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# **Evagrius Ponticus' Rejection of a Magical Understanding of Grace**

## **Odrzucenie magicznego rozumienia łaski w myśli Ewagriusza z Pontu**

**Abstract.** In recent years, a growing number of studies have presented—in one way or another—various psychotherapeutic projections of a set of spiritual practices of early Christian monasticism. In an attempt to establish a dialogue between the doctrines of Late Antiquity and contemporary psychotherapy, it could be risky to extrapolate anachronistic terms, questions and discussions that are foreign to the original context of the Early Church Fathers. In order to overcome this difficulty, we will try to elucidate Evagrius Ponticus' model of psychospiritual integration through his particular understanding of the effective relations between grace and nature. This will possibly allow us to translate and understand the current interest in his psycho-spiritual model in the same terms as those in which it was formulated by Evagrius. In his effort to think about how the process of complete healing of man takes place, Evagrius takes up intuitions and ideas from the Hippocratic and Platonic traditions. These traditions disapprove of magic as an act of impiety towards the divine order inscribed in the  $\theta\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$ . Evagrius follows this fundamental intuition of rejection of magic and sorcery to integrate it into a new Christian synthesis that strives to move away from a magical understanding of the action of grace. Now, as Evagrius moves away from a magical conception of grace, certain theoretical-practical knowledge related to mental and spiritual health can be found in his writings. Evagrius is particularly interested in specifying how grace operates in the cognitive-emotional dynamics that intervene in the healing processes of the soul without contradicting or magically suspending the immanent laws of the  $\theta\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$ .

**Streszczenie.** W ostatnich latach pojawiają się coraz liczniejsze badania, które w taki czy inny sposób przedstawiają różne projekcje psychoterapeutyczne zbioru praktyk duchowych wywodzących się z wczesnochrześcijańskiego monastycyzmu. Należy jednak pamiętać, że próby nawiązania dialogu pomiędzy doktrynami z późnego okresu antycznego a współczesną psychoterapią niosą ze sobą ryzyko związane z ekstrapolacją anachronicznych terminów, pytań i dyskusji, które są obce pierwotnemu kontekstowi Ojców wczesnego Kościoła. Aby przezwyciężyć tę trudność, postaramy się objaśnić model integracji psychiczno-duchowej Ewagriusza z Pontu w oparciu o jego szczególne rozumienie efektywnych relacji między naturą a łaską. Być może pozwoli nam to również przełożyć i zrozumieć obecne zainteresowanie powyższym modelem w tych samych kategoriach, w których sformułował go sam Ewagriusz. W swoich rozważaniach nad tym, jak przebiega proces całkowitego uzdrowienia człowieka, Ewagriusz czerpie z intuicji i idei wywodzących się z tradycji Hipokratesa i Platona. Tradycje te potępiają magię jako akt bezbożności wobec boskiego porządku wpisanego w  $\theta\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$ . Ewagriusz kieruje się tą fundamentalną intuicją odrzucenia magii i czarów, aby zintegrować swój model z nową chrześcijańską syntezą, w której stara się odejść od magicznego rozumienia działania łaski. W miarę odchodzenia od magicznej koncepcji łaski w pismach Ewagriusza pojawiają się elementy wiedzy praktyczno-teoretycznej dotyczącej zdrowia psychicznego i duchowego. Szczególnie interesuje go określenie, w jaki sposób łaska działa w dynamice poznawczo-emocjonalnej będącej elementem procesów uzdrawiania duszy bez zaprzeczania immanentnym prawom  $\theta\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$  lub ich magicznego zawieszania.

**Keywords:** Evagrius Ponticus, magic, grace, Hippocrates, Plato, enchantment, nature.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Ewagriusz z Pontu, magia, łaska, Hipokrates, Platon, zaklęcie, natura.

## Introduction

In recent years, a growing number of studies have presented—in one way or another—various psychotherapeutic projections of a set of spiritual practices of early Christian monasticism. These studies have established a dialogue between the developments of Late Antiquity and the contemporary mental health sciences (Larchet 2001; 2003; 2006; 2007; Corrigan 2016; 2017; Gravier 2016; 2018; Tsakiridis 2010; Hill 2010; Trader 2012; Bradford 2011; 2012; Buju 2019; Gianfrancesco 2008; Peretó Rivas 2017; Vazquez 2015; 2017; 2018a; 2018b; 2019a; 2019b; Tobon 2010; 2013; 2020).

