CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THERIOMORPHISM AND THE COMPOSITE SOUL IN PLATO

Kathryn Morgan

The question of how we conceive and picture the soul is one to which several essays in this volume return, central as it is to Plato’s deployment of myth in his dialogues. My contribution here, rather than focusing on myths of post-mortem judgment of the soul, will examine an aspect of mythological presentation that offers resonant narrative trajectories: images of the composite soul that include animal elements. These images, clustered in the Republic and Phaedrus, have the merit of bringing to the fore a central methodological issue, namely, the extent to which it is possible for human language to represent the soul and the consequences of doing so. I shall argue that attempts to picture the soul bring an attentive audience to the realization of the incapacity of even metaphorical language accurately to express its nature.¹ The job of theriomorphic images of the soul is to make this point obvious. Second, I shall stress that the image of the soul as a composite with one or more animal parts is intimately connected with the problem of embodiment. Although the soul and its constituent parts may be immaterial, we can only conceive of them from the perspective of human beings, souls encased in bodies, and this perspective inevitably colours our image construction. I will not, then, be concerned with technical questions of psychic structure²—how Plato thought the various aspects of the soul interact—but with questions of representation and its heuristic function. My essay will begin with a consideration of one configuration of the relationship between the human soul and animals, the metempsychosis of souls into animal bodies. Next it will examine the group of passages in the Republic and Phaedrus that connect the soul with composite mythological monsters, moving from there to focus on the image of the psychic chariot in the Phaedrus and Timaeus. It will conclude by reflecting on the implications of

¹ Thanks are due to David Blank, Andrea Nightingale, and Mario Telò for valuable comments on this paper; also to Kristin Mann for help with editing.

² For a recent treatment of psychic partition along these lines, see Lorenz (2006).
the famous passage of the *Phaedrus* that compares a speech to a living animal (264c): to what extent is the *Phaedrus* itself a monstrous compound?

1. Men and Beasts

That there was ethical purchase in the comparison of men and animals was made obvious by the fable tradition. Most famously represented by Aesop, fable was made possible by a perceived fundamental similarity between animals and human beings, though it also perhaps played on the notion that important distances separated, or should separate, the world of animals from that of humans.\(^3\) Plato’s *Phaedo* develops yet also transforms the notion of the AESopic fable.\(^4\) At the start of the dialogue, Socrates is shown versifying Aesop’s fables as part of his response to the divine command to ‘make music’ (*Phd.* 60c9–e7). This adumbration of the genre of fable is taken up at 81c8–82b8 in one of Socrates’ initial accounts of the fate of the soul after death: the souls of the wicked wander until their desire for the corporeal (sômatoeidous, 81e1) unites them again with a body. Gluttons are reincarnated as, e.g., donkeys; the lawless and violent become wolves and hawks and kites; decent people without knowledge of philosophy become bees, wasps, or ants. The notion that an unphilosophical soul might be reincarnated into an animal body may be regarded as the most basic Platonic expression of the affinity between animals and certain aspects of the human soul. There is no thought in the *Phaedo* that the soul is itself a compound some of whose parts are animalistic; thus the expression of similarity between the soul and animals must be cast diachronically: a human soul is reincarnated in an animal body.\(^5\)

Even so, certain aspects of the *Phaedo*’s description of the fate of the soul after death are resonant for present purposes. We note that souls who have been too influenced by the body in life cannot shake it off and are trapped by their desire for the corporeal, ‘that which has the form of a body’

---

\(^3\) On fable and the complex relationship between humans and animals, see Clayton (2008), especially 189–191 on Aristotle’s conception of the place of humans in the animal world and his observation that the untrained soul of a child ‘has practically no difference from that of wild animals’ (*HA* 588a–588b).

\(^4\) Morgan (2000), 192–196. Kurke (2006) sees the popular AESopic tradition as an important and elided precursor for Plato’s mimetic prose. She too draws attention to Socrates’ AESopic activities at the beginning of the *Phaedo* (13–15), but does not connect this with the dialogue’s narrative of metempsychosis.

\(^5\) As Robinson (1970), 25–33 points out, the main division of the *Phaedo* is between body and soul.