

On Soul-Body “Dualism” in Plato

Franco Trabattoni

I.

It is a commonplace in philosophical historiography that the psychological doctrines of Platonic origin stand in sharp contrast to the Aristotelian ones: the former entail a clear-cut dualism – possibly to be interpreted as a genuine opposition – between soul and body; the latter instead ensure a closer and more realistic harmony between the psychic and physical components of man. In other words, Plato's position would be a weighty and implausible metaphysical hypothesis, whereas Aristotle's position would be a sober and balanced attempt to account for experience. Precisely on the basis of this assessment, Aristotle's psychological doctrines are popular not just among historians of philosophy, but also among many contemporary philosophers, whereas Plato's avowedly dualistic psychology is brushed to the side as a fanciful and unscientific theory, insofar as it consciously ignores experiential data. In the following pages, I aim to at least raise a few doubts with regard to this commonplace.

The theoretical root of the difference between Platonic and Aristotelian psychology would consist in the fact that whereas for Plato the soul is a substance (to use Aristotelian terminology) that is separable – and at times separate – from the body, according to Aristotle it is the form or act of the living organism: since, for Aristotle, form is not really separable from the corresponding matter, although it is separable as a notion, psychological unity is in principle ensured. Precisely for this reason, Aristotle was bound to regard the Orphic, Pythagorean and Platonic doctrine of metempsychosis as absurd. On the other hand, Platonic dualism would seem to raise a theoretical problem that is difficult to solve, and which is made explicit in the words by which Plotinus opens the first treatise of the fifth *Ennead*:

What is it, then, which has made the souls forget their father, God, and be ignorant of themselves and him, even though they are parts which come from his higher world and altogether belong to it? The

beginning of evil for them was audacity and coming to birth and the first otherness and the wishing to belong to themselves (V 1 1, tr. Armstrong).

This problem can be broken down into two different, if connected, aspects. First of all, a Platonist is bound to ask why, from a general metaphysical standpoint, a wholly immaterial and divine entity such as the soul has become attached to a body. Secondly, it is a matter of taking account of the ethical aspect of this apparently unnatural union: is the soul's descent into a body to be viewed as something positive, insofar as it serves the providential purpose of giving life to matter (and hence of animating the world), as the *Timaeus* would seem to suggest? Or is this a fall, a contamination, possibly the consequence of a transgression, as dialogues such as the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus* would seem to suggest? Is the nature of the soul in harmony or in contrast with the functions it is meant to fulfil? More generally, does this double perspective not adumbrate an ambiguity inherent to Platonic philosophy as a whole, in a way, and which concerns not just the ontological value and weight of matter and the body, but also the assessment of the earthly dimension, the meaning and usefulness of demotic virtues, and the role to be assigned to ethical reflection and political engagement in Platonic thought? If so-called Platonic dualism is taken at face value, it seems as though the alleged coexistence, on two different levels, of a physical reality and a metaphysical one is invariably compromised: if this dualism is reinforced as an opposition, contrast and alternative, it is clear that it will no longer be possible to affirm the full existence of this *and* that reality; rather, it will be necessary to argue that we either have one thing *or* the other. And since the metaphysical dimension is clearly superior according to Plato, all this is to the detriment of the body, of earthly life, of relational ethics, and of politics. Once again, this development is sharply laid out by Plotinus, who claims that from a Platonic perspective all action is failed contemplation.¹ This means that action (and hence man's physical operating within the world, along with ethics and politics) is not only inferior to contemplation but has no intrinsic positive value; it is merely the negative counterpart to the one thing that is of some value, and which is therefore worth pursuing: contemplation.

1 *Enn.* III 8.

One of the most crucial Platonic passages dealing with this problem – crucial, that is, not so much for Plato himself as for the systematic use of it made by the subsequent tradition, starting with so-called Middle Platonism – is the famous digression on the philosopher in the *Theaetetus*. Here the aim of human life is seen to coincide with man's assimilation to God (176a8-c2):

And therefore we ought to try to escape from earth to the dwelling of the gods as quickly as we can; and to escape is to become like God, so far as this is possible; and to become like God is to become righteous and holy and wise. But, indeed, my good friend, it is not at all easy to persuade people that the reason generally advanced for the pursuit of virtue and the avoidance of vice – namely, in order that a man may not seem bad and may seem good – is not the reason why the one should be practised and the other not; that, I think, is merely old wives' chatter, as the saying is. Let us give the true reason. God is in no wise and in no manner unrighteous, but utterly and perfectly [c] righteous, and there is nothing so like him as that one of us who in turn becomes most nearly perfect in righteousness (tr. Fowler).