In view of these studies, questions such as the following are immediately raised: Is it epistemologically legitimate to assign psychotherapeutic value to

a doctrine that was originally conceived under an ethical-religious statute? Is it legitimate to refer to psychotherapeutic efficacy in spiritual practices proposed in Late Antiquity? Moreover, there is the encompassing question: Do the patristic writings formulate models of integration between spirituality and its concomitant psychic dynamics?

In an attempt to establish a dialogue between the doctrines of Late Antiquity and contemporary psychotherapy, it could be risky to extrapolate anachronistic terms, questions and discussions that are foreign to the original context of the Early Church Fathers.

Indeed, the monk from Pontus did not explicitly ask whether there was a model of integration between psychic and spiritual dynamics in his doctrine of λογισμοί. The terms of this approach are completely foreign to Evagrian writings. However, through a process of immersion or familiarization with the language and world of meaning in his writings, we can translate our question into the terms in which Evagrius himself resolves the issue. In this way, far from extrapolating terms foreign to his explanatory model, we would address the issue from the same understanding that our monastic author had of it.

For this purpose, we need to situate ourselves in the discussion that took place in the first five or six centuries of the Christian era, when the practice of monastic spirituality and the doctrine of grace began to develop from and around the Platonic, Stoic and Hippocratic philosophies of medicine. Understanding what the monastic authors—particularly Evagrius—mean by spirituality and asceticism, by grace and nature, as well as grasping the effective relationships that exist between them, will allow us to elucidate to what extent the practices of self-knowledge and asceticism (both behavioral and affective/cognitive) with their associated understanding of grace presuppose the recognition of a series of cognitive-emotional dynamics of a psychic nature that need to be corrected, modified or, more properly, healed or cured by the Spirit. These are the terms that, in our understanding, analogously translate our question about the effective relationships between psychology and spirituality that are of interest to contemporary psychology and specialized literature. This will possibly allow us to translate and understand the current interest in Evagrius' psycho-spiritual model in the same terms in which he formulated it.

In his effort to think about how the process of complete healing of man takes place, Evagrius takes up intuitions and ideas from the Hippocratic and Platonic traditions. These traditions disapprove of magic as an act of impiety towards the divine order inscribed in the θύσις. Evagrius follows this funda-

mental intuition of rejection of magic and sorcery to integrate it into a new Christian synthesis that strives to move away from a magical understanding of the action of grace.

Now, as Evagrius moves away from the magical conception of grace, certain theoretical-practical knowledge related to mental and spiritual health can be found in his writings. Evagrius is particularly interested in specifying how grace operates in the cognitive-emotional dynamics that intervene in the healing processes of the soul without contradicting or magically suspending the immanent laws of the θύσις.

To test this hypothesis, we will first expose the background of a particular notion (which Evagrius seems to follow) of magic or enchantment by which it is understood as an act of impiety towards the divine order inscribed in the θύσις. From the analysis of one of the core writings of Hippocratic medicine (*On the Sacred Disease*) and other writings of Platonic philosophy, we will infer two mutually complementary notions of magic that are collected by Evagrius in his writings and that are relevant in the framework of the search for answers to our questions. Secondly, we will study the role that the monk from Pontus ascribes to grace in the framework of his proposal of healing by the word. We will present his particular understanding regarding the effective relationships between asceticism and grace, which, as we will see, excludes understanding grace as a magical enchantment that suspends or violates the order of the θύσις.

The exposition will be rather hermeneutical and comprehensive. It will not seek to respect a strictly chronological order since it is not possible to disaggregate the work and thought of Evagrius chronologically. There is no reliable data about the years in which he wrote several of his works, and it does not make sense to establish a chronology since the strong ideas of his doctrine are scattered across almost all of his works.

## 1. The Phýsis and Its *Divine Order* in Hippocratic Medicine

From the analysis of one of the core writings of Hippocratic medicine and from an examination of some Platonic dialogues, two mutually complementary notions of magic can be inferred.

