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From Plato and Xenophon to Apuleius and Maximus of Tyre: Evolving Interpretations of the Visibility of Socrates' Daemon

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Abstract. Socrates' daemon, an essential part of Platonic religious and cosmological theories, has attracted ongoing debate since the fourth century BCE. This paper examines evolving scholarly interpretations of the daemons' perceptual accessibility, ranging from Plato and Xenophon's portrayal of its exclusively audible nature to the reinterpretations of this daemonic attribute advanced by second-century CE Middle Platonists Apuleius and Maximus of Tyre. Both Apuleius and Maximus sought to systematize Platonic demonology amidst the Second Sophistic Movement. To validate daemons' existence, they had to portray their visibility, rather than rendering them as abstract concepts. However, due to differences in rhetorical aims—Apuleius, as a Latin writer, sought to adapt Platonism for a Roman audience, while Maximus, as a Greek philosopher, sought to promote philosophical cultivation—they held divergent interpretations of daemons' nature and visibility. Investigating the evolution of demonology and the divergent interpretations of daemon's visibility in the second century CE reveals the larger historical and intellectual background that shaped the Middle Platonism perspectives.

Keywords: Daemon/ Daimon/ Daimonion, Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Apuleius, Maximus of Tyre

1. Introduction

In ancient Greece, the term 'daemon' (*daimôn*) — or its plural 'daemons' (*daimônas*) — referred to either gods or, more commonly, to intermediary spirits dwelling between mortals and the divine. With the rise of Christianity, daemon slowly evolved into the negatively connoted "demon," an etymological transformation that obscured the originally neutral, even benevolent, notion of these figures in Greek thought. Although the appearance of the daimonic spirit traces back to Archaic Homeric epics, it was first theorized philosophically in *Plato's Apology* (399 BCE), wherein Socrates' personal daemon is framed as a divine inner voice that deterred him from immoral or erroneous judgements [1]. Xenophon, a contemporary of Plato and a student of Socrates, similarly portrayed Socrates' daemon as heard rather than seen, only audible to Socrates [2]. Later philosophers continued to grapple with whether daemons were actually visible and came to different conclusions.

This paper explores how and why second-century CE Middle Platonists redefined the perceptual visibility of Socrates' daemon, focusing specifically on competing interpretations proposed in

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Apuleius' *De Deo Socratis* and Maximus' *The Philosophical Orations 8-9*. This interpretive shift concerning the Platonic daemon reflects the broader historical and intellectual context of second-century CE, characterized by a widespread revival of classical Greek philosophical traditions in the Second Sophistic Movement. Apuleius, a Numidian Latin writer, argues that visibility depends on divine favor and the choice of the individual daemon, suggesting that Socrates' daemon may have actually been visible, but to him alone. By contrast, Maximus, a Greek philosopher, proposes that a daemon's visibility depends on the human perceiver rather than the daemon, explaining that one who is spiritually cultivated can behold daemons as oracles. This paper attributed their different arguments and sources to distinct writing intentions.

2. Background

Plato and Xenophon provide the earliest accounts of Socrates' daemon, framing it as an exclusively audible voice *(phonê tis*) [1]. Most of their accounts were published years after Socrates' trial. Both use the neuter substantive *daimonion*, meaning "something divine, daemonic," rather than the masculine noun *daimon*, signaling its indeterminate nature: Socrates never claims to know who or what sends the signal, only that it is trustworthy. Its invisibility presents the *daimonion* as an abstract guiding source rather than a distinct deity. Plato portrays the *daimonion* as exclusively *apotreptic*, turning Socrates away from actions without ever urging him to act [1]. By presenting the *daimonion* as a purely inhibitory, unnamed force, Plato seeks to preserve Socrates' autonomy and philosophical integrity as a rational thinker.

Xenophon, by contrast, argues that the *daimonion* not only restrains Socrates from wrongdoings but sometimes directs him toward right actions. In *Memorabilia* 1.1.4 and *Apology* 12, Xenophon describes that Socrates received positive counsel from his divine sign [2, 3]. Xenophon situates the *daimonion's* protreptic function within established Homeric and Greek divination traditions, insisting that "[Socrates] was no more bringing in anything strange than are other believers in divination, who rely on augury, oracles, coincidences and sacrifices" [3]. This strategy normalizes Socrates within Athenian traditions, though it downplays Plato's emphasis on Socrates' reason and autonomy via an exclusively *apotreptic* daemon. Despite nuanced differences, both Plato's and Xenophon's portrayals could have served to exonerate Socrates from being accused of irrationality, mysticism, and sacrilege.

