

Evagrius of Pontus

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Introduction

Evagrius of Pontus (Evagrius Ponticus) was very influential in the development of monastic theology and spirituality. Through Cassian, his ideas spread throughout the West. His writings fell from sight after some of his ideas were posthumously condemned because they incorporated unacceptable speculations of Origen regarding preexistence and fall of souls and the universal restoration of all things (apokatastasis). However, many of his writings survived under the names of other authors and have been rediscovered and published in recent decades. Currently, these writings are much studied. Here we will outline his life, his theology, his spirituality, and finally look briefly at one aspect of his teaching, anger, which lends itself to comparison with the teachings of Cassian and St. Benedict treated elsewhere in this handbook (see article on Anger).¹

Evagrius' Life

Much of what we know of Evagrius' life comes from the Lausiac History of Palladius, who knew him. Evagrius was born at Iborra in Pontus (northern Turkey) in 346. This was the year in which Pachomius died. He was the son of a country bishop (chorbishop). St. Basil of Caesarea ordained him lector. Gregory Nazianzen ordained him deacon. After the Council of Constantinople, Evagrius was in the employ of Bishop Nectarios (381-397). He became very highly regarded as a churchman. However, he became "ensnared in the contemplation of desire for a woman." She was of the highest social class and loved him in return. A dream of punishment prompted him to leave the city and the woman. He went to Jerusalem to the monastery of Melania and Rufinus. Melania welcomed him. However, gradually he returned to his old, worldly life, changing his way of dress and manner of speech--he was intoxicated with vain glory. He started visiting women. He then was struck with a six-month-long fever. Melania, who suspected the illness might be a sign from God, prevailed upon him to promise to seek to become a monk in the desert. After his recovery, he set off to Nitria in Egypt. He lived there for two years. In the third year he went deeper into the desert, where he lived for fourteen years in Celia. There he supported himself as a calligrapher and copyist. Within fifteen years he had so purified his mind that he was deemed worthy of the gift of knowledge and wisdom and discernment. He tried to relate respectfully toward the monks who were not intellectuals. He drew up books for monks. He struggled with demons of fornication and blasphemy. He became sick from eating uncooked food, so he changed his diet. He died at the age of 54 in 399, after a life of toil and labor. This was the third year he was not troubled by carnal desires.² Evagrius thus died just before the expulsion from the desert of the "Tall Brothers," four monks who like Evagrius, made much use of the theology of Origen. Their expulsion was the result of tensions between the unlettered monks and the Origenists; the more simple monks felt that the Origenists were depriving them of any way to visualize or know God.

Works

Evagrius left behind many works. These include letters, commentaries on the Bible, and a treatise called the *Antirrheticos* where scriptural texts for expelling demons are cited. Some of his works

which concern us here are the following. The Praktikos contains 100 short chapters of asceticism. The Chapters on Prayer is a letter of 153 short chapters (cf. Jn 21.11). This work gives us Evagrius' teaching on mysticism.³ The Gnostikos is a series of 50 counsels addressed to the "gnostic," that is, to a spiritual master. The Kephalaia Gnostica contains 6 sections of 90 chapters each. It is Evagrius's great doctrinal work. It contains theses he derived from Origen which were condemned in 553. The Ad Monachos is a series of 137 proverbs addressed to monks.⁴ The Skemmata is a collection of 62 brief chapters which takes up many of Evagrius' key themes: "the interplay among the eight deadly "thoughts" (logismoi); the distinction between the life of ascetic practice (praktike) and the life of mystical knowledge (gnostike); the nature of pure prayer; the purified mind (nous) as the "place of God" which one meets the "sapphire light" of the Trinity."⁵

The proverb-like writing style which Evagrius used derived from the Stoic philosophers, from the Wisdom books of the Bible, and above all from the Sayings of the Fathers. Evagrius' pithy sayings are full of catchy images, enumerations, and definitions. They often echo the Bible. His sayings are well-honed, but deliberately tantalizing.

Spiritual Teaching

Evagrius is a representative of scholarly monasticism in the desert. He was not unique. The letters of St. Antony, though not scholarly, represent the same Origenist theological ideas which we see in Evagrius's writings. Cassian never mentions Evagrius, presumably because by his time Evagrius had been censored for his views on the origins and final destiny of human beings.⁶ However, Cassian is an example of the great influence Evagrius's ascetic doctrine exercised. His contribution consisted of systematizing the results of psychological self-knowledge according to eight logismoi or trains of thought which lead one into sin.

From Platonic philosophy, Evagrius adopts a three-part division of the soul: rational, irascible, and concupiscible. The spiritual struggle (asceticism) is establishing virtue in these parts of the soul (cf. Praktikos 89). The soul is joined to a body because it has fallen from true knowledge. Purification of the body and passionate part of the soul enables the mind to once again be united to essential knowledge.

