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Kenneth Dorter
University of Guelph

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A PLATONIC MODEL OF THE SOUL-BODY RELATIONSHIP¹

by Kenneth Dorter

In presenting a unified overview of Plato's conception of soul I do not intend to suggest that Plato's undogmatic and unsystematic approach to philosophy can be reduced in a systematic dogma. The model I develop is meant to be taken not dogmatically but instrumentally, as a basis for relating to one another the various things that Plato says about the soul. It is furthermore based upon a conviction that the progressive development of Plato's conception of soul, in the course of the dialogues, was a matter of extension and refinement rather than recantation, so that the conception of soul does not change *in principle*, at least after the *Phaedo*. I shall argue later that this is true even of the considerable difference between the way that the soul is spoken of in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*.

Although Plato's view of the soul-body relationship is generally interpreted as interactionism, in accordance with a straightforward reading of many passages in the dialogues, there are nevertheless some passages that lead in a different direction. Soul is frequently defined as the principle of motion which imparts motion to bodies (*Phaedrus* 245c, *Timaeus* 89e, *Laws* 894b), for example, and it is hard to conceive how on one hand the principle of motion can ever exist in absolute separation from body, since motion entails body, or on the other hand how bodies can go through the motions of decomposition when soul is no longer present to them. As J.R. Skemp observes with regard to the distinction in the *Phaedrus* between the self-moving (soul) and that which is moved by it (body), "In spite of what seems a sheer dichotomy between that which can move itself and that which receives and transmits motion, it is clear that Plato thinks of the two as conjoined in reality and implying one another."² We shall see in what follows that there is good reason to regard Plato as conceiving the soul and body to be not entirely separable (although distinct in nature), in which case the interpretation of Plato as an interactionist can no longer be as straightforwardly maintained.

It may be that his position is fundamentally inconsistent, or it may be³ that he appears to be an interactionist only because of his propensity for using religious metaphors as if they were meant literally. Either way, a conception of the mind-body relationship is implicit in Plato which is quite different from the interactionistic one. This implicit theory deserves attention not only because of the disrepute into which interactionism has fallen, but also because it proves to be interesting in its own right. Moreover it provides a basis for reconciling several of Plato's conceptions of the soul which are often held to be incompatible:⁴ e.g. soul as energy, life-force, the seat of sensation, and rationality.

The four conceptions of soul mentioned above may be subsumed under two more general ones: "energy" (which would include life as a special case) and

mind (which would include both sensation and reason — although we shall see that reason is characteristic of both energy and mind). If we consider that energy is an external phenomenon, located in the spatial world, while mind denotes a purely internal, subjective phenomenon, it would be possible to unify these two general conceptions of soul by showing that they might be regarded as inner and outward manifestations of the same thing. On this hypothesis, to every system of energy would correspond a certain inwardness at an analogous level of sophistication. Thus, to human physiology, with its sophisticated central nervous system, corresponds a highly developed self-consciousness. Other animals display progressively less sophisticated levels of consciousness corresponding to the development of their physiology, while in the case of plants, whatever sort or inwardness corresponds to their much simpler organic systems would be too rudimentary to be usefully described by terms such as consciousness, whose connotations come from our own experience. This would be true in other ways of the energy system of the world as a whole, which is known in Plato as the world-soul, and of systems of artificial intelligence. In all these examples it is not the body, but what I have called the system of energy, to which an inwardness corresponds. Although body may be inseparable from such an energy system, it is nevertheless different in nature, as will be seen in what follows. In other words, although the view that I am putting forward is not an interactionism, it is still a dualism. On this model, the “entry” of soul into body might be conceived as the point at which a quantity of matter becomes organized in such a way as to be a self-sustaining system of energy with an intrinsic source of motion, i.e. alive. Conversely death would mean a body’s loss of its ability to initiate motion as an organism. The “entry” and “departure” of the soul would thus refer to the points at which the energy becomes or ceases to be intrinsic to the material quantum.

