

IMMORTALITY, THE THEORY OF FORMS AND THE «TWIN PILLARS OF PLATONISM»

Famously, Cornford, in the Introduction to his translation of the *Republic*¹, called the Theory of Forms and the doctrine of an immortal soul the «twin pillars of Platonism». In this paper I shall look at this claim.

We might begin with a very early piece of *Rezeptionsgeschichte* to be found in Aristotle's *Politics*². Here, in what purports to be a discussion of some particularly controversial features of the *Republic* and *Laws*, no mention of the Theory of Forms is to be found, or of the notion of soul's immortality. Whatever Plato himself might have thought of their importance for his vision and understanding of a just society, his foremost pupil chose to criticize him without reference to the strength or weakness of the metaphysical and psychological underpinnings supposedly provided by the two theories in question.

The point is a small one, no doubt, but before we pass it over we should perhaps advert to the opening pages of the *Timaeus* (17 c–19 b), where we are again presented with what looks like a summary of key features of the *Republic*. And once again, rather surprisingly, we find no mention whatever of the Theory of Forms or the immortality of the soul; all the stress is on the 'hot-button' topics of *Republic* Books 2 to 5, which we know fascinated people from the beginning.

With two such pieces of evidence before us, it begins to seem possible that, from very early on, readers of the *Republic* took it as a book simply about a just society, largely ignoring the 'heavy' talk about such a society's supposed metaphysical and psychological underpinnings.

This, of course, is what happens to books once they have left an author's control, and by the time he came to write the *Timaeus* Plato might well have felt himself forced to concede, no doubt very wearily, that the *Republic* which people were reading was an *abridgement* of his work that made no mention of the firm philosophical foundations which he thought he had gi-

1. F. MACDONALD CORNFORD, *The Republic of Plato*, Oxford University Press, 1941, xxvii.

2. ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, 2, 1-5.

ven it. Yet it was still, in its controversial political ideas, very much his book, and, like Aristotle later, in summarizing it he would simply summarize what he thought people would recognize, *i.e.*, the *Readers Digest* version of it currently being read.

But this is of course speculation. What seems clear enough is that Plato himself thought the Theory of Forms pivotal to the argument of the *Republic*, along with a theory of soul as tripartite, paralleling a tripartite state. An argument in favour of the immortality of the soul is also put forward (in Book 10), though it remains unclear whether it is the whole soul, three parts and all, or just the intellectual part, which is supposed to be immortal. More importantly, it is uncertain just how big a part the immortality of the soul is supposed to play in the central argument of the dialogue. After Socrates accepts the famous challenge of Glaucon and Adeimantus in Book 2, the whole thrust of the rest of the dialogue's argument, through to the end of Book 9, is to show that justice (which is described in detail as a function of a soul that is tripartite)³ is good in itself, and is its own reward regardless of consequences; the positing, in the Myth of Er at the dialogue's close, of a reward of everlasting bliss *elsewhere* after the completion here of three consecutive lives of virtue – for which we shall of course naturally need an immortal soul – seems strangely out of keeping with what Socrates has been at pains to establish over the previous eight books.

So I propose that we start by positing the theory of a *tripartite* soul as the second pillar of at any rate the *Republic*, given its pivotal role in the dialogue's central argument, and leave open for the moment the question of whether soul's immortality has a claim, on other grounds perhaps, to being a pillar of Plato's thinking across the whole range of his *œuvre*.

It is important, I think, to stress that it is *Plato's* thinking that is at issue; where Socrates might have stood on the matter is a good deal less clear. When he talks of the afterlife in the *Apology* (40 c-41 c), there is no suggestion that its everlasting duration might be provable by argument. And in the *Symposium* (207 c ff) the immortality discussed with Diotima is that of the human race, possibly, through procreation. The first time he mentions individual immortality is in a dialogue most people take to be near the very end of the 'Socratic' dialogues, the *Meno*, and then not on grounds of reason but on grounds of what he has heard from reliable priests and priestesses (81 a-b). And when he does come to discuss immortality as a putative subject of rational proof, in the *Phaedo* (if, that is, it really *is* the historical Socrates who is talking in the *Phaedo*), it is far from obvious that he thinks such an immortal soul is simply the intellectual part of one that is in fact tripartite.

