

# 'Evil' thoughts

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Evagrius had profound psychological insights into the workings of the human mind. The fact that insights, arising from carefully scrutinised thoughts, are essential for change and transformation, was only rediscovered in the 19th century by Freud and Jung. Now it is a commonly accepted working hypothesis for most psychotherapists and analysts. Many of Evagrius' sayings would not be out of place in a modern manual of psychotherapy.

In his teaching on *'watching the thoughts'* he distinguishes the following *'evil thoughts'* or *'demons'* as the most important ones: *"There are eight general and basic categories of thoughts, in which are included every thought. First is that of greed, then impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and last of all, pride."* We have already met the *'demon of acedia'*, spiritual dryness with its feeling of *'what the point?'* or *'nothing ever happens.'*, so effective in preventing us from persevering on the path of meditation. The most important ones are greed, avarice and seeking esteem: *"Of the demons opposing us in the practice of the ascetic life, there are three groups who fight in the front line: those entrusted with the appetites of greed, those who suggest avaricious thoughts, and those who incite us to seek the esteem of men. All the other demons follow behind and in their turn attack those already wounded by the first three groups"*. It is easy to see how rampant these *'demons'* still are in our times!

'Greed' starts therefore the whole process and applies to all aspects of life, not only to food; it is considered to be a form of obsessive attachment to everything, which includes physical and intellectual abilities, knowledge and material possessions, however few these may be. It could even extend to sexual relations, hence to 'unchastity'. 'Greed' was really considered to be a general attitude of being immoderate; therefore in the ascetic life it could apply more to extreme fasting rather than to eating too much food. Moreover, the danger was that this in turn could easily lead to being ruled by the demons of 'vainglory' and 'pride': Abba Isidore the priest said, *"If you fast regularly, do not be inflated with pride, but if you think highly of yourself because of it, then you had better eat meat. It is better for a man to eat meat than to be inflated with pride and to glorify himself."*

Preoccupation with food and fasting could not only lead to 'pride', but also to 'avarice'. The ascetic might be unwilling to break a fast and share a meal with the brother who called because of worries about not having enough food to maintain his own health. In so doing, he also broke with the important virtue of providing hospitality.

'Sadness' and 'anger' are considered to be related demons. Evagrius does not mean by 'sadness' genuine grief or depression, but a sadness that arises, when desires are thwarted. This is often accompanied by 'anger' at those, who have the abilities or possessions the ascetics covet.

'Disordered' or 'evil' thoughts of 'vainglory' and 'pride' are considered by Evagrius to be the most dangerous demons, even when the ascetic is already quite advanced on the path: *"The spirit of vainglory is most subtle and it readily grows up in the souls of those who practice virtue. It leads them to desire to make their struggles known publicly, to hunt after the praise of men.... The demon of pride is the cause of the most damaging fall for the soul. For it induces the monk to deny that God is his helper and to consider that he himself is the cause of virtuous action."*

This discursive form of meditation, 'watching the thoughts' is an essential element on the spiritual path, leading to self-knowledge and knowledge of the Divine Presence.

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