When taken as a whole, this passage is actually far from identifying the aim of human life with the abandonment of the earthly dimension. Certainly, the first sentence urges man to flee "from earth to the dwelling of the gods" as soon as possible. It is also true that this flight is immediately identified with assimilation to God. However, two significant elements would seem to militate against an interpretation of this passage in ascetic and metaphysical (or exclusively metaphysical) terms. The first element is the clause "as far as this is possible", which Socrates immediately adds. The context is a typically Platonic one where we have a (perfect) model and a copy that imitates it. The clause "as far as this is possible" makes explicit what is actually already implicit in the notion of "similarity": That which is similar to something else resembles it in certain respects but not others,² for otherwise the copy and its model would be indistinguishable and would amount to the same thing.³ Therefore, assimilation to God cannot mean "being identical to God"; rather, it must mean "achieving (or striving to achieve) the highest possible degree of resemblance to him". The easiest way to understand the nature of this resemblance is ap-

2 Cf. *Phaed.* 77b-80c: the soul is similar to the Ideas, yet it is not an Idea.

3 Cf. *Crat.* 432b-c.

parently to identify one or more qualities that the model possesses in full, and then establish that the imitator possesses the same qualities to the highest possible degree. For example, if the model is omniscient, omnipotent etc. like the Christian God, assimilation to God must mean becoming as wise, powerful etc. *as possible*. If the essential feature of the model is instead pure contemplation, as Plotinus contends (in agreement with his Aristotelian model), then man must devote his life to knowledge, as far as possible.

However, the Platonic text does not meet these expectations, so much so that it poses a rather challenging problem to Plotinus. Socrates explains that to assimilate oneself to God is to practice virtue, and in particular justice. The problem that this raises for Plotinus lies in the fact that it would seem to undermine the aforementioned relation between action and contemplation. Indeed, the various virtues appear to be intrinsically connected to action; hence, they imply the possession of a body and the presence of the subject within earthly reality. By contrast, he who wishes to make himself similar to God seeks to flee from this reality, to separate himself from matter, the body and all the hindrances created by his needs and desires (in accordance with the *Phaedo* passages we will soon be discussing). The passage from the *Thaetetus*, therefore, seems to imply a subtle yet inevitable paradox: man attempts to assimilate himself to God by a means (the attainment of virtue) that makes it impossible to achieve this aim, since it forces man to cling to certain essential human traits, which give rise to an irresolvable incompatibility with the model to be imitated.

This is not the place to examine Plotinus' solution in detail (I will refer to CATAPANO, 2006). However, it is interesting to note that his suggestion, based on the asymmetry of the relation of resemblance between man and God (whereas the former assimilates himself to the latter, the latter is not similar to the former in any respect), could never work for Plato. The philosopher assigns a crucial role – in cosmology and especially in politics – to the “technical” scheme that posits the necessary existence at all levels of a model which the imitating craftsman (the demiurge, the philosopher-politician) can contemplate, in order to produce copies as similar to it as possible within earthly reality. It is evident, therefore, that the relation of resemblance between the copy and its model cannot work only from the bottom up, as Plotinus would have it, but must also work in the opposite direction, for otherwise the technical paradigm could find no application. This is not a problem for Plotinus, who on the one hand downplays the “technical” and providential role

played by the demiurge,⁴ but on the other – and most importantly – has no real interest in the political role of philosophy (as already noted, for Plotinus action is nothing but failed contemplation). However, this is hardly acceptable to Plato, who unhesitatingly affirms the centrality of politics, and more generally of the technical activity by which human, earthly and ever-changing matter is providentially and rationally moulded after an external and unmoving divine model.

II.

The crucial role played by politics in Plato's thought is, in certain respects, the decisive factor that makes it necessary to tone down the clear-cut dualism between soul and body that would seem to emerge from certain texts – such as the *Theaetetus* digression – that present no doubt ascetic aspects, even apparently extreme ones at times. Indeed, it is hardly a coincidence that many interpreters of the *Theaetetus* have come to regard the digression on the nature of the philosopher as an entirely or partly negative model by which Plato aims to illustrate what philosophy must not – and cannot – be, if it is to maintain an effective connection with the world of ethics and politics (and hence make a successful attempt to counter Protagorean relativism).⁵ It is certainly true that the digression presents the philosopher in largely hyperbolic terms. However, this is a conscious emphasis which serves the very opposite purpose from what the interpreters just mentioned suggest. As we have seen, the best way to assimilate oneself to God is to practice virtue. Even more importantly, detachment from the world – a practice which in the digression is no doubt associated with philosophers – is not intended to ensure the achievement of an ascetic lifestyle, or even of a state of pure contemplation. The purpose of distancing oneself from the body and the world is to create the conditions for the attainment of knowledge of the universal, as far as this is possible, which is the natural goal for philosophers. However, it is significant that in a crucial passage of the digression (175c), as a salient example of the universal knowledge to which the philosopher aspires, justice in itself is mentioned: an object whose knowledge is crucial not on

⁴ See e.g. GERSON (1994), p. 56-57.

⁵ Cf., with different nuances, RUE (1993), FREDE (1999), MAHONNEY (2004), and LANE (2005).

the level of contemplation (where anything possessing the nature of what is “in itself” would be enough), but rather on the level of action, morality, and politics. The intentionally hyperbolic tone here is designed to stress the merely apparent paradox that action and contemplation, when combined, constitute a function that is algebraically the reverse of the one we would expect. It is not true that the more the philosopher removes himself from the world and from concrete life, the more he detaches himself from ethics and politics. Rather, exactly the opposite is true. According to the technical model, the more knowledge we have of the ideal model of justice in itself, the better we can establish justice in the real world. But if philosophers are to achieve this goal, they must not waste any time enquiring about «the way to the agora [...] where the courtroom is, or the senate-house, or any other public place of assembly» (*Theaet.* 173c-d). Philosophers must «neither hear the debates upon them nor see them when they are published» (173d). Nor will they concern themselves with question such as «What wrong have I done you or you me?» (175c). Whereas according to the ordinary way of thinking all this simply means that the philosopher is inept at practical living (consider the harsh criticism that Calicles directs against Socrates in *Gorg.* 484c-485d), and hence utterly devoid of an aptitude for politics, what Plato is arguing is actually the very opposite. Because the philosopher is the only one to enquire what justice in itself consists in, despite all appearances he is the only real politician.

