INTRODUCTION

The *Phaedo* casts a long shadow. The immortality of the soul, the violent rejection of the body, the stark opposition between the intelligible and the sensible, the elaborate eschatology, the definition of philosophy as an exercise in dying: all these elements are intimately associated with Plato's thought and most are to be found here in their purest form. More than any other dialogue, the *Phaedo* reflects the unparalleled brilliance with which Plato was able to interweave philosophical argument, literary portraiture, and mythological symbolism. While other dialogues may be more accomplished on the literary or the philosophical level, no other work synthesizes as skilfully the poetic with the dialectical. Moreover, the theses put forward in the *Phaedo* are lent considerable weight by the setting. On the day of his execution, surrounded by an intimate circle of philosophically minded friends, Socrates argues that, far from being an evil, death is the consummation of a life philosophically lived, when the soul, freed once and for all from the taint of incarnation, recovers its pristine condition as a pure intellect. Here if anywhere, it seems, we find a suitable place for Plato to reveal his own views about the nature and destiny of the human soul.

The *Phaedo* looms large in Neoplatonic interpretations of Plato, which despite local variation are broadly characterized by a focus on the metaphysical and epistemological at the expense of the political and the ethical, the latter being almost wholly assimilated to the metaphysical purification of the soul.[1] Plotinus, the outstanding figure in the Platonic tradition after

[1] This is not to say that political reflection disappears completely. O'Meara (2003) makes the case for a political dimension to Neoplatonic philosophy. Still, the political philosophy of the Neoplatonists was a good deal more limited in its scope than

Introduction

Plato, firmly insists on the separation of the soul from the body as the ultimate end of the philosophical life.[2] Contemporary attempts to recover the authentic Plato, so far as possible, on the basis of a close reading of the dialogues has generated considerable hostility to explicitly Neoplatonizing interpretations, but there is still a good deal more residual Neoplatonism in the air than is commonly acknowledged. If the increasingly baroque metaphysics of the Middle Platonists and Neoplatonists is broadly rejected as a gross distortion of Plato's thought, the same cannot be said of their strategy of reading Plato's ethics in terms of the isolation and separation of the rational soul from the body.[3]

I refer to such interpretations, with deliberate inaccuracy, as Neoplatonic, not because I wish to claim that this conception of human nature is a wholesale invention of later Platonists – the *Phaedo* and the later books of the *Republic* provide textual support for Plato having held such a view – but because this approach involves either projecting this conception onto the whole of Plato's work, including those passages where he seems to offer a rather different account, or introducing a sharp distinction between political and intellectual virtue, along Plotinian lines, where the purificatory 'political' virtues of the tripartite soul are thought to ultimately give way to the higher 'intellectual' virtues of the purified rational soul.[4]

what we find in Plato and Aristotle. This can be attributed in part to the conditions in the Roman Empire under which the Neoplatonists were active, in which the prospects for meaningful political reform were dim, but it also stems from their preoccupation with the fate of the individual soul.

[2] For example, Plotinus, *Enn.* IV.7.1, 20–25; I.1.10, 7–11.

[3] For a strong version of this position, see Sedley (1999). Gerson (2003) focuses on the embodied person as image of a transcendent paradigm, but still emphasizes the vocabulary of purification and intellection. This trend can also be detected in interpretations of individual dialogues. Frede (2009), while acknowledging that Plato takes a more moderate stance towards pleasure in the *Philebus*, continues to understand the ethical finality of human life in terms of a philosophical ascent towards knowledge of intelligible Forms, seeing the concessions to pleasure and the lower sciences as the result of an incapacity to perpetually live a life of the highest intellectual activity. Delcomminette (2006) adopts a similar stance. This tendency is perhaps least evident among those who approach Plato from a political perspective, but often with a corresponding lack of attention to the metaphysical and epistemological dimensions of his thought.

[4] See e.g. Sedley (1999), Rowe (2013).

