

## *Introduction*

### **A Platonist theory of the soul**

While Stoic and Aristotelian psychology is now fairly familiar to us, comparatively little work has been done on Platonist psychology, by which I mean theories of the soul that philosophers in the ancient Platonist tradition developed and that are largely based on interpretations of Plato's dialogues. Plotinus' theory of the soul is perhaps the most sophisticated theory in this tradition. It is to a considerable extent an interpretation of Plato's *Timaeus*, even though other dialogues, in particular the *Phaedo*, play a significant role as well.

Plotinus lived in the third century CE, long after Aristotle and at a time when Stoicism, after a final flourishing in the second century, was withering away. He knew Aristotle's work extremely well, was familiar with such Aristotelians as Alexander of Aphrodisias and had absorbed a lot of Stoicism, in particular in ethics (see *V.P.* 14). Yet his theory of the soul is genuinely Platonist in its nature. It differs from Aristotelian psychology in that it is not based on any sort of hylemorphism. Rather, the soul, for Plotinus, is an entity distinct and separate from the body. And it differs from the Stoic theory of the soul in that this distinct and separate soul is incorporeal. These differences can perhaps be most easily understood against the broader metaphysical background that distinguishes Platonism from Stoic and Peripatetic philosophy. Platonism, after all, is the only ancient pagan school that postulates the existence of a transcendent realm, a realm beyond the world of our experience and independent of it.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle's intellects are also immaterial substances but we do not find in Aristotle a transcendent realm.

### The soul and the rational order of the world

Like Spinoza, Kant and many other great philosophers of the past, Plotinus was deeply impressed by the fact that there is a rational order to the world, an order that can in principle be explained by means of reason.<sup>2</sup> We find such an explanation already expounded in Plato's *Timaeus*, where the divine Craftsman, looking at the perfect order of an eternal model (the Platonic world of Forms), creates this world (our world) as an image thereof. Because he wants the image to be excellent, the Craftsman orders the world in a rational manner. The way he does so is by means of souls. Thus, the wish to create a world that is rationally ordered is the reason why, in the *Timaeus*, souls come into play in the first place. Yet if the Craftsman is supposed to ultimately explain the rational order of the world, then we also need to understand what the Craftsman is.

The view that the world is rationally ordered was widespread in late antiquity.<sup>3</sup> Galen, for example, reports in *De usu partium* how, when dissecting an elephant for the first time, he admired the skill of Nature (whose work he considered to be the work of the *Timaeus* Craftsman).<sup>4</sup> Galen's awe in view of the skill of the Craftsman increases when thinking about how the supreme intelligence of such ingenious men as Plato, Aristotle, Hipparchus or Archimedes comes into being down here, "in such slime – for what else could one call something composed of flesh, blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile?"<sup>5</sup> And Galen's heart is filled with even more admiration and awe (just as Kant's would be many centuries later) when reflecting on the starry heavens (*UP* IV 359 K. = II 446 Helmreich)).

Plotinus shares Galen's admiration for the ingenuity that accounts for the presence of intelligence in bodies in heaven and on earth. This is perhaps most impressively expressed in the opening passage of *Ennead* V I, 2:

<sup>2</sup> The problem of explaining the intelligibility of the world has not gone away. The contemporary version of it concerns what Rescher (1987) 101 calls the "empirical applicability of mathematics". Einstein considered the fact that the laws of nature are written in the language of mathematics a miracle (Einstein (1987) 130f.). Few may be inclined to follow him in this. If it is no miracle, it needs an explanation.

<sup>3</sup> Yet it was also under attack from various movements such as the Gnostics or the Manicheans. For this see in particular Plotinus' discussion of Gnostic views in *Ennead* II 9.

<sup>4</sup> ἔτι καὶ μάλλον ἐθαύμασα τῆς φύσεως τὴν τέχνην *UP* IV 349 K. = II 439 Helmreich.