There are two major divisions in the spiritual life: praktike, concerned with purifying the passionate part of the soul, and knowledge, where the rational part devotes itself to contemplation. The spiritual life is a struggle to rid oneself of evils related to the passionate part and ignorance related to the rational part, while establishing virtues in the passionate part and knowledge in the rational part. One must achieve practical (ascetical) life before advancing far into the world of prayer and knowledge (both of which he calls "theology").

The covering letter to the Praktikos discusses the significance of the monk's clothing. This teaching was taken up by Cassian, but not by Benedict. The rest of the work discusses the eight "thoughts" (logismoi), the passions, sleep, apatheia (passionlessness), and concludes with some instructions and sayings of the monks. The ascetical life is a struggle, a war, against the enemies of the soul: the world, the flesh, and the devil. The devil can't reach the intellect; he can only

arouse images and illusions. The devil cannot prevail against people unless they let him. Temptation becomes stronger as one grows in the spiritual life.

One fights the logismoi by discernment, custody of the heart, and bodily mortification. A logismos is the thinking faculty or its product, a thought produced by discursive thinking. An evil thought attacks the mind from the other two faculties (sensitive and spirited) and is against nature. Some thoughts are good, others impure. Hence, to paraphrase a definition given by Evagrius, a demonic logismos is a mental image which arises in a person endowed with sensibility. It appears in the lower cognitive faculty, the dianoia not the nous. The image proves attractive; a passionate movement arises which incites the person to a decision against God's law, or at least one enters into some sort of dialogue with the image, which is a sort of idol. The monk tries to separate passions from representations. Otherwise he will not be able to look on things with detachment. The wicked thoughts come from the devil or from man's wounded heart. One can't avoid all of them, but one can avoid interacting with them and consenting to them.

One must guard the heart. Attention is the mother of prayer. The best method of repelling the evil logismoi is antirrhesis, countering a temptation with a scripture quotation as Jesus did when he was tempted in the desert. One can also invoke the name of Jesus. One must discern the source of thoughts. Antony said good visions give rise to joy unspeakable and to strength and calmness of thought; others bring apprehension, confusion, dejection, sloth, hatred, fear, and instability. Whatever is disquieting comes from the devil. Each person needs to examine his conscience and manifest his thoughts to a spiritual father.

Cassian introduced the thoughts to the West (they also came there by way of translations from the works of St. John Chrysostom). Gregory the Great eliminated acedia, added envy, left out superbia (vain glory), and changed the order. Later pride and vain glory were combined, and sloth replaced acedia, leading to the standard list of seven in the West. The eight thoughts discussed by Evagrius are as follows. Gluttony and lust concern concupiscible appetites (the "body"). Sadness and anger, are associated with the irascible part of the soul; they concern things we don't have, and finally there are temptations regarding ourselves (pride and vanity) or those which arise from the specifically human side (logistikon of ourselves (sadness, vain glory, and pride). Acedia arises from several parts of ourselves.

Gluttony. Anxiety about one's health, leading to inordinate concern about food. When Evagrius' own diet of uncooked foods made him sick, he switched to cooked food.

Fornication. Desire for imaginary bodies, as unreal as the sicknesses mentioned above. This vice like the preceding tries to seduce us from orderly moral regimen.

Greed. Futile planning for an unreal future.

Sadness, which often follows from indulging in foolish wants or not getting what we want.

Anger. Can ruin health and cause bad dreams. Rather than brooding on our wrongs, we should go out of our way to do good to the person who wronged us.

Acedia (melancholy; depression). Listlessness, weariness of heart, which tempts the monk to abandon his calling.

Vain glory: Vain glory is daydreaming about our greatness, holiness, etc.

Pride: supposing we can do anything without God.

According to the Skemmata (53) these eight all arise from self-love. They all involve the wrong notion about God. They trap us into an unreal world centered on ourselves and lead to a false God. Thus they make impossible the pure prayer which is our supreme goal.

Pure prayer is closely related to the knowledge of God which is our supreme goal. It is reached through the stages we have already discussed. First, one must get rid of passions, that is, unhealthy emotions, to reach a state of harmony. One needs to desire virtue, struggle against obstacles to virtue, contemplate reality. Spidlik says Evagrius the introduced idea of apathy to Christian spirituality. He defined the relationships between apathy, charity, and gnosis thus: "'Apathy has a child called agape who keeps the door to deep knowledge of the created universe.' Apathy makes man resemble the angels, rather than God. It is even possible to say more: man becomes an angel when he has reached perfect dispassion."⁷ The primary signs of apathy are freedom from being agitated by thoughts, an ability to use one to drive out another, tranquility during dreams, prayer without distraction, when the soul begins to see its own light.⁸ In the highest form of prayer, the intuitive mind, having reached its true state and deprived of all images and achieved emotional quiet through gentleness and self-control, will see the mind like a brilliant blue light. The purified mind becomes luminous by the light of the Trinity, which comes to it as grace in certain peak moments.