The same intentional paradox is also to be found in the dialogue which is certainly the text with the most markedly ascetic background – not least for its consolatory nature – namely the *Phaedo*. At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates must respond to the accusations levelled by his friends, who in the face of the threat of death question the philosopher's alleged happiness (in the *Apology* Socrates had argued that nothing bad can befall the philosopher, either in life or death, 41c-d). He does so by showing that the whole life of the philosopher is an exercise in dying, and that therefore it would make no sense for him to fear death, as only after death it will be possible for him (if at all) to attain the real goal in life, namely the acquisition of knowledge of the Ideas.⁶ At first sight, it might seem difficult to find a more unpolitical passage than this in Plato's writing. The philosopher's happiness – as roughly stated also in the *Theaetetus* digression – is nothing but a flight from the world, which is to say his

6 Cf. TRABATTONI (2015).

shift to a different and better reality. But what about ethics and politics, then? What about *eudaimonia* and the leading of a good private and public life in this world and in this life? In actual fact, here too – as in the *Theaetetus* – Plato provides plenty of clues to suggest to the reader that he is highlighting what is only an apparent paradox. Socrates concludes that it is absurd for the philosopher to fear death.

‘Then is it not,’ said Socrates, ‘a sufficient indication, when you see a man troubled because he is going to die, that he was not a lover of wisdom but a lover of the body? [68c] And this same man is also a lover of money and of honor, one or both?’

‘Certainly,’ said he, ‘it is as you say.’

‘Then, Simmias,’ he continued, ‘is not that which is called courage especially characteristic of philosophers?’

‘By all means,’ said he.

‘And self-restraint – that which is commonly called self-restraint, which consists in not being excited by the passions and in being superior to them and acting in a seemly way – is not that characteristic of those alone who despise the body [68d] and pass their lives in philosophy?’ (68b8-c12, tr. Fowler).

After that, as is widely known, Socrates develops a series of arguments to clarify the difference between common virtues (what we might call demotic virtues) and truly philosophical ones. The opportunity to switch from the topic of death to that of virtue is offered in a perfectly natural way by the evident connection between death and courage. Yet this is not enough to justify the insertion, at this particular point in the text, of a treatment of virtues that breaks up the linear unfolding of the dialogue: 1) Socrates is about to die; 2) he must show that death is not a bad thing for him; 3) he does so by showing that philosophy is an exercise in dying; 4) however, he must also show (as Cebes asks him to do, for else the whole argument would not hold) that man, or at any rate his soul, survives death. How does the “digression” on virtue fit within this scheme? In reality, the situation mirrors, if only in a reverse way, what we find in the *Theaetetus*. In the *Theaetetus* an ethical and political context (Socrates has just noted that Protagorean relativism struggles to justify the actual political praxis of cities) is interrupted by a digression with “ascetic” overtones, whereas the exact opposite occurs in the *Phaedo*: a highly ascetic context is suddenly interrupted by an ethical and political digression. My thesis is that both cases offer the same explanation, if only in inverted

terms: when what is at issue is the need for philosophy, and hence philosophers, on the ethical and political level (which in the *Theaetetus* is justified by the ethical-political inadequacy of relativism), Plato draws attention to the paradox according to which philosophy can play a political role precisely insofar as it is an ascetic practice; when what is at issue is the ascetic nature of the philosopher, Plato feels the need to warn the reader that this nature of the philosopher not only does not detach him from ethics and politics, but that on the contrary it makes him the only person competent in such matters (*Phaedo*). What is particularly significant, in my view, is precisely the “digression” in the *Phaedo*. In this dialogue Plato faces a truly challenging task, since the forced circumstances of Socrates' death sentence present the problem in an extreme form. The enquiry risks slipping into an alternative that makes any attempt at mediation difficult, if not impossible. How is it possible to show that the philosopher is happy even after death, if not on the basis of the hypothesis that the real life is not “this one” but “another one”? And if the real life is a different one, how can we hope to preserve the ethical and political vocation of the philosopher, which Plato unambiguously affirms and recalls again and again? Hence the sudden reference to virtues. It is as though Plato were trying to tell his readers: I have just explained that the distinguishing trait of the philosopher is the exercise of dying; however, this should not be taken to suggest that philosophy has no relevance on the ethical-political level; on the contrary, it is possible to show that only the disposition I have described makes the ethical and political virtues what they are, for otherwise they would be only a pale imitation (the same principle is reaffirmed by Socrates later on, at 83e). Divine or philosophical virtues, in other words, encompass human virtues, in the sense that human virtues only become real virtues if they have divine virtues as their model.⁷

⁷ Of course, the hypothesis I have put forward is only acceptable if the section of the *Phaedo* concerning virtues is not interpreted as being inevitably removed from the one featured in the *Republic*, and hence as useless on the political level (as suggested for instance by FREDE, 1999). As I have already discussed this problem in TRABATTONI (2007), I will refer the reader to this essay for a more detailed analysis.

