

**Zeitschrift:** Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique  
**Herausgeber:** Fondation Hardt pour l'étude de l'Antiquité classique  
**Band:** 3 (1957)  
  
**Artikel:** Plato's views on the nature of the soul  
**Autor:** Guthrie, W.K.C.  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-660599>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 24.12.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

I

W. K. C. GUTHRIE

Plato's Views on the Nature  
of the Soul



## PLATO'S VIEWS ON THE NATURE OF THE SOUL

WHEN our host did me the great honour of inviting me to take part in these 'Entretiens', I was doubtful whether I ought to accept. The discussions proposed for this year seemed to be concerned with the thought of later antiquity and the early Christian world, and I felt that although I should be keenly interested to hear them, I was less competent to make a worthwhile contribution of my own in this sphere than in the period up to Aristotle. When however I look at the titles chosen by the other speakers in our symposium, and see that they deal to a considerable extent with the legacy of Plato's thought on its religious side, I am hopeful that it may be of interest if as a beginning, before we launch out on the vast ocean of Platonic influence, I say something about the teaching of Plato himself on a theme so important to religious philosophy as the nature and fate of the human soul.

This subject is certainly not one which has been neglected by scholars in the past. Yet although it has been subjected to repeated scrutiny, it remains true, as one of the most recent writers has remarked, that "the problem of the tripartite soul is among the thorniest of all Platonic problems, and in spite of a vast amount of discussion in recent years, it cannot be said to be solved."<sup>1</sup> The obvious truth of this statement, and the fact that, as it seems to me, one important point in particular has been overlooked in previous attempts at explanation, form my justification for raising the topic again.

The questions which I wish to reopen are these: What were Plato's beliefs about the nature of the human soul?

1. R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedrus* (1952), p. 75.

In what sense did he believe it to be immortal? How far is he consistent in what he says about it in the dialogues? I take it that we should agree on two things, and in what follows I shall assume them to be true. Both have been well expressed by Professor Dodds. First, "Plato's philosophy did not spring forth fully mature, either from his own head or from the head of Socrates", but is "an organic thing which changed, partly in obedience to its inner law of growth, but partly also in response to external stimuli".<sup>1</sup> Second, Plato admitted two levels of truth, which may roughly be called truths of religion and truths of reason. There will always be some truths, and those the highest, which cannot be proved dialectically but must be conveyed in the form of myth, the details of which can claim only probability, not precise accuracy. At the same time he regarded it as the philosopher's duty to push back the frontiers of reason and win for it all possible ground from the domain of mythical imagery.<sup>2</sup> As an example, we may say that immortality was for Plato a matter of rational proof, whereas what befell the immortal part of us after death could only be hinted at in a *ἱερὸς λόγος*.

Having made these two points, I had better add that nevertheless I shall be arguing for a greater measure of consistency in Plato's thought than is usually granted by his interpreters.

I have put some questions in general terms. The specific problem which they raise, and which has always been the centre of argument, is this: Did Plato consider the soul as in its own essence simple or composite, and if the latter, did he believe that the whole of it was immortal, or only the highest part? (I use the English word 'soul', but it must be supposed in every case to stand for the Greek *ψυχή*.)

The mind and personality of Socrates formed the starting-

1. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951), p. 208.

2. Compare Dodds, *Plato and the Irrational*, JHS 1945, pp. 23 f.

point of Plato's philosophy, and remained its inspiration throughout his life. Where he went beyond Socrates, as of course he did, it was never (so I believe) with the intention of contradicting him, but rather of putting his simple, practical teaching on an unassailable theoretical basis. From him he would learn that the chief end of man is to look after the well-being of his soul, and that this *θεραπεία ψυχῆς* is a *τέχνη* (*Laches* 185e) acquired by rigorous self-examination and an understanding of the meaning of ethical terms, which in turn is gained by the method of "common search", that is of question and answer between two people acting in a spirit of mutual helpfulness and friendship. Since full understanding would inevitably reveal itself in right action, virtue is knowledge and no one sins willingly. For Socrates the "soul" that is to be cultivated is clearly the mind or understanding (*νοῦς*). The life extolled is the rational life, though this is no reason why he should not have said, as Xenophon makes him say (*Mem.* 4.3.14), that the soul of man has something divine in it. I think myself, with Erland Ehnmark,<sup>1</sup> that he believed it destined for a blessed immortality, but for the present purpose we can leave this controversial question aside.