If one wishes to see the state (katastasis) of the mind (nous), let him deprive himself of all representations (noemata), and then he will see the mind appear similar to sapphire or to the color of the sky. But to do that without being passionless (apatheia) is impossible, for one must have the assistance of God who breathes into him the kindred light (Skemmata 2).⁹

Faith leads to fear of God, which leads us to bring some order to our lives. Instead of being angry at someone, consider one's own anger and turn it against the evil thoughts and the devil. As one reaches passionlessness, no more troubling dreams. The fruit of passionlessness is love, and this is the doorway to knowledge. We can now live in the real world. By meditating on the logos of things we come to know the Logos. Mustn't stop with what is less than God. Prayer is putting away of thoughts, since all thoughts are less than God. Prayer is petition to God to help eliminate the thoughts. We need God's help for this. In the highest prayer, we are no longer conscious of our prayer. We strive for God, we don't attain God. We are never beyond the temptation to pride. We need to see God in all men and be concerned with their progress as much as for our own. The nearer we draw to God, the more we should see ourselves as one with everybody.

Evagrius gives a nice summary of his key ideas in the Praktikos. "Agape is the progeny of apathy. Apathy is the very flower of asceticism. Asceticism consists of keeping the commandments. The custodian of these commandments is fear of God which is in turn the offspring of true faith. Now faith is an interior good, one which is to be found even in those who do not believe in God."¹⁰

Anger

Anger is the boiling of our irascible part, said Evagrius after the Stoics. It is a stirring up against someone who has done us injury. It can lead to debility and persecution delusions.¹¹ The role of anger is to fight against demons, not human beings. Evagrius gave four signs of resentment: it

irritates the soul all day, it brings before the eyes the face of the offender, it stirs up alarming dreams and terrors of the night, it disturbs the normal activity of the mind which is contemplation. Linked to hatred, anger gives rise to a false desire for solitude. Hospitality, by contrast, is the means to reconciliation and calms excited minds. Antony cautioned his monks never to let the sun go down on their anger. The root of this vice, Dorotheos believed, was to consider ourselves superior to our neighbor. Anger is calmed by singing psalms, patience, and alms giving, said Evagrius. However, these practices must be done with proper measure and at the proper times; otherwise the effect will be short lived.¹² Anger is given to us so that we might fight against the demons and every pleasure. The demons want to direct our anger against our fellow human beings and toward earthly pleasures, and so blind the mind. One should never let one's anger drive a brother to become a fugitive. Gifts and hospitality snuff out quarrels and resentment.¹³ One can distinguish passions of the soul and passions of the body. Anger seems to be the former sort. The remedy for such a passion is spiritual love.¹⁴ When one is tempted, one should never utter angry words against an offending person before turning to prayer. Elsewhere, Evagrius is very emphatic about the harm anger does to prayer. One can't pray if one has saddened someone, is resentful. Resist desires that arise during prayer, because these can fuel anger.¹⁵ Psalms and spiritual songs cool anger.¹⁶

It is interesting to compare Evagrius' teaching on anger with modern day psychology. Here is what a blurb from a health care provider says.¹⁷ Anger is a powerful force for good or ill, an essential element of human life, of caring and loving. Like water, it becomes destructive if it is blocked. Anger means something important is going on in oneself. It is a part of caring; caring persons experience it more than others do. Anger is always paired with fear. If one is afraid of losing something one cares about, one may lash out in anger. This is called aggression; it disregards the rights of others. Aggression is a natural impulse, but we need to do something else when we are threatened, that is, be assertive, which means to strive to meet everyone's needs. This requires that one remain calm and maintain control over one's fight or flight urges. Ways to do this are self-calming techniques, negotiating skills, conflict resolution. Identify sources of anger. Maintain perspective: why do I care so much about this? Is it worth caring about?

Comparing Evagrius and the contemporary ideas, perhaps the name "natural" has been broadened since Evagrius' time to mean statistically normal. One result is that the modern health care provider is more willing to accept anger than Evagrius seems to be.

Evagrius may isolate anger too much from some other emotions, in particular desire, care, eros. In the modern view, anger arises because something one cares about very much is threatened. It energizes one to cope with the threat. Destructive anger is often the fruit of despair. One wants a chance to escape poverty or to contribute to cause or to have a voice in decisions. When one is denied such a chance one is angry. At that point one must strive to effect constructive change or to let go of one's desire or hope, however legitimate, simply because that desire or hope is unattainable. Evagrius' monk may have been in a position where he had few things he cared about, but among these would have been his fellow monks. So, it is difficult to see how Evagrius could have avoided care. What he wanted to avoid was blind passion and rage and smoldering hostility. Passion should be channeled by reason, hostility defused by hospitality. Evagrius might have given

more thought to some of the psalms before he so categorically asserted that anger and prayer are incompatible.