Evagrius Ponticus

The Desert Fathers, on the whole, were, or at least presented themselves as being, uninterested in theoretical speculation about life. But their spiritual doctrine was nevertheless systematised in a highly influential way by one of their number, Evagrius Ponticus († 399). Although he later fell into disfavour on account of some decidedly questionable Origenistic theories about the origins of things and their final destiny, it was recognised in antiquity that his ascetic doctrine was of immense value and was not invalidated by his dubious philosophical beliefs.

Although Cassian never mentions him by name, it is certain that he was deeply influenced by Evagrius, and so, anonymously, Evagrius has played a considerable role in the development of western spirituality, a role which scholars have recently come to appreciate more and more.

Evagrius had a flair for psychology, which enabled him to present in an unusually coherent and persuasive form the fruits of the monastic tradition of self-knowledge.

Evagrius accepts the general monastic belief that the arch-enemy of the soul is in practice a certain kind of thought, for which the monks used the word *logismos*. The monk’s mind becomes befogged or besotted by these thoughts (both images are found in the literature) so that he cannot concentrate on the actual reality of his own life. A *logismos* is essentially a train of thought which engages the mind, so that bit by bit one drifts away from what one is supposed to be doing into a world of fantasy.

Evagrius suggests that there are basically eight general types of *logismos*, and his analysis was taken over by Cassian and was later adapted to produce the classic list of seven deadly sins.

First comes ‘gluttony’. The essence of this is not over-eating, as Evagrius sees it, nor even a desire for fancy food, though both of these are harmful. The essence of the problem, as presented by Evagrius, is anxiety about one’s health. The ‘thought’ of gluttony makes us imagine ourselves falling ill, being without necessary supplies, unable to find a doctor. Then it calls to mind other people who have fallen ill through excessive fasting. Sometimes such
people are even prompted to come and visit us to tell us their troubles. In this way the monk is persuaded to abandon his monastic diet. Notice that the heart of the temptation is a train of thought leading us further and further away from our actual condition, making us solve problems which have not yet arisen and need never arise. Evagrius himself it seems in fact fell ill towards the end of his life because of his abstention from cooked foods. He solved the problem quite realistically by changing his diet. That is the proper way to behave. The healthy procedure is to find a realistic diet and, when necessary, to modify it sensibly, not to insist stubbornly on a diet which has proved unworkable, nor to waste time and energy planning for eventualities which have not yet arisen.

The next ‘thought’ is that of fornication, and once again Evagrius presents it chiefly as a matter of allowing our fantasies to run away with us. Evagrius knew what he was talking about here. As a young man, he had been a successful deacon in Constantinople, and he was used to flee from there because of an unadvised love-affair. Afterwards it appears that he had some kind of breakdown, from which he recovered thanks to the ministration of St Jerome’s friend, Melania the Elder, who was leading the monastic life at Jerusalem. The ‘thought’ of fornication fills our minds with desire for ‘a variety of bodies’ (notice how abstract it all is). This is not a matter of a real human relationship with a real human being. A real relationship which goes wrong does far less damage than these purely imaginary entanglements. And the most sinister aspect of these fantasies is that they persuade us that all our attempts to lead a spiritual life are going to get nowhere. If they persist, they will eventually produce actual hallucinations, Evagrius suggests; we shall start acting out detailed erotic scenes in our imaginations, so that we shall be quite taken up with something totally unreal, instead of trying to cope with what is really there.

Then comes love of money, and once again Evagrius sees the essential problem as being one of futile planning for an unreal future. This ‘thought’ conjures up in our minds the picture of ourselves living on into a terrible old age, in which we are too weak to work. We shall fall ill in dreadful poverty and shall have to face the embarrassment of begging from others. What we ought to do, of course, is have faith in God and leave the future to him. Hoarding money as a bulwark against the future boils down to lack of faith.

Next we run into the ‘thought’ of depression, which often follows on from indulging in foolish wants. ‘Thoughts’ of this kind lead us by the memory to dwell on the good old days, when we were at home with our parents (or whatever cherished memory we have of the past). Then we are suddenly made to realise that all that is gone and we cannot get it back, so we get plunged into depression.

Again the problem has arisen because we got out of step with present reality.

Next comes anger, which can turn even the most gentle person into a savage beast. It particularly prevents us from praying, because we become obsessed with the thought of someone we take to have wronged us. If we allow this kind of anger to persist, it will ruin our bodily health, give us nightmares and, eventually, according to Evagrius, it will make us hallucinate poisonous snakes. Elsewhere he suggests other kinds of bad dream which this ‘thought’ provokes. Yet again we see how all the trouble comes from failing to perceive the real issue. After all, if someone has wronged us, our Christian duty is simply to forgive them, and that should be the end of it. Evagrius suggests that, rather than brooding on our wrongs, we should go out of our way to do something nice for someone whom we think has wronged us.