III.

This state of affairs finds various expressions in Plato's writing; the well-known identification between the philosopher and the politician in the *Republic* and *Seventh Letter*; the need to uphold the political profile of the philosopher against accusations of ineptitude, as in the *Gorgias* and *Republic* (esp. 473e-474a e 487b-d; but let us not forget that this is also the avowed purpose of the myth of the cave, namely to identify *apaidusia* as the cause of philosophers' lack of recognition among ordinary people); and, finally, the only apparently ambiguous nature of Socrates "the philosopher", who in the *Apology* affirms to have never engaged in politics (31c-32e), but then in the *Gorgias* claims to be the only Athenian of his day to have practised the *true* art of politics (521d). However, politics is not the main concern. In its apparent conflict with theory (or contemplation, if we prefer), politics only serves as an example to illustrate the dialectical and functional nature of all forms of Platonic dualism, where a pair of terms are distinguished from one another (insofar as they can be separated) and asymmetrically placed on two different levels, yet at the same time never stand to one another as mere alternatives. The distinctions between real and ideal, action and theory, politics and philosophy, body and soul, do not constitute a binary and parallel system in Plato, whereby we must take either this side or that, and in choosing one thing must abandon the other. For Plato, the real is not real (i.e. cannot be understood as real) without a reference to an ideal model; there can be no action without theory, and no politics without philosophy; most importantly, we are not forced to choose the body to the detriment of the soul and vice-versa, since it is precisely by virtue of the separability of the body that the soul can take a leading role with respect to the human being, who is composed of soul and body, so as to promote and ensure his proper functioning (not merely as a soul but as a composite of soul and body). The less man engages in action and the more he practices contemplation, the more competent he becomes in politics. Likewise, the more the soul distances itself and becomes separate from the body, with its desires and needs, the more it is capable of leading the body (so as ensure a good life for individuals and communities, insofar as this is possible).

In other words, to get back to the question raised at the beginning of the present essay, I would argue that it is incorrect to draw a contrast between Aristotle's psychology and Plato's, as though the former sought to realistically account for the psychophysical harmony of man, and the lat-

ter portrayed man as being torn between two different and alternative drive, whereby no positive outcome may be reached unless one sacrifices the inferior and weaker element. On the contrary, according to Plato it is precisely the relative separation between soul and body that provides the most suitable empirical illustration of the psychophysical harmony of man, including all his physiological, psychological, and ethical functions. For Plato, this separation is not a way to show the essentially metaphysical nature of man, as opposed to what he actually is in his current and concrete condition (according to the famous image of man as an embodied soul); rather, from an empirical and rational perspective, it is the most realistic way to correctly describe man as he actually is, with all his plans, desires, and aspirations. Had Plato been given the chance to counter the Aristotelian conception of the soul, his most significant objection would not have been – as arguably most scholars suggest – that the soul as the “form of the body” impoverishes the divine nature of man by making him inextricably bound to matter. Rather, he would have argued that the idea of the soul as the form of the body does not adequately explain the make-up of man. I will now adduce some arguments in support of this thesis.

Let's start by asking some questions. When in the *Phaedo* Socrates invites his friends to become as detached from the body as possible, what exactly does he mean? And what does this advice imply? What is its ultimate purpose? The actual separation of soul and body?

These questions find an answer in another important passage of the *Phaedo*, in which Socrates explains why it is dangerous for us not to do our best to minimise the demands imposed by our material nature. Right from this moment, it is important to stress the fact that in any case the separation could not be a complete one, given that if man is to continue to exist as a man he must ignore the physiological needs of his organism (even though he can choose to meet these needs to the smallest possible extent, as Socrates recommends). We will return to this point shortly. For the time being, it is important to examine the final part of the section:

‘The lovers of knowledge, then, I say, perceive that philosophy, taking possession of the soul when it is in this state, encourages it gently and tries to set it free, pointing out that the eyes and the ears and the other senses are full of deceit, and urging it to withdraw from these, except in so far as their use is unavoidable, and exhorting it to collect and concentrate itself within itself, and to trust nothing except [83b]

itself and its own abstract thought of abstract existence; and to believe that there is no truth in that which it sees by other means and which varies with the various objects in which it appears, since everything of that kind is visible and apprehended by the senses, whereas the soul itself sees that which is invisible and apprehended by the mind. Now the soul of the true philosopher believes that it must not resist this deliverance, and therefore it stands aloof from pleasures and lusts and griefs and fears, so far as it can, considering that when anyone has violent pleasures or fears or griefs or lusts he suffers from them not merely what one might think – for example, illness or loss of money spent [83c] for his lusts – but he suffers the greatest and most extreme evil and does not take it into account.

‘What is this evil, Socrates?’ said Cebes.