At issue is not the pre-eminence of the rational soul for Plato – a point on which there is little room for disagreement – but rather the nature of its relationship to the lower strata of human nature, particularly to what the *Timaeus* calls the 'mortal parts' of soul. The Neoplatonic reading of the dialogues privileges the imagery of separation and withdrawal drawn from the *Phaedo* and the later books of the *Republic*. But this is not the only way of conceptualizing the soul that we find in the Platonic corpus. In the early books of the *Republic*, in the *Timaeus*, and, with some variations, the *Philebus*, we are presented with a rather different conception of the human good in terms of an equilibrium between the parts of the soul or, in the case of the *Philebus*, as a harmonious mixture of different psychic elements. These passages emphasize the hegemonic function of the rational soul, as a principle of order and reason within the living being, but do not reduce the good of the individual to the good of the rational soul, recognizing that in some cases its interests need to be balanced against, and perhaps even subordinated to, those of the other parts of the soul or even the body.

Much hinges on the question of who we, as ethical subjects, are. For Plato, to give an account of the good of a particular being ultimately requires us to give an account of what that thing is, of its nature. To understand what a good city is and why it is identical with a just city, rather than with a rapacious oligarchy or tyranny, we must understand what a city *is*: what parts it has, how these parts function, and how they are integrated into a unified whole. The question of what is good for a particular being cannot be separated from the question of what its nature is, for to be good precisely *is* to be the sort of thing that it is in the fullest sense. We will arrive at rather different outcomes, ethically speaking, if we take ourselves to be pure rational souls, embodied souls, or composites of body and soul.

The late dialogues present what I take to be the most sophisticated and nuanced account of human nature and of the interrelation of body and soul, and it is on these that I have focused

my attention. However, it is not my intention to tell a just-so story about the evolution of Plato's thought from dialogue to dialogue or from period to period. While I do see evidence for a subtle, though important shift in Plato's views between the middle and the late period, with a softening of many of the oppositions and an ever-increased insistence on the role played by mediating terms, to talk of a sea change would risk obfuscating the fact that many of the elements that I single out as important in the late dialogues are to be found in embryonic form in earlier discussions. The positions that I take to be characteristic of the last period of Plato's life are less a product of the rejection of his early views in favor of entirely new ones than the result of the elaboration and weaving together of strands of argument that were left underdeveloped in his earlier work.

In attempting to move between so many different dialogues, choices must naturally be made about how certain passages are to be read, choices that cannot always be as comprehensively justified as one might like. Attempting to read a particular dialogue on its own terms is a worthwhile and often illuminating exercise, but I am equally convinced that we cannot escape the problem of the immensity and complexity of the Platonic corpus by focusing exclusively on individual dialogues. Although the nature of the relationship between a thesis defended in one dialogue and a different or even contradictory thesis found elsewhere is often problematic, the complexity of the conceptual echoes and the interplay of literary references makes a highly atomistic account of the relationship between the individual dialogues exceedingly difficult to defend. The boundaries between them are simply too porous. To reach an adequate understanding of what Plato is up to, we must look not only at how arguments develop within particular dialogues, but also at how they develop between dialogues. If we cannot take any particular character as Plato's mouthpiece, not even Socrates, the dialectical movement of the arguments as a whole is nonetheless the expression of the cogitations of a single mind ruminating on a remarkably consistent set of problems.

The approach I have adopted aims to be neither excessively modernizing nor excessively archaizing, but to present a reconstruction, within my own historical and cultural horizons, of some of the principal currents of thought running through the later dialogues. Naturally, some of these currents will be of more immediate interest to the reader than others. It is difficult to imagine any reader, ancient or modern, who would be willing to adopt wholesale Plato's much-maligned account of pleasure. But if I have taken the pains to reconstruct it here, it is not as a mere historical curiosity. Problematic though his account of pleasure and pain is, in many respects, it represents an attempt to provide an ontological foundation to the often astute psychological observations that inform his reflections on human nature and the various forms it can assume. If the end result has its share of absurdity and involves some rather audacious modifications of the phenomena to fit the theory, it also provides deep insights into the ephemerality of pleasure and the self-defeating character of vulgar hedonism.