Evagrius Ponticus shares his predecessors' understanding of magic as an act of impiety towards the divine order inscribed in the θύσις, an act with profane

tradition. This understanding of magic is carried over into his understanding of healing by the word under the Spirit or grace.<sup>1</sup>

We find that *On the Sacred Disease*, written between 430 and 420 BC as one of the core writings of the extensive *Corpus Hippocraticum*, is an effort to discriminate the physician's task from popular medicine, which resorted to magical practices, sorcery and superstitious remedies.<sup>2</sup>

By the name of sacred disease, the Hippocratic author refers to a series of symptoms that hermeneutics has identified—to use a modern scientific term—as epilepsy. In chapter X, the author lists attacks, tremors, fainting, delusions, loss of memory, inability to speak and think, hand paralysis, rolling eyes, foaming saliva, spasms, pains, rales and choking among the symptoms that this disease exhibits. It is the extraordinary nature of the symptoms, the inexperience or *aporia*, that makes it possible, according to the Hippocratic author, to adopt an irrational approach towards the disease and to interpret it in terms of sorcery, magic or demonic possession.

As the cause and the necessary remedy for this condition are unknown to them, acting in line with their safety standards, sorcerers establish a healing process by prescribing incantations and purifications (Cf. Hippocratic author, 1983, c. II, 400). In chapter III, the Hippocratic author identifies the practices of witches and sorcerers as a great act of impiety and sacrilege:

Through speeches and practices of this kind [the sorcerers] boast of knowing more than anyone else and completely deceive men by prescribing purifications and expiations, and most of their speeches deal with the divine and the demonic. And

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the presence of notions traceable to Hippocratic-Galenic medicine in Evagrius, the following studies can be consulted: Dysinger 2004; Refoulé 1961; Guillaumont 2009; Messana 1999; Casiday 2013; Tsakiridis 2010; Alby 2015; Boudon-Millot & Pouderon 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The Hippocratic authors were concerned with establishing medicine as an art or *techné* against those who held that medicine was just a matter of luck. Let us remember that the question about luck was a characteristic theme of Greek thought in the second half of the fifth century BC.

In order to prove the scientific status of medicine, various authors of the *Corpus Hippocraticum* are interested not only in showing the success of its therapeutic results but also in demonstrating that these results are due to the causal knowledge that is possessed regarding medical treatment. In other words, they argue that the physician only possesses the *τέχνη ιατρική* to the extent that he knows what he is doing (the skill put into practice), what he is operating on (the object to which the art is applied) and why what is done is done (causal knowledge). Cf. Lain Entralgo 2005.

indeed, it seems to me that their speeches do not reveal piety, as they believe, but rather impiety, since it implies that gods do not exist. Their piety and religiosity are impiety and sacrilege, as I am going to show. (Hippocratic author, 1983, c. III, 402)

Magicians, purifiers and charlatans are the great impious who seek to replace and dominate the divine order with their devices (Hippocratic author, 1983, c. IV, 404).

The Hippocratic author approaches the first definition of magic by first identifying it as a perversion of religion. Instead of contemplating, studying, serving and attending to the divine order inscribed in the *θύσις*, the sorcerer or magician sets out to usurp or suspend that divine force. Magic is but an attempt to steal divine power into fitting human purposes. In this way, magic would be the opposite of a religious act. While religion is surrender, adoration or service, magic is, in the end, an attempt at usurpation.

The Hippocratic physician is a profoundly pious scientist who proclaims the divine condition of the *θύσις* and sees the task of seeking natural therapeutic resources for diseases as an act of piety and worship towards the gods. The disease has its nature and a natural origin. There is an ordered world of causes in this divine *θύσις*. In this sense, the physician must cure the ailment through medication that takes these *αἰτίας* or *πρόφασις* (causes) into account. In contrast to the magicians' ignorance and impiety, the Hippocratic author inscribes the physician's work into the task of unveiling the proximate and immediate causes that can alter or corrupt the divine harmony of the human *θύσις*. The author writes:

This disease does not seem to me to be more divine than the others, but rather has its nature like other diseases, and from there each one originates. And as for its foundation and natural cause, it is divine for the same reason that all the others are. (Hippocratic author, 1983, c. V, 405)

This sacred disease is neither more nor less divine than other diseases. It does not have a special origin in terms of its relationship with the divine. The Hippocratic author attributes it with a divine character insofar as it—as any other disease—comes from nature, to which a divine principle is immanent. The *θύσις* as such has a divine character.