3. IDEM, *Republic*, 434 d-441 c.

My own inclination, following many before me, is to think that both the theory of Forms and the theory of a tripartite soul were Plato's own creation, and I propose to look at both of these in turn as supposed pillars of his system. Starting with the theory of tripartition: it is still there in full force in the *Timaeus*, and is as central to that dialogue as it is to the *Republic*. It is also there in the *Phaedrus*, it seems, in the Myth of the charioteer and the two-horse chariot. But I find it nowhere else, at any rate with clarity. Some have found echoes of it in the *Laws*⁴, but this seems to me very doubtful; what we have there are *disiecta membra* of the old theory, and the dialogue gets along very well with the bipartition of soul familiar to readers of the dialogues antecedent to the *Phaedo*, and antecedent indeed to the fourth book of the *Republic*.

What happened? My own inclination is to think that the concept of psychic tripartition and tripartition of the state found a perfect match in the *Republic*, and that Plato was comfortable with it as long as he thought of a good society as one in which the rulers were members of a group who were by genetic origin and training fit to rule, and had auxiliaries who were by genetic origin and training fit to play that particular role. This would be true both in the paradigmatic human *polis* of the *Republic* and, as described in detail in the *Timaeus*, in that greatest of all *poleis*, the universe itself, where Demiurge and cohort-gods play a role in the cosmos analogous to that played by philosopher-rulers and their auxiliaries in *Kallipolis*.

In a context where the soul is being described without reference to a political context, the *Phaedrus*, tripartition is affirmed, perhaps tellingly, only in the context of a myth. By the time we reach the *Laws*, another 'political' context if ever there was one, and an occasion when conditions might have seemed particularly favorable for its re-affirmation, the account of soul as tripartite seems to have more or less vanished.

This is *prima facie* puzzling, not least because there is no reason to think that in the *Laws* Plato has abandoned the view that societies are composed of the three basic parts which he had talked about in so much detail in the *Republic*. The puzzlement is, however, likely to be resolved if we pay attention to what else is missing in the *Laws*, and this turns out to be that other Pillar of Platonism, the Theory of Forms. Or so, at any rate, I would argue. Like the theory of a tripartite soul, the Theory of Forms too lay at the heart of the argumentation of the *Republic* and of the *Timaeus*. But the self-criticisms of the *Parmenides*, stemming in large part from criticisms the young Aristotle had put forward in his short treatise *On Forms*, introduced pres-

4. Cf. e.g., The Structure of Soul and State in Plato's *Laws*, *Eranos*, 60, 1962, pp. 37-55.

sure into the system, and from that point on Plato no doubt felt obliged to tread carefully on the few occasions that the theory was introduced into various dialogues. So carefully that some have said he abandoned the theory altogether after the *Parmenides*⁵. This is too strong a statement, I think, but it is probably fair to say that the criticisms voiced in that dialogue moved him, as the years passed, and possibly under the influence of the ever-present Aristotle, in the direction of a formulation of the theory as one of forms as essences and paradigms rather than as transcendental particulars (the path towards this is smoothed considerably by the fact that the word *eidos* can be used of all three possibilities).

Certainly, by the time we reach the *Laws*, the one occasion on which Forms are introduced offers no hint that they are meant to be understood as perfect particulars. Their role is that of helping rulers engage with the problem of the one and the many, and all that is necessary for this is an adherence to essentialism, but not necessarily transcendental essentialism. And that seems to be the critical point which unites the Form-doctrine of the *Republic* to the Socratic essentialism antecedent to it in dialogues like the *Euthyphro* and the subsequent Platonic essentialism, as it seems to me, of *Laws* 12. The first of the two «pillars of Platonism», it turns out, is essentialism; its transcendental version shone at its brightest in the period covering the *Republic*, *Timaeus* and *Phaedrus*, but proved in the long run unsustainable.