The *Phaedo* reads like a defence of this Socratic view, though a defence carried on by means of doctrines which go beyond anything that Socrates himself is likely to have said. The supremacy of the soul, its identity with the intellect, the need to cultivate it and render it as independent of the body as possible, all these are emphasized by every means at Plato's disposal. Moreover its immortality is made to depend on its singleness of nature, for nothing composite can be immune from destruction (78c). The idea of the composition of the soul out of several elements is worked out in the *Republic*, but more than hinted at in the *Gorgias* (503 ff.), where it is difficult to agree with Frutiger that "le principe

1. *Socrates and the Immortality of the Soul*, Eranus 1946, pp. 105-122.



de la simplicité de l'âme est encore maintenu".<sup>1</sup> Starting from his favourite analogy with the crafts, Plato's Socrates describes the making of an artefact as in every case a process of so arranging and fitting together a number of different parts or elements that they take their place in the structure of a new whole, which is to be a τεταγμένον καὶ κεκοσμημένον πρᾶγμα. Trainers do the same for the body – κοσμοῦσι καὶ συντάττουσι – and the health of the soul depends similarly on its attainment of κόσμος and τάξις, which must surely imply the presence of parts within it.

Here, however, no more is said, and the approach certainly seems tentative. *Rep.* iv gives us the full and explicit partition of the soul into reason, appetite and the intermediate element of θυμός. Nor can we water down this doctrine by speaking loosely of "aspects" of an essentially unitary soul, instead of "parts" of a composite one. Not only are the words μέρη and εἶδος used as well as γένη, but such an interpretation is forbidden by Plato's appeal to a precise statement of the law of contradiction at 426 b. With this, however, has to be compared the passage in Book x (611 a ff.), where Plato reminds us that it is difficult for a σύνθετον, such as we have just seen the soul to be, to be eternal, especially when, as in this case, it does not seem to be put together in the best possible manner. However, he adds, we must remember that soul in its truest nature is not like this – full of variety, dissimilarity and inconsistency (πολλῆς ποικιλίας τε καὶ ἀνομοιότητός τε καὶ διαφορᾶς γέμειν αὐτὸ πρὸς αὐτό). We see it like this now because it is damaged by its connexion with the body (λελωβημένον . . . ὑπὸ τε τῆς τοῦ σώματος κοινωνίας καὶ ἄλλων κακῶν, ὥσπερ νῦν ἡμεῖς θεώμεθα), but ought to consider it in its purity (οἷόν ἐστι καθαρόν γιγνόμενον). Then we should find it a much more beautiful thing (πολὺ κάλλιον). We must look only at its φιλοσοφία, and understand that it is akin to the divine and immortal and ever-

1. *Les Mythes de Platon* (1930), p. 85.

lasting (συγγενῆς οὖσα τῷ τε θείῳ καὶ ἀθανάτῳ καὶ τῷ ἀεὶ ὄντι: cf. *Phaedo* 79 d, where the soul is spoken of in practically the same words as συγγενῆς οὖσα τὸ καθαρὸν τε καὶ ἀεὶ ὄν καὶ ἀθάνατον). Only then, if we see it stripped of its bodily associations, shall we behold its true nature, whether simple or composite (τὴν ἀληθῆ φύσιν εἴτε πολυειδῆς εἴτε μονοειδῆς).

The only reasonable conclusion from all this is that the soul for Plato is still in essence simple, and only appears composite as the result of its association with the body. I should not have taken up so much of your time with this well known passage were it not that an acute critic like Frutiger could still regard it not as confirming, but as correcting the insistence of the *Phaedo* on the simplicity of the soul. He thought that by saying it is *difficult* for a σύνθετον to be immortal, Plato meant that it is not impossible as it is said to be in the *Phaedo*. But this sort of tentative under-statement is of course characteristic of Plato. Even in the *Phaedo* he only says: οὐκοῦν ἄπερ ἀεὶ κατὰ ταῦτα καὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχει, ταῦτα μάλιστα εἰκὸς εἶναι τὰ ἀσύνθετα, τὰ δὲ ἄλλοτ' ἄλλως καὶ μηδέποτε κατὰ ταῦτά, ταῦτα δὲ σύνθετα; So far as the words go, he is even there attributing probable, not certain mortality to the composite.<sup>1</sup>

In the *Meno*, as in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, the immortality of the soul is brought into connexion with the theory that knowledge is recollection, but nothing is said as to its composition. The real difficulty begins with the *Phaedrus*. Before tackling it, we may note that the *Timaeus*, which was presumably written after all the dialogues so far mentioned, reproduces essentially the same scheme as the *Republic*. The soul is an immortal principle, but when it is incarnated in a mortal body, the θνητὸν εἶδος ψυχῆς is "built on" to it (προσῳκοδόμουν 69 c). This, subdivided as before into a nobler and a baser part, is located in the lower regions of the body. The head is the seat of that part which Plato calls divine

1. Frutiger o.c., pp. 91-93; *Phaedo* 78 c.



(44 d), and contrasts with the mortal. At 90 a he says that God has given us this part as a *daimon*, and as proof of our kinship with heaven. Here too then, our soul in this life is tripartite, but only the highest part of it, namely the reason, is immortal.

