PLATO ON THE NATURE OF LIFE ITSELF

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According to Homeric tradition, ψυχή is the life-breath.¹ To be alive is simply to be ensouled. In some pre-Socratics, the soul is not only a principle of life, but also a unifying locus of motion, nutrition, emotion, sensation, and intellect.² The soul becomes a site of experience and a source of life’s activities more broadly construed. Developments continue in this direction in Plato. But it is also fair to say that Plato initiates an important, theoretically informed separation of life from soul.³ Acknowledging the separation facilitates efforts to recover Plato’s own conception of the nature of life.

The account of life presupposed by Plato is illuminated especially in the Phaedo and the Timaeus. The Phaedo makes clear both that there is a form of life and also that being alive is not simply a matter of being ensouled. Whatever the account of soul (e.g., soul is self-motion), that account is not identical with the account of life. This result is significant since it might very well be that so little light has been shed on Plato’s conception of life, in part, because of a widespread presupposition that, for Plato, to be alive just is to be ensouled. In calling this presupposition into question, I hope both to encourage inquiries into Plato’s views of the nature of life, and also to defend my own proposal for capturing the content of Plato’s conception of life itself.

That there have been almost no attempts to identify Plato’s view of life is not particularly surprising. Plato is certainly no biologist and the question “What is life?” is not explicitly asked or addressed in the dialogues. Happily the Timaeus’ account of the construction of living beings goes a long way toward filling in the details. A cluster of features is identified as constitutive of living beings, beings sufficiently stable and complex to carry out the psychological activities indicative of life. In what follows, I argue first that Plato distinguishes life from soul (though he seems to think that life in fact requires soul), and second that, on his view, order, com-

¹ In Homer, the life-principle of an individual seems to leave the body at death, but to persist in Hades as a mere shade or wraith or image. For detailed discussion, see Claus 1981; and Snell 1953. For fairly recent commentary on the history of conceptions of ψυχή and σῶμα, see the essays collected in Wright and Potter, 2000.
² For a general discussion of developments in Presocratic conceptions of the soul, see Laks 1999.
³ Certainly some pre-Socratics might presuppose the distinction, but it is difficult to determine whether or not the distinction is explicitly drawn or theoretically motivated.
pleteness, unity, and self-regulated activity belong essentially to all living things.

I. Life and Soul

At various points in the dialogues, Plato makes public his willingness to rely on the presence of soul to distinguish what is alive from what is not. In the process of division aimed at defining the statesman, for example, Plato allows the products over which rulers preside to be divided into those with souls (τῶν ἐμψυχῶν) and those without (τῶν ἄψυχων) where the distinction serves to mark off the living (τὰ ζῶα) from the lifeless (Stat. 261b7-8 and 261c7- d4). At Euthydemus 302a-e, we learn that those things that have souls are called living beings (302a8); even gods, assuming they have souls, count as living beings (302e1-3). In those passages, as elsewhere (e.g., Phd. 105c2ff; Phdr. 246c5-6; Tim. 30-32; Soph. 248e7-249b1; Laws X, 895c-896b), Plato presupposes an intimate relation between soul and life. What is alive appears to be so because it is ensouled.

We might wonder, though, about the details of the relation; and a natural place to turn for insight is the “final argument” of the Phaedo. In his efforts to prove the immortality of the soul, Socrates appeals to the premise that the soul is essentially alive; and he claims that the soul is at least some kind of cause of life in bodies. Without addressing the adequacy (or inadequacy) of the final argument or many of its admittedly controversial details, I would like to examine some of the assumptions and examples Socrates exploits to make his case.

For the purposes of the argument Socrates distinguishes between a more refined, sophisticated (κομψότερον) causal account and the safest (ὅσοι φιλεστάται) causal account he had nontechnically (ἀπεχνητος) and simple-mindedly (ἐνίθυσα) introduced earlier in the dialogue (100b1-e4, 105c2). Instead of continuing to explain heat in an object merely by appeal to the object’s participation in the form of heat as the earlier, simple-minded account would suggest, Socrates now offers what he says is a

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4 Cf. Aristotle’s De Anima II, 413a21-2, where we are told that what has soul differs from what lacks soul by life (διαφόρησα τὸ ἐμψυχον τὸν ἄψυχον τὸν ζην).
5 Τὰ ζῶα in this context are animals and not obviously plants, though elsewhere (Tim. 77a-b) τὰ ζῶα include plants.
6 At Euthyd. 302e1 Socrates agrees that whatever has a soul is alive (ὡμολογήκας γὰρ ὃσα ψυχήν ἔχει ζῶα εἶναι). Though the Euthydemus contains claims that Plato presumably does not embrace, given his commitment to this sort of claim in a variety of other dialogues, it seems unlikely that Plato would resist it here, even if he were to go on to resist other claims in the same passage.