‘The evil is that the soul of every man, when it is greatly pleased or pained by anything, is compelled to believe that the object which caused the emotion is very distinct and very true; but it is not. These objects are mostly the visible ones, are they not?’ (83b5-c9, tr. Fowler).

In my view, the key point of this passage is as follows. Socrates does not argue that excessively or chiefly concerning oneself with the body is a bad thing merely on the basis of a dualistic contrast, whereby the body and care of it would be “bad”, but the soul and the care of it would be “good”. The problem with souls overly attached to the body does not lie in the fact that they are incapable of freeing themselves from the body (besides, in the *Phaedo* Socrates warns his readers that suicide is not a legitimate option), but rather in the fact that in such a way they end up believing that the body, i.e. that which is material, is the thing that exists in the most evident and truest way (ἐναργέστατόν τε εἶναι καὶ ἀληθέστατον). But in actual fact – and this is the point that Socrates is trying to make – the reality which exists in the most evident and truest way is not sensible reality but intelligible reality (hence the soul, which has the latter as its object, is clearly superior to the body). Therefore, according to the Socrates of the *Phaedo*, both the body and the soul exist, yet in an asymmetrical relation. As the truest reality is that of the soul, it follows that care of the soul is a far more worthwhile pursuit than care of the body. The point is that according to Plato both the existence of body and soul and the superiority of the latter over the former imply separation. The empirical data we must account for are first of all the actual separation between impulses, desires and physical needs on the one hand, and values and goals of a

spiritual nature, on the other; and, secondly, the superiority – in terms of the complete fulfilment of human nature – of the goods of the soul over those of the body. If this is the case, then the most effective theoretical model is the one distinguishing soul and body as two different and separable objects. Naturally, it may be objected that the analysis of the experience mentioned here is incorrect, and that therefore the dualistic theoretical model has not been adequately justified. This might be true from a general perspective; but it was far from obvious for the poetic and philosophical tradition of the Greeks, from Homer to Socrates and the Socratics: for the most prevalent perception was that expounded by Plato, which sees the soul and body as two different things of unequal value. In any case, this is not the real point at issue. What matters is the fact that for Plato psychological dualism is justified – regardless of the correctness of one's argument – by the need to account for experience, and not by the desire to assign human nature different traits from those it actually possesses.

According to Plato, the fact that the soul is superior to the body and separable from it implies that it can also exist on its own, which is to say in a disembodied and purely spiritual condition. This discloses a potentially very weighty metaphysical background; hence the efforts made by contemporary scholars to downplay this aspect of Platonic thought – for example, by reducing it to a metaphor. In my view, this “reduction” is untenable, or at any rate methodologically incorrect. But, again, this is not what matters here. The reduction just mentioned is usually carried out in order to safeguard the interest of Platonic philosophy in “this world”, the world which actually exists – and its pertinence to it – particularly as regards ethics, politics, anthropology, and so on. But this is an ill-founded concern. The possibility that the soul might lead a better life in disembodied form is a side effect of the separability of soul and body required by our analysis of experience. Therefore, the fact that the the best condition for man is to become all soul and no body in no way changes the fact that the separability of the soul is the precondition for man to lead a good life already in this world. The life of the disembodied soul, as the life of a bodiless soul, is no doubt a form of life unknown to us, one utterly different from the life we experience. While the death *of man* is nothing but the separation of soul and body (as we read in the *Phaedo*), the life *of man* consists in the soul's animation of the body. The life of the separate soul, then, is a different thing; as such, it in no way undermines the intrinsic unity of soul and body in the living mortal being. The unity

of soul and body would be compromised if the soul could lead the kind of life it leads in the body even without it. In such a case, the body would be superfluous – it would be nothing but a burden. But the life of disembodied souls is the life of gods, not men. Hence, for Plato the separability of the soul constitutes both the basis for a future super-human and disembodied life, and the most effective explicative and guiding model to understand and regulate the life of man in his present condition, understood as the soul's animation of the body.

IV.

In support of the thesis I have put forward in the previous pages, namely that for Plato the marked dualism between soul and body is chiefly required as an explicative model to account for experiential data, I will shortly be discussing a problem which Plato raises again in the *Phaedo*: the so-called doctrine of the soul as harmony. This will also allow us to carry out an interesting comparison with the Aristotelian position. Against the doctrine of the soul as harmony (of the body), which Simmias presents in the *Phaedo* as an objection to the thesis of the immortality of the soul championed by Socrates, the text puts forward three different arguments.⁸ Here we are concerned with only one of them, the argument expounded at lines 94b4-95a2:

‘Well,’ said Socrates, ‘of all the parts that make up a man, do you think any is ruler except the soul, especially if it be a wise one?’

‘No, I do not.’

‘Does it yield to the feelings of the body or oppose them? I mean, when the body is hot and thirsty, does not the soul oppose it and draw it away from drinking, and from eating when it is hungry, and do we not see the soul opposing the body in countless other ways?’

‘Certainly.’⁹

⁸ See TRABATTONI (1988).

⁹ In the *Republic* (439c-e) the same argument is used not to show the independence of the soul from the body, but to uphold the idea of the tripartition of the soul. But this issue does not concern us. If what is at issue here is the autonomy of the soul with respect to the body, the problem does not apply at all to a soul responsible for all the vital functions of man.

