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SOUL AND INCORPOREALITY IN PLATO*

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The incorporeality of the soul counts among the well-established Platonic doctrines, as do the soul's immortality and its self-moving nature. "According to Plato, soul is an incorporeal, self-moving substance," states the pseudo-Galen in his *Medical Definitions*, XIX,355 (KUHN), thus summing up two of these three fundamental characteristics. "The soul is an incorporeal essence, unchanging in its substance and intelligible, and invisible, and uniform," says Alcinous in his *Handbook of Platonism*, 25,1 (WHITTAKER), adding invisibility and simplicity to the list.

These summaries imply a thought-provoking question that Plato never directly asks, let alone answers: how seamlessly can incorporeality connect with each soul's individual agency, which is a prerequisite for both the soul's moral life in the human body and its role in the cosmos at large? The aim of this article is to revisit this question by taking seriously Plato's timidity in describing soul, human or not, as being entirely without body of any kind. I am therefore *not* contesting the obvious fact that Plato treats souls as essentially distinct from bodies. Rather, I am interested in why the assumption of incorporeality receives no detailed argumentative underpinning.¹ The truth is that no dialogue puts

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¹ Hence also the absence of definition of the term "incorporeal". In the narrow sense, I take for "incorporeal" what is not composed of physical stuff (the four elements), but is indivisible, dimensionless, not spatially located, and existing without a body. This narrow sense fits the

forward the premise, or indeed the conclusion, that soul is entirely bodiless. This option is suggested in *Laws X* and in the *Sophist*, and also in the pseudo-Platonic *Epinomis*, but even the latter says only that soul “could possibly” be such, and both *Laws X* and the *Sophist* leave us without a clear final statement about the soul’s incorporeality. My suggestion is that the reason for this timidity is methodological: it follows from the variety of roles that Plato ascribes to soul including its actions and experiences in the afterlife. These actions and experiences have an essential moral dimension that connects to the soul’s activity of thinking, but also translates in the description of the soul as a fully individual agent. This may be why the arguments in favor of this agent’s immortality never take incorporeality for their starting point, but always assume that the thinking soul is also a natural self-mover. As such, soul is a fundamental, irreducible feature of reality. Its natural agency can therefore be tackled in a way which is ontologically neutral but, precisely because of this neutrality, it does not tell the whole story about what kind of being soul is.

To assume that the soul’s agency comes before its explicit ontology is of course not to argue against the view of Plato as a dualist. Instead, I wish to imply, more modestly, that Plato’s understanding of the soul as distinct from both the nature of sensible bodies and the fully incorporeal entities such as the Forms makes it difficult to avoid ambiguities that mark the soul’s proper nature. Also, the problem is connected to the lack of a general definition of “body” in Plato: such definition cannot be replaced by opposing soul to both the visible and the elemental bodies.² All this, I submit, is characteristic of Plato’s discourse about soul regardless of the group of dialogues we focus on. The absence of an explicit attribution of incorporeality to soul is usually evoked in connection with the so-called later dialogues, but the situation is similar in the *Phaedo* and *Republic X*. Again, my intention is not to argue *against* the soul’s incorporeality, but to show that, even in these dialogues, the bodiless state is introduced as a

Platonic Forms (certainly those in the *Phaedo*); as we shall see, not even the *Phaedo* applies it directly to soul. The problem for any reader of the dialogues follows from the fact that the authorities quoted in the previous paragraph do not indicate whether they have in mind this austere definition, or incline to what I would call a broad definition that *also* takes for incorporeal what is *capable* of existing without a body, and can be both tridimensional and mobile (see below on the *Timaeus* and *Laws X*). In ancient philosophy, especially after the Stoics, the technical debates about the term “incorporeal” and its range concern mostly abstract entities with no *agency* similar to the one ascribed by Plato to the soul. On the use of the term “incorporeal” in various ancient authors see GOMPERZ 1932 and RENEHAN 1980.

² *Philebus*, 29d7–8, says that we call “body” the four elements “combined into a unit” (εἰς ἓν συγκεῖμενα). Such a unit is clearly the visible and tangible body; no doubt Plato’s elements, taken one by one, are bodies as well.

moral ideal rather than ontological feature of the soul.³ Simply put, the idea of incorporeality sustains the soul's immortality as motivated by ethical concerns relevant to an individual soul: it is the latter that features in the stories about rewards and punishments, stories that make it move across the physical universe. This ethical individuation of souls is crucial for Plato's images of souls that are without human bodies yet behave in human-like ways. Indeed, if the immortal soul retains its individual agency and its particular place within the universe, it is difficult to reduce its activity to pure thinking or to a geometrically determined motion. Hence the subtle yet important difference between Plato and the later Platonists who are explicit about the soul's incorporeality and correlatively less inclined to paint the soul's immortality in terms of its personal story.

To show how Plato separates soul from bodies while refraining from assigning it an unqualified incorporeality, I will therefore start with the soul's immortality in the *Phaedo*, with a focus on the so-called "affinity argument", where Plato comes close to, but then shies away from directly affirming that the soul is incorporeal. In the next two sections, I will turn to *Republic X* and the *Phaedrus* as further texts which deal with the nature and immortality of soul in some significant detail. Section 4 will summarize the soul's status in the *Timaeus*. Section 5 will deal with *Laws X* and a passage from the *Sophist* whose broader focus is on the notional dialogue between the materialists and the "friends of Forms". In a sketchy yet revealing way, this dialogue touches upon the place of the soul in their respective ontologies. The article's Conclusion will sum up Plato's avoidance to posit soul as simply incorporeal and suggest some further philosophical reasons for this reticence.

1. The *Phaedo*

For good reasons, the *Phaedo* is considered to be *the* forge of Platonic soul as incorporeal and immortal. However, if immortality is discussed from several angles, the same is not true of incorporeality. About the soul itself, we thus learn little beyond Socrates' initial assumption that what we call soul is separable from

³ On the later dialogues see e.g. SORABJI 2002, and also CARONE 2005 who, at p. 227, takes issue with "a shared assumption that in the late dialogues the mind itself must be immaterial". For a brief assessment of this view see Conclusion. In this article, I leave entirely aside the supposedly sharp contrast between the Platonic soul's incorporeality and the soul in the pre-Platonic authors. For nuanced remarks on incorporeality in the latter see CURD 2009 and 2013.

the visible and tangible body. Hence the description of death as “nothing other than the soul’s separation from the body”, so that there is, on the one hand, the soul by itself (τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτὴν καθ’ αὐτήν) separated from the body, and on the other hand, the body by itself (αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ τὸ σῶμα) separated from the soul (64c4–8).⁴ This remarkably impartial description implies ontological distinctness of body and soul, but adds nothing about their own natures.⁵ Instead, Socrates will use this distinctness in order to argue in favor of the superiority of the *activity* that belongs to the soul rather than the body. This argument expresses and promotes the vantage point of philosophers as those who place an incomparably higher value on what the soul does: disregarding the body that impedes the acquisition of wisdom (τὴν τῆς φρονήσεως κτήσιν), a philosopher turns towards the soul and its reasoning (λογίζεσθαι), which alone can discover something real (τι τῶν ὄντων, 65a9–c3). This conjunction of epistemology and ethics is what frames the entire course of the dialogue whose main ambition is to justify Socrates’ hope (ἐλπίς) that, once separated from the body, the soul will be granted access to a better kind of life (67b7–c3). This, first and foremost, is why the philosophers “desire to have their soul by itself” (αὐτὴν δὲ καθ’ αὐτήν ἐπιθυμοῦσι τὴν ψυχὴν ἔχειν, 67e7–8).

This framework of the coming arguments in favor of the soul’s immortality must be taken seriously in everything it says, but also omits to specify, namely the proper nature of the soul once it is separated from the body. In fact, from among the coming arguments, the often maligned argument based on the affinity between the soul and the Forms is the only one that pays a closer attention not to what the soul does, but to what it is. Even the affinity argument, however, ends up by saying what the soul is *like*, so that the result is reminiscent of the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates explains the soul’s immortality through “what it does and what is done to it” (πάθη τε καὶ ἔργα, 245c3), and then shies away from saying “what the soul actually is” and speaks instead “about its form” (περὶ δὲ

⁴ Only at 66a1–2, αὐτὴ καθ’ αὐτήν is employed about the Forms as objects of thought inaccessible to the senses. The quoted characterization of death reminds us that the expression “itself by itself”, apparently coined by Plato (see EBREY 2017, 15 n. 33; cf. BROACKES 2009), is used not only as a technical idiom proper to the Forms. The text of the *Phaedo* I use is ROWE 1993; Long’s translation from SEDLEY – LONG 2011 is often modified.

⁵ For some ancients, it is precisely with this laconic characterization of death that the problem starts. I have in mind Chrysippus who, according to Nemesius, reconstructs Socrates’ reasoning as inconsistent: “death is the separation of soul from body; now nothing incorporeal is separated from body; for neither is there anything incorporeal attached to body; now the soul is both attached to body and separated from it (ἡ δὲ ψυχὴ καὶ ἐφάπτεται καὶ χωρίζεται τοῦ σώματος); therefore the soul is not incorporeal” (NEMESIUS, *Nat. hom.* II,22,3–6 [= SVF II,790], trans. SHARPLES – VAN DER EYJK). The *Phaedo* is not named, but the reference is obvious.

τῆς ιδέας αὐτῆς, 246a3). Methodologically speaking, and despite the very different aim and setting of both dialogues, the problem is much the same: what exactly is the soul that performs the actions that reach beyond the states of our visible and tangible body?

Before we focus on the affinity argument, we need to bear in mind that the other arguments in favor of the soul's immortality proceed either from the perspective of thought or from the perspective of motion. Let me start with the latter which is dominant in both the first and the last argument. Concerning the first (or "cyclical") argument, its acknowledged failure follows precisely from its inscription of the soul in the all-embracing process of natural change (see 70d7-e1).⁶ No matter how we interpret the detail and scope of this argument, it clearly puts the soul in some location which cannot be simply metaphorical. Socrates may well keep his distance from the "ancient saying" about Hades, namely "that souls exist there which have come from here" (ὥς εἰσὶν ἐνθένδε ἀφικόμενα ἐκεῖ), and that it is from there that they return here (70c6-7); still, his generalizes version of this reasoning upholds the premise of the soul's local motion. Insofar as his description of the two-directional process of generation results in the necessity to counterbalance death by rebirth conceived as a return of the numerically same souls, it actually reinforces the role of the soul as a real agent implied in the physical world where it moves from one place to another (see the eloquent anti-entropic conclusion at 72a11-d3). It is therefore noticeable that the dialogue's last proof still assumes this basic scheme. Socrates' description of how "the soul comes to Hades" (107d2-3) and how it goes "from here to there" and then back again (107e1-3), follows from the insistence on the soul's capacity to "run away" from the approaching death: what is immortal in a human being, goes away and "leaves its place to death" (ὑπεκχωρήσαν τῷ θανάτῳ, 106e7).

We could debate whether the verb ὑπεκχωρεῖν is used as a metaphor, but any decision in this matter is made difficult by the fact that Socrates applies this verb to both the physical and non-physical entities: at 102d8-9, it relates to the Form which cannot suffer its contrary while, at 103d8, it is used about the snow "retiring" from the incoming heat.⁷ So, metaphor or not, if the soul is to retain its agency and its capacity to enjoy its rewards and suffer its pains, we

⁶ For an analysis of this topic-neutral change see SEDLEY 2012. I leave entirely aside the polemics, going back to Olympiodorus, about the scope of this argument and its aiming (or not) at establishing the soul's complete immortality. On this issue see O'BRIEN 1968, 96-97, BARNES 1978 and GALLOP 1982.