<sup>5</sup> ἰδεῖν δ' ἔστι νοῦ φύσιν καὶ κατ' αὐτοὺς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἐννοήσαντα Πλάτωνα καὶ Ἀριστοτέλη καὶ Ἱππαρχον καὶ Ἀρχιμήδην καὶ πολλοὺς ἄλλους τοιούτους. ὁπότε οὖν ἐν βορβόρῳ τοσούτῳ – τί γὰρ ἂν ἄλλο τις εἴποι τὸ συγκείμενον ἐκ σαρκῶν αἱματός τε καὶ φλέγματος καὶ χολῆς ξανθῆς καὶ μελαίνης κτλ. *UP* IV 359 K. = II 446f. Helmreich.

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Now let every soul<sup>6</sup> first consider this, that it made everything into a living being by breathing life into them, those that the earth feeds and those that the sea feeds, and those in the air and the divine stars in heaven, and it itself made the sun a living being and this great heaven, too, and itself has ordered it and causes it to revolve in orderly fashion, being a nature different from the things which it orders and moves and makes into living beings; and it must necessarily be more honourable than they.<sup>7</sup>

This passage shows the idea, prevalent among many thinkers of late antiquity, that the order of the world is an expression of supreme rationality.<sup>8</sup>

According to the *Timaeus*, the Craftsman accounts for rational souls, which, in turn, are also responsible for the rational order of the world. Thus, the Craftsman is the ultimate cause of the rational order of the world while souls may be called its proximate cause.<sup>9</sup> This does not as such explain, however, what the Craftsman is and how he creates. One step towards a possible explanation of the relation between the Craftsman, rational souls and the rational order of the world consists in postulating that the divine Craftsman is or possesses a soul, and in claiming that the (other) rational souls and the rational order of the world are due to this soul. According to Plotinus there is indeed such a soul that we may call “the soul of the Craftsman”.<sup>10</sup>

What is meant by “the soul of the Craftsman”? This expression is ambiguous and could be used to indicate a number of ways a soul could be the soul of the Craftsman. It could mean that the Craftsman *has* a soul. This “having” in turn can be understood in different ways: for example, in the way in which I possess a car or, differently, in the way I have two legs. Yet it could also mean that the Craftsman crucially *is* his soul. People who believe that they are identical with their bodies, for example, can perfectly meaningfully use the expression “my body” to refer to themselves. If the Craftsman *possesses* (as opposed to *is*) a soul in one of the senses illustrated

<sup>6</sup> Every soul? This seems riddling as the soul of Socrates, for example, does not seem to have made *everything* into a living being. I discuss this passage, and will suggest a solution to this riddle, in Chapter 4.

<sup>7</sup> ἐνθυμείσθω τοίνυν πρῶτον ἐκεῖνο πᾶσα ψυχὴ, ὥς αὐτὴ μὲν ζῶα ἐποίησε πάντα ἐμπνεύσασα αὐτοῖς ζωὴν, ἃ τε γῇ τρέφει ἃ τε θάλασσαν ἃ τε ἐν ἀέρι ἃ τε ἐν οὐρανῷ ἄστρα θεῖα, αὐτὴ δὲ ἥλιον, αὐτὴ δὲ τὸν μέγαν τοῦτον οὐρανόν, καὶ αὐτὴ ἐκόσμησεν, αὐτὴ δὲ ἐν τάξει περιάγει φύσις οὐσα ἑτέρα ὧν κοσμεῖ καὶ ὧν κινεῖ καὶ ἃ ζῆν ποιεῖ· καὶ τούτων ἀνάγκη εἶναι τιμωτέραν κτλ.

<sup>8</sup> See also *Enn.* III 8, II, 26–39.

<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that the Craftsman in the *Timaeus* is not also immediately involved in the creation of bodies, of course.