While the characterization of soul in terms of energy arises from observation of the external, physical world, its characterization as mind arises from observation of our internal experience, in which there is a distinction between mind and body that seems parallel to that between energy and matter. But we shall have to consider these two dichotomies in greater detail before we can properly consider the question of their correspondence. They are in fact not as straightforward as they may seem. The ontological status of energy with respect to matter is far from clear, and the conception of mind or consciousness, which one contrasts with body, is equally so. When we feel hot or cold, sick or well, these feelings are manifestations of the body and yet are as intimately part of consciousness as are our thoughts. The body is alive as much as the mind, and is as much a part of our conscious experience as is our thinking. The distinction of consciousness from its objects thus reflects not the soul (*anima*) as opposed to the body, but the animate body as opposed to what is other than it. From this it may seem that there are no psychological grounds to support a dualistic position after all, and that even the non-interactionistic dualism that I am proposing cannot resist reduction to a neutral monism.

For Plato, however, there is a criterion for preserving the distinction between the soul and the body, one which is not based upon a supposed difference between our mental experience and our corporal experience. The distinction is made instead in terms of rationality. As the *Phaedo* argues (78b-80b), soul exhi-

bits the nature of the intelligible in a way that corporeality does not. Pure mind or soul is by nature rational whereas matter is the source of irrationality.⁵ We discover within ourselves two irreconcilable and therefore discrete (cf. *Republic* 436b ff) sources of motivation, which may be referred to as reason and passion, and may be distinguished — although more easily in theory than in practice since they so thoroughly intertwine — in terms of interest. Reason, in its purest form, has its interest not in its subject, the person thinking, but in its object, that which is being thought about (cf. *Republic* 341d ff), while passion expresses an egocentric motivation, a need or desire of the subject himself. Reason in its pure form concerns itself with what is true, regardless of how it affects us, while passion concerns itself precisely with how we are affected — although because we so frequently use reason in the service of our passions, in calculation and rationalization, we cannot always identify the sources of our motivation and confidently distinguish our reasons from our excuses.

Since reason concerns itself with disinterested, transpersonal truth, it appears as grounded not in our finite nature, wherein we are distinguished from other individuals, but in some realm that is impersonal and timeless. Passions, on the other hand, are rooted precisely in our individuality, embodying as they do our personal gratifications and frustrations. It is thus natural to identify our passions with our body, which, being physically separate from other bodies, is the outward sign of our individuality; and to regard reason by contrast as something transcending our body. This does not imply that they are physically separate, for reason is not physical. Rather, like form and matter in Aristotle, they are distinct in nature but not in location.

The psychological dichotomy, then, is not tantamount to a distinction between pure mind (consciousness) and pure body. The body we experience directly is not divorced from consciousness but is, on the contrary, ensouled, animate, sensitive body. The distinction we experience is rather between two manifestations of consciousness: consciousness in its relation to the rational and in its relation to the corporeal.

Just as the psychological dichotomy is not between two separate entities but between two poles within consciousness, so too the physical dichotomy of matter and energy is not separate entities but poles of corporeal nature. Neither is conceivable without the other, for energy is the power to set matter in motion, while matter is conceived in terms of mass and motion, both of which imply energy. Plato too seems to have conceived of the world-soul (energy) and the world-body (matter) as inseparable,⁶ so that the dichotomy between soul and corporeality is not between two separable things but between motion in terms of its sensible manifestation (corporeality) and in terms of its inherent rationality of pattern and purpose (soul) in accordance with the forms. Here, again, Plato's position does not imply interactionism if soul and corporeality are inseparable, but neither does it imply monism, since the rationality of physical motion would be attributed to the psychic pole, and its irrational qualities to the corporeal.

In both dichotomies, therefore, the distinction is not between soul and body simply but between soul in its relationship to reason (the intelligible) and in its

relationship to corporeality: in the psychological dichotomy a distinction between rational mind and animate body; in the physical dichotomy a distinction between rational motivity and kinetic matter. In neither case is there an absolute separation between soul and corporeality. Rather, soul is identified with the rational tendency within the natural world or within consciousness, and corporeality with the irrational tendency.

Accordingly there is justification for our hypothesis that soul as mind, and soul as energy, may be related as inner and outward manifestations of the same thing, for both have appeared as active manifestations of reason. What Plato means by reason is no simple question, but it is hinted at to some extent in terms of teleology: according to the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Timaeus*, for example, not only does human reason, the mind, operate instrumentally with a view to what is best, but the physical world as well is conceived as a rational system based upon principles in accordance with the maximum attainment of goodness. In the *Phaedo*, accordingly, Socrates is attracted by the Anaxagorean dictum that everything happens in accordance with *nous* (reason, mind) - which he takes to mean that everything operates teleologically — evidently because he sees energy (motive soul) and mind (intelligent soul) as corresponding principles, a view most fully elaborated in the *Timaeus*.