‘Did we not agree in our previous discussion that it could never, if it be a harmony, give forth a sound at variance with the tensions and relaxations and vibrations and other conditions of the elements which compose it, but that it would follow them and never lead them?’

‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘we did, of course.’

‘Well then, do we not now find that the soul acts in exactly the opposite way, leading those elements of which it is said to consist and opposing them in almost everything through all our life, and tyrannizing over them in every way, sometimes inflicting harsh and painful punishments (those of gymnastics and medicine), and sometimes milder ones, sometimes threatening and sometimes admonishing, in short, speaking to the desires and passions and fears as if it were distinct from them and they from it, as Homer has shown in the *Odyssey* when he says of Odysseus:¹⁰

He smote his breast, and thus he chid his heart:

“Endure it, heart, you have born worse than this.”

Do you suppose that, when he wrote those words, he thought of the soul as a harmony which would be led by the conditions of the body, and not rather as something fitted to lead and rule them, and itself a far more divine thing than a harmony?’

‘By Zeus, Socrates, the latter, I think.’

‘Then, my good friend, it will never do for us to say that the soul is a harmony; for we should, it seems, agree neither with Homer, the divine poet, nor with ourselves’ (tr. Fowler).

Socrates' reasoning is quite straightforward. As, on the level of experience, it is possible for the human will to counter the desires and stimuli of the body, within man there must be a subject responsible for this opposition; not only that, but this subject must also be independent from the body, for otherwise it would be incapable of offering any opposition at all. Therefore, supposing that the subject in question is the soul, the soul cannot be a harmony (or agreement) of bodily elements, for in such a case all its operations would merely be the forced consequence of the arrangement of bodily parts. The eventuality we experience on the empir-

10 XX, vv. 17-18 (Odysseus, who has just returned to Ithaca, conceals his indignation at the sight of the amorous exchanges between his maid servants and the suitors).

ical level of the soul disobeying the body and ordering it to act against its own wishes would never occur.

A comparison with Aristotle proves interesting in this respect. Aristotle too in the first book of *De anima* offers some arguments to refute the doctrine of the soul as harmony, but these are not pertinent to our enquiry. Rather, it is significant that at the end of his refutation Aristotle in a way seems to question the result achieved by posing the following question:

εἰ δ' ἔστιν ἕτερον ἢ ψυχή τῆς μίξεως, τί δὴ ποτε ἅμα τῷ (τὸ) σαρκὶ εἶναι ἀναιρεῖται καὶ τὸ (τῷ) τοῖς ἄλλοις μορίοις τοῦ ζώου.

I have left these two lines untranslated because the Greek is uncertain. This (already according to Alexander of Aphrodisias¹¹) makes at least two different interpretations possible, which partially depend on the variants I have added in brackets. I will present them in Ross' versions:¹²

- (1) "If the soul is not a ἁρμονία, why is it that when the mixture which constitutes flesh is destroyed, that of the other parts is destroyed with it?"
- (2) "If the soul is not a ἁρμονία, why is it destroyed when the flesh is destroyed?"¹³

Before addressing the textual problems, let us consider the meaning of each translation. The sentence occurs within the context of a series of objections that Aristotle raises against the doctrine of the soul as harmony. Therefore, the most natural way to understand it would be as an extension/integration of the previous critical observations. Yet it is difficult to see how this could be the case. What we have is a hypothetical sentence that starts with the conditional clause "if the soul is not a harmony", and then introduces a factual element that ought to refute the hypothesis: if x is not true, how do we explain y? Therefore, the conclusion ought to be that x is true (namely, that the soul is a harmony). This is precisely the opposite of how the sentence must be interpreted if we accept translation (2). Besides, this version is hardly unproblematic, for it seems to introduce a sort of foreign body into an argument that is heading in a very dif-

11 *Ap. Philop. in de An.* 153, 3ff. An overview of the positions adopted by the ancient commentators is provided by HICKS (1907), p. 271-272.

12 ROSS (1961), p. 197.

13 Among the ancient commentators, the first translation is accepted by Simplicius and Philoponus, the second one by Themistius.

ferent direction. It is easy to understand why already the ancient commentators took a second possibility into account, namely the one based on translation (1). Apparently, there is little difference, because the hypothetical structure remains the same; hence, it seems natural for the conclusion to support rather than disprove the doctrine of the soul as harmony. But let's consider the complex justification of translation (1) provided by Alexander (via Philoponus). The sentence in his view refers to what Aristotle has stated in the previous lines (408a10-18), and in particular to his argument that if the soul were a mixture, given that different combinations of elements are possible, we would have different souls. Alexander takes this conclusion to mean that the doctrine of the soul as harmony necessarily implies the existence of multiple souls (ἐκ τοῦ τὴν ψυχὴν ἁρμονίαν λέγειν συμβαίνειν πολλὰς ψυχὰς ἔχειν τὸ ζῶον, Philop. *in de An.* 152, 34-35). But if we argue that, precisely because the soul is a harmony, all the mixtures (both that of the flesh and those of all the other parts) perish together, this implies the singularity of the soul: for else, this simultaneousness would be unaccountable. Therefore, the doctrine of the soul as harmony would seem to be compromised, because on the one hand it must grant the multiplicity of souls (given the multiplicity of mixtures), while on the other it must also grant the unity of the soul, since all the mixtures perish together.¹⁴

