

## The soul – living knowledge

*With passages from Thomas Taylor's Introduction to Aristotle's De Anima*

In the Platonic tradition the self is the soul – it is the core of the human nature which puts on and takes off the material body as it moves from life to life. It is the self-motive nature which makes choices based on what it knows, and attempts to put into action its aspirations and desires.

This conjunction of knowledge and action is central to our experiences and if we want to understand what we are, we should investigate the powers the soul has that enable it to both know and act. And while we separate the two aspects of our experience in order to examine them and their possibilities, we should remember that in reality the two are always linked – what we *know* and what we *do* are, ultimately, based on what we *are*. We live what we know, and know what we live.

The two aspects of ourselves, the gnostic (or knowing) and the vivific (or living) parts operate rationally or irrationally – some powers are engaged with the stable world of ideas, other powers are engaged with the moving world of generation. We can represent the whole range of soul powers in the following scheme:

Gnostic and Rational	Vivific and Rational
Gnostic and Irrational	Vivific and Irrational

Let us start by looking at those powers which are gnostic and rational: these are three in number - opinion, dianoia and intellect.

The most limited of these is that of *opinion*, which knows *that a thing is*, but not *why it is*. Opinion receives information from outside itself and then has the power to affirm or deny - for example it knows that the sky is blue, but cannot say why it is blue; or it knows that a thing is desirable, but again cannot say why it is so, or it knows that the soul is not the body, but not why it is not the body. Opinion knows universals, but only as they are in sensible things, since the abstract or unembodied reasons of things are beyond its scope: the higher gnostic powers know universals before their material manifestation, but opinion knows them only after their manifestation. Opinion can receive its initial information from a higher gnostic faculty or from some external authority - the teaching of tradition, of accepted custom, of an individual teacher, or merely someone who expresses an opinion.

*Dianoia*<sup>1</sup> is the middle gnostic rational power: it moves from abstract reason to abstract reason, as well as applying abstract reasons to practical situations. Thomas Taylor, in his excellent introduction to Aristotle's *De Anima*, making a distinction between opinion and dianoia, describes how dianoia operates: "For it [opinion] knows *that* the rational soul is immortal, but it does not know *why* it is immortal, because this is the province of dianoia. But it is the province of opinion to know only *that* it is immortal. Hence opinion is well defined in the *Sophista* [264b]

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<sup>1</sup> Dianoia is from the Greek dia = *through* or across and noia = *knowing*. It is usually translated as reason.

of Plato, to be the termination of dianoia. For the dianoetic power of syllogizing that the rational soul is immortal, opinion receiving this conclusion, only knows *that* soul is immortal. But dianoia is that power which completes, as it were, a certain path, by passing from propositions to conclusions. Thus, for instance, dianoia investigates whence it is that the rational soul is immortal. Afterwards, beginning from things more manifest, it passes on to the object of investigation, and says that soul is self-motive. That which is self-moved, is always moved: But this is immortal: Soul, therefore, is immortal. And this is the employment of dianoia. Hence it is the discursive, or evolved energy of reason, and when unperverted, is that power of the soul which reasons scientifically, deriving the principles of its reasoning from intellect.” The pattern of the dianoetic power is, then, a movement through a series of syllogistic steps - the simplest of which is A is B, B is C, therefore A is C; but the essence of this power is conjoined to real being, because reasons are a direct unfolding of eternal ideas, or real beings.

The highest gnostic and rational power of the soul is *intellect*. If opinion is simple because it can only affirm or deny external facts, intellect is simple because its power is a simple vision of internal truth: from this point of view, it is the middle faculty, dianoia, which is the most complex of the three powers - since even at its simplest it must employ at least three syllogistic terms. Dianoia carries out its abstract process through a period of time: it moves from one thing to another, in the words of Taylor, by *a certain path*; but intellect has no such dependence upon process and time.

Carrying on from the previous quote, Taylor says: “But the employment of intellect, properly so called, is to apply itself to things by simple projections, and in a way superior to demonstration. For as sense by its projecting energy, when it meets with something white, or some particular figure, has a knowledge of it superior to demonstration; since it is not in want of syllogism, in order to perceive that this thing is white, but it knows that it is by simple projection; thus, also, intellect knows intelligibles by a simple application of its gnostic power, in a manner superior to demonstration. The energy of intellect, however, is alone present with those who have arrived at the summit of purification and science,<sup>2</sup> and who, through the cathartic virtues, are accustomed to energize without imagination and sense.” Taylor, by the way, uses the word imagination here to mean that lower faculty by which we re-assemble sense-perceptions in the absence of their originating sense-objects; this is very different from the use of the word to mean the creative process in which we bring towards ourselves the power of the great ideas of the abstract world in order to be true artists. We will look at this lower imagination in more detail a little later.

