“To act and to be acted upon”:
Interactionism in the Phaedo

Marcelo D. Boeri
Pontifical Catholic University, Chile

§ 1. Introduction

Plato says a number of times that in the active-passive relation, the immaterial is the active ingredient and the material the passive one of such a relation. In the Phd. it is pretty clear that the soul is what sets the body in motion (79e-80a; 98c-e). But Plato seems to point out that both the soul is able to act upon the body and the body upon the soul. One might think that it is not entirely clear how the soul and body, despite being so different as regards their nature, are related to each other. My claim is that in the Phd. Plato suggests that some form of interactionism between soul and body is possible (see also Lg. 898e-899a), and that in connection with that issue he advances the view (widely developed by Aristotle), according to which there is a sort of ‘co-dependence relation’ between soul and body. Such ‘co-dependence’, I hold, can be explained by the fact that soul and body share a common feature: both of them are capacities.1 Indeed, I maintain that Plato was a “dualist”. However, by “dualism” I do not mean a theory which posits a radical separation between body and soul (despite their being taken to be two different kinds of entities), but what is usually understood by dualism in contemporary philosophy of mind: the number of kinds of “substances” that there are. Rather, if my discussion of the “interactionist passages” in the Phd. is plausible, one should consider that, even assuming that soul and body are two ontologically different things, they are nonetheless closely related to each other insofar as they can interact.

The paper proceeds as follows: in the next section (§ 2) I discuss some passages in the Phd. where Plato shows the power of the soul over the body as well as that of the body over the soul. I will also indicate how the fact that both the soul and the body can be understood in terms of capacities is helpful for seeing why Plato need not affirm that both relata are bodies for them to enter into a mutual causal relation. Finally, in § 3 I provide some brief concluding remarks.

§ 2. Soul and body as moving and moved factors

The view that the soul is the origin of motion is almost a commonplace in Plato. It even constitutes one of the basic premises of the famous argument for the immortality of the soul in the Phdr. (245c). Sometimes Plato speaks of one’s soul as what is able to use and rule over...

1 According to Plato, “capacities” (or “powers”: δυνάμεις) are the kind of thing in virtue of which “we […] are able to do whatever we can do” (R. 477c1-2: ἡμεῖς δυνάμεθα ἃ δυνάμεθα). Plato’s examples are psychological powers (sight and hearing; see also 477b-d). This characterization of δύναμις also may be applied to the body. At Th. 185e6–7 Plato asserts that while the soul examines some things ‘alone and through itself’, there are other things which it examines through the ‘capacities of the body’ – διὰ τῶν τοῦ σώματος δυνάμεων–; cf. Phd. 79c2-d1 and Sph. 247e3).
the body, and because of its ability to rule, the soul is “more valuable” than the body (cf. *Alc. I* 129e-130c; *Phd. 78c–79d; *Lg.* 896c1-3). In the *Phd.* the argument to show the priority of the soul over the body runs as follows (79c-80a): (i) when soul and body are present in the same thing, nature ‘orders’ (τῇ φύσεις προσφέρει) the latter to be a slave and to be ruled (τῷ μὲν δουλεύειν καὶ ἀρχεθαν), and the former to be the master and to rule (τῇ δὲ ἀρχήν καὶ διηκονίζῃ). (ii) The soul, in being incorporeal and dealing with the unchanging,² is like the divine. (iii) But the divine is able to rule and to lead by nature, while what is mortal is able to be ruled and to be enslaved. (iv) If this is so, the soul is like the divine and the body like the mortal.