When he wrote the *Phaedo*, the twin currents of intellectualism and Puritanism still flowed so strongly in Plato that he assigned only reason to the soul, regarding all passion and emotion, as well as sheer physical appetite, as the work of the body trying to drag down the soul to its own level. These therefore must be repressed, and the soul cultivated as far as possible as if it were already disembodied, in that "practice for death" which is the philosopher's proper occupation. In the *Republic* he has advanced to a recognition that conflict occurs in the soul itself, and this figure of internal conflict (στάσις) is also developed in the *Sophist* (228 b). It leads to a change of emphasis in practice as well as theory. The passions and appetites are acknowledged to have their place in human life. Attention is directed rather to their regulation than to their complete suppression. But Book x shows him still faithful to the conviction that the existence of these conflicting elements in the soul is only made possible by its association with the body, and that in its purity, its "truest nature", it is characterized by φιλοσοφία alone; and only this philosophic soul is immortal. This is the teaching of the *Timaeus* also, and I believe it to have been Plato's conviction throughout his life. That he should ever have brought himself to include the two lower parts of the soul in its purest and truest nature seems to me a psychological improbability far more difficult to swallow than any difficulty caused by their attachment to discarnate souls in the *Phaedrus*. Only the reason is immortal; or, since the word "reason" is too cold and dry to convey the full import of a philosophy based, like Plato's, on Eros (at its highest level, but still Eros), let us rather say: only that part of the soul which strives consist-

ently after wisdom and knowledge can belong to the eternal world, for only that is συγγενής τῷ θείῳ. And after all, it is at least difficult to conceive how a completely disembodied soul could retain its appetite for food and drink, which are absorbed in bodily organs and serve the purposes of the body alone. Here however the real difficulties begin, and to appreciate them we must turn to the *Phaedrus*.

At the very beginning of what is said there about the soul (245 c), we notice that its immortality is no longer made to depend on its simplicity, but a different proof from those in the *Phaedo* is offered, the proof from self-motion. Passing to its nature or form (ἰδέα 246 a), Plato emphasizes that what follows will be only a simile. It would be a superhuman task to describe it οἷόν ἐστι, but we may say ὅ ἔοικε, and this means, as has been generally recognized, that "the myth will be in part an allegory, that is to say a description in symbolic terms which can be readily translated into what they stand for" (Hackforth, *Phaedrus* p. 72). Indeed the meaning of Plato's comparison of the soul to "the combined power of a team of winged horses and their charioteer" (246 a) is transparent enough. It is the familiar tripartite soul, in which the charioteer represents the reason, the nobler horse the passionate element, and the baser horse the physical appetites.

Having said this, however, we have to admit that the composite nature of the soul is not, as it has appeared to be in the dialogues we have so far considered, dependent on its incarnation in a body. In the first place, the souls of the gods, equally with those of men, are likened to charioteer and horses; or to follow the simile more accurately, the god is said to be the charioteer who drives his winged team (246 e Ζεὺς ἐλαύνων πτηνὸν ἄρμα). In the second place, souls that are destined for incarnation in mortal bodies have already their three elements – driver, obedient horse and unruly horse – before their fall from heaven, when they are still

striving to follow in the train of the gods and get a glimpse of the vision of reality in the plain of truth.

We are in an obvious difficulty if we confront this picture of the soul with those in other dialogues. There, we said, it is only association with a body that imparts to the soul its lower elements. Here on the contrary they are ascribed to discarnate souls also. Scholars hitherto seem to have followed one of two courses. Either they say with Wilamowitz that the imagery in fact breaks down ("Das komplizierte Bild des Seelenwagens mit den zwei verschieden gemuteten Rossen ist allein für das Verhalten der Seele im Menschenleibe erfunden", *Platon* i p. 467; so also Taylor, *Plato* 307; we must not "press the details"); or else, like Professor Hackforth, they posit an unresolved contradiction in Plato's own mind. "Plato wavers to the end between the religious, Orphic-Pythagorean conception of a divine soul essentially ('in its true nature') divorced from all physical functions, all 'lower' activities, and a more secular and scientific conception of soul as essentially a source of motion both to itself and to τὰ ἄλλα." On this view "it can only move the body in virtue of itself possessing 'motions' over and above the reason which contemplates the eternal Forms." (*Phaedrus*, p. 76.)