The conception that mind and energy (but not body) correspond to each other as inward and outward manifestations of what may be called soul, bears a certain resemblance to neutral monism such as Spinoza's, and to idealism such as Leibniz's or Schopenhauer's, but there are in fact fundamental differences. For Spinoza everything has a parallel existence on both the physical and ideal planes, so that it is both a body and "idea", and the idea of a sufficiently sophisticated organism is a mind. But for Spinoza the counterpart of mind (thought) is not energy — which he does not discuss, and presumably regarded merely as a property of bodies — but body (extension), and so mind and *body* are parallel aspects of entities; whereas for Plato it is mind and *energy* that are parallel, while body is fundamentally opposed to them by nature. Plato's position, therefore, is a dualism rather than a monism, as was pointed out above. Accordingly, while for Spinoza there is an "idea" for every body, for Plato such subjectivity would exist only for bodies which possess an internal principle of motion, i.e. which are alive. Moreover, since for Plato mind and body are distinct, he is not in Spinoza's position of having to deny that they can influence each other. To this extent Plato may still be considered an interactionist, but not when interactionism is taken to imply the separability of its substances.

For Leibniz and Schopenhauer, on the other hand, energy is, as for Plato, the physical manifestation of the same principle that we experience inwardly as the self: "appetition" for Leibniz and "will" for Schopenhauer. But for them, as for Kant, the physical world, and therefore energy, has no reality in itself but is merely the mind's representation of the in-itself in the forms of time and space. Only appetite or will exists in-itself; the physical world exists only within our consciousness, as our way of representing the in-itself. For Plato, on the other hand, the corporeal world, and therefore energy (the world-soul) has intrinsic existence independent of a perceiving consciousness.

The relationship between soul and body may best be seen in the *Timaeus*, where rational form, corporeality, and soul are all posited as primordial, prior in nature to time (cf. 52d with 37d). But although they are equally trans-temporal in nature, they are distinguishable in terms of logical priority. First is pure form, the forms being the object apprehended by divine reason, one of which serves as the model for the created world (30c). It is ambiguous, however, which is second in priority, for corporeality and soul are in fact inseparable. Both are implicit in the chaos described earlier (30a), since chaos is both material and in motion;⁷ and later we are told, in a different context, that “for there to be what is moved, without the mover, or the mover without what is moved, is difficult, or rather impossible” (57e). Accordingly one might consider body prior because we cannot *conceive* of motion until we conceive of what is moved, or one might consider soul prior because we cannot *understand* the changing corporeality until we understand its guiding principle, rational soul. This ambiguity is reflected in the treatment of the *Timaeus*, for body is discussed first (30c), but we are later told that although body comes first in the order of discussion, soul must be conceived as “older” since it is to rule the other (34b-c). Soul and body are thus inseparable but neither is reducible to the other.

This view of the complementarity of mind and energy has relevance beyond Plato's world. Anyone who sees the universe as organized in a fundamentally rational way must attribute some analogue of rationality to the motive force of the universe, energy (which may be conceived as autonomous rather than divinely controlled). While this way of putting it would be uncomfortably speculative for most scientists, the principle is nevertheless present in their implicit use of teleology as a heuristic principle. It is often taken for granted not only that natural phenomena will conform to rules commensurate with the principles of our understanding (logical, mathematical, and aitiological) and thus be intelligible to us as coherent experience, but also that the principles of teleological reason too can be applied to nature: we can not only discover *that* natural events occur in a certain way, but we can also ask *why*. There is a tacit supposition that nature does everything as if for a reason, and that there are not only patterns of regularity but also an essential relationship among the patterns so that the forms of reality and patterns of events can be reduced to ever fewer and more fundamental principles. This is to suppose that nature operates in accordance with principles similar to those by which reason measures value, such as “economy”.