There are some interesting points arising from this passage: in what sense can it be said that the soul “rules and leads what is mortal, the body”? It appears to be easy to answer this question: I move my arm because I have decided to do that. On Plato’s ontological map, deciding is a psychological item, so the soul is able to set one’s own body in motion because the movement of one’s body depends upon one’s decision. This is what to rule over one’s own body means: the body does not move by itself.³ Moreover, Plato holds that to rule belongs to the nature of the soul, and to be ruled to the nature of the body. One might understand this to mean that a body by itself is motionless, so “setting something in motion” does not belong to the body’s nature.⁴ But the most appealing point is that, even though Plato provides this argument in favor of the soul as the moving principle, he explicitly allows that the soul can be affected by the body. In fact, the soul as a whole is dragged away (ἐξάκειται; 79c6) by the body. So even though the soul uses the body to examine something through the senses (79c3-4), thus reminding us that the soul is that which is active, Plato asserts that the soul can be affected by the body. But if we are to accept his claim that the active role belongs to the soul, not to the body, how is it possible that the soul is dragged away by the body? Moreover, the soul itself (due to the harmful influence of the body) wanders, becomes confused and dizzy, “as if it were drunk” (79c7-8; see also *Phd.* 66a5-6). To be sure, the cause of the soul’s being in such a state is the body, but this introduces a tension, because the active role is supposed to belong to the soul, not to the body.

At this point my suggestion is that Plato advances an idea, widely developed by Aristotle, according to which there is a sort of “co-dependence relation” between soul and body. Although the view that the active factor is the soul is not new in Plato (it goes back to *Alc. I* 129c5-e5; 130a1, and of course it is present in other dialogues too: *Phdr.* 245e5 ff.; *Lg.* 896c-897d; 898c-899a), the passage in the *Phd.* is particularly important for my purposes here: the soul uses the body (τῷ σώματι προσχρῆται; 79c3) to examine what it examines. This means that the body is the instrument of the soul, so the priority of the soul is clear.

These lines of the *Phd.* run parallel to a former passage where Plato states that nothing we hear or see is accurate (65b): when the soul attempts to examine something together with the body, the soul is (or can be) deceived by the body. This being the case, the body can exert a pernicious influence on the soul, and even though the soul cannot be completely separated

---

² This premise is not explicit, but it can be inferred from the context.

³ In the previously cited passage of the *Lg.* it is clear that the body contains no principle of change in itself, and that change occurs (both in the single body and in the cosmos) thanks to the existence of a self-moving soul. See also *Phd.* 98c-e, where Socrates argues that the true cause of his being seated is not that he is composed of bones and sinews, but rather that, since the Athenians thought (or decided; ἐδοξεῖ) that it was better to condemn Socrates, he also thought it was better to remain seated (98e2-4). Socrates does what he does because of his *choice* of what is best (99b1: τῇ ἣ προσχέρει τῷ ἀπλέον), so the real cause of his remaining seated on his bed was both what the Athenians and he *thought*.

⁴ This fits well with the normative character of nature as described in *Phd.* 81a. See also *Phdr.* 245c-d; *Lg.* 895e-896a (commented on by Casertano, 2015, p. 401-402).
from the body while the person is still alive, there is a way in which we can come closest to knowledge: this manner would consist in having no communion or association with the body (67a3-4) “beyond what is absolutely necessary” (ὁτι μὴ πάντα ἄνευχη). Examining something together with the body is what we do in so far as we are alive. Of course, Plato is aware that one can get rid of one’s body only “as much as possible” (65c8: καθ’ ὁποὺ διόνυσται; see also 66b-d). Maybe the solution is to develop a technique to neutralize the influence of the body upon one’s soul and what is associated with it. But even within this framework, where Plato strongly believes in the necessity of releasing one’s soul from communion with the body in order to reach “what it is in itself”, he reminds us of the importance of perception as a previous step to attain what is “truly real” through the argument from recollection.\(^5\)

According to Plato, there are two kinds of being (δύο εἴδη τῶν ὄντων), one visible and the other unseen (79a6-7). The former never stays in the same condition, and the latter does. So if the soul is something unseen (ἀνέκτος) or not visible (οὐ κρατάτων), one should assume that it is more similar (ὑμοπροκεῖται) than the body to the unseen (79b16).\(^6\) Now if the soul belongs to the kind of thing which is “unseen” and thereby must remain always in the same state, one might wonder how it is possible that the soul undergoes changes (due to the action of the body; 81b4-5), “so that the soul thinks (δοξάζει) nothing is true except the corporeal” (81b5-6). If the soul is akin to what stays in the same state (79d), how is it possible that the soul sometimes wanders (79c6), and sometimes is at rest from its wandering (79d)? Plato makes it clear that the soul remains in the same condition because it is “in touch” (ἐπονομαζότας; 79d6) with things that are immortal and unchanging; that affective state (πάθημα) is called “wisdom”.\(^7\) This passage clearly indicates that wisdom should be seen as the state in which one’s soul is unaffected by the body. Indeed the soul can change, since it can be in a state of ignorance or of wisdom. Plato’s claim that the soul stays in the same condition cannot mean that