⁷ On these metaphors as describing change, or the lack thereof, see O'BRIEN 1967, 203-208, and O'BRIEN 1977.

cannot avoid to imagine that its ability to leave the visible and tangible body behind is a prerequisite for arriving to the colorful elsewhere, which the myth paints as, unquestionably, a physical location.⁸ This continuity between how soul is rendered in the final proof and how it is described in the ensuing myth confirms that, in these pages, neither the soul's immortality nor its indestructibility are connected to its incorporeality (in the next section, we will see that the same is true about the complementary argument in *Republic X*).

All this does certainly not amount to a denial of the soul's incorporeality. However, to avoid to discuss the latter, especially on the basic of a full-fledged theoretical dualism, makes it easier for Socrates to keep his focus simply on what the soul does. In this respect, the last argument of the dialogue together with the subsequent myth illustrate well the double bind that obliges Socrates to paint the soul as an agent that literally animates the body, but also as a moral agent that tries to withdraw from the body it animates. If, therefore, the description of the soul's survival in terms of "retiring" or "leaving its place" perpetuates the physicalist undertones due to the analogy with snow and fire,⁹ Socrates is ready to pay this price in order to safeguard the broader ethical continuity that presides over the dialogue as a whole. In the myth, this ethical horizon is confirmed at 114b-c, where the punishments or rewards of souls, and hence their place in the scheme of the "true Earth", relate to their variously successful purification of desire. Socrates' conclusion that "those who purified themselves sufficiently with philosophy live thereafter entirely without bodies" (ἄνευ τε σωμάτων τὸ παράπαν, 114c3-4) is not a general ontological statement. At this point of the story, all souls are without human or animal bodies, so that the life "entirely without bodies" is meant to evoke the soul's dwelling places (οἰκήσεις) that are too difficult to describe on the present occasion. Socrates' caveat concerning the exactness of *this* description casts however no doubt on "the soul's own adornment (τῷ αὐτῆς κόσμῳ), namely temperance, justice, courage, freedom and truth" (114e5-115a1). No doubt these qualities are incorporeal but, since all qualities *as qualities* are such, their list cannot reveal anything new about the soul's ontology (in the simplest sense of what the soul must be like in order to be able to do what Socrates asks of it).

⁸ Damascius (*Phaed.* 1,503 WESTERINK 1977) reports two puzzling exceptions to this view: Platonist Democritus says that the "true earth" is a Form, and Plutarch that it is Nature. See GERTZ 2011, 178-179.

⁹ Symmetrically, the soul's return to the body can be expressed in terms of a military-like occupation; see ψυχὴ ἄρα ὅτι ἂν αὐτὴ κατὰσχη at 105d3. BURNET 1911, 123, remarks that this is a "simple military metaphor" that "implies no metaphysical theory".

As a result, the last pages of the dialogue do not dispel the ambiguity that follows from the definition of death as separation of the soul from the body: is it a separation from the body of the visible and tangible kind, or is it a process that implies, on the side of the soul, a truly unqualified incorporeality? This ambiguity is of course reinforced by the lack of any explicit definition of what “body” is. But even in the absence of such a definition it is remarkable that this ambiguity is not diminished in the *Phaedo*’s only argument that avoids to describe the soul as either an epistemic or a moral agent and, instead, addresses the nature of the soul and its fundamental properties more directly than any other argument on offer.

The so-called “affinity argument” is therefore important for our issue independently of its success or not at establishing the soul’s immortality. As the argument reacts to the fear that when the soul leaves the body it simply dissipates (70a, 77b, 77d–e), its starting point consists in two straightforward questions (78b5–9):

What kind of thing (τῷ ποίῳ τινί), I mean, is such that it is proper to it (προσῆκει) to suffer the dissipation, and what kind of thing is not like that? And should we then consider to which kind soul belongs (καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο αὖ ἐπισκέψασθαι πότερον [ἢ] ψυχὴ ἐστίν), and on that basis be confident or fearful on behalf of our own soul?

A careful reading of these introductory questions makes us realize that, even here, Socrates avoids to ask directly “what is soul?” or “what kind of thing soul is?” The suggested approach is oblique: first let us define what can and what cannot dissipate, and then see into which kind the soul belongs. The answer will be unsatisfactory concerning the issue of immortality, but highly revelatory nonetheless: the soul belongs to neither kind entirely, but is *closer to* the kind that, being truly unchangeable, cannot dissipate. In order to understand what motivates such an ambivalent conclusion, we need to follow the argument’s progress from its initial distinction of two kinds of things to what exactly it says about the soul as such. In this last respect, it is also important to take into account the fact that the argument reaches its formal conclusion at 80b, but four more pages explain its implications for, again, not the soul’s ontology, but its moral development.

To tackle the fears about the soul’s dispersion, Socrates introduces a polarity between what “has been put together and is naturally composite”, and what “is actually incomposite”; to the former, it is proper (προσῆκει) to be unmade in the reversal of its composition, to the latter it is proper (προσῆκει) to escape all division (78c1–4). The verb προσῆκειν modulates the argument right from the

start as it expresses a likelihood rather than axiomatic certainty.¹⁰ In the next step, Socrates extends the properties of what is incomposite from being indivisible to also being “always in the same state and condition” (ἀεὶ κατὰ ταῦτα καὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχει), which implies that the composite things “are in different conditions at different times and are never in the same state” (78c6–8). Even in these lines, Socrates stays prudent: it is “most likely” (μάλιστα εἰκόσ) that it is so. The reason for this restraint is not spelled out, but it probably follows, first and foremost, from the rather uncertain status of bodies. Given that we have no definition of what exactly a body is, but can characterize it as “itself by itself” (64c6), all general statements about bodies seem to require some qualification.¹¹ In contrast, Socrates’ example of the incomposite things, the Forms, will meet with Kebes’ unqualified approval: it is *necessary* (ἀνάγκη) that they stay in the same condition and state (78d8).

The example of Forms is what connects, explicitly, the present argument to previous discussion. At 78d1–7, the Forms such as the Equal or the Beautiful stand for all “essence itself (αὐτὴ ἢ οὐσία), to which we confer being in our questions and answers”, and which is always in the same condition and state. The Equal or the Beautiful count therefore among the linguistically expressed objects of thought, each one being by itself (μονοειδὲς ὄν αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό) without suffering any kind of change whatsoever. The contrast with the changing things that occur as many is easy to establish (78d10–e6) but, as such, this contrast brings nothing new to the overall argumentation: the distinction between the Forms such as the Equal or the Beautiful and many equal or beautiful things serves only to illustrate the already established polarity of the incomposite and the composite things. The important shift comes therefore in the next step where Socrates expresses this polarity in terms of sense-perception and its limits: whereas the changeable things can be touched, seen, or perceived with other senses, the things that never change in any respect are “unseen and not visible” (ἀιδῆ καὶ οὐχ ὄρατά), and can only be grasped by our discursive reasoning (τῷ τῆς διανοίας λογισμῷ, 79a1–4).

At this point, Socrates offers no argument that would independently establish that the things that change are necessarily perceptible, whereas those that

¹⁰ Borrowed from the initial question (78b5), this verb frames the whole argument since Socrates repeats it at 80b in the much discussed concluding sentence that I will analyze below. ROWE 1991, 464–465, takes προσήκειν to imply that Socrates is not offering a rigorous proof, but advances “good reasons” for his view of the soul.

¹¹ Two pages later, at 80c9–d2, we will learn that the embalmed bodies stay “almost whole for an unimaginably long time, and even if the body rots, certain parts of it – bones, sinews and all such things – are still practically immortal” (ὅμως ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν ἀθάνατά ἐστιν).

do not change in any respect can never be perceived. What he deploys instead is a generalized appeal to experience, which will enable him to connect the soul with the incomposite and unchangeable beings without, however, identifying it as one of these. This crucial connection is established in two nontrivial steps: first, Socrates rephrases the basic polarity of “two kinds of beings” (δύο εἶδη τῶν ὄντων) in terms of the visible as opposed to the invisible (τὸ μὲν ὄρατόν, τὸ δὲ ἀιδέζ, 79a6–7); second, he reiterates that “we ourselves are the body on the one hand and the soul on the other hand” (ἡμῶν αὐτῶν τὸ μὲν σῶμά ἐστι, τὸ δὲ ψυχή), and then redistributes this polarity along the *scale* of the visible and the invisible (79b1–17). It is of course this redistribution that yields the final result: if the body is “more like” (ὁμοιότερον) and “more akin to” (συγγενέστερον) the visible being, then the soul *must* be more similar and more akin to the opposite pole of the scale.

The minutiae of this conclusion have been analyzed by many previous readers who, more often than not, express their unease at Socrates’ use of comparatives ὁμοιότερον and συγγενέστερον: it is these that prepare the awkward conclusion that the soul is the sort of thing that is “altogether incapable of being disintegrated, or nearly so” (80b9–10).¹² Still, the comparatives, which express the shift from the original clean-cut polarity of the incomposite and the composite things to the scale that admits of degrees, are of central importance for preserving the connection between the nature of the soul and the *activity* of philosophy. Simply put, it is the comparatives, and thus the implied *scale* of incorporeality, that create the interval where the soul can meaningfully exercise philosophy as self-purification which is, logically, a sort of change.

Without *this* sort of change, nothing in the *Phaedo* would make much sense. Seen in this light, the argumentation at 78–79 fails to make the soul incorporeal in the same sense as the Forms are, but this is necessary insofar as the soul needs its own ground, so to speak, where it thinks the Forms and acts accordingly. In this way, the argument preserves a rationale for philosophy as a means of moral improvement. That the soul’s purity gets compromised in the process is a condition of striving to purify it: the incorporeal Forms are not only the soul’s proper objects of thought, but also what the soul should desire and emulate. In a more general perspective, since Socrates makes incorporeality equivalent to the absence of *all* change, soul can only approximate such a state if it is to preserve its specific kind of life.

¹² On *Phaedo*, 78b–79b, and its various challenges see the relevant pages in GALLOP 1975, BOSTOCK 1986 and ROWE 1993, and also ROWE 1991 and APOLLONI 1996. On the development at 79c–80b see right below.

The issue of the soul's changeability should therefore come to the foreground; this happens, but only partially, at 79c–80b. Here the soul's purification comes into focus thanks to the contrast between its disordered wandering caused by its attachment to a body (see *πλανᾶται καὶ ταράττεται* at 79c7) and its achievement of the state when it is “at rest from its wandering” and, grasping the unchangeable beings, in relation to them it “stays always in the same state and condition, because the things it is grasping (*ἐφαπτομένη*) have the same kind of stability” (79d5–7). Yet this stable state, labeled “wisdom” (*φρόνησις*), cannot be absolutely identical to the state of what it grasps: to perpetuate the acquired wisdom, the soul needs to be *active* so as to exercise philosophy as described throughout the *Phaedo*. In our passage, this activity translates into the soul's natural government over the body: when the body and the soul are joined together, says Socrates at 79e8–80a5, nature (*φύσις*) places the former in the position to serve and be the slave, the latter in the position to rule and be the master. This means that the soul is “similar to the divine” (*ὄμοιον τῷ θεῷ εἶναι*), since the divine is naturally what rules, whereas the body is “similar to what is mortal” (*τῷ θνητῷ*).

Thus we are reminded of Socrates' account, early in the dialogue, of gods as masters over human life and of his of belief that this relation extends beyond death (63c). Hence also the insistence that philosophers should emulate the nature of their masters, thereby making their souls impervious to the body's desires (67d with the reminder of death as separation that the philosopher's soul rehearses most keenly).¹³ The question is to know why, at exactly this point, Socrates reminds us of his image of gods as our masters. The answer seems clear: the soul's epistemological relation to the Forms needs to be complemented by its more proactive attitude towards bodies. To aim at the Forms while keeping the body at bay are two facets of the soul's activity that imply, each in its own way, that the soul can be “by itself” and immortal, but it is still changeable and its changes translate into its relation to bodies. The result is too fuzzy to count for the soul's proper ontology but, whatever we think about the latter, the soul's relation to bodies is undoubtedly an original bond: on Socrates account, the soul is repeatedly tied to a body regardless of the success of its epistemic and moral efforts.¹⁴ This situation, epitomized in the conclusion that soul is

¹³ On the *Phaedo* as, primarily, an invitation to such a rehearsal see SPRAGUE 2007 who can stand for the whole tradition of reading the *Phaedo* from an ethical perspective.

