

Therapy of Body and Soul

Phoebus gave to mortals Asclepius and Plato, the one to save their bodies, the other to save their souls.

(DIOGENES LAERTIUS, *Vitae* 3.45)

Introduction

The conception of soul and its relation to body has had a central place in the philosophical, religious and anthropological discussions from antiquity up to the present day. Studies in the historical background of these conceptions in ancient Greece often start with Plato's dialogues and Aristotle's works, especially his *On the Soul*, the first systematic account of the topic. The term *psuchē* is most often translated into English as 'soul', which is an expression with an extremely wide semantic breadth and a great variability of conceptual connotations. The Greek term *psuchē* has no less an ambiguous meaning and has a long and rich history which extends back far beyond Plato and Aristotle.

In the Homeric epics, the oldest extant Greek literature, *psuchē* signifies for the most part the ghost or shade of a man leaving the corpse (*sōma*) at the moment of death and departing to Hades as soon as the dead body is cremated. The only consequence of this concept for living heroes is the possible risk of losing one's *psuchē*. Where there is no *psuchē*, there is no life. *Psuchē* therefore plays the part of the 'life-principle',¹ and for living heroes it can thus be translated as 'mortal life'.² For the cognitive, conative and affective faculties of man, which I shall call 'psychic' (or 'psychological'), Homer uses various terms,³ but never *psuchē*.⁴ As suggested by B. Snell, the absence of

1 Cf. Homer, *Il.* 21.569 (ed. Allen).

2 Other aspects of life are described by Homer in terms of βίος or αἰών (*Od.* 15.491, ed. von der Mühl; *Il.* 4.478 and 9.415, ed. Allen): βίος typically means 'way of life' and as such is distinct from αἰών as well as ψυχή, while αἰών in the sense of 'lifetime' can sometimes be used as synonym for ψυχή (e.g. *Il.* 5.685), and occasionally αἰών and ψυχή leave a dying man at the same time (*Il.* 16.453; *Od.* 9.523).

3 E.g. θυμός, νόος, φρήν (φρένες), καρδίη, κῆρ, ἦτορ and other 'psychological' words. Cf. Sullivan (1995).

4 Falling into a faint is occasionally described in terms of *psuchē* leaving the body (*Il.* 5.696, ed. Allen: τὸν δ' ἔλιπε ψυχή, *Il.* 22.467: ἀπὸ δὲ ψυχῆν ἐκάπυσσε). But in these cases it is rather

psychological unity in the Homeric heroes may correspond to the absence of a concept of bodily unity. There are many words in the Homeric vocabulary expressing various specific aspects of human corporeality (such as δέμας, ῥέθρα, γυῖα, μέλας, or χροός), but none of them indicates a bodily unity. Snell informs us that Aristarchus, the great Alexandrian scholar, had already noticed that in Homer the word *sōma*, which subsequently came to mean ‘body’, means ‘corpse’ and ‘is never used with reference to a living being.’⁵ Snell concludes that ‘early Greeks did not, either in their language or in the visual arts, grasp the body as a unit’,⁶ and he finds the same perspective in early Greek attitudes to the soul: ‘Homer has no one word to characterise the mind or the soul. Ψυχή, the word for soul in later Greek, has no original connection with the thinking and feeling soul.’⁷ While some important objections to Snell’s argumentation have been formulated,⁸ the idea concerning the analogy of body and soul concepts in Homer remains well-grounded and is still useful. Paying special attention to the body-soul relation when discussing the concept of *psuchē* is, I believe, a legitimate and appropriate approach not only in Homeric studies but in later periods of ancient history as well.⁹ This approach will, therefore, provide one of my methodological guidelines in what follows.

In the textual evidence for the period between Homer and Plato—to set the bounds of the discussion in this chapter—we can find an opposition of *psuchē* and *sōma* in various types of conceptions but these do not always correspond with the typical English sense of the words ‘soul’ and ‘body’. In order to avoid misunderstandings, I shall distinguish the various different forms of what I will call the ‘*psuchē-sōma* opposition’. In Homeric texts, to start with, *psuchē* and *sōma* refer exclusively to afterlife experience, to the eschatological dimension of man. In contrast to the other forms, the Homeric *psuchē* does not denote any psychological features of man, nor does *sōma* identify any features of the living body. The *psuchē* of a living man refers to his mortal life and losing one’s *psuchē* equals losing one’s life. This fact captures the fundamental difference between mortals and immortals: soul is a sign of man’s mortality and,

the threat of losing one’s life that the poet expresses there rather than an identification of *psuchē* with consciousness. What speaks against the latter reading is the fact that it is not *psuchē* that returns to the body as the person comes into life, but rather breath or θυμός (*Il.* 5.697–698 and 22.475).

5 Snell 1953, 5.

6 Snell 1953, 7.

7 Snell 1953, 8. Cf. Dodds 1951, 15: ‘Homeric man has no unified concept of what we call *soul* or *personality*.’

8 See for example Padel 1992, especially chap. 2.

9 Cf. Holmes 2010, 29–37, Renehan 1979.