

How does the soul direct the body, after all? Traces of a dispute on mind-body relations in the Old Academy

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One notable feature of – or perhaps rather, lacuna in? – Plato’s philosophy that only really comes into focus from the perspective of later developments is the virtual lack, in his published works, of any suggestion as to what influence, mechanism or device the soul – which is presented as a substance of quite antithetical nature to the body (viz. eternal, immaterial, non-extended) – can employ to control and direct the body which it rules, sets in motion, and holds together.¹ In such works as the *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic* or *Timaeus*, it just does this, in a remarkably non-problematic way. What I would like to enquire into on this occasion is, first, whether what I have suggested here is really the case, and secondly, why might this be so? In the *Phaedo*, after all, it is axiomatic that it is the role of the soul to rule, and that of the body to be ruled (80a), but how this takes place is never specified. The body, or love of the body, is said repeatedly to contaminate the soul, but we are never told how. Later, in the *Phaedrus*, in his most formal and programmatic statement of the role and nature of the soul (245c–e), Plato presents it as self-moved, and the origin of all motion in other things,² but once again the mode by which this might be achieved is not perceived as a problem. Again, in the *Timaeus*, the various parts of the soul are distributed about the body and interact with it in a way laying Plato open to criticism by Aristotle for making the soul an extended entity (*de An.* I 2, 404b13 ff.), but there is still no suggestion as to how this works. Lastly, in *Laws* X, the soul is once again the source of all physical motion, but we never learn how it does this.

1 I think in particular of such a document as Plot. *Enn.* VI 4–5, a protracted enquiry as to how immaterial being can be present to material things, beginning from the problem of how the soul can be present to the body. Plotinus seems to have composed this treatise at least partly in response to Porphyry’s protracted queries as to how the soul can relate to the body (*Plot.* 13. 11–12).

2 *Houtô dê kinêseôs men archê to auto heauto kinoun*, 245d6–7.

Is it unreasonable to suggest that there is something important missing here? Let us consider a number of key passages, all well-known. First of all, at *Phaedo* 65a, Socrates asserts that the essence of philosophy consists in “releasing the soul, as far as possible, from its communion with the body (*apolyôn hoti malista tēn psychēn apo tēs tou sōmatos koinōnias*)”. There is no suggestion of a problem about the mode of its *koinōnia*; the only problem is how to minimize this for the future. The union of soul and body is, in fact, non-problematic. The soul rules the body, and it is also in grave danger of being contaminated by it (*sympephyrmenē*, 66b5); the body gets seriously in the way of the soul when it comes to cognizing true being, and distracts it by obtruding its own concerns (65d–e; 66b–e). And this theme develops further in the pages that follow, until we are presented at 81a ff. with the predicament of souls that have been so polluted by bodily concerns that not even after death can they free themselves entirely from them, and are to be found “as shadowy phantoms (*skioeidē phantasmata*) roaming about among tombs and graves” (81d). Such *skioeidē phantasmata* are presumably dimly visible because they are actually carrying about with them material (or quasi-material?) contaminations of some sort from their former bodies.

Now one might argue that Socrates is merely exploiting popular, non-philosophical beliefs here, but I doubt that that will quite do as a way out of the problem. He really gives no indication that he is speaking here in terms not intended to be taken seriously. In general, I think we may agree that, while the body is seen as a serious problem for the soul in the *Phaedo*, the problem of just how the one entity acts on the other is not even raised.

Nor is the situation any different in the rest of the Platonic corpus. The development of the doctrine of the tripartite soul in the *Republic* does not explicitly involve the interaction between it and the body, except that now the passionate and irrational urges which were presented in the *Phaedo* as emanating from the body are attributed to the lowest, irrational part of the soul; but in Book X, 611b–612a, we have a remarkable passage, where the embodied soul is compared, memorably, to the sea-god Glaukos, encrusted by barnacles and deformed by the action of the waves, so that his real form can no longer be discerned. Our task is to discern the soul in its true form, “not deformed by its association with the body” (*ou lelōbēmenon hypo tēs tou sōmatos koinōnias*, 611b10–c1). What is the implication of this image when transferred to the soul?