¹⁴ This seems not fundamentally contradicted at 113e where the incurably criminal souls are said to stay in the Tartarus forever: they are still tied to a particular location. For a stronger

incomposite “or nearly so”, moderates the whole argument’s leaning to a strict substantial dualism of body and soul.

In this respect, it needs to be emphasized that Socrates attributes mental and physical properties to the body and the soul alike. He seems equally at ease while speaking of the body as desiring (65c), and of the soul as containing or “having” an earthy admixture (81c8–9), a corporeal element that, again, is capable of desiring (81e1–2). This agrees well with the dialogue’s leading idea that the philosopher, more than other people, “releases his soul as much as possible (μάλιστα) from its communion (κοινωνία) with the body” (65a1–2). Here the separation, attempted while we are alive, is described as a matter of degree and Socrates never draws a clear line between the body’s desires and the soul’s desire for the body: they seem to go together and oppose the soul’s desire for purification.¹⁵ The whole issue of separation falls therefore short of producing a stable ontology of the soul. Here I subscribe to Thomas Johansen’s conclusion that the *Phaedo* “underscores the ontological flexibility of the soul that we find elsewhere in Plato”, and also to David Bostock’s earlier insistence that “we evidently cannot say that the soul never changes” because “it is obvious that the soul *is* a changing thing, and in this respect is like the body and *not* like the forms”.¹⁶ Whether a true ontology of the soul is even possible insofar as we only receive various descriptions of its attitudes and actions, is therefore an open question.

Other dialogues, where Plato brings together the descriptions of the soul as thinking and as moving, may get us closer to an answer. However, the relevant dialogues will follow the *Phaedo* in *not* applying the notion of incorporeality directly to the soul as an immortal agent. Even if Simmias’ notion of harmony as “invisible, incorporeal, altogether beautiful and divine” (85e5–86a1), but still dependent upon its material realization, will get its improved reuse, this improvement will not borrow from any of Socrates’ arguments. Instead, it will refine

version of this image see *Gorgias* 525c where the eternally damned serve as deterrent examples to lesser criminals.

¹⁵ My distinction between the soul’s aiming at the invisible Forms and its managing of the visible body that it inhabits would thus correspond to the distinction, made in JOHANSEN 2017, 19, between the “intentional” and the “functional” separation: the former “relates to what the philosopher has in mind, what he is thinking about”, the latter concerns “what [the soul] does independently of the body”. Cf. also WOOLF 2004 who distinguishes between “evaluative” and “ascetic” attitudes. On the connection between the philosopher’s activity and the soul “itself by itself” see also EBREY 2017, 15–16. For various senses of separation in the *Phaedo* see PAKALUK 2003.

¹⁶ JOHANSEN 2017, 27; BOSTOCK 1986, 119. And see already GALLOP 1975, 140–141.

the soul's unspecified material used by the demiurge in the *Timaeus*. The latter will be more explicit about the soul's constitution than any other dialogue, but the possibility that souls have some sort of "material" can be traced back to *Republic X* and the *Phaedrus*.

2. *Republic X*

The focus of this section is on the demonstration of the soul's immortality in the last book of the *Republic*, a dialogue richer than any other in information about the soul's life in human body and, by extension, human society. As in the *Phaedo*, however, we hear much more about what the soul does than about what it is, and to extract from the *Republic* something like an ontology of the soul seems difficult in the best of cases. I will not attempt any such reconstruction; instead, I wish to revisit the argument at 608c–612a, whose strangeness has embarrassed the most charitable readers.¹⁷ What can perhaps be said in favor of this piece of reasoning is that Plato may anticipate here Strato's objection against the conclusion of the *Phaedo*, namely that Socrates identifies too easily and illicitly the soul's immortality with its indestructibility.¹⁸ It is indeed the latter that comes to the foreground in *Republic X* where Socrates turns to "the greatest rewards and prizes that have been proposed for virtue" (608c1–2).¹⁹ These rewards are first characterized by their duration, which provides a smooth passage to the issue of immortality: as truly great, they require not "a short time" (ὀλίγος χρόνος), but "the whole of time" (πᾶς χρόνος). And to enjoy something throughout "the whole of time", soul needs of course to be immortal.

For all its strangeness, and the necessary qualifications that will have to follow, this is a direct introduction to the demonstration of what makes the soul

¹⁷ See the quotations in BROWN 1997, 211. Brown's is the most thorough defense of the whole demonstration.

¹⁸ Since I am interested in the soul's implicit ontology, not in comparing the attempts at proving its immortality, I simply assume that the proof in *Republic X* (which infers immortality from indestructibility) is complementary to the last proof in the *Phaedo* (where the exact opposite happens). Hence the possibility to see *Republic X* as preempting the objection that the soul's immortality (defined through its essential participation in Life) need not guarantee its indestructibility. For Strato's doubts about *Phaedo*, 105e7–107a1 see WESTERINK 1977, 332 (= DAM. II,78), and the analysis in REPICI 2011. On Strato's criticism see also HACKFORTH 1955, 195–197.

¹⁹ The *Republic* is quoted from Burnet's *OCT* edition, translated by G. M. A. GRUBE, revised by C. D. C. REEVE, printed in COOPER 1997; I will occasionally modify the translation.

immortal. At the same time, like in the *Phaedo*, the ethical horizon of the proof is crucial: from the soul's perspective, human actions in "a short time" are decisive for the stretches of time in between incarnations. To make this ethical scheme work, the soul must be shown not only to survive our death, but to keep its individuality and agency intact. As a result, Socrates' argumentation will yield a strong continuity between the proof of immortality and the following moralizing myth, which – like all the eschatological myths – cannot avoid describing souls as persons.

Before such a description, a more abstract reasoning needs to prepare its ground. This reasoning starts from two general premises. The first one is simple and simply stated: "the bad is what destroys and corrupts, and the good is what preserves and benefits" (608e3–4). The second one, introduced in the guise of a question, is less obvious and needs to be immediately clarified by a series of examples (608e6–609a4):

And do you say that there is a good and a bad for each thing (ἐκάστω τι)? For example, ophthalmia for the eyes, sickness for the whole body, blight for grain, rot for wood, rust for iron or bronze. In other words, is there, as I say, a natural badness and sickness for almost everything (σχεδὸν πᾶσι σύμφυτον ἐκάστω κακὸν τε καὶ νόσημα)?

This badness, adds Socrates, once it starts to act (ποιεῖν) on something, will at first make it worse, and finally (τελευτῶν) destroy it entirely. This additional remark seems intended to exclude from the discussion the cases of destruction by a sudden accident: an arrow that strikes you in the eye destroys the latter no less efficiently than ophthalmia, but can hardly be described as a badness that is connatural to the eye. Accidents need therefore be left out the argument: each and every thing, insists Socrates in his next replica, can only be destroyed by its own natural badness (τὸ σύμφυτον κακὸν ἐκάστου) and its own affliction (ἢ πονηρία ἑκάστου); and "if they don't destroy it, nothing else will crush it (εἰ μὴ τοῦτο ἀπολεῖ, οὐκ ἂν ἄλλο γε αὐτὸ ἔτι διαφθείρειεν), for the good would never destroy anything, nor would anything neither good nor bad" (609a9–b2). As a result, for each thing, there is something inherently good and something inherently bad, while everything else is indifferent, leaving the thing in question in its present state. This resulting scheme is clear, although, besides leaving aside the possibility of accidental destruction by external causes, it also omits to account for the fact that material things or bodies undergo a general decay brought about by the passage of time. This omission is due to Socrates' tight focus on emphasizing that, generally speaking, things are never immune to dangers inherent in their *particular* constitution.

In his next step, Socrates starts to wonder about the possible exception to this rule. His question does not suggest the possibility of some perfect thing which would be entirely free of any inner flaw. Instead, Socrates evokes something which *would* suffer from its own badness, but *not* be finally destroyed by it: such a thing, he concludes, would be “naturally incapable of being destroyed” (τοῦ πεφυκότος οὕτως ὄλεθρος οὐκ ἦν, 609b). And it only takes Glaucon’s tentative agreement for Socrates to suggest that we take a look at the soul from precisely this angle.

First, based on everything said in the dialogue so far, it is clear that soul *has* its proper badness, which comes to it in various guises: the cardinal vices of “injustice, licentiousness, cowardice, and lack of learning” are listed at 609b11-c1 as that many reminders of the fact that the soul’s moral qualities constantly improve or deteriorate. The question is therefore to know whether this process can entail the soul’s utter disintegration. Unsurprisingly, Socrates will defend a negative answer to this question, and to drive it home, he will paint a contrast between the consequences of the disease for the body and the vice for the soul. In the former case, disease can destroy the body and bring it “to the point where it is a body no longer” (εἰς τὸ μηδὲ σῶμα εἶναι, 609c7); in the latter case, it never so happens that the vices corrupt the soul “and make it waste away until, having brought it to the point of death, they separate it from the body” (609d6-7). The implications of this contrast are then developed in some detail, including the question of how they relate to the central issue of death and justice. At 609d9 to 611a1, this development is quite meandering, but its core consists in repeating that no disease of a body can translate into the vice of the soul in the same way as, for instance, a piece of poisoned food, whose own badness is *not* a badness proper to the body of the man who eats it, can “implant” to the body a badness that will ultimately become its own. This idea, spelled out at 609e1-610a2, moderates so to speak the initial division of evils; in fact, it implies that some evils can pass from one body to another. The soul, however, stays detached from all such transference, and what lies behind Socrates’ reasoning is therefore a strong belief in the *causal separation* of what we call “soul” from what we call “body”.

Unfortunately, this causal separation offers no precise information about what “body” and “soul” are. Concerning the nature of the body, Socrates assumes its divisibility which seems to correspond to what we know from the *Phaedo*. The soul is not destroyed by any of the bad things that can happen to the body, he says, “not even if the body is cut up into the smallest pieces” (610b2-3). But even here, the focus is not on the body’s general properties, but on what can happen to human bodies. Only from this perspective can Socrates say that the body could undergo such a destruction that it would not even be a body anymore (609c7). This only make sense if the object under description is a

human body that loses its wholeness and functional unity. The goal of Socrates' reasoning is, after all, to establish a similar wholeness and unity on the level of the soul, since what needs to be shown is not only that the latter never perishes as a consequence of its vices, but that it safeguards its body-independent moral identity. Separated from the body destroyed by its own badness, the soul will be neither more nor less just or unjust than it was during the time of its being a *human* soul. Whether the souls can be described as properly incorporeal, or again as (only) fundamentally different from all visible and tangible bodies, does not affect the conclusion that, after death, the just will be rewarded for their goodness and the unjust will suffer for their badness. For this purpose, the above-summarized causal separation is largely sufficient, regardless of the fact that, throughout his reasoning, Socrates passes from soul to man and back again without any methodological scruples.

Up to 610e, the contrast between body and soul amounts therefore to emphasizing that divisible bodies are prone to destruction by the badness that follows from their constitution. Soul, in contrast, only becomes bad by turning vicious, in other words by doing something by its own agency. This seems to sum up the difference between vices and diseases, at least insofar as the latter do not follow from how bodies act on their own, but from how they *suffer* from what belongs to their nature. That much being clear, the second and then the third part of the whole argument leave particular bodies aside and focus more on the soul: the second and short part clarifies the soul's role in the large cosmological context and insists on the necessity of reincarnation (611a4-9), whereas the more extensive third part leads, finally, to the much-postponed question about the soul's "truest nature" (611a10-612a6).

