats in these three philosophers –all of them lived in a period of transition. Perhaps these periods needed this kind of “out of the way” concepts to allow thinkers to face the new challenges they had to encounter.

**KEYWORDS:** *Daimon*, spirit, philosophy, Socrates, Descartes, Hegel, philosophical tradition.

Apparently, things like demons, ghosts and spirits should not be very common in the philosophical tradition. A discipline like philosophy, a paradigm of rationality and the effort of thought, hardly appears to be the best environment to support these kinds of topics. But, contrary to popular belief, these topics do appear recurrently throughout the history of philosophy. These concepts, most of the time, were used to describe different questions metaphorically that could be hard to understand or just plainly tricky. And we must confess that, in those occasions, a ghost can be very useful. We can see that usefulness in the enormous success of these beings, since they are still being used to explain several philosophical questions of the utmost importance today.

It is quite paradoxical that philosophy, which prefers questions rather than answers and uses reasoning rather than the acceptance of conventional authority or tradition, sometimes turns to ghosts, demons, and spirits to enrich the discussion or the analysis and to guide toward a clearer examination of problems.

It is our purpose here to point out some of the philosophical moments in which these types of beings were used, from Socrates to Hegel, in order

to analyse the role of ghosts and spirits in the building of philosophical thought.

### SOCRATES AND HIS *DAIMON*

Socrates is the archetypical philosopher and his influence in the world of philosophy is huge. His method is still used in our classrooms and his legacy lays in the very roots of our thought. Socrates is the paradigm of philosophy but, despite that, he used the figure of *daimon* to explain some of his philosophical conceptions.

A *daimon* or demon was a concept from the Greek mythology whose meaning changed according to the different contexts in which it appeared. In its early period it was a very vague word<sup>1</sup>. It was identified with “fate”, but later on, since it was a concept whose origin went back to the primitive gods, it was demoted to a lower rank. *Daimones* were depicted as half human and half beast and they used to fight for darkness. Despite this, Homer already rebelled against this tradition<sup>2</sup> and by the times of Socrates the concept of *daimon* had lost part of its force and was driven toward a stronger rationalization (although it is important to emphasize that this rationalization was still ambiguous in the period of the birth of philosophy).

In the fifth century BC, the concept of *daimon* was suffering an evolution, all the while still “polluted” by most of its primitive and irrational features. According to Pausanias, in his *Description of Greece*, he saw a painting of a *daimon* made by Polignoto and he described it as follows: “[the *daimon*] eats the flesh of the dead, leaving only their bones... Its colour is between black and blue, like the meat flies, it shows the teeth and it is seated on the skin of a lynx” (Paus. 10. 28. 7). A nice image.

On the other hand, for Plato<sup>3</sup>, who followed on this issue Hesiod and his *Works and Days*<sup>4</sup>, the *daimon* represented the souls of the wiser dead who deserve a special place in the other world. Plato defined a *daimon* as a being situated among mortals and immortals, since it was intended to convey human affairs to the gods and the divine matters to men.

Meanwhile, for the Pythagoreans, the *daimones* represented the souls of the dead who fly around in the air. They were something between gods and humans, and also served as a link between men and gods<sup>5</sup>. All of this shows that, in times of Socrates, the Greeks had the concept of *daimon*, although it

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<sup>1</sup> See the entry in DGE on line (consulted in July 2018): <http://dge.cchs.csic.es/xdge/δαίμων>

<sup>2</sup> For example, in the fragments in which Homer uses the form *daimoni isos*, that is, godlike: Hom., *Il.* 5. 438, 16. 705, 20. 447, 21. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Pl., *Smp.* 202 d-e.

<sup>4</sup> Hes., *Op.* 122, 314.

<sup>5</sup> Bermejo *et al.* 1996: 193.

was still ambiguous and imprecise. The evolution of the notion would lead to an identification of the idea with the “genius” that each person seems to possess in an individual level. In this context, one person can talk with his or her *daimon* as synonymous of talking with his or her own self and different from the *daimon* of the others.