Plato's and Xenophon's abstract depictions of *daimonion* have sparked continuous debate over whether Socrates' *daimonion* should be understood as a reasonable intuition or as an external divine intervention [4, 5]. Representative proponents of the latter view were Apuleius and Maximus, Middle Platonic thinkers from the latter half of the second century CE. Writing during the Second Sophistic, they sought to systematize and promote Platonic doctrines at a time when the relationship between the divine and humans was under renewed scrutiny, not least due to Christianity's rise [6]. As E.R. Dodds observes, the second and third centuries were marked by heightened concern over divine providence and humans' contact with the divine [7]. This cultural climate made the perceptibility of daemons urgent: a divine sign experienced only as a private inner voice, as in Plato and Xenophon, could be dismissed as delusion rather than genuine revelation, as the skeptic in Maximus' *Oration 8* suggests. Such dismissal threatened to undermine the intellectual legitimacy of Platonic tradition. By arguing for daemons' visibility, Apuleius and Maximus reinforced the credibility of daemons as intermediaries between gods and humans and, in doing so, strengthened the coherence and defensibility of Platonic tradition.

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3. Apuleius: visibility as divine will and a daemon's choice

In *De Deo Socratis*, Apuleius situates daemon within a cosmic hierarchy of divine beings, drawing on Platonic metaphysics and Homeric and Vergilian epic traditions. Apuleius defines daemons as intermediate beings that occupy the realm of air between aetherial gods and mortal humans. The higher Olympians, though not estranged from human affairs, are removed from direct contact with humans due to their supreme hierarchy and can only be approached through intellectual contemplation, priesthood, and sacrificial rituals. Daemons are the spatial and practical bridge between humans and gods, two otherwise unconnected realms, with designated members allotted to oversee specific areas. They are beings that are "by species, rational by nature, emotional in mind, aerial in body, and eternal in time," sharing immortality and rationality with the gods above and emotional susceptibility with the humans below [8]. Adopting Plato's voice, Apuleius explains that "[daemons] carry both our desires and our good deeds to the gods," "[conveying] prayers from here and gifts from there, and go back and forth carrying requests from here and help from there," while also acting with their own agency [8]. Daemons' appearance on earth encompasses dreams, omens, the flight of birds, or even the appearance of the gods themselves [8].

Daemons' intermediate nature makes their visibility possible yet complex. Apuleius connects daemons' visibility to the physical composition of their bodies, which are constituted of "such sparse, bright, fine strands" of air that transmit ordinary perception and prevent daemons from being perceived by normal human gaze [8]. Human vision simply passes through, is blinded by, or slides off daemon bodies under ordinary conditions, unless "by divine favor [daemons] permit themselves to be seen" [8]. In other words, Apuleius argues that daemons' visibility is not a fixed property but one that depends on a daemon's own decision and the permission from divine authority to make itself perceptible to a specific human. The selectivity of daemon's visibility makes it more personal, meaningful, and deliberate when it occurs.

To substantiate daemons' selective visibility, Apuleius draws on the cultural authority of Homeric and Virgilian epics. He argues that the "gods" who appear to epic heroes and designated mortals are not the Olympian gods themselves, but daemons endowed with shapeshifting power who execute divine volition. Citing the scene in the *Iliad* where Minerva descends through the Greek army to restrain Achilles, he quotes: "Only to him is she clear, no other man beholds her" [8]. For Apuleius, this "she" figure is a daemon that, by Minerva's favor, assumes her form and reveals itself only to Achilles. Apuleius then cites Virgil's *Aeneid*, where Juturna, aiding her brother Turnus amidst a vast crowd of soldiers, "mingles with men and yet is seen by none" [8]. He similarly interprets the figure here as Juturna's messenger daemon, visible to only Turnus. These epic examples provide authoritative evidence that selective daemonic visibility is not a novelty of Platonic philosophy, but something embedded in Greek and Roman literary traditions. Apuleius argues that the emotional "gods" depicted in those epics are better understood as daemons who "feel pity, resentment, sorrow, joy, and every state of the human mind," because the truly transcendent Olympian gods are not subject to emotional turbulence [8].