In this context, we could formulate a second notion of magic: magic is the human usurpation that ignores and tries to suspend the habitual causal order of the *θύσις*. Magic is an act of impiety against the gods since the divine order inscribed in the *θύσις* is ignored.

## 2. Curative Enchantment in Plato

In many Platonic dialogues, we can find the words “enchantment,” “incantation” or “spell,” mainly when the philosopher approaches the question of the capability of the word to modify the soul (Plato 1985a, 155e, 158b, 158c, 176a; 1987a, 289e; 1999, 903b, 906b; 1987c, 80a; 1987b, 484 BC).

In the *Phaedo* (1988c, 78a, 114 AD), Socrates is named the great enchanter (ἐπωδὸν) for he is capable of modifying the soul's fears with his spells (ἐπαιίδω) (Plato, 1988c, 77e).

In the *Theaetetus* (1988b, 157c), it is said that Socrates exercises his trade as a midwife through his incantations.

In the *Meno* (1987c, 80a), Socrates' interlocutor admits feeling spellbound or enchanted (κατεπάδεις) by Socratic interrogation.

However, pejorative allusions to magical incantations are indeed found in Platonic works. In the *Republic*, Plato (1988a, II 364b, IV 426b) explains that some priests and diviners make young people believe that through sacrifices and incantations together with pleasant feasts, they can be purified from any personal or social crime. Plato points out the danger that young people may infer a peculiar way of being and a way of directing life to live it to the fullest, unconcerned about what a purification process requires.

Magic would be, in this way, a farce, a deception, a fraud; the simulation of dominating or suspending the laws of nature so as to make them subjectable for human purposes. Plato (1985b, 315b) also uses the word enchantment or spell (κεκηλημένοι) in this sense, to describe the sophists' speeches as being similar—as he says not without irony—to those enchantments of “snakes, tarantulas, scorpions and other beasts” (Plato 1987a, 290a).

Along with this negative meaning, there are also texts where Plato (1985a, 157a) refers to spells or enchantments that have the potential to modify and heal the soul not by magic but due to natural virtue. When the spell is composed of suitable and beautiful words, it has a natural and inherent healing virtue. The spells or incantations that cure are those that exert a therapeutic action that consists of producing σωφροσύνη.

The incantation has persuasive efficacy, according to Plato (1999, Plato, II 659d–e; II 664b–c; II 665c; VI 773d–e), due to the natural virtue that the beautiful word has to arouse a new belief in the soul. It is a spell or enchantment that is understood in opposition to magic. While the latter pretends to suspend the

order or the forces inscribed in nature, persuasive enchantment, on the other hand, is the force of the philosopher's word to operate and heal the soul's faculties by the natural virtue of its form and content.

### 3. Evagrius Ponticus: A Doctrine of the Cure of the Soul Away from Magic and Enchantments

The above two ancient sources are integrated and assumed into the new Christian synthesis formulated by Evagrius.

The healing processes of soul diseases proposed by Evagrius can only be understood in the light of the notion of *θύσις*, which incorporates as a novelty the data of the Christian Revelation. A Christian understanding of the healing of the soul in no way implies a magical action of grace that necessarily suspends the natural order of the *θύσις*.

Strictly speaking, Evagrius does not make any systematic treatment regarding grace. However, in numerous passages of his work, he finds in Jesus Christ—as the possessor of the *λόγοι* of all things—the persuasive (and thus healing) force of the word. Evagrius acknowledges Christ as the physician of our souls by the explicit use of the verb *to enchant*. Let us read one of these passages:

Our fathers are only the fathers of the flesh, while God is the “father” of the soul. And just as the son's illness grieves the father, so the disorder of the soul grieves God. At the sickening of the son the father calls the physician; but, God has sent the physician of our souls from heaven, so as to enchant (*θέλγων*) human beings, thus bringing wickedness to virtue and ignorance to the knowledge of God. (Evagrius Ponticus, 2013, 57, 3)

In this passage, Evagrius conveys a meaning of the verb *θέλγω* with Platonic reminiscences. God the Father, faced with the soul's illness, sends his own Son as a physician. He heals by enchanting, bewitching, enamoring and fascinating souls.