It seems to me that the ‘barnacles, seaweed and stones’, so to speak, that encrust the soul (611d5), although presented here in a distinctively negative context, may be seen as a sort of anticipation of the later Platonist concept of the ‘pneumatic vehicle’, the *ochêma*, which was proposed as a sort of ‘cushion’ between soul and body, acquired by the soul in the course of its descent through the celestial spheres to embodiment. In this account of the soul in Book X, as has been frequently noted, the model of the tripartite soul, complete with its passionate element, has been abandoned in favour of a model of ‘true’ soul, with accretions consequent on its association with the body, which it will then be divested of when it leaves the body. Later Platonists were certainly able to reconcile these two models by making appeal to the doctrine of the *Timaeus*, where a strong distinction is made between the ‘immortal’ and ‘mortal’ parts of the soul (69cd), the latter of which is added to the ‘immortal’ soul by the “Young Gods’ for the purpose of fitting it into the body – although by various later authorities a distinction was made even between the irrational part of the soul and the *ochêma*.³

Before we turn to the *Timaeus*, however, we should take at least a glance at the *Phaedrus*, where once again we have the situation of a soul – this time with a tripartite structure apparently antecedent to embodiment⁴ – descending into a body and interacting with it. Once again, the fact of this happening is not problematic, while the mode of interaction with the body is systematically obscured. If we think, after all, of the titanic struggles of the charioteer with the unruly horse (254a–e), where there is much leaping forward, vigorous reining-in, falling back on the haunches, foaming at the mouth, bitter reproaches, and so forth, all this activity takes place *within the soul*. There must indeed be parallel movements performed by the body – the lover approaches his beloved, after all, and makes some overtures – but the connexion between the two sets of activities is left in the air. Obviously this struggle within the soul ultimately results in physical action, but Plato presents the process as quite unproblematic, though it would be here that the

3 In this passage of the *Timaeus*, it is rather the body that is spoken of as an *ochêma* for the soul (69c7), and the ‘mortal soul’ is constructed to be a sort of ‘cushion’ between immortal soul and body.

4 Even the gods, indeed, appear to have tripartite souls – though very probably Plato himself did not intend this detail to be dwelt on (since the two horses of the divine pairs are both perfect, 246a7–8); but later Platonists plainly brooded somewhat on the possible identity of their three parts, as we can observe from Alcinous, *Didasc.* 25.7.

presence of some sort of ‘vehicle’ for the soul would seem to be very much called for. Remarkably, though, in the midst of all this imagery involving a charioteer and pair of horses, Plato seems to have no use, in his allegory, for the actual chariot (on which the charioteer must take his stand, and to which the horses are harnessed). It is almost as if this item was something of an embarrassment to him; it is mentioned initially, at 247b1–3, in conjunction with the chariots of the gods,⁵ but it really plays very little part in the allegory after that.

In the *Timaeus*, of course, we find one of the chief passages which gives rise to (or at least comes to constitute a proof-text for) the later doctrine of the ‘vehicle’: 41e, where the Demiurge assigns each of the souls a star, and “embarking it onto it as a vehicle (*ochêma*), exhibits to it the nature of the universe”. Whatever Plato really intended to convey by this, later Platonist speculation understood this astral ‘vehicle’ to be a means for connecting the immaterial to the material through the mediation of an entity composed of a special sort of particularly refined matter; and there is some evidence that this line of thought had its beginning in the Old Academy, as we shall see below.⁶

The *Timaeus* also presents a strong correlation between each of the three ‘parts’ of the soul and an area of the body – the rational part with the head, the spirited with the breast, and the passionate with the belly and ‘lower parts’ (69d–71a); and indeed one particular organ, the liver, is portrayed as acting as a sort of ‘mirror’ (71b4), which may receive impressions of the rational thoughts (*dianoêmata*) emanating from the intellect, based in the head. All this assumes that there is contact between mind and body, but it still does not address the question of *the mechanism or conduit* by which such contact might take place. To arrive at this, surely, we must postulate either a quasi-material element in the soul, or a quasi-immaterial element within the body, and this, despite the interesting introduction of the astral vehicle, Plato really shows no sign of doing.

However, the disciples that Plato had gathered around him in the Academy, such as Speusippus, Xenocrates, Aristotle and Heraclides of

5 They are well-balanced and easily steered (*euênia*), while ‘human’ ones are steered ‘with difficulty’ (*mogis*), because of the imbalance of the horses.