<sup>10</sup> See *Enn.* IV 4, 9, 1–6. Plotinus there refers to the soul of “Zeus who sets everything in order”. I take it that Zeus in this passage is the *Timaeus* Craftsman.

above, then we still may not know what the Craftsman is after having explained what his soul is. However, if the Craftsman crucially *is* his soul, we will, by understanding what his soul is, already at least partly understand what he is. I say “at least partly” because even if the Craftsman crucially is his soul, he could still also be something else. I am going to argue that the Craftsman indeed crucially (but not exclusively) is his soul according to Plotinus.<sup>11</sup> If so, the problem of the relation between the Craftsman and individual rational souls now becomes that of the relation between the soul of the Craftsman (in this sense) and individual rational souls. We will have to explore this relationship in some detail below, but I hope that this sketch already indicates that the rational order of the world is, crucially, due to the soul. Indeed, I am suggesting that this is Plotinus’ main motivation for developing the theory of the soul that is the subject of this book.

### Plotinus’ three hypostases

In order to explain the way in which the Craftsman is his soul, we will need to introduce a further notion, namely that of a hypostasis. This notion, rarely used in modern and contemporary philosophy, is most familiar from discussions in ancient and medieval Christian thought, where it is used to indicate the threefold differentiation of the Trinity. (See the discussions of the Trinity in, for example, Gregory of Nyssa, Abelard, Aquinas or Ockham.) It is notoriously difficult to explain what a hypostasis is and I will only discuss it to the extent that I consider necessary for the purposes of this book.<sup>12</sup>

Kant, although using the notion of a hypostasis polemically, captures one of its crucial features. According to Kant we call something a hypostasis if we attribute real existence to it while, in his view, it exists only as a thought. In this case, we *hypostasise* mental content (*Critique of Pure Reason* A 384). Quine uses the word “hypostasis” in the same way when talking about the “hypostasis of abstract entities” (Quine (1950) 630). The crucial feature that I think Kant and Quine capture and which is useful for our

<sup>11</sup> The Craftsman is also his intellect as the passage from *Enn.* IV 4, 9, 1–6 shows, where Plotinus, with reference to *Phlb.* 30D, attributes to the Craftsman a royal soul and a royal intellect.

<sup>12</sup> Why did the Church Fathers use the notion of a hypostasis? The reason will at least partly be due to the Christian view that the inner complexity of God cannot be correctly explained in terms of substance and attributes or whole and part, or any other of the traditional ways in which philosophers used to describe a complex entity that is nevertheless unified in some relevant and strong way.

purposes is something like this: if we hypostasise something, we attribute real existence to it even though it appears only to be a concept. This is not supposed to serve as a full explanation, of course, but I hope it will help in what follows to illuminate the way in which Plotinus considers the soul of the Craftsman to be a hypostasis – a hypostasis that is called the hypostasis Soul.

Now it is clear that what is responsible for the rational order of the world must be, in one way or other, reason. According to Plotinus, the soul of the Craftsman, that is, the hypostasis Soul, is crucially responsible for the rational order of the world. Using the notion of a hypostasis, we may, based on this, call the hypostasis Soul, being the Craftsman in so far as he is responsible for the rational order of the world, reason hypostasised. It is the hypostasis of reason as such. I will explain in the first three chapters that this is not just the hypostatisation of an abstract concept. Moreover, Plotinus' notion of reason must be understood within its ancient context and we should not assume that the ancient notion or notions of reason are the same as our own.<sup>13</sup> As we will see, the hypostasis Soul will turn out to be *active* reason – after all, it must be such as to be able to bring about the *existence* of the rational order of the world.

The Soul is not the only hypostasis in Plotinus. Instead, he postulates three: the One, the Intellect and the Soul. The three hypostases are hierarchically ordered and differ from one another by a continuing degree of differentiation. The first hypostasis, the One, is conceived of as completely simple, not allowing for any differentiation whatsoever. The second hypostasis is the first differentiation of the One. Perhaps the best way of getting an initial sense of the differentiation of the Intellect is this: Plotinus follows Aristotle's view that the thinking of a divine intellect, its contemplation, is constitutive of the intellect but also of its object; accordingly the hypostasis Intellect essentially contemplates itself. This implies a certain, at least minimal, complexity in that the Intellect possesses different functions, such as being a subject as well as an object of contemplation. For this reason, Plotinus considers the hypostasis Intellect as distinct from the hypostasis One in its being minimally differentiated or articulated. The hypostasis Soul, in turn, is different from the hypostasis Intellect by a further articulation or differentiation. I shall argue that the differentiation distinguishing the hypostasis Soul from the hypostasis Intellect is due to their different