I should like to suggest a different solution. The system of eschatology which Plato adopts in his myths is a complex one. In outline it was not original, for it appears in Empedocles, and is pretty clearly the system taught in the poems from which the verses were extracted that have been discovered on the famous gold plates from Italian graves. I like to call it Orphic, but in deference to the suspicion with which that name is generally greeted today, I am willing for the moment to regard this as no more than a personal whim. The name does not matter, but the system was there. It taught that essentially the soul is divine (the *daimon* common to Empedocles and *Timaeus* 90 a; the θεός which the dead man is to become according to the tablets from Thurii),

but has been compelled to undergo a series of incarnations as punishment for some not very clearly defined original sin or impurity. It may be the universal human impurity due to our origin from the Titans, sons of Earth and slayers of Dionysus. But since no classical authority says so explicitly, let us emulate Pindar's caution and speak of it as *ποινὰ παλαιού πένθεος*. Empedocles specified the sins of flesh-eating and perjury, but why a divine being should commit these sins he does not say. Perhaps the sin as well as the punishment was *Ἀνάγκης χρῆμα*.

Be that as it may, as soon as a soul has sinned, and is therefore doomed to the wheel of reincarnation, it has lost its purity. Thereafter, as for ten thousand years it makes the weary round of the wheel, now in and now out of a human or animal body, it is never free from the contamination of the sublunary world, exemplified in, *but not confined to* its direct association with a body.

This is the scheme of the *Phaedrus*. To the *Ἀνάγκης χρῆμα* of Empedocles corresponds the *θεσμὸς Ἀδραστείας* of 248 c. When one of the *daimones*, says Empedocles, has sinned, it must wander for thrice ten thousand seasons an exile from its native element, being born in all forms of mortality (fr. 115). In the language of Plato's myth, the soul which cannot follow the gods and get a full vision of the truth, falls to the earth and is born, first as a man, and afterwards, if its earthly life deserves it, as a beast. It cannot return "to the place whence it came" (248 e) for ten thousand years, unless it succeeds in living the philosophic life three times in succession. Each circuit from one birth to the next lasts a thousand years, from which it follows that in the cycle of reincarnation much more time is spent out of the body than in it. How it is spent, we learn from the myth of Er in the *Republic*.

The point is this. For one who holds these beliefs, the essential contrast is not between an incarnate and a discarnate soul.



Whether or not a soul is actually in the body or out of it is comparatively unimportant if it is caught in the wheel, and destined for incarnation or reincarnation. The essential difference is that between a soul that is in, or destined for, the κύκλος βαρυπένθης and one that has escaped from it and returned εἰς τὸ αὐτὸ ὅθεν ἦκει. Only after escape is immortality attained, for immortality does not simply mean an ability to outlast the body. It implies divinity and presupposes complete purity. Souls still in the wheel have the taint of the earthly still clinging to them, alike during incarnations and between them.

Here I would draw attention to something which is usually overlooked in this connection.<sup>1</sup> It is regularly said that the psychology of the *Phaedrus* is inconsistent with that of, for example, the *Phaedo*, because in the *Phaedrus* the lower parts of the soul survive when it is out of the body, but in the *Phaedo* they do not. This is not strictly true. It is said there, admittedly, that the passions and appetites are of the body and do not belong to the soul's true nature; but it is not said that the soul is immediately rid of them after death. On the contrary, we are told (81 a ff.) that a soul that has given itself over to bodily desires and pleasures while in the body is, when it leaves it, still permeated by the corporeal. It must therefore wander about in the region of the corporeal until, "through the desires of that which follows about with it", it is again imprisoned in a body. To be immediately rid, at death, of the taint of the body (that is, of the lower parts of the soul) is a privilege reserved for the philosopher whose life has been a successful "practice for death". Similarly in the myth of the *Gorgias* it is said that every soul, just like every body, retains after death the blemishes which defaced it in life (524 d-e). That is why Zeus decreed that judgment must be pronounced after death, lest the ugliness of the soul

1. I think for instance that it is missed by Professor Dodds in his remark about the *Phaedrus* in *The Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 231 n. 62.



be hidden by the cloak of a fine body, or of wealth and power.

