Nomos, Kosmos & Dike in Plutarch

José Ribeiro Ferreira, Delfim F. Leão & Carlos A. Martins de Jesus (eds.)
Abstract
In the Timarchus myth in Plutarch’s De genio Socratis, the daimon is conceived as the highest part of the human soul, currently referred to as “intellect” (νοῦς) and wrongly believed to be internal. By contrast, in the two speeches preceding and following the myth (by Simmias and Theanor, respectively), the daimon is a superior entity assisting each man in multiple ways. This is Plutarch’s way to harmonize Plato’s different pronouncements concerning the personal daimon – an attempt anticipating later developments found in Plotinus.

One of the most controversial of Plutarch’s Moral Essays is the one entitled Περὶ τοῦ Σωκράτους δαιμονίου and generally known to scholars by the Latinized title De genio Socratis. This is a dialogue set at the time of the overthrow of the Spartan-backed oligarchic government of Thebes in 379 BC by a conspiracy involving the return of some Theban exiles and the killing of the oligarchs. Several of the characters introduced by Plutarch are Thebans taking an active part in the conspiracy, though Epameinondas, who figures prominently in the dialogue, refuses to shed the blood of fellow-citizens, in spite of his patriotic and anti-Spartan leanings.

One of the speakers in the dialogue is Simmias, one of Socrates’ pupils, whom we know from Plato’s Phaidon; another is Theanor, a Pythagorean adept who has come from southern Italy to bring back the remains of Lysis, another Pythagorean, who had died at Thebes. At one point in the dialogue the issue of the nature of Socrates’ guiding daimon is brought up, and different views are presented by three speakers: Galaxidorus, Simmias, and Theanor; the two latter characters do not limit themselves to the specific problem, but offer general doctrines concerning daimones, with particular emphasis on those that accompany each man as personal guardians.

The question of how the two parts of the dialogue, namely the historical and the doctrinal aspects, relate to each other has been the object of a great deal of controversy. It is not our purpose to tackle this problem at this time; it will suffice to remark that the prevailing trend in scholarship seems to favor the dialogue’s unity by pointing out several links connecting the two parts, and to refer to the essays by Babut and Barigazzi, which provide a detailed survey of this long-standing discussion.¹