<sup>13</sup> For more about the difference between ancient and modern notions of reason see Frede & Striker (1996).

ways of thinking: while the thinking of the hypostasis Intellect is non-propositional (as I shall argue), the thinking of the hypostasis Soul (which is constitutive of it) is propositionally structured. Since propositional thought is, in a way to be discussed, more differentiated than non-propositional thought, the Soul is more differentiated than the Intellect. In roughly this way the Plotinian hypostases are distinct from one another through an increasing articulation from first hypostasis to third. Distinguishing between two kinds of thinking (propositional and non-propositional) allows for a clear-cut distinction between the two thinking hypostases: while the hypostasis Soul is propositional thought reified, the Intellect is non-propositional thought reified. I note that reason as a hypostasis is thus understood as specifically *one* of two kinds of hypostasised thinking, namely as thinking that is structured propositionally.<sup>14</sup>

### The structure of the book

The first three chapters of this book are devoted to the hypostasis Soul and in particular to answering the following three questions: why did Plotinus introduce the hypostasis Soul? What is this hypostasis? How is it related to individual souls? In addition to what was said in the last section, these chapters cover the two major reasons, as I will argue, why Plotinus introduced the hypostasis Soul. The first reason is as follows. It is often thought that Plotinus disagrees with the Christian view of the relation of the transcendent realm to our world. It is said that while the Christian God is a creator, the world, according to Plotinus, emanates from his hypostases. Against this I shall argue that Plotinus follows Plato's *Timaeus* in claiming that there is a Craftsman and thus a creator. I think this is important to emphasise since the creation of a world, as I will argue, presupposes practical as well as theoretical thought. The Craftsman not only has to cognitively grasp the paradigm (i.e. the Platonic world of Forms) that he wants to create an image of but must also think about *how* to create a world such that it is an excellent image of the world of Forms. That this is Plotinus' view becomes particularly clear, it seems to me, from his discussion of providence (understood as that which cares for and excellently arranges the sensible world).

There is also a second reason for introducing the hypostasis Soul. In good Platonist fashion Plotinus believes that, since there are many

<sup>14</sup> The three hypostases may also be called hypostases of God, i.e. ways in which God exists.

individual souls, there must be an entity that accounts for this manifold and gives unity to it. He identifies this entity as the hypostasis Soul. I discuss why an entity of a new type is necessary for providing unity to individual souls and explain why neither the divine Intellect, no Platonic Form nor any individual soul (including even the World Soul) can account for this unity. Plotinus compares the relation of the hypostasis Soul to individual souls with the relation of a genus to its species and characterises it as one of whole to parts. One remarkable feature of the whole–part relation is that the whole is considered ontologically prior to its parts in the following sense: while the parts are dependent for what they are on the whole, the whole is not dependent on the parts for what it is. This obviously calls for explanation. Given our intuitive understanding of the notions of part and whole, we would expect the priority to be the other way round: that the parts are ontologically prior to the whole – or at least that the parts and whole are ontologically co-dependent. In Chapter 3 I trace the history in the background of Plotinus’ understanding of this whole–part relation and attempt to provide an explanation of how it works.