It is thus no contradiction of anything that Plato has ever said if in the *Phaedrus* he speaks of the lower parts of the soul outlasting its incarnation in a body. Even in the *Phaedrus*, I suggest, we may affirm that its composite nature is bound up, if not with actual inclusion in a body, at any rate with its involvement in the doom of repeated incarnation. The souls of the gods are in the simile compared to a charioteer and team of horses like the others, but with a significant difference. Driver and horses are at one, are alike good: θεῶν μὲν οὖν ἵπποι τε καὶ ἡνίοχοι πάντες αὐτοὶ τε ἀγαθοὶ καὶ ἐξ ἀγαθῶν, τὰ δὲ τῶν ἄλλων μέμικται (246 a). What can this mean except that essentially the souls of the gods are of one and the same nature, since they contain no possibility of evil?<sup>1</sup> This will apply also to the souls of those philosophic men who have made their final escape from the wheel of birth, for then their nature too will be wholly divine. θεὸς δ' ἔσθι ἀντὶ βρότῳ was the promise of the gold plates, which Empedocles knew had come true for him: ἐγὼ δ' ὤμην θεὸς ἄμβροτος, οὐκέτι θνητός (fr. 112.4). For Plato too the end of the philosophic life was ὁμοίωσις θεῷ, for the immortal part of us, the reason, is so in virtue of being divine (Tim. 44d).

This is the conclusion to which we must come if we strip off the trappings of the myth to get at the truth of which for Plato it is the imperfect image (ὅτι ἔοικεν ἡ ψυχή, not οἶόν ἐστι). Are we right to treat the imagery in this way? Yes, for Plato has made his meaning clear when he tells us that charioteer and horses of the gods are "good and of good origin", but that the nature of the others is mixed. For the gods the allegory of the chariot implies no plurality of nature.

1. Professor Hackforth (*Phaedrus*, p. 76) says: "One hesitates whether or not to 'translate' this statement", but decides after all to do so, and hence concludes that "even 'pure' soul is θυμοειδής and ἐπιθυμητικός as well as λογιστικός." It is this statement with which I find it particularly difficult to agree.

Its imagery was necessary in order to give an imaginative picture of a religious truth which Plato believes, but of which neither he nor any other man can give a rational explanation. It is a truth that can be stated in Christian as well as Platonic terms. How did sin first enter the world, if man is made by God and in God's own image? Plato's simile does not then explain (for that is impossible) but illustrates pictorially how the soul, which is in its pure essence simple and perfect, *could become* a mixture of good and bad. It is of one nature. That is represented by saying that horses and charioteer are alike good. But a soul may become contaminated, and this has actually happened to the souls of mortals who have been drawn into the wheel of birth. Having the horses and charioteer already in his picture, Plato can represent this without a change of imagery, by saying simply: τὰ δὲ τῶν ἄλλων μέμεικται. Frutiger asks (p. 82): "Si durant leur vie céleste, les âmes n'avaient pas déjà en elles une force capable de vaincre la raison, par quoi pourraient-elles être entraînées au mal?" The question is pertinent, but one may meet it with another: "If the image of charioteer and horses itself implies a mixture of forces in the soul, how is it that the gods are free from all danger of a fall?"

To any who may still think that on this explanation Plato does not seem to have made altogether clear how the fall of a soul is possible in the first place, I would answer that it would be most surprising if he had. Empedocles does not explain how a *daimon*, one of those οἷτε μακραίωνος λελάχασιν βίωιο (fr. 115.5), first comes to follow Strife and take to bloodshed and perjury. He only tells us what happens when it does. As I have said, the fall of man, the origin of evil in the human soul, is scarcely susceptible to rational explanation by a religious teacher who believes that man is made in the image of God. How then did he fall? There is no answer, but since to such a man – Plato or the writer of *Genesis* ii and iii – there is no surer article of belief, he tells us not

how it happened but how it might have happened. It is as if, said Plato, the souls of God and man alike were each a charioteer driving winged horses. Since the nature of God, as we know, is pure and simple, we must imagine that in his case driver and horses are completely at one; but in other souls a flaw appears, for the horses have not the perfection of the driver, and one of them brings the whole equipage to the ground.