---

\(^5\) As already observed by others, Plato does not say that nothing perceptual is significant: ‘perceptual experience’ is important for evoking the Forms, as held by Plato himself, *Phd.* 75a (Dixsaut, 1991, p. 97-99; Rowe, 1993, p. 197, and more recently Vigo, 2009, p. 58-61, Trabattoni, 2011a, p. XLIII-XLV; 86, n.98; 87, n.100, and Casertano, 2015, p. 316-317, 332. For a similar view –although in a different context– cf. *Th. 186b-c*.

\(^6\) Although the soul is said to be invisible, this does not mean that it is *identical* to the invisible. Plato just states that it is ‘more similar’ than the body to the unseen. According to Casertano (2015, p. 326), this seems to imply that both the soul and the body share the feature of being invisible, and that the body is less invisible than the soul (*Phd. 81c11-d2*). What is always in the same state and condition is ‘most likely’ to be incommunicable (and hence indivisible; 78c5: τὸ ἀσύνθετον), whereas what is in each case in a different state is composite. Again this introduces a contrast between the soul and the body, but such a contrast is again nuanced, probably to indicate that, although the difference between the soul and the body is significant, under certain conditions the soul is subject to change (Rowe, 1993, p. 185).

\(^7\) Plato also says that the soul can be in touch with things having instability (i.e., bodily things; 79c8), and, because of this, it is dragged by the body into what never stays in the same state. When this happens, there is no knowledge or wisdom; see *R.* 508d (cited by Dixsaut, 1991, p. 353, n.163), where Plato argues that when the soul rests entirely on (ἐπιπροσέχοντα) things that are illumined both by truth and what is, it understands, knows, and manifestly has comprehension (ἐνθεοπλαστήθη), whereas what is in each case in a different state is composite. Again this introduces a contrast between the soul and the body, but such a contrast is again nuanced, probably to indicate that, although the difference between the soul and the body is significant, under certain conditions the soul is subject to change (Rowe, 1993, p. 185).
it undergoes no change at all; the type of change that the soul does not undergo is the change that implies destruction.

Now the main thrust of the problem I am dealing with is this: if by their very nature soul and body are so radically different, how is it possible to assert that soul and body can be acted upon by each other? That the soul acts upon the body is quite clear, since it is what sets the body in motion. But the soul too is acted upon by the body, since when it is under the body’s influence it wanders, gets confused, and so on. According to Phd. 79c–81c, all the changes that the soul experiences because of the action of the body are for the worse (when the soul becomes confused and dizzy; Phd. 66a-e), even though the soul, in being akin to what is unseen, should be associated with what is unchanging. But this is possible because the soul that is liable to undergo such changes is an embodied soul, probably pertaining to a weak person, someone who is unable to deal properly with his or her body. The embodiment of this soul cannot be “pure”.