The discussion of the first three chapters is concerned with souls in the transcendent intelligible realm, most notably with the hypostasis Soul but also with individual souls (such as the World Soul or the soul of Socrates). Yet individual souls, as opposed to the hypostasis Soul, are also active in the sensible world, that is, in the world of our experience. In Chapter 4 I shall argue that the activities of individual souls in the sensible world are a function of their lives in the intelligible world, or, in other words, a function of their essential thinking. In so far as souls are active in the sensible world, they contribute to the creation and maintenance of the sensible world (i.e. to its providential arrangement). The relation of the soul’s activity in the intelligible world to its activity in the sensible world can be understood in a number of ways and it may even seem unclear which of the two activities is prior to the other. Given that part of the thinking of the soul in the intelligible world is practical, it may seem natural to assume that its purpose lies in the practical activity in the sensible world. Against this, I will argue that the soul’s activities in the sensible world are not the purpose or aim of its thinking in the intelligible world but rather simply a consequence of it. As in Stoicism, the crucial thing is to think properly about what the right thing to do is. The right action, if not hindered, will then be a consequence of this proper thinking.

Different types of individual souls deal differently with their task in the sensible world.<sup>15</sup> In Chapter 5 I will consider divine souls (understood as the souls of the visible gods: the World Soul, the souls of the stars (fixed stars, planets, the sun and moon) and the soul of the earth) and explain how Plotinus' discussion of them depends on the *Timaeus*. In my view, this topic is important for at least three reasons. First, divine souls are crucially involved in the providential arrangement of the sensible world. I will try to clarify in what way this is so. Second, if we study Plotinus' theory of the soul with a particular interest in the human soul, divine souls can serve as a simplified model where decisive functions are more easily detectable. In this way, studying divine souls will help us to better understand how the human soul functions and what is essential to it. Third, if, from a Platonist point of view, we want to understand how we should live our lives, divine souls can serve as a paradigm. For while they are essentially the same sort of being that we are, they cope much better with their activity in the sensible world. This allows us to see how it is possible for a soul to be active in the sensible world without being involved in the struggles (moral and otherwise) typical for human beings. In this sense, Plotinus' divine souls have a role similar to that of the sage in Stoicism.

Plotinus' discussion of the destiny of human souls in the sensible world is heavily indebted to Plato's *Phaedo*, as we shall see in Chapter 6. Platonists in late antiquity usually held that human souls, although ideally residing in the intelligible world, at times quite literally descend (through space) into the sublunary sphere in order to ensoul human bodies. For Plotinus, accepting the notion of descent leads to the following problem: if the soul is essentially engaged in its thinking in the intelligible world, how is it possible for it to descend? Its descent cannot mean that it is no longer active in the intelligible world. Yet if descent is not to be understood in this way, what does it mean for the soul to descend? I shall discuss how Plotinus solves this problem: he claims (and this, in addition to introducing the hypostasis Soul, is the second great innovation of Plotinus' theory of the soul) that the soul does not, strictly speaking, descend at all, but instead always remains in the intelligible world. Yet the human soul, like the divine soul, also has to care for a body (at least for some periods of time). However, as opposed to divine souls, human souls are greatly absorbed when caring for their bodies; indeed, so much so that they can at best rarely

<sup>15</sup> I shall talk of "types of soul" throughout the book. The class of souls belonging to the same type share certain important features. Souls belonging to one type are, for example, *divine* souls. Although it is helpful, I think, to distinguish between different types of soul, it is crucial to be aware that the differences between different types are not essential (for reasons to be discussed in Chapter 3).

direct their attention to the intelligible objects they essentially contemplate. Plotinus thus, in contrast to Descartes and the modern tradition, separates our proper thinking from our consciousness or awareness in such a way that it is possible for us to think without being aware of it. He thus shows (which may well be true) that the notion of thought does not involve or imply that of consciousness (“consciousness” understood in the sense specified).<sup>16</sup> Due to their deep engagement with bodies, human souls tend to get confused by their activity in the sensible world and lose sight of their own essential activity and thus also of what they really are. Our confusion is caused by our appropriation of our *embodied* lives: the soul believes that the desires, pains and sorrows of the body are its own. Plotinus not only diagnoses this misidentification (as he sees it) but also explains how it can be overcome. This discussion will cover one of two senses in which the human soul descends: what it means for the human soul to descend in this sense is to turn its attention to the body.<sup>17</sup>