Heraclitus pointed out “man’s character is his *daimon*”<sup>6</sup> and, as such, it can be good or evil. According to Democritus, “Happiness does not dwell in flocks or in gold; it is in the soul which is the home of a person’s *daimon*”<sup>7</sup>. We can see how the concept of *daimon* was getting bigger and bigger in the description of the inner and spiritual elements of human beings. In *Timaeus*, Plato followed the same idea and said that the *daimon* that dwells within each one of us is the supreme and directive authority of our moods<sup>8</sup>.

But we must, finally, arrive to Socrates and his view of the *daimon*. First of all, let us start with the conclusion. The Socratic *daimon* represents a synthesis of all the previous representations and conceptualizations of the word. All the previously indicated ideas of the Greek *daimon* arrived to Socrates in a way that allowed the master of Plato to attribute to himself his own *daimon*. So, Socrates said that he had a personal *daimon* or spirit who whispered words in his ear. It is important to stress here that Socrates did not identify his personal character with the one of his *daimon*, but kept his religious outlook on this spirit, saying that such spirit was independent from his character and possessed supernatural powers.

Anyway, Socrates said that the *daimon* was not a new god invented by him. On the contrary, Socrates sustained that this *daimon* or spirit was identified with the gods to whom the priests turn to when they wanted to tell their prophesies, the same way the Pythia of the Delphic Oracle did.

Socrates placed his *daimon* inside him, allowing him to get in contact directly with the divinity. And, in a completely new way, challenging the previous tradition on *daimones*, Socrates defended the religious character of this new inner strength. This inner religious strength, although it seems to have some irrational features, is domesticated by reason. Hence the attitude, also novel in Socrates, towards the *daimon*: he did not deny the force nor the divinity of the *daimon*, but he did not slavishly worship it either. In this sense, we can say that Socrates neither ignored nor turned himself in to the *daimon*. For Socrates it represented a synthesis between popular religion and the rationalization of philosophy.

Socrates understands the *daimon* as essentially negative. This does not mean to deny it, but that the *daimon* is something that deters him from doing

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<sup>6</sup> Heraclit, fr. 119.

<sup>7</sup> Democritus, fr. 171, cf. Kristovic 2001: 327.

<sup>8</sup> Pl., *Ti.* 90 c.

something, although it never gives him orders<sup>9</sup>. This attitude allowed Socrates to stay away from the fanaticism or the idea that someone could possess the absolute truth. And, ultimately, it was the Socratic *daimon* that was the force that put him in the path of the search for truth and the philosophical inquire.

In short, the relationship of Socrates with his *daimon* reflected both sides: the rational character of the philosopher, and his respect for the irrational that was present in the religious mysteries of the Greek culture. Such mysteries, as we can see, were very much respected by Socrates and he tried to understand them, even though he never gave himself completely to them. Through the *daimon*, Socrates seemed that he was convinced that the oldest, deepest and darkest Greek religious tradition was talking to him. It is here, in this situation, where we find the biggest paradox of all, at least considering the origin of the philosophical tradition. On the one hand, to combine the tradition from which the *daimon* came, with its magical and religious experience, and the reason of the philosopher, which was Socrates' main focus. On the other hand, to do so dialectically is a very difficult task, but we have to make an attempt in order to honour the irrational origins of the rational thinking<sup>10</sup>.