Another passage has recently been adduced as evidence against the view that Plato consistently believed in the immortality and divinity of the highest part of soul alone – that which we call reason. Professor Hackforth sees “complete disagreement” between the *Laws*, his latest work, and the *Timaeus* in this respect. In *Laws* x, he writes, we find “attribution to the world-soul (*and by inference to the individual soul ‘in its true nature’*) of much besides reason, viz. ‘wish, reflection, forethought, counsel, opinion true and false, joy, grief, confidence, fear, hate, love, and all the motions akin to these’.”<sup>1</sup>

Now “the individual soul in its true nature” is for Plato, or has been hitherto, the soul of the complete philosopher, which has cast off all the trammels of this world and won its way to the divine plane of reality where dwell the eternal Forms and the gods to which it is akin, being itself immortal and divine. For Plato to tell us that this soul, far from being εὐδαίμων, is subject to grief and fear, would be a volte face so incredible that whatever be the explanation of this passage, I do not think it can be that. Moreover if we are going to take this to apply to the soul “in its true nature” we must account for the fact that Plato has not only included some activities which seem inappropriate, but omitted to mention those that most properly belong to it, namely any activities connected with the attainment of knowledge and wisdom for their own sakes. There is no mention of ἐπίστασθαι, γινῶναι, φιλοσοφεῖν or anything else which for Plato clear-

1. Hackforth, *Phaedrus* p. 75 (my italics). The passage referred to is at 897 a.

ly *was* the function of the soul in its true nature. If we are to take the paragraph *au pied de la lettre*, it even seems that so far as we have quoted it, it describes the lower part of soul, excluding pure reason, for a little later on he speaks of it as νοῦν προσλαβοῦσα, "adding to itself *nous*", or else doing the opposite and consorting with folly. Could Plato ever have spoken of the soul "in its true nature" as ἀνοία συγγενομένη?

To say that in this passage Plato is giving us his considered view of soul in its true nature is, I think, to forget the context and purpose of the argument. The *Laws* is still a political treatise, and by proving that in the government of the world as a whole psychical causes are prior to physical Plato has it in mind to combat the harmful effect which the opposite belief must have on the conduct of members of a *polis*. His reason for opposing those who say that nature is ruled by inanimate forces and not by design (τύχη not τέχνη), is to refute their low opinion of political activity (889 d): "They say that statesmanship has little in common with nature but is largely an artificial affair, and so all legislation is not natural but artificial, and its tenets are not true." Naturally then when he has demonstrated the priority of soul, he emphasizes those aspects of it which link it with practical statesmanship. Deliberation, forethought, will, opinion, fear and confidence etc. are all of great importance to the statesman, and even on the psychology of the *Republic* or *Timaeus* they belong to the soul, not the body. It is the workings of soul in this world that interest Plato at present, not the behaviour of the philosophic soul that has died to the world, or the souls of the gods as they contemplate the reality beyond space and time. At 904 a, he says that there is soul in every action both good and bad, and this is the kind of soul that he is primarily including in the statement under consideration (897 a). Nor can it well be argued that because of this shift of interest he has actually changed his convictions and ceased to believe in the wheel of incarnation and the possibility of ultimate release, with



all that that implies for the true nature of the soul. At 903 d he speaks of the soul as being joined now to one body and now to another, and at 904 d, in language which would not be out of place in the *Phaedo*, he tells how a soul by consorting with divine virtue becomes divine itself, and is then transported to another, better place. When this happens we can have no reason to think that it will be other than *nous* pure and simple, identical with the supremely good soul that guides the wheeling stars, in the perfect circularity of whose motion its nature as *nous* is revealed (νοῦ κίνησις 897 d).

There remains perhaps the difficulty mentioned by Professor Hackforth, that if the soul is to be the moving principle, it must itself possess motions "over and above the reason which contemplates the eternal forms" (p. 8 above). I do not know whether, when Plato defined the soul as ἀρχὴ κινήσεως in the *Phaedrus*, this was for his own philosophy a new development; but at least it represented an ancient view of soul which must always have been familiar to him, and it is impossible that he could have thought of it otherwise than as a source of energy. In the *Republic*, as Cornford has written,<sup>1</sup> the three parts of the soul are also to be thought of as "manifestations of a single fund of energy, called Eros, directed through divergent channels towards various ends". These channels seemed to Plato to be in the main three. Hence instead of defining *nous* (for which 'reason' is an inadequate translation) as the highest part of a tripartite soul, we can also describe it as the power of soul when all its energies are directed to the pursuit of wisdom, and every desire for the objects either of worldly ambition or of sensual gratification has lost its meaning. The highest manifestation is certainly as much of a motive force as are the other two. *Psyche* is the vital principle, it is the energy of life itself.