One of the great charms of reading Plato is that the skill and subtlety of the characterization creates a tension within the dialogues between the complexity of the individual in his concrete existence and the system of ideal types with which the philosopher works. The systematizing and schematizing impulse, important though it is, never entirely overshadows his sense for the uniqueness of personalities and events. Although I have taken into account the literary style of each particular dialogue, where relevant to the argument, my focus is primarily on the theoretical content. The more literarily sophisticated reader may feel that the dramatic context has been unduly neglected, but I suggest that any such dissatisfaction be taken as an invitation to return to the inexhaustible richness of the dialogues themselves.

CHAPTER I

THYMOS

The term *thymos*, for which there exists no adequate English translation, designates for Plato that part or faculty of the soul occupying an intermediate position between reason and bodily desire and responsible for mediating between them, through the forceful imposition of the dictates of reason on the unruly appetites of the body. There is a *prima facie* temptation to conflate *thymos* with a general emotional faculty, such that the Platonic tripartition of the soul into reason, *thymos*, and appetite (*epithymia*) would correspond to a modern division of our mental faculties into reason, emotion, and desire. But such a confusion does a disservice to Plato and the assimilation should be resisted, at least until we have understood the basic principles underlying his account of *thymos*.

The Platonic *thymos*, also called the *thymoeides*, is associated with a narrower range of psychic phenomena than what is normally designated by the English word 'emotion', notably fear, boldness (*tharros*), ambition (*philotimia*, *philonikia*), and above all anger.[1] The literary roots of these associations are to be found in Homeric epic, where *thymos* plays a central role in the inner life of the heroes. In Homer, deliberation is often cast as a discussion, or even a struggle, either within the *thymos* itself or between the hero and his *thymos.* This apparent autonomy of *thymos*, along with *psyche* (soul) and *noos* (mind), was one of the factors that led Snell to his famous thesis on the fragmentation of the Homeric agent, whom he understood to be constituted of diffuse bodily and psychic forces lacking the fundamental unity necessary for true individuality.[2] While

[1] On the origin of the term *thymoeides*, see Jaeger (1945).
[2] Snell (1946), 15–37. Gill (1996), 29–41, points to the Hegelian roots of Snell's argument and the post-Cartesian conception of subjectivity against which he measures Homeric agency. On the difficult term *noos* in Homer, see Warden (1971).

subsequent work on Homeric psychology has exposed the limits of Snell's original claims and cast doubt on the extent to which we can extract ontological or psychological doctrines from literary tropes, it remains true that the Homeric *thymos* is consistently portrayed as possessing a mind of its own, constituting a partially autonomous psychic force pursuing its own goals that must be soothed, restrained, or even dialogued with.

Plato picks up on the Homeric way of talking about *thymos* as an independent actor on the psychological stage, especially in the *Republic*, where the different parts of the soul, including the *thymos*, are described in highly anthropomorphic terms that reflect the analogy drawn in the dialogue between the structure of the city and the structure of the soul. Plato also echoes Homer in placing the *thymos* on the boundary between the bodily and the psychic, a point that is especially clear in the *Timaeus*, where *thymos* is located in the chest (as in Homer) and appears to be at least partially co-extensive with bodily processes, such as the racing of the heart.[3] Consequently, the Homeric poems, and in particular the *Iliad*, constitute an indispensable point of reference for understanding Plato's treatment of the *thymos*.[4] On the linguistic plane, the constellation of concepts and metaphors used to talk of the *thymos* are often derived from, or at least have parallels in, Homer. More important, the ideal of the pursuit of honor (*time*) characteristic of the soul dominated by *thymos*, although embodied by the contemporary timocratic (i.e. honor-governed) regimes in Sparta and Crete, nonetheless finds its consummate expression

[3] *Tim*. 70a–b. It has been noted that in Homer there is no strong opposition between the bodily and the psychic. See for instance Cornford (1937), 284–286; Snell (1946), 29: '*thymos*, *noos*, and *psyche* as well, are separate organs, if we can put it this way, which have their own particular function. These soul-organs are not, in principle, distinguished from bodily organs.'