#### DESCARTES AND *LE MALIN GÉNIE*

The description of the origin of this concept is similar to a tale. It is a cold and snowy winter night, the whole world seems mired in the silence and torpor. Descartes, despite his rationalism, begins to doubt everything that surrounds him: Is it possible that 2+2 is not 4 anymore? Is it possible that all there is around the house, the fire in the chimney, is merely a dream? What if an evil genius is fooling me?<sup>11</sup>

It is surprisingly easy to arrive to these hypotheses even though its origin is the rational thinking imposed by this philosopher. The evil genius or evil

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<sup>9</sup> The Socratic *daimon* deters the philosopher in several occasions. For example: - It prevents him from leaving a place until repairing a fault (*Phdr.* 242 b-c). / - It deters him from talking to certain people (*Th.* 151 b) / - The *daimon* prevents Socrates from getting up to have certain intellectual encounter (*Euthd.* 272 e) / - It tries to convince Socrates to not inform Alcibiades of his hobby (*Alc.I* 103, 105 d, this dialogue has been attributed to Plato, but there are still discussions on the question of its authenticity) / - It deters him from intervening in politics (*Ap.* 31 d) / - The *daimon* tries to convince Socrates to ask his friend Timarcus to stay at home and to not leave the house, but Timarcus, ignoring him, gets out and commits a murder (*Thg.* 129 a-c). / - Socrates is also asked to dissuade the Athenians to initiate the expedition to Sicily (*Thg.* 129 d). It is important to stress here that the *Theages* presents several problems that make difficult to acknowledge its authenticity. For example, Lamb considered that Plato was not the author because the dialogue was inferior and with a faint un-Socratic atmosphere (even though in antiquity was regarded as a Platonic work). See Lamb 1927: ix-xxi.

<sup>10</sup> Further reasoning on this issue can be seen in Kingsley 1999: 118-132.

<sup>11</sup> See Mongin 2013: 9-10.

demon was a resource used by Descartes in order to radicalize the search for a clear and evident knowledge. The idea consisted in building the hypothesis that perhaps we were created by a God who sought deluding us, even in the knowledge that seemed obvious. A God that made us in a way that, when we think that we are living in a true reality, we are, in fact, wrong. According to this philosophical approach, we could be living in error, since this evil genius might be toying with us. This issue threw a torpedo into the seas of reality. How can we be sure of reality if there is a possibility that we are being misled? And then, we should not forget, how can philosophy, the mother of critical thinking, offer such a solution to the understanding of reality when *le malin génie* seems related to superstition?

So, let us explain how it works. Descartes wrote in his *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations of First Philosophy* that he was going to use the methodical doubt as the very first tool in his pursuit of an epistemic method. He went from the universal doubt to seek an unquestionable first truth upon which to lean all of his system. We can roughly describe the process. There were three levels of doubt in Descartes' philosophical proposal: the senses, dreams and the devil genius.

First, the senses may deceive us in many occasions and they can induce us the error, so, there is no other alternative than doubting the external experience.

Second, the dreams show us a false reality and we believe them while we are sleeping. There is no other way than believing them and without waking up we would never know what is true and what is false.

Third, the evil genius or evil demon, this character that can make us doubt the evidence of mathematics or the experience of the evidence itself. The whole world might be a huge scene were unreal situations are being faked.

It is well known that long before Descartes these themes had already been used. The question of dreaming needed to be answered. Philosophy needed some indisputable evidence to substantiate the rational thinking here. For example, in *Theaetetus* Plato had already proposed the dream argument<sup>12</sup>. In this dialogue, *Theaetetus* agrees with Socrates that what appears to a dreamer is not real<sup>13</sup>. As a consequence, it is likely that there is no reality and everything is a phantasmagoria. This topic was particularly spread in the Baroque period, as we can also see in Shakespeare or Pedro Calderón de la Barca.

The problem here is that now we have a very difficult task to overcome. How can one be sure that there is no real devil genius? Descartes tried to answer that question by saying that God, in his power, would never allow such thing to happen. But there is always the issue that, once created the idea, is not so easy

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Suter 1976.