The short reincarnation argument is presented as an obvious corollary of the soul's indestructibility and it does not deal with reincarnation *as such*. Its insistence on there being always the same number of souls implies, however, that if life in its mortal forms is not to stop, the souls must return to animate new bodies. This thought is complemented by Socrates' remark that just as the number of souls cannot diminish, it also cannot grow since, were this the case, it would yield a progressive immortalization and the ultimate depletion of mortal life-forms. Not even the rare defenders of the indestructibility argument are pleased by this "sort of snowball argument", which does not offer new insights into the soul's ontology. Still, it implies that souls, of which there is only a given number, are strong, non-interchangeable individuals.²⁰ The same assumption, we

²⁰ I borrow "a sort of snowball argument" from BROWN 1997, 234-238.

could add, underlies every argument used by Socrates, in different dialogues, to prepare an imminent eschatological myth.

Much more could be expected of the immediate follow-up which returns, abruptly and directly, to the issue of the soul's internal partition. Before taking a look at how this issue resolves in *Republic X*, I should therefore remark on the general question of whether the soul's tripartition is an ontological issue. I submit that the only text which could suggest an affirmative answer is the *Timaeus*, granted that even this dialogue offers nothing more than a likely account of the soul's constitution. The use of tripartition as a methodological device rather than ontological truth is more explicit in both the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*. In these dialogues, tripartition is a device that enables Socrates to actually *simplify* the complexity of what happens in the soul, in other words to approximate this complexity without defining exactly what the soul really is. This does not make tripartition "false" since it is a powerful means of unifying the soul's multiple activities and, by the same token, a tool of safeguarding some connection between the soul's many sides and *one* human person that inhabits the city.²¹ As a result, some passages where there is question of tripartition *may* bear, in one way or another, on the soul's ontology. What I contend is only that Plato does not establish any clear and general connection between these two issues.²²

Bearing this caveat in mind, we can follow Socrates' turn to the issue of the soul's true or even "truest" nature (the superlative occurs at 611b1; "true nature" at 612a3-4). This turn, however, is entirely methodological and does not result in stating or defining what such a true nature is. The soul's simple or incomposite character is evoked as a serious option, but one which could only

²¹ Yet another question is to know whether the parts of the soul amount themselves to something like a person. For instance, ANNAS 1981, 109-153, sees all soul-parts as potentially similar to persons; STALLEY 2007 is critical of this view. On Platonic souls as "persons" see LONG 2005 (not focused on the issue of tripartition), KAMTEKAR, 2006 and 2017, 129-185.

²² LORENZ 2006 is a well-argued attempt at taking tripartition at its face value. Still, Lorenz leaves aside the moment when, in Book IV, the argument for tripartition is described as presently sufficient, but *not exact* (435d). Book VI repeats this reservation (504a-b) and its echo is heard in the passage from Book X we are just about to read. In any case, in analyzing this passage, Lorenz himself, at pp. 37-38, points out that "it may, after all, not be essential to the soul to be a composite of reason, spirit, and appetite". So, again, the being of the soul and the issue of tripartition may, but need not, be connected. For a similar conclusion reached from a different point of departure see BURNYEAT 2005-2006. On parts of soul in Books IV and X see also FRONTEROTTA 2013. On the "longer" and "shorter" route of inquiry into the soul's structure see BUCHHEIM 2006.

be tested by a further inquiry. In the first of his four subsequent replicas, two short and two longer ones, Socrates warns us against thinking “that the soul in its truest nature is full of multicolored variety and unlikeness or that it differs with itself” (ὥστε πολλῆς ποικιλίας καὶ ἀνομοιότητός τε καὶ διαφορᾶς γέμειν αὐτὸ πρὸς αὐτό) since “the argument doesn’t allow it” (ὁ γὰρ λόγος οὐκ ἐάσει, 611a10–b3). This could mean that such a picture of the soul would prevent us from giving any coherent account at all, but it could also be an incitation at speaking with decorum proper to this stage of inquiry. Socrates’ second replica points indeed towards this latter option: to be “composed of many parts” (σύνθετόν τε ἐκ πολλῶν) does not make it impossible, but “not easy” (οὐ ῥάδιον) to be eternal. To be so only demands to be “put together in the finest way” (τῇ καλλίστῃ κεχρημένον συνθέσει, 611b5–7).

In his two longer replicas, Socrates leaves this fine tuning of the composite soul aside and, instead, proposes (611b10–c5) that

to see the soul as it is in truth (οἷον δ’ ἐστὶν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ), we must not study it as it is while it is maimed by its association with the body and other evils – which is what we were doing earlier – but as it is in its pure state (ἀλλ’ οἷον ἐστὶν καθαρὸν γιγνόμενον), that’s how we should study the soul, thoroughly and by means of logical reasoning (λογισμῶ). We’ll then find that it is a much finer thing (πολύ γε κάλλιον) than we thought and that we can see justice and injustice as well as all the other things we’ve discussed far more clearly (ἐναργέστερον).

Here the soul’s “pure state” is still not identified with an incomposite nature, and there will be no further inquiry into this issue. The phrase “much finer thing than we thought” is again neutral ontologically and, like the affinity argument of the *Phaedo*, it shows that the talk about the soul’s nature is not averse to the talk about the *degrees* of the soul’s simplicity. This fact confirms that, in *Republic X*, Socrates does ultimately *not* suggest that soul, in its true nature, must be simple or incomposite.²³ The rest of his third replica then sums up the considerations of the tripartite soul and its variegated disfiguration typical of its attachment to the body (611c6–d8). To this the fourth and final replica recommends the antidote consisting in the practice of philosophy as “akin to the divine and immortal and what always is”, and therefore revealing the true nature of the soul

²³ See WOLF 2012, 151, 156–157. On the similarities and differences with the *Phaedo* cf. also ROBINSON 1967.

that aims in this direction and raises “out of the sea in which it now dwells”. However, whether the soul so revealed “has many parts or just one and whether or in what manner it is put together” remains to be determined (611e1–612a6).²⁴

The soul’s simultaneously epistemic and moral purification agrees therefore perfectly with the previous neutrality concerning the soul’s “true nature”. Socrates is emphatic that the latter cannot be deduced from his account of the soul as immersed in human affairs, and he is consistent in avoiding to prejudge the result of some prospective inquiry. The text’s focus is firmly on the composite or incomposite nature, whereas the issue of incorporeality is not even mentioned. Looking back on Book IX, we could re-describe the recommendation to see soul better after it is purified by philosophy in terms of grasping finally the soul as that which “is more” (μᾶλλον ὄν) than the body insofar as it is “filled with things that are more” (τὸ τῶν μᾶλλον ὄντων πληρούμενον, 585d7–9). Whether Socrates seriously hints at degrees of being correlative to the scale of immutability is not easy to tell, not in the least because he describes the soul as “participating” in truth and essence, and generally suggests that

that which is related to what is always the same, immortal, and true, is itself of that kind, and comes to be in something of that kind (καὶ αὐτὸ τοιοῦτον ὄν καὶ ἐν τοιοῦτῳ γιγνόμενον) – this is more, don’t you think (μᾶλλον εἶναί σοι δοκεῖ), than that which is related to what is never the same and mortal, is itself of that kind, and comes to be in something of that kind (585c1–5).²⁵

Since, however, αὐτὸ τοιοῦτον ὄν refers here to the soul’s pure pleasure and ἐν τοιοῦτῳ γιγνόμενον to the soul where such pleasure occurs, we are still in the same situation as in the *Phaedo*. Once again, the properties that oppose the soul to the body derive from what the soul, if properly educated, strives to attain. In both the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, the soul’s clean-cut opposition to body is mitigated by a difference of degree, regardless of how much the soul is separated from visible and tangible bodies. It is the latter that the soul is repeatedly opposed to, without any clarification of whether being visible and tangible is

²⁴ Cf. WOOLF 2012, 159: “So what we have at 611d–e is not primarily a *description* of the soul’s true nature, but a *prescription* for how we are to discover what that is.”

²⁵ The use of “being more” in *Republic* IX is itself preceded by μᾶλλον ὄντα in *Republic*, VI,515d3, which describes the objects that will be ultimately grasped by the prisoner liberated from the Cave. VLASTOS 1965, 4 n. 1 says this is “the first occurrence of μᾶλλον with a participle of the verb *to be* in surviving Greek philosophical prose”. Vlastos, at p. 19, sees the talk of something “more real” as Plato’s misstep: to talk about various *kinds* rather than degrees of being “would have served him much better as an instrument of categorical inquiry”.

the only criterion for being a body – which is doubtful since, on such a narrow definition, the elements themselves would not be bodies. To this last issue I will return with the help of the *Timaeus*. At this point, it is more important to bear in mind that even if we were able to decide whether the soul is composite or incomposite,²⁶ this decision would not automatically resolve the issue of the soul's incorporeality. To a large degree, like in the *Phaedo*, this ambivalence fuels the myth that closes the dialogue. With a wonderful vividness, and yet challenging our imagination, the rewards and punishments conferred on the souls are rendered in terms suited to a fully corporeal existence and are enjoyed as such, including the scene where the souls gather, talk to each other and compare their different pleasures and sufferings (614d–615a). To allow for such an activity, and also for the subsequent scene where the souls decide about their next incarnation (617d–619e), soul must keep its nature intact throughout its never-ending life, regardless of the fact that we ignore what exactly this nature is. This detracts nothing from the myth's ethical importance; ontologically speaking, however, it is a meagre result.

3. The *Phaedrus*

If the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* describe the soul variously as both a thinking and a moving thing, it is in the *Phaedrus* that the importance of motion comes in full focus. At the same time, the dialogue puts a new emphasis on the need to grasp the nature of the soul. More precisely, dealing with the art of rhetoric which is its main subject, the *Phaedrus* firmly states that anyone who treats rhetoric seriously

will write with complete accuracy (πάση ἀκριβείᾳ γράψει) about the soul and enable us to see (ποιήσει ἰδεῖν) whether it is something which is one and uniform in nature (ἓν καὶ ὅμοιον πέφυκεν) or complex like the form of the body (κατὰ σώματος μορφὴν πολυειδές); for this what we say is to reveal the nature of something” (271a5–7).²⁷

²⁶ The underlying simplicity of the soul throughout the *Republic* is defended by SHIELDS 2001. BAUER 2017 proposes a compromise: the soul is not fundamentally simple, but its nature involves an “unenforced harmony” of its parts. Both authors strive at reconciling *Republic* IV with *Republic* X; but, again, if Socrates acknowledges in the latter that the former does not expose the soul's true nature, he still leaves the issue unresolved.

²⁷ I quote the *Phaedrus* after YUNIS 2011; the often modified translation is from ROWE 1986.

This precept is nevertheless only partly followed in two passages which say indeed something about the soul's nature. First, in the same context of advice to future rhetoricians and teachers of rhetoric, Socrates remains ambivalent when he insists that to grasp the nature of soul is impossible without understanding "the nature of the whole" – without, however, specifying what the "whole" in question (270c2) is meant to be: is it one of the composite soul, one of the soul-body compound, or one of the universe?²⁸ Similarly, his previous truthful account of "the nature of the soul, both divine and human" (ψυχῆς φύσεως περί θείας τε καὶ ἀνθρωπίνης, 245c2–3) starts with the expression ψυχή πᾶσα (245c5) whose ambiguity has been noted by Hermias and discussed ever since: should we understand it as "all soul" or as "every soul"?

Regardless of this ambiguity (on which see below), there is a clear methodological correspondence between the two passages. The difference is that pages 270c–271a will only offer the most general advice about how to proceed when inquiring into the nature of any entity under discussion: we need to decide about its simplicity or complexity, and we also need to understand what natural capacity it has to act and to be acted upon (270c8–d7). And if the above quoted lines 271a5–7 stress the first part of this task, the earlier passage, at 245c–246a, matches its second part: its *definitional* focus is precisely on the nature of the soul as revealed through its experiences and actions, whereas the issue of simplicity or complexity is left aside, and then *replaced* by the famous tripartite *image* of the soul.