After anger comes the famous noonday demon, accidie or listlessness. This is a condition in which we cannot settle down to anything; nothing appeals to us, nothing engages our interest. We go wandering round the room, peering out of the window to see whether we are any nearer to supper time. The day seems eighty hours long. And nobody comes to visit us, so we start thinking bitter thoughts about the lack of charity among other people. Then we begin to wonder what the point of it all is anyway; we could perfectly well lead our Christian lives elsewhere. Everything that we have to do goes sour on us. The point of this temptation is, of course, to make us abandon our course. And the tragedy is that if we do run away, we take all our problems with us, and shall run into exactly the same difficulties anywhere we go.

The last two ‘thoughts’ are the most sinister of all: vainglory and pride. Vainglory is simply daydreaming about our own magnificence. The monastic content of it in Evagrius is a daydream about becoming a famous holy man, sought out by hordes of admiring women, and by people seeking miraculous cures and exorcisms. Finally they will come and drag us off to be ordained... Alas, as likely as not, just when our imagined glory is at its height, the demons will play a further trick on us and we shall find that the holy priest we imagined ourselves to be is wrestling with the most humiliating thoughts against chastity.

Pride is the final madness. It consists essentially in supposing that we can do anything without God.

All these ‘thoughts’ have a common element, in that they all derive from self-love. And they all also involve a wrong notion of God. In fact, they all trap us into living in a false human world, wrongly structured around ourselves, and leading to a wrong God.
And so they are all designed really to ensure that we cannot approach the true God in anything like genuine prayer.\textsuperscript{16} Genuine prayer, however, is what we have to aim at, according to Evagrius. But we must proceed slowly. Pure prayer, which is closely related to that knowledge of God which is our highest goal,\textsuperscript{17} cannot reach its full flowering in us until we have progressed through several stages.\textsuperscript{18}

First of all, we must try to defeat the ‘thoughts’ and the passions which they arouse. Evagrius seems to be using the Stoic notion of ‘passions’, meaning ways in which our human faculties get trapped into pointless and irrational reactions.\textsuperscript{19} They are not to be identified with emotions as such.\textsuperscript{20} Passions are by definition disordered reactions, so that passionlessness can be stated to be ‘the health of the soul’.\textsuperscript{21}

It is not emotionlessness which Evagrius wishes to inculcate, but a state of harmony in which all our faculties are doing precisely what they were created to do, so that they do not disturb our equilibrium or hinder the proper clarity which the mind should have.

At the relatively humble level which we have been considering so far, the natural functioning of the soul involves our desiring faculty being directed towards virtue, our aggressive faculty being directed against all the obstacles to virtue, and our rational faculty being aimed in the direction of contemplation of reality.\textsuperscript{22}

Evagrius does not dwell very much on the natural operation of our faculty of desire, but it is important to notice its presence in the healthy soul. A healthy soul is not one which grimly does its duty, it is one which is doing what it wants to do. That is why it does not practise self-control.\textsuperscript{23} Virtue is natural to us, it is vice which is unnatural.\textsuperscript{24} Vice appears to be attractive only because our minds are seeing things awry, because of \textit{logismoi} backed by demons, whose whole purpose is to keep us in the dark and prevent us from attaining to the knowledge of God.

The first prerequisite, then, is that we should come to be aware of the truth, and Evagrius indicates that we all have a capacity for this. The whole undertaking begins with faith,\textsuperscript{25} which gives us some kind of knowledge of truth, however opaque. And there is at least a kind of latent faith, even in those who do not believe in God, according to Evagrius.\textsuperscript{26} Faith, when actualised, leads us to fear God, which leads us to make some attempt to introduce order into our lives.\textsuperscript{27} And it is this attempt which shows us what is wrong with us.\textsuperscript{28} And it is here that we need to be attentive. The demons will, for instance, try to get us into a frame of mind in which we think that we are entitled to be annoyed at somebody.\textsuperscript{29} If we succumb to this, then we shall devote our attention to the thought of the person with whom we are annoyed. What the ascetic needs to do is to focus his attention instead on the fact that he is annoyed. Instead of seeing some other human being angrily, he tries to see his own anger. He can then begin to fight against it. And at first he has to use any device for restraining anger that he can think of. But gradually we should become more adept at wielding our own powers, even if at first this only means ‘using a nail to drive out a nail’, that is to say, playing off one passion against another. For instance, pride and unchastity are reckoned to be incompatible, so we can play off the thought of one against the thought of the other.\textsuperscript{30}

But more essentially we need to reclaim anger for its proper purpose. It is always a waste of good anger to get annoyed with other human beings.\textsuperscript{31} Instead we should turn our anger precisely against our thoughts and against the demons who deploy them.\textsuperscript{32} Evagrius suggests that we should address an angry word to any thought which is troubling us, even before praying for help against it, since it is the nature of anger to disperse thoughts.\textsuperscript{33}

In this way we shall be using anger in accordance with its true nature, to clear a way through the thoughts which swarm all around us, so that we can gradually come to a clearer perception of what it is all about. Thus we move from a fairly blind lashing out against whatever seems to be getting in our way to a position where we are fighting in the daylight.\textsuperscript{34}

The desired goal of this whole exercise is a state in which we are no longer at the mercy of inappropriate reactions. And this is a profound state of balance and harmony. It is interesting that Evagrius mentions as a sign of approaching passionlessness the fact that we are no longer troubled by our dreams.\textsuperscript{35} This suggests, in more modern parlance, that the state of virtue is envisaged as one in which our subconscious is not at odds with our conscious purposes.