The faculty of intellect, as the highest gnostic faculty of the soul, needs some careful thought if we are to understand what it really is and what it is not. As a possession of the soul, this intellect might be called intuition - the immediate and whole perception of truth. Many confuse intuitive with instinctive knowledge because both kinds seem to arise in the mind without process. But instinctive knowledge is generated by material experiences either of the individual creature or through that of the preceding generations of its species; intuition, on the other hand, arises from contact with pure abstract ideas: for this reason the subject matter of the two kinds of knowledge is very different.

More importantly we should be aware that while the other gnostic faculties are unambiguously our own individual possession, our faculty of intellect is not quite so simple: from one point of view, certainly, it may be affirmed as a faculty of the soul, but from another it may be more properly thought of as something higher than the soul in which we participate when we are in a fit state so to do. Intuition is the highest gnostic power when the soul acts and thinks as an independent thing; but when we touch our intellectual source we are infused with its power,

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor tends to use the word science to mean *true knowing* rather than our more modern usage as purely a methodology.

which is beyond the separation of individuation, and we share in *Nous* or Intellect in such a profound way that knower and thing known become one. In this participation we rediscover those eternal truths which are not conditioned by our temporal limitations but, rather, are the very absolutes which the soul often mistakenly looks for in the worlds of change.

We must now turn to those powers which are gnostic and irrational – *phantasy* and *sense*. Of these, the latter needs little explanation: we may define it as that level of knowing which is entirely concerned with externals, receiving separate impressions of material things while they are present – as such the senses are entirely passive. But the phantasy is less easily understood: it is an inward faculty which receives the types or impressions of the separate senses and which then recreates these within itself. This activity adds a degree of intelligibility and unity to sense perceptions – and from this point of view the phantasy is less passive than the senses (although compared to higher gnostic faculties it is still considered passive). For example, the shape and colour the eyes have received of a cat are combined with the sound of purring received by the ears and the feel of fur received by the touch, so that this first inward faculty can, with a degree of certainty, affirm that it has before it a cat.

All the activities of the phantasy are, then, anchored in sense perception; but since intelligibility and unity are characterised by permanency, the phantasy allows the holding of sense perceptions beyond the departure of the sense objects and thus can recreate remembered perceptions. Furthermore since it has moved sense perceptions upwards a little way towards intellect, phantasy also has a kind of shadowing creativity (for creativity is an essential characteristic of intellect); it can combine the different sense perceptions into a new and artificial unity, so that, for example, we can phantasise a panther that is pink and has semi-human movements - for this reason phantasy is sometimes called lower (or figured) imagination. Aristotle calls the phantasy ‘passive intellect’, as Thomas Taylor points out: “intellect, indeed, as having the object of knowledge inward, and applying to this object by simple projections, like intellect, and without proof; but passive, because its knowledge is attended with impressions, and is not unfigured.” Sense is tied to the present, because it can only know what it actually before it; phantasy can extend itself both backwards into the past through recall, and forwards into the future through anticipation. Both the phantasy and the senses are concerned with particular objects - they know *this* particular white object (which is before the eyes, or the inner eye of phantasy) but not *every* white object.

Thus, in brief, we have added to the three *rational* gnostic faculties two *irrational* gnostic faculties to give a complete spectrum of gnostic powers which allows the soul to contact and explore the most particular material thing starting with the senses, and also the most abstract universal idea ending in the intellect, and all stages of knowledge between these two extremes. As we move up from senses, through phantasy, opinion, and *dianoia* towards intellect, our knowledge becomes increasingly intelligent, permanent, universal, comprehensive, reliable and creative.

Having looked at the gnostic faculties which allow us to contemplate reality at these various levels, we must now consider our other soul faculties which allow us to act and give life. We will start by looking at those vivific powers which are rational.

The highest and most comprehensive of the vivific powers is *will*, whose sole aim is the good. It has, therefore, a simplicity akin to that of the intellect, as well as a sphere of direct operation which is abstract: this is obscured by the fact that we often identify lower powers – even down as far as the instincts – as will. It is true, of course, that lower powers have a real relation to the will, just as the senses have a real relation to the intellect, but we should see these lower faculties as those which clothe the activity of will when seen from the lower realms. Perhaps a working definition of will is *that power by which a thing unites with the good that it perceives*. If this is accepted, then we must admit that the quality of the will is dependent upon the quality of perception: pure

intellects, seeing the good without variance, are eternally united to the good; but the human soul, having a variable participation in intellect, also has a variable participation in the good.

The second gnostic and vivific power of the soul is *pre-election*: its character is more complex than that of will. As Taylor says, “And the will, indeed, is alone directed to the good; but pre-election is of an ambiguous nature. And the will is of the rational soul, as itself subsisting by itself; but pre-election pertains to the rational soul, so far as it is complicated with irrationality. For when the soul is beyond generation, she energises according to will; since she is then in good alone. But when she subsists in generation, since irrational powers are then connected with her essence, she possesses, as the consequence of this complication, pre-election, because at one time she is conversant with irrationality, and at another time with reason, and chooses this thing *prior* to that.” At its best pre-election acts at the level of *dianoia*, using its syllogistic conclusions to choose the best of various options; at its lowest it acts at the level of opinion, choosing on the basis of the *appearance* of good.