1. *The Doctrine of Eros, The Unwritten Philosophy* (Cambridge 1950), p. 71. Cfr. *Rep.* 485 d.



The soul of the philosopher, or of God, does not lose that life when it turns to contemplate reality. On the contrary the philosophic souls "have life, and have it more abundantly", ἡ γὰρ νοῦ ἐνέργεια ζωή, as Aristotle wrote in a truly Platonic mood. But it would be a great distortion of Plato's words to say that they have θυμός and ἐπιθυμία.

In this life, *nous* is characterized by the possession of philosophic *eros*. The lower manifestations of *eros* belong to the lower parts of the soul. God, and the soul that has attained divinity, can presumably no longer feel *eros* at all, for that is the intermediate state of one who has not yet fully attained. To ask: "What then is the nature of the 'motion' of God, and of souls absorbed into his being?" would be, for a man like Plato, to exceed the bounds of *logos*. Here mysticism steps in. The source of knowledge and of being cannot be looked at directly with the eye of the mind, any more than the sun, its earthly image, with the eye of the body.

Nevertheless this is just the sort of question that the irrepressible Aristotle did ask. In many fundamental things he remained the faithful pupil of Plato, and when they differed the reason was usually this: for Plato, however far dialectic might go, the veil between it and *mythos* must always remain, since it existed in the nature of things. For Aristotle, to take refuge in *mythos* at all was nothing but a confession of weakness. This final question therefore he tackled, and answered by drawing the distinction between κίνησις and ἐνέργεια, and defining the former as ἐντελέχεια κινητοῦ ἀτελούς (*Phys.* viii.257 b 8). Where motion ends, we reach no state of passivity or ineffectiveness. On the contrary, it is only then that full and unimpeded activity begins.

And so I conclude that, once he had emerged from the purely Socratic phase of thought, Plato's views about the nature of the individual soul were fundamentally consistent. (How far these views were already inherent in the mind of Socrates is a question for another paper, if indeed it can

be answered at all.) From the moment when they first incur the doom of pilgrimage through the cycle of *palingenesis*, souls are compounded of three main elements; or, if you like, three streams of energy directed to objects of different sorts. Of these, the lower two can only exist – they can only have meaning – in connexion with the possibility of contact with a body, that is, of existence within the cycle. The highest part, and that alone, is perfect and divine, and this at the same time is the soul in its true, or pure, nature. If there is inconsistency in this, it is an inconsistency inherent in the human situation, poised as we are uneasily between the worlds of beast and of god, a mixture of the two, divinely discontent. This also Aristotle saw. A man, he said, must live according to his highest part, and that is *nous*. In so far as he does this, he will indeed seem to be living “not *qua* man, but by virtue of a divinity which is in him”. Yet at the same time “this part would seem to *be* each one of us, and it would be absurd to choose not one’s own life but that of another” (EN x.1177 b 27 ff.). Aristotle also maintained, even at a risk to the consistency of his own philosophy, which he valued above all else, that whereas soul as the principle of physical life must perish with its body, *nous* alone was different. It alone “comes in from outside” and is divine (*Gen. an.* 736 b 28, EN 1177 b 28), and it may outlast the death of the body (*Metaph.* 1070 a 25), for it is something separate (*De an.* 430 a 17). For “Pythagorean myths” about the migration of a soul into different bodies he felt nothing but contempt (*De an.* 407 b 20 ff.), but the immortality and divinity of *nous*, and of *nous* alone, was a part of his Platonic heritage which he found it impossible to renounce.<sup>1</sup>

1. I should like to draw attention to an excellent article on this subject which nowadays tends to be forgotten. It is *Plato and the Tripartite Soul*, by J. L. Stocks, in *Mind* vol. 24 (1915), pp. 207-221.