Within this framework, Apuleius proposes the possibility of a personal daemon that expresses divine favor and guidance toward a specific virtuous individual: "a personal guardian, single overseer, household watchman, private caretaker, intimate acquaintance, tireless observer, inescapable onlooker, inseparable witness, who reproves [one's] bad deeds and approves [one's] good ones" [8]. Apuleius argues that Socrates' virtue, lifelong philosophical contemplations, and piety make him exactly the sort of mortal who would attract the care of a personal daemon to guide him; Socrates, in turn, also worships this daemon as his guiding spiritual force. The exclusively

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restraining nature of Socrates' daemon (*apotreptic*) pertains to Socrates' philosophical autonomy, since he can actively choose his actions as a rational thinker. In this sense, Apuleius frames Socrates' daemon as a fitting divine attendant for a mortal endowed with exceptional intellect and moral virtues. Additionally, Apuleius believes that Socrates' daemon is in fact visible, as "[Socrates] often stated openly that it was not a voice but a heavenly sign that he had received" [8]. He suggests that the sign Socrates described might actually have been an appearance of his personal daemon, perceptible only to Socrates, as Minerva was to Achilles. For Apuleius, it is unsurprising that Socrates, a man with "wisdom… equal to any divinity," is chosen to perceive this supernatural force [8]. If anyone could perceive a daemon, it should be Socrates.

4. Maximus of tyre: visibility as a perceiver's spiritual clarity

While Apuleius's theories appear straightforward, Maximus begins by frankly admitting the difficulty of understanding this subject. At the opening of *Oration 11*, he acknowledges that the notion of daemon is prone to debates, "given that their nomenclature is unclear, their nature obscure, and their powers a matter for dispute" [9]. Maximus further concedes that his arguments may shift across his lectures, and this deliberate inconsistency runs throughout his work to mirror his internal thought processes. Indeed, the forty-one lectures in *The Philosophical Orations* are not a finished set of philosophical theories, but rather Maximus' ongoing interrogation of Platonic and Homeric traditions. In the introduction to *Orations 8-9*, Professor Michael Trapp states that the closest form that parallels Maximus' two lectures on daemon is Apuleius' *De Deo Socratis* [9]. Indeed, Maximus also argues for daemon's visibility and explains daemon within a hierarchical framework of divine beings: intermediary beings occupying the middle position in the hierarchy that separates gods from humans, capable of communion with both realms. In *Oration 8*, Maximus situates demonology within Homeric traditions, just as Apuleius did. Yet, despite the similarities, Maximus arrives at a fundamentally different explanation of daemon's formation and visibility in *Oration 9*.

In contrast to Apuleius' identification of daemons as a class of aerial beings composed of refined substance, Maximus argues that daemons are human souls that have shed their bodies. He writes that, when a body perishes, "the soul, holding itself firmly together, swims free on its own" and "makes the crossing away from the earth, becomes a creature of the air, and is given the name *daimon*" [9]. The perception of souls encased in mortal bodies is confined by flesh, confused by shapes and colors, and "obstructed by the misty air" [9]. Once freed, they can finally "see Beauty itself with [their] own eyes and rejoice in it" [9]. The freed souls who can see true beauty pity the confined mortal souls, so god assigns these freed souls, now daemons, to "[patrol] the earth and [involve] themselves with men of all different types… helping the good, avenging the victims of injustice, and punishing wrongdoers" [9].

Daemons are always present and active; what makes their presence seem inconsistent and selective is the human watcher's ability to perceive them. The daemon sees clearly because death has removed perceptual obstruction. Embodied humans, contrarily, remain encumbered by these obstructions that cloud their perception. Maximus implies that, to perceive a daemon, the watcher must have cleared this fog through philosophical cultivation or a moment of spiritual clarity. Therefore, a daemon's perceptibility to a given mortal is not a passive blessing dispensed by divine volition, but an outcome generated when the individual soul rids itself of internal perceptual blockages. For Maximus, daemon's visibility parallels an oracle. Just as an oracle's presence is meaningless to one without the wisdom to interpret it correctly, a daemon is invisible to a soul who lacks intellectual clarity. Maximus states that one can perceive a daemon either by hearing it, seeing it, or both [9]. The latter two require more spiritual clarity. In this framework, the only auditory

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nature of Socrates' daemon stems not from the daemon itself being invisible by nature, but from Socrates' inability to see it.

At the end of *Oration 9*, Maximus offers three personal encounters with daemons: "I have seen the Dioscuri, in the form of bright stars, righting a ship in a storm. I have seen Asclepius, and that not in a dream. I have seen Heracles, in waking reality" [9]. Maximus' specification that he saw these daemons, or oracles, while awake is deliberate. A daemon that is visibly present in real life delivers its guidance directly, and nothing mediates between the daemon and the watcher. Thus, Maximus suggests that the most reliable oracle is one that is visible and rightly interpreted by someone who has cultivated the intellect to receive it.