This does not strike me as a very plausible explanation, for more than one reason. First of all, the argument would be adduced too late, since the discussion of the multiplicity of souls had already been brought to an end a few lines before, after which the debate had taken a different turn (the focus had shifted to Empedocles' doctrine).¹⁵ Secondly, if Aristotle truly meant to say what Alexander believes, he would hardly have given the sentence a hypothetical form. Rather, he would have argued along the following lines: given the structural multiplicity of mixtures, the doctrine of the soul as harmony implies the plurality of souls; bodily mixtures perish together; hence, if the soul were a harmony, it would have to be simul-

14 Philop. *in de An.* 152, 3-10: εἰ γὰρ μὴ εἶη, φησὶν, ἡ ψυχὴ ἁρμονία ἀλλ' ἕτερόν τι τῆς μίξεως, διὰ τί τῆς μίξεως τῆς σαρκὸς φθειρομένης καὶ ἡ τῶν λοιπῶν μορίων συμφθίρεται μῆξις; εἰ γὰρ τοῦτο, δόξειεν ἂν μία μῆξις εἶναι πάντων τῶν μορίων καὶ οὐ πολλαί· διὰ τί γὰρ τῆ μῆ πᾶσαι συμφθίρονται; οὕτω δὲ καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ μία ἔσται καὶ οὐ πολλαί, εἰς ὃ ἄτοπον ἀπάγεσθαι ἐδόκει ὁ λόγος ὁ λέγων τὴν ψυχὴν ἁρμονίαν εἶναι. ὥστε εἰ μῆξις μίξεως ἀναιρουμένης ἀναιρεῖται τὸ ζῶον, μία ἄρα καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ ἁρμονία οὔσα.

15 408a18-24.

taneously one and many. In this reasoning, the second premise carries an absolute meaning, so it makes no sense to make it conditional upon the hypothesis that the soul is a harmony. If the soul were not a harmony, wouldn't the various bodily mixtures perish together anyway? Finally, the sentence we are discussing has a clearly contrastive sense, as is shown by the opening δέ.

It thus seems to me that the only acceptable meaning is the one expressed by translation (2). The fact that this is a kind of aside that is not taken any further does not strike me as a problem, since Aristotle frequently interrupts or attempts to problematise his argument: a feature that probably reflects the aporetic nature of his thought, as well as the dialogical-dialectic dynamics inherent in teaching. After having refuted the doctrine of the soul as harmony, Aristotle notes the problem of the compatibility of what he has just stated with his own views: if, as Aristotle's philosophy suggests, the soul perishes the very moment it is stripped of "the mixture which constitutes flesh and that of the other living parts", it would seem as though the theory according to which the soul is the harmony of the body represents the most natural and effective explanation for what has just been argued, namely that the soul perishes together with the body. Hence Aristotle's question: why, despite this, is the soul not a harmony? In other words, notwithstanding all the objections already raised, Aristotle here would be displaying a somewhat sympathetic attitude towards the notion that the doctrine of the soul as harmony is the explanation most compatible with the soul's dependence upon the body. Giancarlo Movia has rightly noted that «of all his predecessors' doctrines, that of the soul as harmony is the one closest to the Aristotelian thesis of the unity of soul and body».¹⁶

Let's see how all this might be compatible with the text. I will here continue to follow Ross' commentary. In his view, translation (1) would require τῷ at line 25 and τό at line 26 (although it would also be compatible with the presence of τό in either position). By contrast, translation (2)

16 MOVIA (2001), p. 262 («fra tutte le dottrine dei predecessori, quella dell'anima-armonia è la più vicina alla tesi aristotelica dell'unità dell'anima e del corpo»). Cf. Philop. 151, 9-10: Ἐκτιθέμενος τὴν δόξαν τῶν λεγόντων ἁρμονίαν εἶναι τὴν ψυχὴν ἔλεγε πιθανὸν εἶναι τοῦτον τὸν λόγον.

would require τῶ in either case. Here is breakdown of the three possibilities, accompanied by the respective translations:

- (a) τῶ at line 26 and τό at line 25:
“together with the mixture which constitutes flesh, also that of the other material parts is destroyed” (tr. 1).
- (b) τό in both cases:
“the mixture which constitutes flesh and that of the other material parts are destroyed together” (tr. 1).
- (c) τῶ in both cases
“[the soul] is destroyed together with the mixture which constitutes the flesh and that of the other material parts” (tr. 2).

This breakdown is consistent with the fact that both HICKS (1907) and HETT (1936), who adopt translation (2), choose to insert the article τῶ in both positions (the same translation is provided by LAURENTI (1973), which does not give the Greek text). However, Ross disagrees with this interpretation, probably based on the fact that whereas the manuscripts are more or less equally divided in their reading of line 25, almost all of them favour τό at line 26. Therefore, Ross chose to print τό at line 26 but for line 25 adopted τό in his 1956 *editio minor* and τῶ in his 1961 *editio major*. Evidently, though, the meaning in his view does not change, because whereas (1) is compatible with either variant, (2) necessarily requires τῶ at line 26, and hence must apparently be ruled out. The translation featured in the *editio major* is consistent with (1). ROSS (1961) is followed by MOVIA (2001), whereas CORCILIUS (2017) adopts ROSS (1956); both scholars, in keeping with the Greek text they give, choose translation (1), as BODEÛS (1993) does in his French translation (without the Greek).