The importance of this shift cannot be overemphasized since it means that tripartition is actually *not* part of how the soul's nature is defined. It only steps in once Socrates turns from the soul's nature and its immortality to the soul's *ιδέα* while reducing his speech about the latter to what it resembles. As a result, we never truly learn whether the three parts painted by Socrates belong only to this image, or to the soul proper. Still, both the explanation of the soul's immortality and the subsequent image of the immortal soul contain information pertinent to the issue of the soul's incorporeality. Without reconstructing the whole argument, we must therefore take a closer look at several points that Socrates is clear about, but also at several problems that are left unsolved.

The first and most important point is of course the explicit focus on the soul's motion, clearly conceived as local motion. In the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, souls were described as moving around the universe, but it is in the *Phaedrus*

²⁸ As pages 270–271 do not lead to a more exact definition of the soul's nature, I need not enter here the detail of various solutions given to this trilemma. For a detailed overview and further discussion see THEIN 2012.

that motion, more exactly self-motion, is identified with the soul's nature and shown to represent the soul's essence (οὐσία) and to convey its definition (λόγος, 245e3–4).²⁹ It is, therefore, the self-motion that determines the soul's immortality. This is clear from Socrates' claims (1) that the soul's nature will be truly apprehended (τάληθεξ νοῆσαι) on the basis of its experiences and its actions (245c3), and (2) that the starting point of the following demonstration (ἀρχὴ δὲ ἀποδείξεως) is the premise "all soul is immortal" (245c5). Strictly speaking, therefore, the demonstration in question is *not* the proof that the soul is immortal: what needs to be demonstrated is the previous claim that erotic madness is something good and divine. This, says Socrates at 245b6–c2, is what "we have to demonstrate" (ἡμῖν δὲ ἀποδεικτέον), even if this demonstration (ἀπόδειξις) will be disbelieved by those who are too clever for their own good. The phrase ἀρχὴ δὲ ἀποδείξεως ἧδε, which follows almost immediately, refers most likely to this larger proof of which the clarification of the soul's nature is a prerequisite.

Ψυχὴ πᾶσα ἀθάνατος is therefore the crucial premise of the whole palinode that is about to start. This seems to give a slight edge to the understanding of ψυχὴ πᾶσα as "all soul" rather than "every soul": clearly, for the palinode to succeed, the irrational element of the soul must be there all along. More importantly for our issue, what follows is an explanation of *why* is the soul immortal rather than a "proof" *that* it is so. And it is here that motion connects to soul in a way that has nothing metaphorical about it: "for that which is always in motion is immortal" adds Socrates as a second part of his premise, and then he goes on to ground the eternal motion in self-motion.³⁰ Here Socrates' reasoning amounts to establish the principle or starting point of motion in the whole universe and to show that only what is not moved by something else can be such an ultimate and independent principle (245c7–d5). Indeed, adds Socrates, such a principle cannot be destroyed if the universe and everything that comes to be is not to be destroyed with it and come to a final halt (245d6–e2). At

²⁹ Cf. SEDLEY 2009, 152 n. 9, who also refers to an important corresponding passage in *Laws* (X,895d1–896a4) on which see the next section.

³⁰ My reconstruction therefore departs from ROWE 1986, 174 (who takes 245c5–246a2 for "the proof of the immortality of the soul" which Socrates "methodically begins with"), and also YUNIS 2011, 136–137, who takes ψυχὴ πᾶσα ἀθάνατος for "the conclusion of the argument, placed first for emphasis, clarity, and grandeur", and sees τὸ γὰρ ἀεὶκίνητον ἀθάνατον as "the major premise of the entire argument", a premise which "is axiomatic". I read both phrases as introducing a larger demonstration whose proper object is the goodness of erotic madness. This difference, however, has no bearing on the issue of the nature of the soul as grounded in its self-motion. I agree with both Rowe and Yunis that, at 245c5, ἀεὶκίνητον is superior to αὐτοκίνητον. On this last issue see also DECLEVA CAIZZU 1970.

this point, the argument becomes remarkably circular since such an option is precluded by the fact that “what moves itself has been shown to be immortal” (ἀθανάτου δὲ πεφασμένου τοῦ ὑφ’ ἑαυτοῦ κινουμένου, 245e3). And since “soul” is by definition what moves itself, it “will be necessarily something which neither comes into being nor dies” (246a1–2).

My interest is not in whether this demonstration could succeed as a proof of the soul’s immortality.³¹ Rather, I wish to emphasize that soul is, like in the *Phaedo* and *Republic X*, in charge of the organized motion in our universe.³² This of course means that the self-moving soul must be capable of moving what we call bodies. This capacity is specified as follows: “all body which has its source of motion outside itself is soulless (ἄψυχον), whereas that which has it within itself and from itself is ensouled (ἔμψυχον), this being the nature of the soul (ὡς ταύτης οὔσης φύσεως ψυχῆς, 245e4–6).” It belongs therefore to the nature of the soul not only to move itself, but to animate certain but not all bodies: hence the difference between animals and inanimate things. This neat distinction confirms that Socrates’ argumentation is indifferent to the composite or incomposite character of the soul. All opposition between souls and bodies is stated exclusively in terms of moving and being moved, whether from the “inside” or from the “outside” (“from the outside” should mean through the ensouled bodies, like when I hold and move a pen or a cup of coffee).

Compared to the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, this is indeed a new line of argumentation since, in those dialogues, the soul’s power to move a body was assumed but never so directly addressed. Still, beyond stressing the soul’s motion, Socrates adds nothing concerning *how exactly* the soul transfers its motion to the tridimensional bulk that a living body is. Soul is not an unmoved mover, and nothing points towards an efficient causation similar to one that soul will acquire as an Aristotelian form. If, therefore, some indication on this matter can be extracted from Socrates’ palinode, we have to look for it, with all the necessary prudence, in the subsequent image of the soul. My focus will be on this image as such together with the first part of the description of how the soul behaves in the universe (246a3–e3). In contrast, I will leave aside the controversial issues raised by the next part of the description including the unspecified relation between the motion of the souls and the celestial motion.

³¹ For discussion of this and related issues see e.g. DEMOS 1968; BETT 1986; HANKINSON 1990; PRICE 1990; MOORE 2014.

³² More exactly, in these dialogues, it is in charge of all organized motion in the sublunary part of the world. Only the *Timaeus* and *Laws X* will pay attention to the soul’s role in celestial motion.

Concerning this last issue, we only should bear in mind that the *Phaedrus* does not introduce, let alone assign to the soul, the geometrically determined rotational motion that the *Timaeus* will connect with the nature of the intellect.³³

The image or the soul's *ιδέα* is introduced as a substitution for a full explanation of it. This substitution starts with a direct visualizing of the invisible soul: "Let it then resemble the naturally combined winged power of a team of horses and their charioteer" (ἐοικέτω δὴ συμφύτῳ δυνάμει ὑποπτέρου ζεύγους τε καὶ ἠνιόχου, 246a5–6). I follow Yunis' text³⁴ while modifying Rowe's translation so as to bring out the fact that "winged" characterizes not only the horses, but also the charioteer. The entire soul is winged and Socrates develops his image accordingly, including "the quills of the feathers" that "swell and set to growing from their roots under the whole form of the soul" (ὑπὸ πᾶν τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς εἶδος, 251b5–7). As a matter of fact, soul *is* imagined as a tripartite wing that grows feathers and reaches maturity when its plumage is at its fullest and most perfect. This becomes clear right after Socrates describes the two horses and the charioteer as three parts explicative of moral psychology. The feathered wing, in contrast, enables Socrates to say more about the entire soul in the context of his explanation of the difference between the mortal and the immortal living beings:

All soul has the care of all that is soulless (ψυχή πᾶσα παντὸς ἐπιμελεῖται τοῦ ἀψύχου), and patrols the whole universe, coming to be now in one form, now in another (ἄλλοτ' ἐν ἄλλοις εἶδεσι γιγνομένη), Now when it is perfect and in full plumage (ἐπτερωμένη), it travels through the air and governs the whole cosmos; but the one that has shed its feathers (ἡ πεπορρυσασα)³⁵ is swept along until it lays hold of something solid (στερεοῦ τινοῦς), where it settles down, taking on an earthy body (σῶμα γήϊνον), which seems to move itself because of the power of soul, and the whole is called a living being, soul and body fixed together, and acquires the name "mortal" (246b6–c6).

³³ Here, and in the next section, I will not discuss the attempts at importing the Timaeian account of the world soul into the *Phaedrus*; this line of interpretation, inspired by some passages in Plotinus' *On the Descent of the Soul into Bodies* (*Enneads*, IV,8 [6]), aims at goals different from my main topic.

³⁴ At 246a5 (= 246a6 BURNET), Yunis, like most recent editors starting with Ast, reads ἐοικέτω. The alternative reading is Hermias' εἰοικέ τῳ δὴ ("it looks like").

³⁵ In Rowe's translation, the soul "has lost its wings". Nehamas and Woodruff's translation, in COOPER 1997, also speaks about "a soul that sheds its wings". But the process implied is one of molting, not losing the wings; cf. again the image of the growing feathers at 251b5–7. For this sense of the verb πεπορρυνέω see Aristotle on the peafowl: "The bird moults when the earliest trees are shedding their leaves, and recovers its plumage when the same trees are recovering their foliage" (*HA* VI,9,564a32–b2).

As for the immortals, adds Socrates, we have never adequately seen or conceived god, so that we visualize (πλάττομεν) the latter as some living being with a soul and a body combined for all time (246c6–d2). Gods are therefore modelled as souls with permanent bodies, so that the individual Olympian divinities can be used as paradigms to which human souls resemble and whose likeness they seek in their earthly life (252c3–253c6). This is why gods are amply used in Socrates' description of human lives, but their evocation sheds no new light on what the soul is. What Socrates has to add on this subject is therefore integrated into his account of the wing, which completes the initial image of the tripartite soul. At 246d5–e3, this account offers a concise and more colorful summary of what we know from the *Phaedo*: “wing” stands for “soul” insofar as the latter can embrace the divine and lift itself towards the beautiful, the wisdom, and the good (the Forms will be introduced later on). The latter nourish the wing's plumage, whereas their opposites cause its waste. Like in the affinity argument of the *Phaedo*, all soul is therefore situated on a scale that extends from the body as tangible and “earthy” to the incorporeal Forms (“without color or shape, intangible”) situated outside the universe (247c4–d1).

This much being clear, most readers have found the exact phrasing of what Socrates says about the wing and the soul so peculiar that they emend the text of all manuscripts. Without emendation, Socrates states that “the natural property of the wing (πέφυκεν ἡ πτεροῦ δύναμις) is to lift what is heavy (τὸ ἐμβριθέες) upwards, carrying it through the air to where the race of the gods resides, soul having, of the things associated with the body, the greatest share in the divine” (κεκοινώνηκε δὲ πη μάλιστα τῶν περὶ τὸ σῶμα τοῦ θείου ψυχῆ, 246d5–e1). The emendation, first introduced by Heindorf, brackets or deletes the noun ψυχῆ and, in the second step, connects κεκοινώνηκε with “wing”, not “soul”. About the need for this solution, the editors agree: for Heindorf, “soul” is a gloss which is “absurd or rather meaningless”; de Vries, in his commentary, echoes this judgment and follows Heindorf in referring to Plutarch whom he takes (mistakenly) to disregard “soul” too; Rowe states that it “must a gloss, since soul is emphatically not one of the things which ‘belong to the sphere of the body’.” Less directly and not wrongly, Yunis remarks in support of this reading that “although the wings are part of the soul, they can be considered in relation to the body since mortal being are conglomeration of soul and body (246c2–6).”³⁶

³⁶ HEINDORF 1802, 250; DE VRIES 1969, 130; ROWE 1986, 178; YUNIS 2011, 139. As for the alleged support for the emendation in PLUTARCH, *Platonic Questions*, 1004C, Heindorf and de Vries only quote the *question* Plutarch is about to answer, but not his *answer*. According to Plutarch, while reading the sentence in question, we should “understand quite simply that, while there are good

All these authors believe that to let the sentence without emendation would imply that soul is corporeal. However, the expression τῶν περὶ τὸ σῶμα need not imply that soul is truly one among the bodies (in fact, this would be strange even for its “wings”). Rather, it seems to refer to the commerce with the corporeal realm, and that soul is in association with bodies is true regardless of its exact ontology. In the quoted sentence, therefore, Plato only maintains the usual degree of uncertainty about the soul’s proper nature. We could thus agree with the quoted comment by Yunis, and still follow the manuscripts: “in relation to the body” can apply to soul of which Socrates offers an image where “wing” stands for the soul’s nature and power. The important thing is to realize that, like in the *Phaedo*, Socrates projects our soul on an evaluative scale that stretches from a wing-like and godlike imaginary body to the “earthy body” where the soul lands once it falls from the divine. And even at the valuable and godlike end of this scale, at its most distant from the tangible body, soul is not transformed into what is fully incorporeal, intangible, without figure.