The healing process that the Gnostic can carry out with his word is rooted and specified in the medical ministry that Christ exercises. In the *Kephálaia Gnostica*, Evagrius (1985, V, 90, S1) writes that “whoever by the grace of our Lord has obtained the spiritual science will zealously help the holy angels by removing rational souls from malice and ignorance.”



In this new context of Christian spirituality, the monk from Pontus seems to follow the rejection of magic that is characteristic of the Platonic tradition and Hippocratic medicine. In Evagrius' Christian horizon, this rejection translates into a particular conception of the action of divine grace, far from any fideism that ignores the natural dynamics of the **θύσις** (and thus cultivates a conception of grace as a kind of magic spell, exclusively responsible for healing). Of course, this is not Evagrius' conception, although this does not mean that our author does not see grace as a condition for the possibility of healing the soul. He seems to be striving more to distance himself from a magical understanding of grace.

In his treatise *On Thoughts*, Evagrius explains that when the soul is invaded and obscured by passions, it does not fulfill the minimum conditions for the word that conveys the healing logos to work. In this case, the word is used as a magic enchantment (κατεπάδω):

Because the impure cannot see the contemplation of these [things], and although others have taught them, they would repeat it as an incantation (κατεπάδοιεν) without understanding because of the great clouds of dust and the agitation caused by his passions during the battle. Because all the troops of foreigners must be silenced so that only Goliath can face our David. (Evagrius Ponticus, 1998, 19)

Here, the term enchantment is used by Evagrius in a pejorative sense to show that the grace of contemplation is not to be obtained magically. The gift of science is given as a grace to “he who has made himself capable of acquiring it.” That is, grace does not suspend, as we stated, the natural course of the **θύσις**. Being non-violent, it does not operate by contradicting or suspending the free exercise of the parts of the soul. When the necessary dispositions do not exist in the parts for the word to work, the word is repeated as a useless ritualism or a magic spell on the soul.

The healing that the word produces in the soul (since verbal healing is predominantly what Evagrius speaks of, and the word is the source of grace and even a providential instrument to return to the “health of unity”) does not constitute an automatic process completed once that word is spoken—as if by magic or enchantment. Divine grace acts upon human nature in accordance with it, following principles that are superior (supernatural) to it. Grace ordains man to a higher end. Evagrius understands these powers as aids that have been given to man to re-access the science of the Holy Trinity. There is no other purpose to the healing process than to achieve the bliss of the soul. Then, healthy or sick

functioning of a faculty is defined by being ordained (or not) to the proper end of man, which is the knowledge of unity.

Evagrius does not seem to acknowledge an area of autonomous, natural and independent development of grace, which we could recognize today as the field of psychological dynamics. Jesus Christ is the source of healing for these dynamics. Then, establishing a pendular or dialectical relationship between the operation of grace and asceticism, between the healing operation of the Spirit and the immanent laws of nature, implies stepping away in the opposite direction from Evagrius' understanding of them.

Grace does not operate in the soul like magic, that is, according to an arbitrary order. When grace operates in the soul, the habitual causal series that exists in the dynamics of the human faculties is not suspended. On the contrary, grace acts upon the faculties according to the order that the Creator himself has inscribed in them. In the *Notes of Luke*, Evagrius (2006, I) points out that “the physician of souls gives orders appropriately, and his commands are appropriate to the passions.”

Just like the great Tempter uses the psychic dynamics of the fallen soul to propose his “words of perdition” (Evagrius Ponticus 2005, prol. 2), and “[the demons], thanks to learning, know the languages of human beings” (Evagrius Ponticus 1985, IV, 35) to be able to tempt them, the sacred texts and the Gnostic's word can set in motion and heal certain dynamics of a psychic nature (Evagrius Ponticus 1971, I, 71).