In attributing reason to nature one is not necessarily making an anthropomorphic claim, for one can impute reason to the natural order without conceiving this reason as a personality or consciousness. And if nature can be said to be rational, this is in effect to ascribe rationality to energy, for the systems of energy are what instantiate the rational laws. Science's conceptual minimalism, which goes back at least to Ockham's Razor, militates against ascribing to energy any but its most empirically observable characteristics: motivity and its products. This cautiousness is indispensable to scientific method, but for philosophy, which seeks to place what is experienced within a synoptic perspective, such minimalism would be self-defeating.

Not only can this Platonic position thus more readily account for the full range of our experience of the physical world than can a narrow materialism, but it seems to me to accord more with the demands of morality as well. If the ultimate reality is matter, whether defined in modern terms by spatial discreteness and mutual exclusion, or in ancient terms (whether as matter or body) as the principle of individuation, human nature tends to be conceived in the first instance in terms of discrete individuality: if my body is my primary reality, and individual bodies are discrete and mutually exclusive, then we are fundamentally different from one another and naturally in a state of competition. Materialism, which implies a nominalist or conceptualist view of universals, and a belief that the individual is the only reality, most naturally leads to the view that the fundamental moral principle is self-interest. While altruism may arise from “enlightened” self-interest, for that very reason it is ultimately not a value *in itself* but an instrument of selfishness. It may not be inevitable that materialism lead to egoism but that is the natural direction of its implications.

On the present view, however, reason is at least as essential and primordial as corporeality (more so, in fact, as Plato argues elsewhere) and accordingly provides its own criteria for conduct. Far from emphasizing the discreteness of individuals, reason sees them in terms of what is common to them rather than their differences: the corporeal senses perceive individuals rather than universals, while reason perceives universals rather than individuals. The Platonic position, oriented toward reason and universality, thus gives rise to a very different view of “others” than that resulting from the materialistic position; one which *begins* from our community rather than our discreteness, and in which, therefore, altruism becomes justified in itself, not merely for the sake of selfishness.

Reason is, as we have seen, one pole within our mental experience, the other being irrational passions. The relationship between them can best be clarified by turning our attention to the doctrine of the tripartite soul. Plato speaks of the soul both as reason and as the principle of motion. The unity of these two very different characterizations may be expressed in terms of the famous definition of time, in the *Timaeus* (37d), as “the moving image of eternity”, for eternity here refers to reason (29a), and the basis on which such motion is possible is soul (36e). As both the principle of motion and an instrument of eternal reason, soul may be described in general as rationality set into motion. But in its purest manifestation, as logically distinct from body, soul would be pure rationality, since without reference to body its character as the principle of motion is merely abstract and implicit. This is the rational element of the tripartite soul.

If we next conceive the soul in its factual state, in relation to body, the phenomenon of life occurs when corporeal matter becomes ensouled, animate, as we discussed earlier. At this “lowest” (i.e. most corporeal) level of soul occurs the simplest stage of consciousness: the body responds to stimuli in terms of its requirements for self-preservation. What is conducive to the body’s maintenance becomes an object of desire and is experienced as pleasant, while what is threatening is feared and experienced as painful. This is the appetitive level of soul.

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If the highest and lowest elements of the tripartite soul thus reflect the rational and corporeal poles of animate being, respectively, what of the middle element, spiritedness? Since the *Republic* presents us with “the soul writ large” (368d-369a) in the form of a society, let us consider the genesis of the spirited class within it. The appetitive level of soul was reflected in the “healthy” city (372e — note the corporeal adjective), and the rational level will be reflected in the wise guardians. The spirited level arises in the transitory state between these constitutions, as the warrior class. We see that it arises not from physical needs, since all such needs have been met, but from a desire for increment: at first we will want couches and delicacies, to show our superiority to brutes like pigs (372d), and when these desires are satisfied others will take their place (373a-c) until our insatiability puts us into competition with our neighbors, resulting in war. This urge in us for perpetual new attainment is the basis of the ambition and pride characterizing the spirited element of the soul, which is as fundamental as the rational and appetitive elements. The world as a whole is constituted between rational and corporeal poles, and soul, which mediates them (cf. *Timaeus* 30b), accordingly comprises something of the character of each. But it is not reducible to the sum of those two characteristics since neither of them by itself entails motion: reason is the eternal and unchanging, while corporeality is, by itself, inert. It is only through the additional characteristic of motion that a “moving image of eternity” can come about, and reason and corporeality can be mediated. This comes about on the basis of the soul’s third and more distinctive characteristic as a principle of change, and it is this characteristic of never being completely at rest, of always seeking a new state, that appears in consciousness positively as ambition and negatively as frustration and anger at obstacles — the spirited element. The exercise of power is therefore essential to it, making it eager for recognition of its prowess, a lover of honor.