5. Comparisons of Apuleius and Maximus' portrayals

Although Apuleius and Maximus draw on similar sources, especially Homer, Plato, and Xenophon, they explain the visibility of daemons in different ways. Both build their arguments on Plato's metaphysical cosmos, in which daemons mediate between gods and humans, while also drawing on Xenophon's association between daemons and traditional forms of divination. Maximus further alludes to chariots' upward climb in Plato's *Phaedrus* by linking the perception of daemons to the soul's ascent toward Beauty. Despite drawing from similar sources, Apuleius and Maximus diverge when explaining *how* daemons are visible: for the former, visibility depends on the divine, yet for the latter, on the human perceiver. This paper argues that this difference stems from their different target audiences and rhetorical aims.

Apuleius, writing in Latin, adapts Platonic demonology for a Roman audience. Unlike Maximus, who draws most of his sources from Homer and Plato, Apuleius incorporates Latin poets. As scholar S. J. Harrison argues, *De Deo Socratis* is embedded in Roman literary traditions, as it draws on Latin authors such as Ennius, Plautus, and Virgil, besides Homer [10]. In Harrison's words, "Apuleius takes up a traditional theme prominent in the contemporary writing of the Greek Second Sophistic and turns it into a Latin and Roman form for a Western audience" [10]. Apuleius' argument that a daemon's visibility depends on divine favor and the daemon's choice can be situated in his cultural context. In Roman religion, all divine revelation was conventionally channeled through ritual observances designed to elicit prophetic oracles. The gods are the ones who choose to send the oracles, just as daemons become perceptible when they choose; human recipients remain largely passive in this process. Although it would be an overstatement to draw a direct parallel between Apuleius' daemon model and Roman augural practice, the connections may be implied.

By contrast, Maximus, a Greek writer, prioritizes neither the Roman adaptation of Platonism nor Apuleius' rhetorical accommodation; instead, he deploys Platonic thought to nurture sustained philosophical reflection and spiritual refinement across Greco-Roman audiences. As John Bussanich explains in the Bryn Mawr Classical Review of Trapp's edition, Maximus was "not a doctrinaire Platonist, but one who espouses beliefs in theology and ethics acceptable to Platonists, Aristotelians, and Stoics alike" [11]. His teachings were more of a Greek paideia—a comprehensive education and upbringing for an individual—than the doctrines of systematic Platonic philosophy. Similarly, Jereon Lauwers argues in *Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Sophistry in the High Roman Empire* that Maximus' orations are best understood as *protreptic* works that direct the audience toward philosophy as a way of life [12]. Accordingly, Maximus presents the perception of daemons as the reward of one's philosophical and moral progress, urging his audience to cultivate their spirits. In this respect, his account reflects Plato's ideal of *periagōgē*, the soul's reorientation toward truth and reason [13].

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Apuleius' and Maximus' use of different evidence further reflects these different aims. Apuleius relies almost exclusively on authoritative literary traditions, grounding his account in Homer, Virgil, and other canonical poets, whereas Maximus incorporates his personal testimonies. Given that Apuleius has been previously accused of using magic to seduce his wife Pudentilla, his reliance on established authorities may have helped distance his account of daemons from association with supernatural experience [14]. The sole reliance on acknowledged literary traditions also makes his argument more credible to the Romans. By contrast, Maximus incorporates three personal accounts of daemons. Because he argues that only philosophically advanced individuals can perceive them, these testimonies serve as rhetorical proof of his own intellectual attainment, making him a more reliable speaker. These real-life testimonies also invite his audience to pursue the same spiritual cultivation.

6. Conclusion

This paper has traced the evolved interpretation of Socrates' daemon from Plato's and Xenophon's accounts of its exclusively audible nature to Apuleius' and Maximus' reexamination of its possibly visible quality. Both Apuleius and Maximus, second-century Middle Platonist thinkers, sought to promote Platonic philosophy during the Second Sophistic Movement. However, their explanations of daemons' nature and how they could be visible diverged due to their distinct stances and writing intentions. Adapting Platonism for Roman institutional religion, Apuleius locates daemons' visibility in divine favor and the daemons' choice. By contrast, Maximus, whose work seeks to cultivate sustained philosophical reflection across Greco-Roman audiences, roots daemonic perceptibility entirely in the perceiver's inner spiritual lucidity.

This paper acknowledges its limitations in drawing on a relatively narrow source base. The analysis of Middle Platonic thinkers relies primarily on *De Deo Socratis* and *Orations 8-9*, and a fuller study would incorporate Plutarch's *De Genio Socratis*, which offers another distinct Middle Platonist treatment of the same daemon question, despite being written earlier, in the late first century CE. Future research should also examine the possible influence of Neopythagorean thought on both authors' daemon hierarchies. It should also situate Platonist thinkers' thought within the Stoic and Christian polemical context, particularly Augustine's direct critique of Apuleius in *City of God*, to situate this debate on humanity's relationship with the divine within the broader religious transformation of the Roman Empire.

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