Our author beautifully states that the Lord has entrusted the representations of this world to man, like sheep to a good shepherd, when referring to the way of knowledge through representations, which—in Evagrius' schema—is inherent in the rational part of the soul. With this, He has given him a harp and a lyre with which to gather and rest the flock. This “ψσαλτήριον” enables the sheep to return to graze at the foot of Mount Sinai, that is, to feed on the law of the Lord (Evagrius Ponticus 1998, 17). Note here that Evagrius is not subordinating God's infinite power to the sound of a harp or a lyre (the singing of the Psalms). Rather, it is man who is linked to the practice of psalmody, represented by the harp and lyre, because it is the appropriate remedy for healing his false representations of his faculties.

In the *Praktikos*, the same term, κατεπάδω, no longer holds a pejorative connotation. Here, instead, Evagrius indicates the virtuosity of the word to free the soul from the *logismoi*:

When we meet the demon of acedia, then, with tears, let us divide our soul into two parts: one that consoles and the other that is consoled, and, sowing in us good hopes, let us pronounce with holy David this incantation (κατεπάδω): “Why are you sad, oh my soul, and why do you upset me? Wait on God, because I will praise him, he is the health of my face and my God.” (Evagrius Ponticus 1971, 27)

In the face of the attack of the demon of acedia, Evagrius proposes repeating with David an enchantment (κατεπάδω); but here the term “enchantment,” unlike in the *Treatise on Thoughts*, refers to a practice opposed to magic. Here, the divine word of David’s psalm is not repeated as mere empty ritualism but as a word that heals and orders through the same immanent order of the soul’s powers. Only through a particular cognitive-affective dynamic does it unfold all its persuasive and healing potential. The psalm is a divine word that persuades the soul and invites it to virtue, thus cooling and extinguishing the disordered passions that make one sick. The word of the psalm heals and orders through the very immanent order of the powers of the soul.

Evagrius’ reluctance to postulate a magical conception of grace is also manifested in his interest in explaining the processes of imbalances of passions and cognitive distortion to which the eight λογισμοί give rise. And, of course, he also expresses his rejection of a magical conception of grace in his explanation of the cognitive and emotional dynamics that are corrected through the images that are alluded to, mainly the Psalms and the Holy Scriptures to which Evagrius most resorted.

The Gordian knot of its healing procedures focuses on correcting, removing or neutralizing the emotional and cognitive structures that operate as proximate causes of soul ailments. The Gnostic’s word, the rhythmic recitation of the psalmody, the confutation and the unmasking of thoughts (ἀντίρρησις) are practices that are purposed to re-signify through new experiences how, influenced by a λογισμοί or by a disordered passional inclination, the monk carries out his own self-assessment as well as his evaluation of the circumstances and of others.

## Conclusion

Evagrius is interested in disclosing the healing dynamics of grace in the imminent operation of the parts of the soul. In this new context of Christian spirituality, Evagrius seems to return to the rejection of magic characteristic of the

Platonic tradition and Hippocratic medicine. In Evagrius' Christian horizon, this rejection translates into a particular conception of the action of divine grace that is distant from any kind of fideism unaware of the natural dynamism of the  $\theta\acute{\upsilon}\sigma\iota\varsigma$ . The Evagrius conception of healing dynamics steps away equidistantly from the spiritualist and psychological positions regarding grace.

From his monastic experience of self-knowledge and spiritual guidance of other souls, Evagrius seeks to explain the healing work of the Spirit away from incantations and spells. This interest is concomitant to his task of specifying the dynamics and processes of a psychic nature that take place in the healing process. The Gnostic's word and the word of Sacred Scripture are the "instruments" of that process. In this way, Evagrius proposes truly therapeutic practices regarding dynamics that today we recognize as properly psychic. Evagrius sees no antinomy between grace and nature, between Spirit and asceticism. On the contrary, he understands them in mutual synergy.

This particular understanding of grace epistemically legitimizes recent studies that postulate psychotherapeutic projections of the Evagrius doctrine. The Evagrius approach to health must be understood as a spiritual itinerary that integrates and subsumes an extensive compendium of healing practices of a psychic nature which cannot, however, be separated from the operation of grace. Grace does not operate in a different or separate dimension to the healing process directed by the ministry of the Gnostic's word. And, as Dysinger points out, the healing process, in turn, participates in the ministry of the Divine Physician.

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