What of the second pillar? As I mentioned earlier, what is a pillar of the *Republic* in the matter of philosophical psychology is more obviously the doctrine of tripartition rather than that of soul's immortality, but this does not mean that his views on soul's immortality, or on the nature of soul-as-such, or on some other aspect again of the notion of soul, could not finish up being one of the other pillars across the dialogues as a whole. Famously, Burnet called the 'care' of the soul central to *Socrates'* thinking⁶, and it is hard to doubt both that this is the case and that for Plato too it was of central importance. On the assumption that from the *Phaedo* on we are looking at thinking which is basically Platonic, the care of the soul is a matter of profound importance to him, and characterized by memorable passages in the *Republic*, the *Timaeus*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Theaetetus*, and, not least, the work he died while writing, the *Laws*, where his commitment to the notion burns with a flame as bright as it ever burned at any time in his life.

5. Cf. pre-eminently G. E. L. OWEN, The Place of the *Timaeus* in Plato's Dialogues, *Classical Quarterly*, n. s. 3, 1953, pp. 79-95.

6. J. BURNET, The Socratic Doctrine of the Soul, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, VIII, (1915-1916), pp. 235-259, (pp. 235 ff.).

Another candidate for the title «pillar of Platonism» might well be thought to be simply that of the notion of soul itself. But this is less likely, given that the notion of soul had been around for centuries, and figures prominently in the Homeric poems too. More likely is the specific sense of soul as the intellectual and moral principle which makes us the creatures we are. While it is true that the beginnings of such a notion can be found earlier than Plato, for example in Heraclitus and Empedocles⁷, it is a concept that Socrates and Plato made very much their own, and central to their thinking. Just how important it is can be found at a descriptive level in the *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Timaeus*, and prescriptively in the various eschatological Myths and in the *Laws*⁸.

The *Laws* is a particularly telling document in this regard, since Plato, in old age, is now fully aware of the presence and persuasiveness of a major enemy of his thinking, and that enemy is atomism. In *Laws* 10 he engages this enemy with uncompromising argument: psychic agency, he says, is real, and it is, not secondary, but *prior* to the physical.

This is, I think, one of Plato's most powerful statements in the dialogues, and I shall return to it. But before that I wish to look again at what Cornford took to be the second pillar of Platonism, the notion of an immortal soul. If we understand this as meaning that soul is immortal and can at the same time be *demonstrated* to be such by rational argument, Plato could with some justification have claimed that the idea owed its origins to himself and (possibly) Socrates. But would this have been enough to make it the second supposed pillar of his system?

In the *Republic*, as we saw, it features in a part of the book which has all the appearances of being a lengthy afterthought (Book 10), composed to clear up one or two qualms elicited by some of his earlier, very controversial thoughts on early education. In no way was it central to the book's main argument. In the *Phaedo*, by contrast, it is undoubtedly absolutely central, but at the same time fairly easy to account for in terms of the dialogue's context, a death-bed scene where an argument or arguments to prove that the real Socrates – his soul – might be shown to be leaving his pupils for an everlasting life elsewhere, rather than being obliterated a couple of hours thence, might be deemed something «devoutly to be wished».

In the *Timaeus* the immortality of the soul (now unequivocally affirmed to be the rational part of soul only, 41 c-d) is combined, in a memorable passage, with the notion of the need to take great care of it (89 d-90 d), and

7. E.g., HERACLITUS, fr. 45, 107; EMPEDOCLES, fr. 3.

8. For a detailed account, cf. the relevant chapters in T. M. ROBINSON, *Plato's Psychology*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1970/1995.

in the *Phaedrus* a new and sophisticated argument – far more sophisticated than anything that has appeared in the dialogues so far – is put forward to prove, not just the immortality of human (rational) soul but that of ψυχὴ πᾶσα, «soul in all its forms» (245 c 5). What seems to me interesting about this, apart from the sophistication of the argument itself, which has a very Aristotelian look to it, is that the concept of immortality is clearly something so central to Plato's thinking that he is prepared to argue for it in the case of all other (rational) souls, not just the human soul. And it is a matter which he will pursue to an astonishing conclusion, arguing finally, in the tenth book of the *Laws* (896 a ff.), just a short while before his death, that his view applies to soul as such; any rationality or irrationality it exhibits is supervenient.