To sum up: the tangible body or something solid (στερεόν, 246c3; cf. 239c5, 255c4) and the figureless Forms give us the coordinates of the soul’s motion, but neither belongs to the soul’s proper nature characterized by the soul’s natural self-motion. The latter is more pronounced than in the *Phaedo* or the *Republic*, but this seems to be due, first and foremost, to the different issues discussed in these dialogues. Regardless of how we understand the soul’s tripartition – does it belong to the soul’s images or to its being? –, all three dialogues ascribe to soul the capacity for local motion, which is a prerequisite for its immortality: as an agent and the subject of experience, the soul has to live somewhere and Socrates keeps connecting the soul’s location to its achievements or its failures. Repeatedly, however, the image of the soul moving around the physical universe obscures the question of what soul is and how is it constituted. By the same token, we have learned nothing so far about how the soul’s motion relates to its capacity for thinking. In fact, nothing in the *Phaedo*, the *Republic* or the *Phaedrus* precludes us from concluding that this relation is contingent and that animation and thought are two fundamental features that soul simply happens to have.

Before we take a brief look at how this situation changes in the *Timaeus*, it needs to be stressed that, no less than the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus* draws our at-

many faculties of the soul concerned with the body (τῶν περὶ τὸ σῶμα τῆς ψυχῆς δυνάμεων πλείονων οὐσῶν), the faculty of reason or thought, whose objects he has said are things divine and celestial, is most closely akin to the divine” (1004D in CHERNISS 1976). Plutarch is therefore close to what I suggest in the next paragraph. Also, in the *Timaeus*, the world soul is partly composed of οὐσία that is περὶ τὰ σώματα γυνομένη (35a2–3); see the next section.

tention to there being two different kinds of dualism in Plato: one that divides bodies from the Forms, and another one that separates bodies from souls. And whereas the former is defined by the incorporeality of Forms whose agency is diverse,³⁷ the human soul's task is to *fully* animate the body and, in the best of cases, to be a successful intellectual and moral agent.³⁸ The motion is required for the first of these two tasks, whereas the capacity to think is a prerequisite for the second. These two tasks are woven together in the narrative that Socrates offers about individual souls and their actions and experiences: in the *Phaedo*, *Republic X*, and the *Phaedrus*, the degree of understanding or knowledge has a direct impact on the kind of life the soul is living. *This* degree, however, cannot change the soul's degree of being a soul: no soul can be more or less a soul than another (*Phaedo*, 93b3–6). Yet it is about this being a soul that we have learnt little beyond the necessary fact that our soul moves and that it thinks, and that the former activity pulls the soul towards visible and tangible bodies, whereas the second turns its attention towards the objects of thought. It can be expected that this situation will somehow change in the *Timaeus*, where we hear about what the soul is *made of*, but also about how thought and a certain kind of motion are so tightly related that the former can be described as the latter.

4. The *Timaeus*

In the *Timaeus*, Plato deals with the soul outside of human ethical concerns that permeate the dialogues I have discussed so far. The focus is on cosmic goodness, and individual ethics is only touched upon in connection with the restoration of the intellect's original structure by means of mathematical astronomy (see 47a7–c4, 90b1–d7). This narrowing down implies no major shift in Plato's understanding of soul; it simply follows from the scope and aim of *Timaeus*' speech. Regarding this speech, I will focus on what the world soul and our intellect are made of. More exactly, I will take a look at how one and the same account explains (1) how and from what stuff (to use a neutral term) the demiurge puts together the world soul and (2) how he sets it in motion. In this ac-

³⁷ Some Forms, such as Largeness or Equality, are posited as having direct impact on things; other Forms, such as Justice or Piety, are instantiated in virtue of being grasped by our intellect; still other Forms are imitated by an agent such as the demiurge of the *Timaeus*. These differences need not be discussed here.

³⁸ For a succinct presentation of Plato's dualisms see MÜLLER 2017 who distinguishes between "metaphysical dualism" and "anthropological dualism".

count, the issues of constitution, motion and thinking are therefore originally interweaved, and they all rely on an explicit spatial arrangement of the soul.³⁹

To speak about “stuff” implies that the world soul is made out of something entirely different from the elements that give bodies their visibility (as fire does) and tangibility (as earth does). These elements are only used to create the corporeal aspect of the world, which is described as *σωματοειδές* (31b4). Once finished, the cosmic body is a solid composed of the entirety of four elements (31b–32c) with their mutually distinct geometrical structures.⁴⁰ It is, says Timaeus, “a whole and complete body made up of complete bodies” (*ὄλον καὶ τέλειον ἐκ τελέων σωμαίων σῶμα*, 34b2). The constitution of this complete body is second to the primary constitution of the world soul out of its three original ingredients: Being, the Same, the Different. Their givenness is underscored by Timaeus’ use of a demonstrative pronoun: they are simply “these here” (*τῶνδὲ*, 35a1). Yet in a sense, there are *six* original ingredients, since each of the three occurs in its indivisible and its divisible kind. The demiurge can thus use “the Being that is indivisible and always changeless (*τῆς ἀμερίστου καὶ ἀεὶ κατὰ ταῦτὰ ἐχούσης οὐσίας*), and the one that is divisible and comes to be in relation to bodies (*καὶ τῆς αὖ περὶ τὰ σώματα γιγνομένης μεριστῆς*, 35a1–3).⁴¹ The same twofoldness applies to the Same and the Different, and in all three cases the demiurge creates an additional mixture of the indivisible and the divisible version: for instance, in the case of Being, he “he made a mixed form of being (*συνεκεράσατο οὐσίας εἶδος*) in the middle, derived from the other two” (35a3–4). The result is nine ingredients, six of which maintain, presumably to various degree, some relation to bodies (*περὶ τὰ σώματα*). But, of course, at this stage of creation (or, more neutrally, at this level of composition) there still are no bodies in the sense of either the four geometrically determined elements or their perceptible masses. So in what sense are two-thirds of the soul stuff related to bodies?

³⁹ I will quote the *Timaeus* in D. ZEYL’s translation from COOPER 1997.

⁴⁰ On the elements and their variety see BODNÁR 2008. This issue is beyond the scope of my present inquiry.

⁴¹ This corresponds to how *Phaedo*, 78c6–8, distinguishes between the incomposite and unchangeable things and the things that are composite and changing. In the light of how this distinction is developed in the *Phaedo* (see above), Timaeus would be forced to acknowledge that the world soul is only almost incorporeal – granted that there is no fundamental difference between *ἀσύνθετον* employed in the *Phaedo* and *ἀμερίστον* used in the *Timaeus*; the latter would then be closer to *Republic X* and its above-quoted claim that even what is “composed (*σύνθετόν*) of many parts” can be eternal if it is “put together in the finest way” (611b5–7). For a recent account of how and to what end the world soul is constituted see CORCILIOUS 2018, 55–62.

The usual answer to this question implies that Timaeus simply anticipates the world soul's relation to the yet to be composed physical universe. Regardless of its divisibility and spatial arrangements, the world soul is fully incorporeal. For instance, Luc Brisson warns us that, first and foremost, "we must not take metaphors for reality" and, perpetuating the error of Speusippus or Aristotle, lend the world soul an extension (μέγεθος).⁴² Indeed, the world soul can be described as incorporeal and yet moving by constant circular motion.⁴³ The latter then makes the soul reach towards the material realm, more specifically towards the motions of celestial bodies. The overall result can be as follows:

Take first the revolutions of the world-soul. These have the most intimate possible link with the visibly circular motions of the heavens. They are not merely the cause of those motions. The celestial motions *are* the revolutions of the world-soul, made visible. At 47b Timaeus maintains that we have been given eyes "in order that, *seeing the revolutions of intellect in the heavens*, we may use them upon the revolutions of thought inside ourselves, which are akin to them". And as he has already explained at 38-9, those revolutions became visible when the Creator illuminated each of them by planting in it its own heavenly body. In themselves the world-soul and its revolutions are incorporeal (36a6), but when illumination is added, the combined effect is something bodily. The incorporeal thus differs from the corporeal, not by necessarily being altogether non-spatial, but by lacking essential characteristics of body, such as visibility and tangibility (cf. 28b, 31b). There is no reason why an incorporeal should not have a circular motion, even though its invisibility and intangibility make this undetectable to the senses.⁴⁴

There is certainly no reason to disagree with the *sense* of this summary, but still the *meaning* of "incorporeal" and "bodily" is not narrowed down to something univocal. In this respect, the quoted summary faithfully reproduces the problem: Timaeus makes ample use of the polarity that opposes soul to the visible and tangible body, but offers no statement to the effect that soul is sufficiently defined

⁴² BRISSON 1974, 339.

⁴³ See BROADIE 2012, 94: "The cosmic body and the cosmic soul fit together as two exactly interpenetrating spheres, one corporeal, the other incorporeal; and each is in circular motion (the body: 34a1-5; the soul: 36c2-d7 and 37a5)." At 36d9-e1, the demiurge puts inside of the world soul "all that is *σωματοειδές*".

⁴⁴ SEDLEY 1999, 317-318 (I admit to not understanding the reference to line 36a6). Sedley's interpretation, which I do *not* consider wrong, is followed by e.g. BURNYEAT 2000, 58-59, or SORABJI 2003, 154.

by invisibility and intangibility (it cannot be since the Forms and mathematical objects are also such), or that body is sufficiently defined by visibility and tangibility (it cannot be since the elements are bodies that, as such, are neither visible nor tangible). What is clear is that soul can be described as consisting of some stuff, and that this stuff is capable of two things. First, it receives the well-defined ratios that are truly imposed upon it (it is also capable of thinking these ratios). Second, it has the capacity to animate the organized elemental and also perceptible matter. How the soul does it is no clearer than in the *Phaedo* or the *Phaedrus* although, in the *Timaeus*, the description of one portion of the soul stuff as *περὶ τὰ σώματα γιγνομένη* seems to shift the suggested image of the soul even closer to the corporeal sphere: used at 35a2–3 about part of the world soul, the same expression will reappear at 84b4 where Timaeus speaks about diseases (*παθήματα*) that are *περὶ τὰ σώματα γιγνόμενα*, in other words that take place in bodies and affect them. Of course, even diseases *as such* are not bodies (the same holds for the soul's revolutions), but they certainly are states of bodies and do not occur in separation from the latter.

In short, introducing both the divisible and the indivisible stuff blended together into a rotating tridimensional structure, the description of the world soul suggest an ontology *sui generis*, which implies its own sort of dualism where what differs from the elemental bodies and their masses can only be labelled “incorporeal” with some further qualification.⁴⁵ The same thing is then true about human intellect since the latter is a structural replica of the world soul from which it differs by the *quality of stuff* it is composed from. The strangeness of this difference is rarely emphasized,⁴⁶ but Timaeus leaves no doubt about it: to produce human intellects, the demiurge (41d4–7)

turned again to the mixing bowl he had used before, the one in which he had blended and mixed the soul of the universe. He began to pour into it what remained of the previous ingredients and to mix them in somewhat the same way (*τρόπον μὲν τινα τὸν αὐτόν*), though these were no longer invariably and constantly pure, but of a second and third grade of purity (*ἀλλὰ δευτέρα καὶ τρίτα*).