In Chapter 7 I will discuss Plotinus’ theory of how precisely the human soul is active in the sensible world. This will provide the second sense of descent. Plotinus borrows the notion of the soul-using-a-body from the *First Alcibiades* and distinguishes it from that of the soul *tout court*. The soul using a body is nothing other than the soul in so far as it is cognitively active in the sensible world. I will argue that it is active there in this way by means of a complex power that enables it to perceive, have emotions and desires and so on. I shall attempt to show that the power that enables the soul to do all these things is its faculty of presentation (*phantastikon*). This faculty is functionally comparable to the Stoic mind or ruling part. Plotinus rejects, however, the Stoic view that this power is the essence of the soul. One interesting result of this discussion will be that Plotinus considers reasoning (*logismos*) as belonging to the faculty of presentation. It is thus important to distinguish *reasoning* from the proper discursive or

<sup>16</sup> Compare this to sense perception. One can perceive something without being aware of it. When you drive a long distance, it may happen that, for a while, you are no longer aware of your driving although you are still seeing the road and the other cars. So you perceive the road and the other cars without being aware of it. If you want to call the perception itself also a form of consciousness then this is a different form of consciousness from the one I am discussing here. In this sense you may as well also call thinking consciousness. However, this is not the same as being aware of one’s thinking (or of one’s perceiving). I only deny, on behalf of Plotinus, that thinking implies the awareness of one’s thinking (whether or not one also wants to call thinking itself a form of consciousness).

<sup>17</sup> Although the soul plays, of course, an important role in Plotinus’ ethics, I will restrict my discussion of ethics to some considerations concerning purification in Chapter 6. For Plotinus’ ethics see Schniewind (2003) and Song (2009a).

propositional *thinking* of the soul: while discursive thinking and reasoning *appear* to be the same because of their sharing a propositional structure, reasoning is a cognitive process in time based on presentations (*phantasiai*). It works in ways similar to those by which early modern empiricists such as Locke explain to us how reason works. The proper thinking of the soul in the intelligible world, by contrast, is not at all like this. It is neither based on presentations nor is it a process in time. Plotinus thus distinguishes, I argue, at least three ways of thinking that each has a specific role: discursive *reasoning*, the propositional thought of the soul in the intelligible world (that I shall call discursive *thinking*) and the non-propositional thought of the Intellect.

The final chapter is devoted to the relation of the soul to the body and in particular to the soul's activity in the body. Plotinus disagrees with the view held by virtually every other ancient psychologist that the soul literally is *in* the body; for him the soul, while acting on the body, remains completely independent of it. In this context, I will also discuss what Plotinus calls the trace of the soul, which is intimately related to a specific sort of soul that leaves the trace. Plotinus calls this sort of soul nature. The soul *active* in the body (without *being* in the body) will thus turn out to be nature. Finally, I will discuss the souls of animals and plants and in particular whether animals are rational or not – a topic that was hotly disputed in late antiquity.

It may be worthwhile to say something more here about how I distinguish, terminologically, between three different entities that all can be rightly called “soul”, each of which is important for us human beings. The first of these three sorts of individual soul (and the only one that is immortal) is that which is active in the intelligible world. I shall call this the *higher soul*. The second sort of soul is the faculty of presentation that I compared above to the Stoic ruling part or mind, and that I identified with the faculty of presentation. I shall call this the *lower soul*; it is the power by which our soul is active in the sensible world but is also the centre of our awareness (and in this sense consciousness). It is that soul that we, in our embodied lives, usually identify ourselves with (together with our living human body). When Plotinus discusses what *we* are, he often thinks that, in one sense of “we”, we are the lower soul (together with the body). Now it may seem that what I call the lower soul, since it is active in the sensible world, is also active in the body. According to Plotinus, however, the activity of the lower soul is purely cognitive; it deals exclusively with presentations that Plotinus considers immaterial, as I shall discuss in Chapters 7 and 8. Now crucially, cognitive activity neither occurs in the