The sheer breadth of this conclusion to Plato's argument, after a lifetime of rumination on the matter, suggests that Cornford might have been right after all in calling the doctrine of immortal soul one of the twin pillars of Platonism. But it is still worth asking, it seems to me, «Which doctrine of immortality is at issue?». In the *Meno* soul is claimed to be immortal because certain «priests and priestesses» say it is (81 a-b); no rational proof is proffered. In the *Phaedo* a number of rational proofs are proffered, but in the context of a world of atomic individuals, each looking out (or not looking out) for his or her own soul; life as a member of the *polis* seems very far away.

Turning to the *Republic*, despite the description of virtue as playing the role one is fitted for in the collectivity and being as such its *own reward*, its own εὐδαιμονία, we have already seen that the proof of soul's immortality in *Republic* 10 is in fact a reversion to the atomic thinking of the *Phaedo*; immortality is a necessity, if an individual is to enjoy appropriate rewards in some *future life* for virtue exhibited in this one.

Much the same can be said of the *Timaeus*, a dialogue combinable in so many ways with the *Republic*. The famous passage there (89 d-90 d) that talks of the need for care of our immortal soul is in terms of people as atomic particulars, rather than as members of a *polis*. The *Phaedrus* likewise lays emphasis on the immortality of the individual soul, though this time, interestingly, in terms of an everlasting relationship with some other beloved individual.

In the same *Phaedrus*, however, the new definition of soul as «self-moving» or «self activating» (αὐτὸ κινεῖν, 245 c 7) adds a new dimension to the concept of its immortality that has major implications, spelled out specifically in *Laws* 10. Souls are now immortal because self-moving, and by the same token prior to the material (896 c 1-3), all of this within a world now finally described as sempiternal rather than everlasting. The highest among such souls are those which possess rationality, that is, in our world the souls

of humans and elsewhere the souls of gods. How critical this new understanding of soul, and in particular of the souls of the gods, is for Plato, becomes evident when he talks of five years of incarceration for those who fail to accept what he is saying, and the death penalty if, on finishing their five years in prison, they have clearly not changed their mind on the issue (908 e–909 d).

What are we to make of all this? That soul's immortality is important overall as an item of Platonic thinking seems beyond doubt. But in the final analysis it seems to me to be its priority to matter which is the feature which most counted for Plato. In his early and middle to late-middle life this priority was stressed in terms of temporality; in the *Phaedo* and *Republic* it is soul's *temporal* antecedence to body which is question, and in the *Timaeus* he is at pains to stress that, hard though it is to imagine, the Demiurge fashioned even the *world's* soul before he fashioned its body. With the passage of time, however, Plato came round (in *Laws* 10) to agreeing with Aristotle that the world is without temporal beginning or end (*i.e.*, it is sempiternal), and his concept of the world's soul had to be accommodated to this. It will still be prior to the world's matter, but now logically prior rather than temporally so. As such it will also be immortal, as he has always believed, but somehow its immortality has now started to look a lot less important. The contumacious citizens of *Laws* 10 who face the death penalty will do so for denying that there are divine beings which are intrinsically *prior* to themselves rather than that such beings enjoy endless existence. Their sin in so denying is one of *hybris*, not one of disputing a point in metaphysics.

We are now in a position, I think, to reformulate Cornford's famous assertion a little. The *Republic* is indeed a manifestation of *versions* of what might be called «twin pillars of Platonism», but we must be careful how we describe them. What we see in the *Republic* is commitment to a belief in Forms as perfect particulars, in other words belief in the Theory of Forms in its classic version, along with a theory of human soul as immortal, and temporally prior to body. What we see more broadly across the dialogues is a theory of forms as essences, the *Republic* bestriding the central part of the *œuvre* with a particular *version* of the theory suggesting that the essences in question are perfect particulars. In the case of soul, what we see more broadly across the dialogues is a theory of soul as intrinsically prior to body, and sempiternal (*i.e.*, without beginning or end) in duration, the *Republic* again bestriding the central part of the *œuvre* with a particular *version* of that theory suggesting that the priority in the case of human soul is manifested temporally, and that its duration is (at least) without end. In a word, the *Republic* presents us with an alluring but only partly sustainable version of two commitments which can indeed – when the implications of *all* that Plato has to say about them, much of it in dialogues far distant in composi-

tional time from the *Republic* – be said to constitute twin pillars of the Platonic system as a whole. Whether they might be further described as *the* twin pillars is of course another paper.