[4] The *Iliad* plays a particularly important role in any attempt to arrive at an account of pre-Platonic conceptions of the *thymos.* In the introduction to her thorough study of the semantics of *thymos* in early Greek epic, Caswell (1990), 2, observes that 'passages from the *Iliad* are of greater interest because they include a greater variety of expressions. Passages from the *Odyssey*, Hesiod and the Homeric Hymns tend to greater predictability or repetition and therefore offer less insight into the visualization of the inner processes with which this work is concerned.'

in the warrior ethos of the Homeric poems and especially in the figure of Achilles.

Although the Platonic *thymos* draws on the psychological traditions crystallized and preserved in the Homeric poems, it cannot be dismissed as a mere remnant of a pre-philosophical folk psychology. Plato is the reviver and re-conceptualizer of the *thymos*, not the mere transmitter of an inherited tradition. Among what survives of the writings of the Presocratics, we find no trace of *thymos* in the sense of a distinctive part or faculty of soul, and even in Plato's own writings *thymos* makes a relatively late entry onto the stage. The introduction of *thymos* as a distinctive part of the soul is a philosophical innovation, the commandeering of a traditional notion in the service of a distinctively Platonic conception of human nature, enabling Plato to paint a richer picture of human motivation, one that goes beyond a simple binary opposition between reason and bodily desire. The transformation of the Homeric *thymos* is rooted in a double movement, in which Plato both reduces the scope of its function, subordinating it to the rational soul, and elaborates a new, philosophical conception of virtue that challenges the Homeric equation of excellence with military power and prowess in battle.

The reception accorded to the Platonic *thymos* in Antiquity was decidedly cool. While Aristotle maintains the threefold classification of desires in terms of their origin in reason, *thymos*, or appetite, he refuses to concede rationality to the *thymos* and lumps it together with appetite over and against reason.[5] Plotinus, despite paying lip-service to the authority of Plato, largely follows the Aristotelian critique of Plato's psychology, preferring a model of faculties or powers over Platonic parts. Although he does mention both *thymos* and appetite in his discussion of the lower faculties of soul, appetite is largely assimilated to

[5] For the threefold division of *orexis* (desire), and the division into rational and irrational desires, see especially *De an.* 3.9 432b3–7. For an overview of all the passages in which this distinction occurs see Cooper (1984), 669n. 2. A more recent discussion of Aristotelian *orexis* that goes even further in calling into question the continuity between the Platonic and the Aristotelian treatment of *thymos* is to be found in Pearson (2012).

the Aristotelian vegetative soul, while *thymos* is downgraded to mere anger.[6] In both cases, the label *thymos* is preserved, but its essential function as an intermediary between the rational and irrational parts of the soul has been lost.

Tripartition has fared little better among contemporary scholars. The Platonic *thymos* has received relatively little attention, and little of the attention that it has received has been positive.[7] Nonetheless, it plays a pivotal role in Plato's account of human psychology and political order, as a force that, although distinct from the rational soul, is naturally arrayed on the side of reason. In what follows, we shall examine Plato's reasons for portraying the *thymos* as a distinctive motivational force in the soul possessing a natural affinity with reason, as well as for the close kinship he sees between a timocratic pursuit of military excellence and philosophical virtue. The aim is not merely to mount a defense of the Platonic *thymos*, but to trace how and why the rigid opposition between body and soul, desire and reason, begins to break down and give way to a more complex and nuanced conception of human nature.