⁴⁵ On the world soul and its specific relation to the mind-body dualism see FRONTEROTTA 2015, 43 n. 11. CARONE 2005 is more radical in suggesting that, in this context, we reject the vocabulary of dualism entirely. By now it is obvious that I leave aside the issue of the soul's mortal parts, of which Timaeus only describes their location in the body and their function. KARFIK 2005, 214, concludes that they are “specific movements of specific tissues, both arising from the immortal soul and acting upon it. There is no mortal soul apart from the body of a living being nor is there any substrate of it other than the bodily tissues of an organism.”

⁴⁶ BROADIE 2012, 92–93, is an honorable exception.

Is this statement part of the dialogue's moral message, or is it relevant to the soul's ontology? The affirmative answer to the first question seems obvious even to those who dismiss the passage as vague and metaphorical.⁴⁷ But if the moral message assumes that the world soul's cognition is superior to human mind, we would expect the deficiency of the latter to be due to our limited perspective on the world, not to the lower quality of our soul stuff. The suggested gradation of the soul-blend's purity (the text mentions three degrees) can hardly shed some new light on the soul's nature. Rather, it lends more weight to the previous description of the world soul's life as a perfect unity of rotating, touching upon various objects, and giving this touch an articulate structure of true beliefs and convictions about things that come to be, and understanding and knowledge about things that are (37a2–c5). By the same token, however, this very description makes us realize that Timaeus says here something valuable and precise about the structure of thought, but he only partially clarifies the nature of the soul that does the thinking.

This is not a negative result. Rather, this is how the cosmological context reveals the limits of the language we use when speaking about soul. In the *Phaedo*, the *Republic* or the *Phaedrus*, soul visits the confines of the universe, but this motion starts from its individual agency and capacity for experience. In the *Timaeus*, the presentation goes from the world soul to individual human intellects, the latter being modelled upon the former: the world soul thus explains all epistemic capacity, but cannot ground the human soul's non-epistemic actions and states. This, again, is why there is so little to say about the Timaeian soul if we see its mixed composition as only an incorporeal, mathematically expressed structure. However, if we take seriously the idea of soul as a divisible mixture extended through the material universe, we are vindicated in our suspicion that Platonic soul is mostly incorporeal in the sense of being invisible and intangible for us while moving and thinking in complex patterns that are made possible by the divisibility of the stuff it is made of. No doubt any suggestion of this kind is, strictly speaking, unverifiable. But, even if Timaeus' speech is no more than a likely story, it is worth noticing that, like other dialogues we have been discussing so far, it does not connect the soul's immortality to incorporeality.

⁴⁷ See e.g. CORNFORD 1935, 143: "In all this section of the dialogue the veil of myth grows thicker again, and it is useless to discuss problems that would arise only if the statements were meant literally." *Philebus*, 30b–e, echoes *Timaeus*, 41d4–7, in Socrates' remarks on the relation between the intellect as the king that orders the universe and the less powerful intellect in our soul. These remarks develop no independent ontology of soul.

In this respect, the soul, incorporeal or not, is on a par with other components of the universe that are immortal or everlasting: they can only be so thanks to the perfect art and the good will of the demiurge (see 41a7–8).

All this seems to make the nature of the soul quite undecidable, at least insofar as we suppose that there *is* a nature of the soul that should be definable beyond the explanation of its activity. In this respect, Timaeus' speech is very cautious: in fact, his explanation of what the world soul and the human intellect do fits equally well with different interpretations of their composition. That Timaeus leaves aside the description of the soul's individual agency in the sense discussed in other dialogues does not result in a purified image of a simple and fully incorporeal soul. On the contrary, the resulting image is one of striking complexity, which is projected into the intellectual core of the soul. While it is able to think the incomposite being, the world soul is coextensive with the physical universe, and human intellect is embedded in the latter in its own way. This clarifies the soul's operations in the universe, but we know little about what the soul is beyond the sum of these operations and their objects. In this respect, the cosmic perspective on the soul yields no greater resolution than the focus on individual soul with its actions and experiences.

5. *Laws X* and the *Sophist*

This tentative and admittedly incomplete conclusion seems to find further support in *Laws X*, where the Athenian Visitor offers a long disquisition on the soul that starts from self-motion as the motion “that moves both itself and other things, suitable for all active and passive processes and accurately termed the source of change and motion in all things that exist” (894c4–7).⁴⁸ Like in the *Phaedrus*, self-motion defines soul (895e10–896a4), which receives two more characteristics: like in the *Phaedo*, it naturally rules over body; like in the *Timaeus*, it is older and nobler than body (896b10–c7). This eclectic progress enables the Athenian to conclude that “habits, customs, will, calculation, right opinion, diligence and memory will come prior to length, breadth, depth and strength of the bodies (μήκους σωμάτων καὶ πλάτους καὶ βάθους καὶ ῥώμης), if soul is prior to body” (896c9–d3). This agrees with the premise of the soul's active omnipresence: it resides everywhere and causes all motion, in other words “all things”, regardless of whether they are good or evil (896d5–e2).

⁴⁸ I quote the *Laws* in T. SAUNDER'S (occasionally modified) translation from COOPER 1997.

This interweaving of ethics and physics is unrivalled in other dialogues, and its tenor matches the task of providing the political rulers with a well-argued weapon against atheism. Accordingly, to put a distance between the divine soul and the corporeal nature, the Athenian is emphatic about soul as agency that moves and shuffles bodies such as stars, and is not to be read as a metaphor for the self-sustaining order of the universe. And yet, even in this context, Plato does not venture beyond the initial identification of soul with self-motion. In contrast with the *Phaedrus*, the Athenian simply avoids to ask “self-motion of *what?*” (the *Phaedrus* does not answer this question but it emphasizes its difficulty and offers an image that replaces the real answer).⁴⁹ It is clear that soul’s actions precede the three dimensions of *bodies*, but the soul *as such* receives no further description and is repeatedly presented as a varied ensemble of functions that share their irreducibility to visible and tangible bodies. In all, the richness of Book X follows from a theoretically precarious compromise where the soul operating at the cosmic level takes charge of motions connected with the emotional, if not outright irrational part of human soul: the soul’s “primary” motions that use the “secondary” motions of bodies in order to achieve a shared goal are “wish, reflection, care, deliberation, true and false belief, joy, pain, confidence, fear, hate, love and all the kindred motions” (897a1–3). There is no doubt that these primary motions express themselves across the broad spectrum of mental as well as physiological states.

The focus is therefore not on the soul’s ontology, but on both epistemic and emotional mental states, and on the place they can find in a providential teleology that uses what appears to be bad to enhance the overall goodness of the soul-governed world. The soul’s composition and structure are therefore not the main issue, and the range of the soul’s tasks reminds us of various dialogues where soul takes the leading role. The creation of images that confirm the resemblance between “the course and motion of the heavens” and “the motion and revolution and reasoning of intellect” (897c4–6) has a strong rhetorical flavor since its intended public is all citizens of the planned city. We are not “incompetent makers of verbal images,” says the Athenian at 898b3, after he invites us to grasp “the nature of the motion of intellect” (897d3) by visualizing the wheels or a sphere turning on a lathe: “this bears the closest possible

⁴⁹ Concerning the soul’s λόγος, the difference between the two texts is small, but perhaps telling. *Laws* X define soul directly as “the motion itself capable of moving itself” (τὴν δυναμένην αὐτὴν αὐτὴν κινεῖν κίνησιν): soul *is* motion, not only *in* motion (896a1–4). The *Phaedrus* speaks about “what moves itself” (τὸ αὐτὸ κινουῦν): soul is a self-mover, something that moves itself, rather than self-motion *per se* (245c8). Both texts of course agree that soul is ἀρχὴ κινήσεως.

affinity and likeness to the cyclical motion of intellect” (898a5–6). On the basis of such an image, we understand intuitively that soul is what “drives round the sun, moon and the other celestial bodies” (898d3–4) and, as a result, we can be “fairly confident” that soul driving the sun “operates in one of three ways” (X,898e8–899a4):

Either (a) the soul resides within (ἐντός) this visible spherical body and carries it wherever it goes, just as our soul (ἡ παρ’ ἡμῶν ψυχή) takes us around from one place to another, or (b) it acquires its own body (σῶμα αὐτῆ) of fire or air of some kind (as certain people maintain), and impels the sun by the contact of body with body (ὠθεῖ βία σώματι σῶμα), or (c) it is itself entirely bodiless (αὐτῆ ψιλῆ σώματος οὔσα), but guides the sun along its path by virtue of possessing some other prodigious and wonderful powers.

Here, finally, Plato mentions soul that is ψιλῆ σώματος or, literally, “bare of body”. However, this expression receives no further discussion and receives its sense from the context, where it appears as one of the three options of how soul relates to the celestial body it moves. These options go beyond our experience of human soul (cf. 895c11–12). The latter furnishes the Athenian with only one option of how to answer his own question which, again, is not “is soul incorporeal?” but “what is the position of the soul relatively to what is moved by it?” In fact, in relation to the moved body, the first and the third option are ontologically neutral: they only say that the soul is “inside” or “outside” the body it moves. Given that the second option makes the soul itself into a kind of body that moves another body, *both* the first *and* the third option would naturally imply an incorporeal soul. Their difference is that, in the first option, the soul moves the celestial body from the inside, analogically to *our* soul moving *our* body, whereas the third option, which cannot be modelled on our experience, would imply some magical power to move bodies, without touch, from the outside. Clearly, therefore, even if we would take soul for entirely incorporeal, the third option is less attractive than the first.⁵⁰

The quoted passage with its three options is a good reminder that this is as close to the fully stated incorporeality of the soul that Plato ever gets. Yet the lack of decision among the options should *not* be read as implying that soul could, after all, be corporeal even if distinct from the visible and tangible bodies. The Athenian puts these options forward as that many ways of persuading the

⁵⁰ For another comment on this passage and its open-ended character see CARONE 2005, 256 n. 99.

potential believers of the divine status of soul that moves celestial bodies (see 899b3–9). Hence his reticence at discussing the details of the soul’s immortality, and the issue of incorporeality, as perhaps too refined for the general public.

No such discretion is needed in the *Sophist*, but even in this dialogue, the Eleatic Visitor introduces the soul’s incorporeality as an option that the reformed materialists will not fully espouse even when they concede that some entities present in the soul, such as justice or wisdom, are indeed incorporeal. The development of the passage in question, the famous “gigantomachy” about being (246a4–5), is most revelatory of Plato’s reticence concerning the proper ontology of soul. As the Visitor presents it, the battle takes place between two camps, the materialists who “insist that what is is constituted exclusively by what offers resistance to touch in some way, defining body and being as the same thing” (246a10–b2), and the opposite army of those who “enforce their view that true being consists of some sort of intelligible and bodiless forms (νοητὰ καὶ ἀσώματα εἶδη, 246b7–8).⁵¹ Claiming that the materialists are more intractable in their views, the Visitor proceeds to show them the error of their ways, building up an argumentation that has more to do with ethics than with the question of being in some technical sense (see 246d4–9 on making the materialists “better people”). For the sake of the Visitor’s argument, the materialists will easily succumb to shame and concede that there are beings other than bodies. This concession implies soul, and the distinction between the soul and the body of a mortal creature (246e5–9), but it is not this soul as such that is said to be incorporeal. What the reformed materialists say is that soul is “something from among the things that are” (τι τῶν ὄντων, 246e9) and that individual souls differ among themselves by properties such as being just or unjust, wise or unwise (247a2–3). Explicitly incorporeal will then be what causes these properties to occur in the souls, namely justice and wisdom, and also their opposites: it is “in virtue of their possession or presence” (ἔξει καὶ παρουσία, 247a5–6) that souls become just or unjust, wise or unwise. As for justice and wisdom, together with other virtues and their opposites, they cannot be seen or touched and, generally, even the reformed materials are not “saying that anything like that has some sort of body” (μῶν σῶμά τι λέγουσιν ἴσχειν, 247b6).