The situation, to my mind, is quite clear. Some of the most respected translations of last century chose the textual variant that practically entails version (2), evidently on the grounds that this seems like the more natural version and the one more in keeping with the hypothetical-dialectic nature of the sentence. Later, other authors and commentators, starting with Ross, deemed the philological factors more cogent, namely the insufficient and weak attestation of τῶ at line 26; hence, they chose to leave τό in that position, which led them to accept translation (1). It thus seems as though we are dealing with a typical exegetical aporia: the variant that seems more natural in terms of meaning is the less probable one as far as the reconstruction of the text is concerned.

In my view, the problem can be solved by proposing a fourth possibility, based on a different reading of the text according to (b), namely:

(b') τό in both cases:

“together [with the soul], the mixture which constitutes flesh and that of the other material parts are destroyed” (2).

This would solve all problems. The question that Aristotle is suddenly raising, possibly as a kind of annotation inserted in the text in view of future considerations, might be taken to be the following: while there are good reasons to reject the doctrine of the soul as harmony, one must also bear in mind that the most natural position for someone wishing to demonstrate the simultaneous passing away of soul and body is a theory similar to – or partly overlapping with – that of the soul as harmony. And the Aristotelian conception of the soul as the form of the body would indeed appear to be a theory of this sort (as shown, in particular, by the interpretation provided by Alexander of Aphrodisias¹⁷).

Given all this, we can now draw some conclusions. Had Plato known the Aristotelian doctrine according to which the soul is the form of the body, he would probably have countered it with an objection similar to the one Socrates raises against Simmias in the *Phaedo*. He would not so much – or merely – have argued, as throngs of later Platonists were to do (Atticus, Plotinus, Porphyry, etc.¹⁸), that it is philosophically and metaphysically outrageous to deny that the soul is a substance which is separate, imperishable, divine, and so on. Rather, he would have argued that the theory according to which the soul is the form of the body is inadequate on the scientific and explanatory level, since – just like the doctrine of the soul as harmony, towards which Aristotle significantly shows some indulgence – it fails to duly account for the psychological and ethical elements which de facto characterise man and his actions within the world.

17 See Alex. Aphr. *De an.*, 24-26.

18 «Platon war kein Platoniker» (GADAMER, 1985-1991, p. 508).

References

- BODEÛS, R. (1993). Aristote. *Traité de l'âme*. Paris. Flammarion.
- CATAPANO, G. (2006). Plotino. *Sulle virtù, I 2 [19]*. Pisa. Pisa University Press.
- CORCILIUS, K. (2017). Aristoteles. *Über die Seele. De anima*, Übersetzt, mit einer Einleitung und Anmerkungen. Hamburg, Felix Meiner.
- FREDE, D. (1999). Platons "Phaidon". *Der Traum von der Unsetzbarkeit der Seele*. Darmstadt. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- GADAMER, H.G. (1985-1991). *Gesammelte Werke II*. Tübingen. Mohr Siebeck.
- GERSON, L. (1994). *Plotinus*. London, New York. Routledge.
- HETT W.S. (1936). Aristotle. *On the Soul, Parva naturalia, On Breath*. Cambridge (Mass.). Harvard University Press, London. Heinemann.
- HICKS, R. (1907). Aristotle. *De anima*, with Translation, Introduction and Notes. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.
- LANE, M. (2005). 'Emplois pour philosophes': l'art politique et l'étranger dans le politique à la lumière de Socrate et du philosophe dans le *Théétète*. *Les Études Philosophiques*, 3, p. 325-345
- LAURENTI, R. (1973). Aristotele. *Dell'anima*. In: Giannantoni, G. (ed.). *Aristotele. Opere*, vol. IV. Bari. Laterza.
- MAHONNEY, T. (2004). Is Assimilation to God in the *Theaetetus* Purely Otherworldly?. *Ancient Philosophy*, 24, p. 321-338.
- MOVIA, G. (2001). Aristotele, *L'anima*, Milano. Bompiani.
- ROSS, D. (1956). *Aristotelis de anima*. Oxford. Clarendon Press.
- _____ (1961). Aristotle. *De anima*, Edited with Introduction and Commentary. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- RUE, R. (1993). The Philosopher in Flight: The Digression (172c-177c) in Plato's *Theaetetus*. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 11, p. 71-100.
- TRABATTONI, F. (1988). La teoria dell'anima-armonia nel *Fedone*. *Elenchos*, 9, p. 53-74.
- _____ (2007). Si può parlare di "unità" della psicologia platonica? Esame di un caso significativo (*Fedone*, 68b-69e). In: Migliori, M.; Napolitano Valditara, L.; Fermani A. (eds.). *Interiorità e anima. La psychè in Platone*. Milano. Vita e Pensiero, p. 307-320.