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Η ΑΘΑΝΑΣΙΑ, Η ΘΕΩΡΙΑ ΤΩΝ ΙΔΕΩΝ ΚΑΙ ΟΙ «ΔΥΟ ΠΥΛΩΝΕΣ» ΤΟΥ ΠΛΑΤΩΝΙΣΜΟΥ

Π ε ρ ί λ η ψ η

Στὸ ἄρθρο αὐτὸ ὑποστηρίζεται ὅτι οἱ δύο θεμελιώδεις ἀντιλήψεις τῆς Πλατωνικῆς *Πολιτείας*, ἡ ἀθανασία τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ ἡ θεωρία τῶν Ἰδεῶν, τὶς ὁποῖες ὁ Cornford περιέγραψε, μὲ τὴν περίφημη πλέον διατύπωση, ὡς τοὺς «δύο πυλῶνες τοῦ Πλατωνισμοῦ», στὴν πραγματικότητα ἦταν κάτι ποὺ ὁ ἴδιος ὁ Πλάτων τὸ ἀντιμετώπιζε ὡς προβληματικὸ ἀπὸ πολλὰς ἀπόψεις.

Σὲ ὅ,τι ἀφορᾷ τὴν θεωρία τῶν Ἰδεῶν, θεωρῶ πῶς, ὅπως φαίνεται καὶ ἀπὸ τὸν Πλατωνικὸν *Παρμενίδη*, ὁ Πλάτων ὑπερασπίζεται ἀπλῶς «κάτι σχετικὸ» μὲ τὴν θεωρία τῶν Ἰδεῶν. Καὶ πόσω μᾶλλον ποὺ, πιθανῶς ὑπὸ τὴν ἐπιρροὴ τῆς συνεχιζόμενης συζήτησης μὲ τὸν Ἀριστοτέλη, ἐκεῖνο ποὺ διατηρεῖ ὅταν πιά γράφει τοὺς *Νόμους*, εἶναι περισσότερο μιὰ θεωρία τοῦ πῶς οἱ ιδέες καθ' ἑαυτὲς ἐνυπάρχουν στὰ ἐπιμέρους ὄντα παρὰ μιὰ θεωρία τῶν ιδεῶν ποὺ θεωροῦνται καθ' αὐτὰς ὄντα. Ἡ, γιὰ νὰ τὸ θέσουμε ἀλλιῶς, ὁ Πλάτων ἔχει διατηρήσει ἓνα βασικὸ στοιχεῖο ἀπὸ τὴν ἀρχικὴ θεωρία, δηλαδή τὴν ὄντολογία τῶν ιδεῶν, ἐγκαταλείποντας τὴν ἀντίληψη περὶ τῶν Ἰδεῶν ὡς ἀνώτερων ὄντων.

Σὲ ὅ,τι ἀφορᾷ δὲ τὴν ψυχή, ὑποστηρίζω ὅτι ὁ Πλάτων ἀπορροῦσε ἕως τὸ τέλος τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ γιὰ τὴ σχέση τῆς μὲ τὸ σῶμα. Ἐπιπλέον φαίνεται πῶς εἶχε μετακινηθεῖ, ὅσο μεγάλωνε, ἀπὸ τὴν ἀρχικὴ ἀντίληψη τῆς ἀθανασίας ὡς αἰωνιότητος σὲ ἐκείνην τῆς ἀθανασίας ὡς διαχρονικότητος.

Συνεπῶς οἱ δύο «πυλῶνες» γιὰ τοὺς ὁποίους κάνει λόγο ὁ Cornford εἶναι μᾶλλον ὀρθότερο νὰ ἀποδοθοῦν ὡς «πυλῶνες» γιὰ κάποιους ἀπὸ τοὺς διαλόγους τῆς μέσης περιόδου, κυρίως τῆς *Πολιτείας*. Ὡστόσο δὲν γίνεται νὰ ἀποκαλοῦνται «πυλῶνες» ὅλου τοῦ Πλατωνικοῦ ἔργου, πόσω δὲ μᾶλλον οἱ δύο μοναδικοὶ «πυλῶνες» τοῦ ἔργου τοῦ.

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