The scheme of participation of the soul in virtues as incorporeal Forms is conform to a number of other dialogues and, if we leave aside the rhetoric of shaming, the portrait of the reformed materialists’ change of mind is not far

⁵¹ The translation of the *Sophist* is ROWE 2015, occasionally modified. For general discussions of the battle see BROWN 1998, POLITIS 2006, and WIITALA 2018, who all analyze the meaning of the below-discussed expression “what completely is” (τὸ παντελῶς ὄν).

from Socrates' philosophical conversion described in the *Phaedo*. Still, Theaetetus uses the moralizing rather than epistemic idiom to sum up how far, on his understanding, the reformed materialists are willing to go with what, from among the invisible things, is or could be incorporeal (247b7–c2):

About all this they do not answer in only one way (τοῦτο οὐκέτι κατὰ ταῦτ' ἀποκρίνονται πᾶν); they say the soul itself (ψυχὴν αὐτήν) seems to them to possess body of a sort (σῶμά τι κεκτηῖσθαι), whereas when it comes to wisdom and each of the other things you have asked them about, they're too ashamed to dare either to concede that such things don't figure at all among the things that are or to insist that they are all bodies (πάντ' εἶναι σώματα).

In this way, the reformed materialists seem to echo the second options from *Laws*, X,898e8–899a4: soul is composed of some sort of corporeal stuff although, for us, it is neither visible nor tangible. The context, however, is different: from the question of how souls move celestial bodies we have shifted to soul as bearing the opposite properties such as justice and injustice. What motivates the reformed materialist may therefore be the worry that an incorporeal bearer of the incorporeal opposites is an overly abstract notion disconnected from virtues and vices of human soul. If this hunch contains a grain of truth is nevertheless hard to say since the discussion turn immediately away from the soul and towards a general criterion of being that would apply to both the incorporeal and the corporeal entities.

At 247c9–e6, this discussion offers no specific information about soul, except that soul must indeed be something if it has the capacity or power (δύναμις) to act or to be acted upon (e.g. to receive justice or wisdom). Also, nothing new on the nature of soul is ventured in the subsequent discussion of the views of “the Friends of the Forms” (248a4–5): distinguishing between coming to be and being, this discussion informs us that it is “through thinking by the soul” (διὰ λογισμοῦ ψυχῆ) that we reach to what truly is (248a10–13). Thus “the soul knows and the being is what is known” (248d1–2). This is a valuable piece of epistemology, which may indicate that the Friends of the Forms *could* take soul for incorporeal, but this inference is for us to make. In any case, such an inference is not confirmed by the Visitor's suggestion that if, on this account, knowing is doing something to the object of knowledge, the status of the knowable being is rather shaky: this being itself (let alone the knowing soul) is undergoing some sort of change. Hence the subsequent debate which is not about soul, but involves it in the explicitly ontological issues.

Passing from being as *object* of thought to the inclusion of what thinks to the range of “what completely is” (τὸ παντελῶς ὄν), this debate follows from

an insistence that it would be absurd to believe that, in the scope of full reality, there is nothing that lives, thinks, and moves (248e7–249a2). This suggestion, however, implies first and foremost that soul’s reality is tied to life and motion. Reading carefully through the next and much entangled replicas, we can conclude that soul *is* no less fully than the incorporeal beings, but they need not have *the same kind* of being. Frustratingly, the Visitor does not clarify in what sense “what completely is” lives, thinks and moves: are these activities meant as the features that *all* reality variously exhibits, or are they exercised by some, but not necessarily all, the real beings?⁵² While he clearly says that life and intellect imply the presence of soul (249a4–7), the Visitor is less clear about whether this presence, as a condition of intelligibility of beings, is to be imputed to all these beings themselves as objects of thought. At 249a5–10, the dilemma is stated concerning the unknowability of an unchanging being and the unknowability of being that changes, but this dilemma is then discussed without any specification of the role of the soul. After 249a9–10, where the dilemma is formulated, the discussion contains no explicit mention of soul; *voûς* only appears, as at 249c3, in the sense of human understanding. But this may simply be because the Visitor is implicitly inclined to impute the change to what does the thinking, the soul, and not to the object of thought in the sense of the Forms.⁵³

For all its philosophical density, the much-analyzed issue of “the great forms” only concerns a slice of the ontological variety suggested by the introduction of τὸ παντελῶς ὄν at 248e7–249a2. It is clear that soul counts among true beings, and that it possesses the capacity to act and to be acted upon. This, however, is hardly enough to clarify what the soul properly is since the Visitor never limits this capacity to the incorporeal entities alone. Our assumption that the reformed materialists must be wrong and that, just like the Forms, soul should be understood as fully incorporeal, is therefore not supported by an argument. Instead, this assumption usually follows from our belief that soul is shown to be incorporeal in other dialogues where Plato deals with its nature in more detail. What I wanted to bring out, and will now summarize in a few concluding remarks, is that the dialogues offer no such demonstration. This of course cannot and must not serve as an argument *against* the soul’s incorporeality. Still, we face the question stated in this article’s introduction: what motivates Plato’s restraint concerning this whole issue?

⁵² On the inclusion of soul as active being in “what completely is” see POLITIS 2006, 167–168. See also BROWN 1998, 201–202.

⁵³ For a very similar suggestion see BROWN 1998, 203.

Conclusion

Compared to the texts of his predecessors, Plato's dialogues suggest an ontological variety of which soul is the most obvious bond. The need to endow the soul with a number of roles may be the simplest explanation for why Plato does not develop the soul's ontology beyond what is necessary for the context-sensitive descriptions of its actions and experiences. The richness of these descriptions is unrivalled, but the more detailed they are in their particular contexts, the less they seem to amount to one coherent ontology. The usual reaction to this worry consists in pointing out that Plato's stories about soul are images of the true soul, and that we must understand them as such. This is certainly a correct intuition, not in the least because Plato himself repeats the same warning. Unfortunately, its truth does not contain a method of arriving at "true soul" itself. The reason is that Plato's images of the soul repeatedly re-enact the tension between our intuitions and our more articulate theories. More specifically, what stands in the way of a clean-cut theory of soul is the tension between the refined notion of ontological incorporeality and the robust understanding of soul as a person-like moral agent.

This tension is most obvious where the soul performs actions connected to the morally underpinned immortality. This connection brings in complications that seem more difficult to solve than the technical problems such as the soul's spatiality or tridimensionality, although the latter, insofar as it is linked with the soul's internal division, may be more of a problem than some interpreters assume.⁵⁴ Be that as it may, several dialogues including the *Timaeus* certainly disregard the general connection between incorporeality and simplicity established in the *Phaedo*. For some readers, this follows from a shift in Plato's views: in the earlier dialogues, Plato treats soul and body simply as two separate substances; in the later dialogues, soul acquires spatial properties, which also better explains the soul's ability to move bodies. This view may have its appeal but, on the basis of our present inquiry, it seems important to insist that the spatial features of the soul and the explicit appeal to its composite character in the *Timaeus* do not solve the puzzle of the soul's proper nature, and the same is true about *Laws X* and the *Sophist*. Regardless of the novelty of descriptions of the soul in these dialogues, the resulting situation is thus the same as in the so-called earlier dialogues.

⁵⁴ See above on the *Timaeus*. The composite character of soul in the latter makes this problem different from the modern issue of the spatiality of the *simple* indivisible soul as discussed in Descartes, Leibniz or Kant. On the spatiality of the soul in Kant and his predecessors see BENNETT 1974, 82–92 and HESSBRÜGGEN-WALTER 2014.

The variety of Plato's perspectives on soul signals therefore a more general dilemma whose two horns present us with equal advantages and disadvantages. If we say that soul is incorporeal, we gain a direct explanation of its invisibility and intangibility, and a reasonable basis for assuming that it may also be simple – a good step towards the soul's immortality based on its indestructibility. On the other hand, this perspective is rather weak in explaining the soul's capacity to act on something that is not soul. If we assume that soul need not be incorporeal in every possible respect, we get a better picture of how it acts on bodies, and we better understand how its immortality connects to its self-motion. On the downside, we have no idea about the nature of the stuff the soul would be made from: it would be a sort of matter, but nothing like the matter we know from experience or deduce in the science of physics.

All things considered, this result is a tie. What tips the balance to incorporeality is either the moral imperative of purification, or the need to integrate soul into a more systematic metaphysics. The former option seems to prevail in Plato himself, but also in the *Epinomis*.⁵⁵ The latter option is at work in the Neoplatonists such as Proclus, whose *Elements of Theology* present us with the complete argumentative sequence that goes from the soul's self-motion (conceived as a capacity to revert upon itself) to its immortality and incorporeality based on its complete separability from bodies (*Elem. Theol.* §§ 15–16).⁵⁶ No full sequence of this kind is spelled out in the dialogues: concerning soul and incorporeality, Plato treads more carefully and, in dialogues as diverse as the *Phaedo* or the *Timaeus*, he describes the soul as true agent that acts both within and without us, grounding our personality while keeping its metaphoric eye on the cosmic coordinates. This, again, does not mean that Plato does not conceive of soul as incorporeal. It only makes us more alert to the problems inherent in such a conception and enables us to understand why Plato is cautious and only describes soul *as if* it were such.

⁵⁵ In *Epinomis* (981b5–7), we learn that nothing except soul, which is of a single form (μορφὴν μίαν), “could possibly be incorporeal (ἀσώματον) and entirely without any color at all (χρῶμα οὐδὲν οὐδαμῶς οὐδέποτε ἔχον)”. The emphasis is on the soul's active and the body's passive nature: the soul is what actively fashions the compound of body and soul, using this or that of the five solid bodies (see 984b–c). The framework of these statements is similar to *Laws* X including the focus on the celestial beings whose soul is said to have acquired the unwavering and most powerful intellect (982b5–6). How exactly do the souls move the celestial bodies is hard to say since we are only told that the celestial bodies could never perform their complex yet exact motions “unless a soul is attached to each of them or resides in each (μὴ ψυχῆς πρὸς ἑκάστῳ γενομένης ἢ καὶ ἐν ἑκάστοις, 983b–c)”. This is reminiscent of *Laws* X and various options of how soul moves the sun. On the difficulties that we face when reading the *Epinomis* see DILLON 2003, 183–197.

⁵⁶ On this whole argumentation see MENN 2012, 58.

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Summary

This article takes a closer look at what Plato's dialogues tell us about the incorporeality of the soul as one of the well-established Platonic doctrines, on a par with the soul's immortality and its self-moving nature. What motivates the proposed rereading is Plato's timidity in describing the soul, human or not, as being entirely without body of any kind. The aim of the article is not to contest the obvious fact that Plato treats souls as essentially distinct from bodies, but to understand why the assumption of incorporeality receives no detailed discussion of its own. One possible answer is that such a theoretically rigorous discussion is always less important to Plato than his emphasis on the variety of actions and experiences ascribed to the soul both here and in the afterlife. While having an essential moral dimension that connects to the soul's activity of thinking, these actions and experiences contribute to the description of the soul as a fully individual agent, akin to that of a person. To highlight the immortality of this agent, it is more opportune for Plato to start from various facets of the soul's natural self-motion, while leaving aside possible arguments in favor of the soul's full ontological bodilessness. In any case, the Platonic soul is introduced as a fundamental part of reality. Its natural agency can therefore be tackled separately from its explicit ontology. By this means, the agency – akin to human agency – that is attributed to the soul can retain its provisional ontological neutrality.

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