<sup>13</sup> Pl., *Tht.* 158 b-d.

to rule it out. Is there a devil genius? Are we living in the *Matrix*? Are we just brains in a vat?<sup>14</sup>

The only purpose of this evil genius is misleading us. He has a superhuman power over us, he can make us sleep, or dream, as vividly as if we were actually awake. The devil genius can make us believe that 2+2 is 5. Even the fundamentals of logic are under his attack. It is here, at this point of no return, at the height of this doubt induced by this weird spirit, where everything around us may be false. It is here where we need something that has to be absolutely certain. Descartes took us from this situation and said: I know that I am some kind of being that exists, I am aware of myself. I can ignore my own nature; in fact, I can be completely wrong about what I am, but I am completely true and indubitable; and even more, I know with absolute certainty that I am a being who, at the very least, has experience of his conscience<sup>15</sup>. This is the famous Cartesian "*cogito ergo sum*" –I think, therefore I am.

The evil genius is one of the cornerstones of Modernity and once it was brought into life by Descartes, the necessity of expelling it from the castle of reason grew in importance. It appeared like a contradiction because, on the one hand, we had reason and philosophy, and, on the other hand, we had faith and the concepts of the realm of the fantastic and wonderful, such as the devil demon. Why did Descartes decide to unsettle us bringing about such a character? Perhaps the right answer is that what Descartes really did was to announce the death of the devil genius. That is, perhaps he removed all sense to the presence of an imaginary and mythical element, more proper from the superstition rather than the philosophical thought<sup>16</sup>. This concept needed to be overcome in order to get over the medieval reasoning that was still going on in Descartes' time. The devil genius was the announcement that to achieve a real philosophical and scientific rationality we had to get rid of this kind of concepts that were more typical of the superstition than the philosophical thought.

As we have seen, with the Cartesian devil genius happened the same as with the Socratic *daimon*. It seems that in the periods in which there is a clash of paradigms, philosophy tends to use these kind of fantastic ideas or concepts which are so strange to the rational tradition that is the gem of philosophical thought. This is one of our explanations of the presence of devils, ghosts and spirits in the philosophical tradition<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> For further readings on this amazing topic, see Putnam 1981: 1-3. The "Brains in a vat" theory is the first chapter. See also the online chapter <http://www.iep.utm.edu/brainvat/> (consulted September 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Descartes, *Meditations of First Philosophy*, first meditation.

<sup>16</sup> Velázquez Delgado 2005: 162.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, the chapter devoted to Descartes in Bermúdez 2012: 95-101.

This clash of paradigms was represented by the irrational tradition, on the one hand, and the philosophical and scientific thought, on the other. The irrational has the ability to use the symbolic, the fantasy, the use of metaphors, certain rhetorical turns, the imagination, etc. All these tools are part of the panoply at hand for the irrational thought. However, for the philosophical thought, the main instrument is always reason.

### HEGEL AND THE ABSOLUTE SPIRIT

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was a late thinker who needed time and maturity to give shape to his philosophical doctrine. It took him a while to find the concept of the Spirit that later on was the very fulcrum of his thought. He believed that could reveal the ultimate truth of reality and of all human history. Hegelian philosophy is overwhelmingly comprehensive and was a huge effort made to try to give an explanation to all reality. His books were written in a complex and abstract jargon which made them very difficult to understand. Hegel was an idealist and a monist: he was an idealist because he believed that reality was, ultimately, something not material (what he would call eventually “Spirit”). And he was a monist because he believed that all things from reality were aspects of a single thing (also the Spirit in its development as we will see).

When this German philosopher died in 1831, he left such apotheosis in the philosophical panorama that inevitably a period of depression or crisis could not be helped. His figure was so outstanding that no other philosopher after him could avoid thinking or rethinking his theories<sup>18</sup>.

The main philosophy that comes from Hegel was that all phenomena from our reality, all of them (from our own consciousness to even the metaphysical foundations of politics or science), are just aspects of a single Spirit. This concept, the Spirit, which has drawn our attention in these pages, is quite complex, since it includes the concepts of “mind” and “idea” in the same thought. This term comes from the German word “Geist”, that is aptly translated as “spirit”<sup>19</sup>. It was important, within the framework of idealism represented by Hegel, on the one hand, the idea of a contrast between Spirit and Nature and, on the other hand, the idea of a reconciliation of both, or absorption of the tension we mentioned through the spirit<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. D’Agostini 2009: 13ff.