Pre-election might be called free-will: it is the level at which most humans live (more or less) – and for this reason an understanding of simple will as something *above* pre-election is rather elusive. If we consider the will of intellects proper (or of Gods) as unswervingly directed to the good, it may seem as if we are denying them a power of choice enjoyed by human beings – but such a view only evinces our lack of appreciation of the infinite power of the good, as well of those beings who are able to receive good in an eternal measure, rather than through the allotments of passing time.

Finally we must consider the irrational vivific powers which may be considered in relation to the two kinds of lives which are below the rational – the animal and the vegetative. The powers which are concerned with the animal life are *anger*<sup>3</sup> and *desire*, and it is these powers which enable the soul to move the body: in the *Phaedrus* the soul is portrayed as riding a winged chariot drawn by two horses – and it is these two powers which are symbolised by them, the power of reason being symbolised by the charioteer who holds the reins.

Desire is the irrational faculty which pursues what appears to be good and beautiful, while anger is the irrational faculty which defends against the breakdown of order: desire’s primary task is to generate, while anger’s task is to ordinate, so that although they are both irrational, anger is more attentive to reason because while generation can take place without reason – if only for a little while – ordination cannot. In the analogy of the chariot in the *Phaedrus* (at 253e) Plato makes it clear that one of the horses is more compliant to the commands of the charioteer, and that this horse touches the lowest rational gnostic power: “It is likewise a lover of honour, together with temperance and modesty; *is the companion of true opinion*, is not whipped, and is only to be governed by exhortation and reason.” This idea is also expressed in the *Timaeus* (44d ff) in the symbolic location of the powers in the body, where the reason is said to be seated in the head, anger in the chest above the diaphragm, and desire below the diaphragm, so that there is no immediate contact between the desires and the reason but rather anger acts as the mediator.

Hermeas commenting on the *Phaedo*, and bearing the imagery of the *Timaeus* and the *Republic* in mind says: “The divine Plato distributes the parts of the soul into different parts of the body. Hence, considering intellect and the reasoning power as analogous to the ruler of a city, he establishes them in the brain: for the brain is spherical, and man is a microcosm. He makes the brain, therefore, analogous to the heavens. In the next place, since *anger* is naturally more noble than *desire*, and is analogous to those in a city that fight for its defence, and repress whatever is disorderly and tumultuous in it, and whom he calls *auxiliaries*; since anger also reproves and opposes desire, - hence he fixes it in the heart, that it may be in the vestibules of reason, being only separated from the brain by that interval the neck. But the desiderative part, as being

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<sup>3</sup> But see overleaf for a discussion of what is meant by anger.

irrational and similar to the *mercenary* tribe and the multitude in a city, he places in the liver, as an ass at a manger. Anger, therefore, is more noble than desire, as being nearer to reason; and hence it has a better station, for it is arranged in a better region.”

And a little further on he very significantly says of desire that it possesses “intellections only as far as to the phantasy” – so that we can see that of these irrational vivific powers, anger is informed by opinion (*i.e.* from the lowest rational gnostic power) but desire is informed by the irrational gnostic powers, phantasy and sense. With both these words, the student needs to be a little careful: *anger* is the best translation of *thumia* – but even a cursory examination of how it is used here will show how it is more than the negative emotion which the word denotes in everyday language. *Desire* on the other hand, is a translation of *epithumia*, and perhaps denotes less than its everyday scope: for *epithumia* is the desire of externalities, while we sometimes use desire to mean the aspiration for inner intellectual goals.

Below the animal life, with its anger and desire, there is the vegetative life which has three powers - the *nutritive*, the *augmentative* and the *generative* - by which all living things are nourished, increased and generate beings similar to themselves. If the desires are set at one remove from the reason, these powers are twice removed – the activity of the body at a cellular and organic level being almost entirely automatic, and only directly affected by the conscious mind after long and specialised training.

Taylor goes into the activities of these lowest powers in more detail, but perhaps all we need to establish here is that these powers are distinct from desire, for as he says “It is worthwhile, however, to consider what the difference is between desire, and those natural powers, the generative and nutritive. For we do not see that desire energizes about anything else, than about nutriment and the generative powers, so that it would seem to follow that desire is the same with the vegetative powers. What, then, shall we say? That it is not the same. For desire, indeed, energizes in conjunction with sense; but the vegetative powers energize without sense.” He goes on to discuss the relationship between these three powers and desire: the former having as their goal three distinct things (nutrition, growth or reproduction), but the latter having a single aim, which is pleasure.

I hope this suffices for our initial survey of the powers of the soul. The human soul as a possessor of faculties may be seen as primarily active through reason, anger and desire: this is a direct result of her creation described in the *Timaeus* as being mixed within the Crator (Rhea) from essence, sameness and difference - the reason being an expression of the soul’s essence, anger an expression of sameness, and desire an expression of difference.