6 Galen, writing in the later 2nd. cent. A.D., seems to be the first Platonist to make mention of an *augoeides te kai aitherôdes pneuma*, which is used as an *ochêma* by the soul for effecting its *koinônia* with the body (*PHP*, p. 643 f. Müller, II p. 475 De Lacy), but he speaks of it as an already established concept.

Pontus, were an independent-minded and argumentative lot – as he had taught them to be – and an issue like this was not going to be left untouched for very long. The problem of the mode of interaction between the immaterial and the material plainly began to exercise the minds of the younger generation. As a candidate for the mediating entity, interest seems to have centred on the stuff of the celestial realm, whether viewed as a particularly pure form of fire or as some other more exotic element, which one might term *aithêr*.

Already from the period of Plato's old age, we have, I think, one little indication that such speculations had impinged upon his consciousness. At *Laws* X 898e–899a, where the Athenian Stranger is discussing the way in which we may imagine the stars to be guided by their souls, he makes the suggestion that one possibility would be that a particular star might take to itself “a body of fire, or air of some sort”. This, of course, does not explicitly address the problem of how a soul might relate to a terrestrial, mortal body, but it at least adumbrates it. It really sounds here as if Plato is taking account – rather grumpily – of problems about mind-body interaction being raised by various of the more troublesome of his followers.

Among the more outspoken of these would be Aristotle and Heraclides of Pontus. To take Aristotle first, his ‘deconstruction’ of the Pythagorean-Platonic soul in the *De anima*, in which the soul becomes simply “the first actuality of a natural body with organs”⁷ (*prôtê entelecheia sômatos physikou organikou*, II 1, 412b5–6), certainly disposes of the problem of interaction between such an immaterial entity and the body, but it does not free him from the problem of how purposive action takes place. There is still the question of the nature of the Active Intellect of *de An.* III 5, and its action upon the ‘passive intellect’ which is in some way inherent in the individual. This is mysterious enough, but on the whole less troublesome, and irrelevant to our concerns on this occasion, because both intellects are (presumably) equally immaterial.⁸ The problem which Aristotle declines to address in the *De anima* is how a decision come to in the passive, or immanent, human

7 Or perhaps, as Bos (2003) in particular would maintain, with some plausibility, “a body which acts as an instrument for it”. Aristotle, he points out, always elsewhere uses *organon* in this latter sense.

8 The Active Intellect is indeed compared to the Sun, or to light (430a15), but that does not imply that it is itself fiery.

intellect is translated into the movement of bones and sinews to pursue some end that the human being has set itself.

This problem, however, is addressed, as we know, elsewhere, and notably in the well-known passage of the *De generatione animalium*, 736b27 ff. Here we are introduced to a special sort of ‘innate spirit’ (*symphyton pneuma*) residing especially in the blood around the heart, which constitutes the seat of the nutritive and sensitive soul, and which is responsible for the process of image-making (*phantasia*), as well as for purposive action. The substance of this, we are told, is “analogous to that element of which the stars are made” (736b38) – that is to say, of Aristotle’s postulated ‘fifth substance’, or *aithêr*. So at least we have now a bridge-entity, notionally capable of receiving immaterial impulses from the intellect, and transposing them, through the instrumentality of the blood, into movements of bones and sinews.⁹

Aristotle, however, does not seem to have been prepared to assert that the intellect itself is anything other than immaterial. This step was taken, at least in respect of the soul,¹⁰ by his colleague Heraclides of Pontus.¹¹ Heraclides is an interesting figure in many ways, but all that concerns us in the present context is his reported view that, while the human soul is immortal, and subject to reincarnation (fr. 97 Wehrli), it is composed of at least a quasi-material substance, “light” (fr. 98), or “aether” (fr. 99). This latter testimony, from the proem of John Philoponus’ *Commentary on the De anima* (p. 9 Hayduck), runs as follows: “Of those who have declared the soul to be a simple body

9 Cf. also the intriguing passage in *MA* III 10, 703a6 ff., where the *pneuma* is related to the whole process of *orexis* and its realisation.

10 Although it is not clear that Aristotle did not regard intellect as being soul of at least some sort. There is a notable reference at *de An.* II 2, 413b26 to intellect, which, if it can exist separately, must belong to *psychês genos heteron*, which can mean either ‘another kind of soul’, or ‘a kind (of thing) different from soul’. I would incline to the former alternative, but I do not think that it is possible to decide definitively between these two interpretations of the phrase.