In the soul reason is our desire for truth, appetite our desire for physical gratification, and spiritedness their common denominator, desire in and by itself. Spiritedness may accordingly be considered the most general aspect of soul (as in the doctrine of eros), as reason is primary teleologically, and appetite most immediately evident experientially. Its unity may be expressed generally as the agency of reason in corporeality, and its tripartite structure appears as one focuses in turn on 1) reason, 2) corporeality, and 3) agency per se. The three parts, as well, constitute a microcosm of the three interpenetrating levels of reality: form (reason), soul (spiritedness) and corporeality (appetite).

From all this it is clear that the lower levels of the tripartite soul — appetite and spiritedness — do not belong specifically either to the soul or the body, for neither a pure disembodied soul (reason) nor inanimate body could support them, but only to the conjunction of soul and body, i.e. to the living body. Perhaps it is for this reason that in the *Phaedo* Plato can refer to appetite and spiritedness as functions of the body, and in the *Republic* as functions of the soul. In a dialogue devoted to proving the soul’s immortality it would simplify matters to limit the notion of soul to the soul’s “eternal” part, reason, and refer the lower levels of the body-soul composite to body, by contrast; for if appetite and spiritedness belong only to the conjunction of soul and body they may, with

equal justice, be treated as functions of either. Thus *Timaeus* links them in one place to the soul itself (42a-b) and in another to a secondary and corporeal “mortal” soul (69c-d).⁸ It is usually supposed that Plato changed his conception of the soul, from simple to tripartite, between the *Phaedo* and *Republic*; but even in the *Republic* when the question of immortality is raised it seems that the true soul is no longer conceived as tripartite but limited to a pure and simple nature (611a-612b), in which case the perspective of the *Phaedo* is retained. If it is not the whole tripartite soul that is taken to be immortal (however we interpret this) in the *Republic*, but only reason, and the other elements pertain only to the embodied soul, then there is no fundamental difference between the *Republic* and the *Phaedo* on this point, for the *Phaedo*’s characterization of material desire and spiritedness as motives competing with reason in the living person (e.g. 68c, 81b-82c, 94b, 94d) is clearly the tripartite soul doctrine in principle.

University of Guelph

NOTES

¹This paper has been slightly revised in places, in response to the discussion which followed its presentation at the colloquium. A longer version will be published this year as chapter 12 of my book, *Plato’s Phaedo: An Interpretation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

²J.R. Skemp, *The Theory of Motion in Plato’s Later Dialogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1942), p. 6.

³As I have argued in “Plato’s Image of Immortality”, *Philosophical Quarterly* 26, (1976), 295-304, and the book mentioned above, n. 1.

⁴See, for example T.M. Robinson, *Plato’s Psychology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 32. The dual conception of soul in Greek philosophy generally, as both energy and mind, is noted by Aristotle in *de Anima* I 2. I use the term “energy”, despite its being an anachronism, because it is appropriate to the conception of soul as the principle of motion.

⁵There is an apparent exception to this in *Laws* X (896e). See below, n. 8 and context.

⁶In addition to the earlier reference to Skemp, see *Timaeus* 30b, 34b, and 57e (provided one takes the temporality of the *Timaeus* as a metaphor for logical priority rather than as a literal succession of events).

⁷It is sometimes argued that this motion is not due to soul since it is irrational. But while the motions of soul are rational *per se*, when combined with and influenced by the irrational nature of the body irrational motion would result. This distinction between pure and embodied soul is easily obscured in genetic myths like the *Timaeus*, where the body must be spoken of as if it were capable of self-sufficient existence. It is not necessary to suppose that Plato regarded soul and body as ever physically separate from each other.

⁸This may be the point as well of the *Laws*’ reference to two contrasting souls (896e).