Indeed the fact that one’s soul is embodied does not necessarily mean (not even in the Phd., where the ascetic position is so strong) that one’s soul is subject to being affected in a bad way. When an individual dies, Plato argues, one’s soul can be separated from the body either in a pure or in an impure condition. The former is the case of a soul that has spent its life “not associated with the body at all” (80c3-4: οὐδὲν κοινωνοῦσα αὐτῷ). When Plato asserts that such a soul did not spend its life associated with the body “at all”, he must mean that such a soul has not been subject to the governance of the body and its negative influence. By contrast, a soul is in an impure condition when it separates itself from the body, because it has been coupled with it. There is a sense in which any soul has been coupled with the body, since to examine something through the body is to do so through perception (79c-d); inversely, whenever the soul examines something alone by itself it apparently gets rid of any contact with what is corporeal and thereby, one might assume, is not concerned at all with perception. But that cannot be the case, because Plato endorses the view that we can come closest to knowledge “while having no communion with the body beyond what is absolutely necessary”. The “Platonic knower” has to deal with his or her body to some extent; Plato’s point, I guess, is that the body should not rule over the soul. Otherwise one cannot have wisdom. Thus not even the wise person can remove the body from his own life, and this is so because one’s soul (at least while one is still alive) is mingled with it. But Plato’s intention clearly is to point out that the soul that is in a pure state when leaving the body is the one that has not been ruled by the body and its desires (in this picture the body is seen as an evil; 66b5-6: ἦ γνωκῆ μετὰ τοιοῦτον κακοῦ, i.e. τὸ σῶμα).

All these striking details of Plato’s theory remind us that Plato has no problem at all in advancing the claim that body and soul, in spite of being two items so different in nature, can (causally) relate to each other. One might tend to suppose that soul and body are able to causally affect each other because there is some commonality (κοινωνία) between them. But Plato, as convincingly argued by John Dillon, did not regard relations between soul and body as constituting a real problem. In the Phd. Plato appears to take for granted that such relations obtain, and that they can be taken to be causal relations: the soul makes the body move, and the body makes the soul change (the soul gets confused, dizzy). Despite the radical difference between soul and body, he does not see any problem in asserting that those souls whose con-

---

8 The person who is able to attain ‘what it is’ is the one who addresses each thing with his thought alone ‘as far as possible’, without trusting sight in his thinking or dragging any other sense along with his reasoning (Phd. 65c-66a). This is the way in which a Platonic knower will be separated “as far as possible” (ἀπαλλαγεὶς ὁτι μάλιστα) from his eyes and ears, and, so to speak, “from his whole body” (σύμπαντος τοῦ σώματος; 66a3-6).

9 Dillon, 2009; 2013.
ditions are impure continue to be somehow “attached” to the body when they separate from it. In fact, when these kinds of soul are separated from the body, they cannot get rid of the corporeal completely, as is indicated by those “shadowy phantoms” (σκιοειδῆ φαντάσματα) of souls (81c11-d2). But if the soul is more similar to the invisible than to the visible, it can still be just seen, because there is still something visible attached to it (these are the souls that have not been able to detach from the body in a “pure way”).

Now if the soul is able to act upon the body and the body upon the soul, one might think that Plato had in mind what contemporary philosophers call “interactionism”, i.e. the view that material (body) and immaterial (soul) things within a certain psychophysical unity have causal influence on each other. Such an interactionism must be conceived of in dualistic terms, that is, as the interaction of two things radically different in kind. Apparently Plato sees no problem in granting that soul and body are associated; he sees no problem in maintaining that they have mutual causal relations, either. And although he does not say that there must be a commonality between them in order to explain the manner in which they affect each other, we can attempt to find something which is “common to soul and body”.

§3 Concluding remarks

I have already suggested that if soul and body can be regarded as capacities, maybe one could find a commonality that is shared by both of them. The link between soul and body should be sought in what is common to them, and I believe that such a common factor is that both soul and body can be taken to be capacities, since they are able to act and to be acted upon. After all, capacities can be regarded as relational properties; Plato seems to agree with this view when he states the relational features of what is active and passive (Th. 157a5-6). Indeed, if both the soul and the body are able to act and to be acted upon, they turn out to be very plastic notions that should not necessarily be understood as entirely foreign to each other. This commonality between soul and body, though, does not explain how an immaterial entity sets the body in motion, or how a material entity is able to carry out a certain action on the soul.

---

10 Wong, 2007, p. 169-170. The serious problem for the anti-dualist (or what the dualist fails to explain) is how it is possible that the immaterial and the material can act upon each other (Gerson, 2003, p. 123).

11 The expression “common to soul and body” belongs to Plato (Phlb. 33a), although it is not present in the Phd.


13 This piece was written with the financial support of Fondecyt Project 1150067 (Chile).