11 I say ‘colleague’, but this must be taken to referring to their time together in the Academy. Diogenes Laertius’ rather muddled account of his career (V 86) speaks of him as at first, after his arrival in Athens, attaching himself to Speusippus, and then becoming a follower of Aristotle, but this must be taken in conjunction with his other report that, after staying in the Academy through the scholarchate of Speusippus, he returned to his home town of Heraclea in 339. If he was a ‘follower’ of Aristotle, therefore, it must presumably have been while they were both still members of the Academy – when, as we know, Aristotle already had his group of partisans (Aelian, *VH* III 19).

(*haploun sôma*), some have declared it to be an aetherial body, which is the same as to say ‘heavenly’ (*ouranion*), as for instance Heraclides of Pontus.” This makes it sound as if Heraclides actually used the term *ouranion sôma*, but Philoponus plainly regards this as equivalent to *aethêrion*, and he is probably right. He also seems to have declared that the Milky Way was the proper home of souls when they have left the body (*ibid.*), which would be consistent with their having an aetherial nature.

This, then, is the alternative to having to postulate an intermediate entity such as *pneuma*, and it was one that could commend itself to a member of the Old Academy, albeit a notably independent-minded one. Aether and light are, admittedly, pretty rarefied forms of body, but at least they are not *antithetical* to the other substances of which bodies are made. We can see here, I think, the beginnings of a trend of thought that was to lead in the next generation to the Stoic solution that the active principle in the universe was a certain sort of pure, ‘intellectual’ fire (*pyr noeron*).

What Speusippus or Xenocrates thought about the mind-body problem is unfortunately not clear. Their respective definitions of soul, “the Form of the omni-dimensionally extended” (*idea tou pantê distatou*) and “number moving itself” (*arithmos heauton kinôn*), do not tell us anything in this regard, but one feels that Xenocrates, at least, cannot have been oblivious to the issues raised by Aristotle and Heraclides.¹² In the absence of any evidence, however, there is no point in speculating. Suffice it to note that, within the confines of the Academy, this curious blank spot in Plato’s philosophy was not left without some attempts at solution.

Finally, though, we must ask, how could this issue, which so bothered later philosophers such as Descartes, remain so apparently unproblematic for Plato? One answer that occurs to me is this. The physical world was, after all, not real for Plato; it is really no more than a giant hologram, of which we too are parts. If we consider the process by which the Forms in the *Timaeus* are projected onto that field of force which is the ‘Receptacle’, it is in the form of combinations of basic tri-

12 A straw in the wind, in the case of Xenocrates at least, may be that he is attested (fr. 53 Heinze = 264–6 Isnardi Parente) to have interpreted the dodecahedron, among the basic molecular bodies of the *Timaeus* (55c), as constituting the (aetherial) substance of the heavens, rather than simply being “used up for the overall decoration of the Universe”, in Plato’s studiously vague phrase. This acceptance of aether might well bring with it the idea that aether was the substance of either the soul or at least some aspect of it.

angles, which are themselves immaterial entities. Aristotle exercises his sarcasm on this theory (*Cael.* III 8, 306b23 ff.), precisely on the grounds that no number of such two-dimensional triangles, if stacked on top of one another, could ever amount to anything three-dimensional and thus solid. But Aristotle is, perhaps deliberately, distorting Plato's position: the triangles are not intended to be stacked on top of one another; they are to be placed end to end to form the various 'Platonic solids', and thus create a world, and this world is really no more solid than that. We in our turn certainly find it solid, but this is because we too are formed from combinations of basic triangles. So in this way there is no 'mind-body problem', because there is not really any such thing as 'body', Everything is just one or another mode of soul. To give W. B. Yeats the last word:¹³

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things.

If we are after all just a spume, then, I suggest, the mind-body problem does not arise – though doubtless other problems do; and plainly at least some of Plato's pupils were not satisfied with such a position. Yeats's stanza continues:

Solider Aristotle played the taws
Upon the bottom of a king of kings.

Yeats' contrast here is splendidly inconsequential, but we take his meaning. For Aristotle the world is properly solid and three-dimensional, and it is with Aristotle that the mind-body problem begins.

13 1928.