The Unity of *Thymos*

It is a scholarly commonplace that the introduction of *thymos* in the middle-period dialogues marks a tectonic shift in Plato's moral psychology, marking the emergence of a properly 'Platonic' theory of the soul in opposition to the intellectualist 'Socratic' model that dominated in earlier dialogues.[8]

[6] *Enn.* IV.3, esp. 28. A full discussion of Plotinus' treatment of *thymos* and *epithymia* can be found in Karfik (2014), 119–124.

[7] Bobonich (2002) goes so far as to argue that Plato abandoned tripartition in the last dialogues, particularly the *Laws*, in favor of a supposedly superior bipartite psychology. His arguments are criticized at length in Kahn (2004) and Laks (2005), 85–92. The only studies that I am aware of that are dedicated specifically to the Platonic *thymos* are Cooper (1984); Calabi (1998); Hobbs (2000), esp. 1–74; Frère (2004); Burnyeat (2006); and Renaut (2014).

[8] See, e.g., Vlastos (1991), 86–98. While the introduction of the *thymos* (and the elevation of bodily desire to the level of a soul part) certainly marks a distinct change in the tone of Plato's ethical discussions, we should be cautious in speaking of a complete revolution in his psychology. Rowe (2007), 164–185, argues for the extension of the unitary model of the soul to the *Republic* and beyond, such that the ultimate aim of ethics would be understood in terms of a purification of the rational soul

I emphasize the term 'moral', despite its potentially misleading connotations, because the division of the soul into parts is undertaken in an attempt to explain the motivations that lead us to act in particular ways.[9] In analyzing the soul in terms of its parts, Plato is interested in classifying the primary forms of desire, pleasure, and pain that we experience, explaining how they motivate us to pursue certain ends and what the ideal relationship between these ends would be. While this way of conceptualizing the structure of the soul is the most important from the point of view of ethics and politics, which remained at the center of Plato's interest until the end of his life, we cannot straightforwardly identify the tripartition of the soul with Plato's psychology *per se*, since elsewhere we find intimations of quite a different possible division of the soul in terms of cognitive faculties.[10]

When the *thymos* makes what is likely its formal debut in Book IV of the *Republic*, Socrates is concerned to distinguish it from both the appetitive and the rational elements in the soul, arguing that just as the city is divided into three classes, each corresponding to a different natural character, so too

from its lower parts analogous to the purification of the soul from the body in the *Phaedo*. While I am sympathetic to the suggestion that we can reconcile the unity and division of the soul, it seems to me that the form of unity that predominates from the *Republic* onwards is that of a tripartite soul made one through the imposition of measure and harmony on the whole, not through a Phaedonic isolation and purification of the rational soul.

[9] A trio of articles by Pradeau (1998); Lisi (2006); and Fronterotta (2006) draw attention to the fact that in the *Timaeus* and *Phaedrus*, Plato consistently employs the vocabulary of 'forms' or 'kinds' (*eide*) rather than 'parts' (*mere*). While I think the contrast between the two ways of talking about the different types of soul is somewhat overdone, the approach I have adopted here has a certain affinity with their understanding of the constitution of the soul and its relation to the body. See also Burnyeat (2006), 16n. 23, who objects that for Plato *eide* are treated as parts of the relevant *genos*.

[10] For instance, the distinction between the two circles of the soul endowed with different cognitive powers in the *Timaeus.* We might also mention in this connection the reference to the 'writer' and the 'painter' in the soul in the *Philebus* (39a) which appears to indicate two different cognitive faculties. Solmsen (1955) discusses possible Platonic antecedents of the Aristotelian faculties, but is too quick to dismiss 'sense perception' (*aisthesis*) as a 'power' or 'proper activity' in the *Timaeus*, especially since he takes no account of the fact that one of the soul's constituent circles appears to require sense perception in order to function at all or of the fact that the soul is essentially compounded out of the sensible and the intelligible.