<sup>19</sup> Traditionally, *Geist* has been translated as “spirit”, however, this word does not do justice to the full meaning of the German concept. *Geist* is halfway between spirit and mind. Its connotations are much more mental than the word “spirit” and, as well, more spiritual than the term “mind”. It is difficult to understand the term in its fullest sense. It is even more difficult to explain it.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Ferrater 1988: 1016-1018.



Hegel used the concepts “idea” or “absolute idea” as if they meant the same than “Spirit” (*Geist*). In some sense they are the same with the minor difference that the Idea is the abstract aspect of a concrete and living reality of the Spirit<sup>21</sup>. The main difficulty we face here in order to analyze the concept is the definition of Spirit, since, in a certain way, the Spirit is everything. Better said, it is not only “everything”, but also “the truth about everything”. The Spirit begins its philosophical journey as a partial truth that needs to be completed.

We can offer here several statements in order to try to clarify the meaning of the concept of Spirit in the Hegelian tradition:

The Spirit appears as the object and the subject of the self-conscience. The Spirit is also a Universal that unfolds itself. The phenomenology of the Spirit (which is also the title of the most important of Hegel writings) is the description of the history of that self-unfolding. For Hegel, the Spirit is the very core of existence, the icing of the cake, the quintessence of being, the ultimate essence of being.

The whole historical process that constitutes reality is the development of this Spirit towards the self-awareness. When this state is finally reached, all that exists, everything that participates in the being, will be in harmony with itself. Hegel used the term “absolute” to name this state of self-consciousness of everything<sup>22</sup>.

This process we are trying to describe here, which would form an inherent part of reality itself, was not covered by Hegel as a material process of change. It would be beyond the material. Hegel did not think that the mind or spirit had appeared from an inanimate nature, but as something that pre-existed, which was the subject of the historical process that was the reality.

Let us think again about the concept we are analyzing –the “Spirit”. According to the Hegelian tradition, there were two structures: mind and reality. We should not assume that change did not affect both structures: in other words, change seems to be the only perennial thing in our world. We should not assume either that reality must be divided into thoughts and objects of thought. So, if the structures of mind were aspects of the Spirit, and thoughts and objects were also aspects of Spirit, we must conclude that all reality is Spirit.

We can see here that in the very core of the Hegelian metaphysics we found a concept as abstract and almost magical as Spirit. Undergoing the historical development of reality this concept is lying there, showing us that all reality is a historical process. If philosophy were a castle, the Hegelian Spirit would be its tower, understanding this concept as the innermost and strongest structure of a castle.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ferrater 1988: 1017.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Bermúdez 2012: 192ff.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the Hegelian notion of Spirit has influenced many different philosophical traditions. If we add this idea to the previous concepts of *daimon* and *le malin genie*, we can see that inside the philosophical thought there is a strong current of irrational thinking. We must assume that these concepts used by such an important group of philosophers belong to a different tradition: the tradition of the irrational. We could say that perhaps these were only words, but in philosophy nothing is left by chance. Every word is used with a purpose, and there could have been very different concepts using different terms. But Socrates, Descartes and Hegel chose these ideas: *daimones*, *geniuses* and *spirits*. The very roots of philosophy perhaps are deeply sunk in the language of magic, in the epic poetry, in the powers of the shamans<sup>23</sup>. Perhaps there is another reality behind the racks of philosophy. Perhaps we cannot continue judging things by their appearance. We can begin to see the underlying philosophical principles behind the philosophical tissue, the basic patterns that are repeated throughout the history of philosophy, and all of these point to an idea, that the rational and the irrational are strongly interconnected.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Kingsley 1999: 118.