The fruit of passionlessness is love, and this is the doorway through which we pass to knowledge.\textsuperscript{36} All knowledge is thus characterised by charity. Though Evagrius does not elaborate on this, it is an important hint. Once we are freed from our passions, we can see and appreciate things for what they really are.\textsuperscript{37} Things are no longer simply viewed from the perspective of deranged fears and fantasies, but in the plain truth. Evagrius, rather mysteriously, says that once we have reached a certain degree of passionlessness, the mind becomes aware of its own native light.\textsuperscript{38} This seems to mean that the mind becomes conscious of its own lucidity, enabling it to see things truly.\textsuperscript{39}

This leads us into the first stages of contemplation and knowledge. Instead of living in the sticky world of the passions in which we see things largely with reference to ourselves, we can now live in a world of facts. And these, it seems, are to be viewed as essentially
a pedagogical device provided by God to lead us to the knowledge of himself.  

What Evagrius has in mind is something rather different from the romantic sort of contemplation of nature which has sometimes been recommended in recent times. For Evagrius, the essential thing is that we should come to understand the structure of things, the rationale of things.  

By contemplating the principles or reasons (logoi) of things, we come to some apprehension of the divine Logos who gives all created things their existence and reality.  

Evagrius does not seem to regard this as merely an optional development. We shall not reach the knowledge of God unless we pass through the knowledge of created realities.

However, this intermediate stage has its own dangers. We may become too fascinated by something which is less than God, whether it be our own psychological equilibrium or the clear perception of created beings. This is why Evagrius warns us that, just because we have attained to passionlessness, we should not assume that we have yet attained to true prayer. And just because we are capable of perceiving things clearly in themselves, without any disordered reaction to them, it does not mean that we have yet reached our goal. If the demons cannot any longer get at us directly through our passions, they can still occupy our minds with particular thoughts.

Prayer is defined as a ‘putting away of thoughts’. Any thought, however devoid of passion, however simple, is necessarily less than God. And the very luminosity of the mind can become a temptation, if we try to conceive of God by some kind of shaping of our mind’s light. This would seem to be one of the most insidious of all demonic attacks, because it occurs at a high level of spiritual maturity. Evagrius suggests that there is a way in which a demon can get hold of our brain and fiddle the mind’s light so that the person praying sees some kind of vision and identifies what he has seen as being God. But God can never be contained within any particularised vision. God has no shape whatsoever, so the ‘thought’ of God must be quite unlike any thought which shapes the mind. That is to say, God can never be in any simple way the ‘object’ of our understanding. He is not ‘outside’, as objects of knowledge are. He is, in fact, ‘substantive knowledge’. Knowledge of God is stated by Evagrius to be ‘co-extensive with the substance of the mind’.

Cassian derived from Evagrius the belief that the highest prayer of all is when we are no longer conscious of our prayer. A similar doctrine is in fact found in a comment on the book of Proverbs, whose authorship has recently been reclaimed for Evagrius: when we contemplate, we no more know that we are contemplating than we are conscious of our own sleeping.
According to the Origenist belief which Evagrius adopts, human beings are destined literally to become angels,54 but one essential characteristic of the life of the angels is their function of helping others.55 So for us to lead the angelic life does not, for Evagrius, mean withdrawing from all concern for others so that we can enjoy a higher spirituality on our own. The nearer we draw to God, the more we should see ourselves as being one with everybody.

We must remember that the whole edifice which Evagrius has built up rests on very solid foundations. If we lose humility, we lose everything, so any kind of mystical pretentiousness or self-satisfaction will be totally ruinous. Similarly any tendency to forget that we owe all our achievements to God will simply result in the final madness, which is pride. If Evagrius leads us to heights which we do not often find in the Desert Fathers, he never loses sight of the basic realism of the desert. Unless there is a very sound foundation, the higher reaches of the spiritual life will be no more than illusion, and a very dangerous illusion too.

Bibliography and Abbreviations

Editions used, Abbreviations

(a) Editions of particular works


Gnostikos in Frankenberg (see below), pp. 546–53.


Letters in Frankenberg, pp. 564–635.


Or. the eds of the treatise On Prayer (De Oratione) in PG 79: 1165–1200 and in Φιλοκαλία, 1 (Athens 1957), pp. 176–89, are far from satisfactory; in addition I have used several MSS including the important Paris B.N. Coislin 109. The numbering of the chapters varies slightly in different eds and MSS.


(b) Miscellaneous editions

A travers J. Muyldermans, A travers la tradition manuscrite d'Évagre le Pontique. Louvain 1932.