## RÉSUMÉ DE LA DISCUSSION

La discussion se concentre tout de suite sur le problème de la cohérence et de l'unité intrinsèque de l'œuvre philosophique de Platon. M. Gigon souligne que les questions touchant la structure de l'âme (l'âme est-elle un tout rigoureusement homogène ou composée de parties plus ou moins distinctes?) et son immortalité (est-ce que la ψυχή toute entière peut être considérée comme immortelle ou seulement une partie, le νοῦς?) sont celles qui, manifestement, mettent le plus à l'épreuve l'unité de la pensée platonicienne. Chez Platon (comme d'ailleurs chez Aristote) l'élaboration d'une doctrine objectivement cohérente semble rendue presque pratiquement impossible par le conflit entre les exigences de la gnoséologie spéculative, la psychologie empirique et une morale qui doit chercher dans l'au-delà la victoire définitive de la justice. Pour Aristote, il suffit de rappeler les difficultés innombrables que rencontre quiconque veut interpréter d'une part le *De anima*, d'autre part, les restes de l'*Eudème* (auxquels il convient d'ajouter *Ethique à Nicomaque* 1102 a 26 sqq. et 1139 a 2 sqq.). Chez Platon, on se demandera surtout comment l'immortalité de l'âme préconisée par le *Phédon* se concilie avec la théorie de l'âme tripartite dans la *République* et dans le *Phèdre*. Les deux parties inférieures de l'âme tripartite sont-elles immortelles comme la première ou non? Le problème se complique encore lorsqu'on s'efforce de tenir compte des Lois; mais sur ce point, M. Gigon souligne qu'il convient, dans le stade actuel des recherches, de n'utiliser la doctrine des Lois qu'avec la plus grande prudence. La doctrine des Lois, telle que nous la lisons, fait trop souvent l'impression d'être un platonisme en état de «décomposition».

MM. Wazink et Theiler sont d'avis qu'en effet il est impossible de réduire le *Phédon*, le *Phèdre* et la *République* à une formule commune satisfaisante. Il y a des différences qu'on ne peut pas éliminer. Il faut tenir compte du fait que chacun de ces dialogues

a son propre σκοπός philosophique, son propre champ de problèmes et sa propre atmosphère. Dans la doctrine de l'âme, c'est tantôt tel aspect, tantôt tel autre qui est élaboré et qui reçoit toute la lumière. Il est difficile de savoir dans quelle mesure Platon s'est rendu compte des contradictions que pouvaient entraîner et ont entraîné effectivement ces changements de point de vue.

Un problème particulièrement obscur et dont les étrangetés sont mises en lumière par MM. Waszink, Theiler et Guthrie, est celui de la chute de l'âme humaine. Nulle part Platon n'explique comment l'âme a pu abandonner sa demeure céleste, son état primordial en compagnie des dieux. On comprend bien que l'âme, une fois déchue, puisse toujours de nouveau être séduite. Mais comment la chute première a-t-elle été possible? Il y a là probablement un problème insoluble sur le plan rationnel. C'est pour les mêmes raisons, on ne l'oubliera pas, que Platon ne peut donner une explication suffisante de la corruption de l'Etat idéal. L'explication qu'il donne dans la République a un caractère nettement irrationnel. M. Waszink insiste très énergiquement sur l'importance que tout cet ensemble de problèmes a eu pour les Pères de l'Eglise d'Orient. Un bon nombre d'idées platoniciennes reviennent dans les réflexions chrétiennes sur la chute du premier couple humain, surtout chez Origène et Grégoire de Nysse.

Revenant à Platon, M. Guthrie fait remarquer que, dans le Phédon (premier dialogue du groupe Phédon-Phèdre-République), la destinée des parties inférieures de l'âme reste obscure. Les passages les plus importants restent manifestement et peut-être volontairement imprécis. De toute façon, M. Guthrie ne croit pas que ces difficultés puissent mettre sérieusement en danger l'unité fondamentale de la pensée platonicienne. On peut parler d'une évolution de cette pensée, mais d'une évolution qui reste continue.

Pour M. Theiler, le point le plus important est celui-ci: l'orientation générale du Phédon est totalement différente de l'orientation de la République. Le portrait du philosophe devant la mort, l'appel au renoncement aux biens terrestres au profit de la *theoria*,

le caractère de *consolatio*, autant de caractéristiques propres du Phédon qui conduisent à des réflexions sur l'âme, totalement différentes de celles qu'introduit la discussion sur la structure de la vie sociale dans la République.

D'ailleurs, M. Guthrie est convaincu que la parabole du Phèdre (le cocher et ses deux chevaux) provient de sources pythagoriciennes. A ce propos, M. Gigon rappelle que la littérature grecque, entre Hésiode et Empédocle, possédait sans doute un assez grand nombre de poèmes théogoniques et anthropogoniques qui se situaient aux frontières de la mythologie gratuite et de la spéculation préphilosophique, et qui ont pu exercer une certaine influence sur Platon. Il est d'ailleurs évident, conclut M. Waszink, que les éléments traditionnels sont sensiblement plus nombreux dans la doctrine du Phédon que dans les théories vastes et laborieuses de la République.