CHAPTER 2

SOUL AND BODY

Much light is thrown on Plotinus’ view of the relation between body and soul by what he says about the various functions of the compound they form. It might therefore seem right to consider these first and then proceed to use the evidence so produced to reconstruct a picture of the nature of the compound. But this nature is such that a prior understanding of it is probably essential to a satisfactory examination of the compound’s activities.

Plotinus was a Platonist. He followed Plato in dividing existence into a sensible and an intelligible world. To this intelligible world man has access through the operations of his soul whose nature is akin to the intelligible, where alone it can act to the limit of its capacity. It follows that its union with the body cannot be a real union, but only an association. This will be seen to be the keynote of all Plotinus’ psychology; it runs through all Neoplatonic thought, and so finds its way into the Neoplatonic commentators’ interpretations of Aristotle’s de Anima.

Some of the principles involved are brought out in Plotinus’ criticisms of his predecessors, so that it may be helpful to start by looking at these. But before doing so it should be noted that the very question “how is soul related to body?” is not as straightforward as it seems.

1 This is obvious. It must not be taken to mean that Plato was a Neoplatonist. Attempts to read Plotinus into the dialogues, such as those of C. J. de Vogel, e.g. in her articles “On the Neoplatonic character of Platonism and the Platonic character of Neoplatonism”, Mind n.s. 62 (1953) 43–64, and “A la recherche des étapes précises entre Platon et le néoplatonisme”, Mnemosyne ser. 4.7 (1954) 111–22, are unsuccessful and misleading. For a criticism of such views in A. J. Festugière, Contemplation et vie contemplative selon Platon (Paris 1936) cf. Bréhier, “Platonisme et néoplatonisme. A propos du livre récent du P. Festugièrè”, REG 51 (1938) 489–98. The case for a neoplatonizing interpretation of some key passages in Plato has been restated by H. J. Krämer, Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Platonismus zwischen Plato und Plotin (Amsterdam 1964) passim, esp. 193ff.
We have already found it necessary to define soul in a special way. Coming to body we find that it is already a complex entity (IV.7.1.8-10), as are even simple bodies in so far as they consist of both matter and form (ib. 16f., cf. V.9.3.16-20): only pure matter is completely devoid of any of the form which all sensible substances have (II.4.5.3ff.). Such form comes from the lower powers of the world soul sometimes called φύσις (nature). So when we ask how soul is in the body we must remember that that body already has soul in a certain way (cf. VI.4.15.8ff.). The soul we are now to discuss is only that operative in the living being, above the level of mere body.

“And, in general, matters pertaining to the soul are wondrously different both from what men have assumed as a result of not investigating them, and from the easily available notions which they acquire from sense-data and which delude them by virtue of similarities.” (IV.6.3.71-4). The philosophers are clearly included in this censure. In the early treatise On the Immortality of the Soul (IV.7[2]) Plotinus passes under review a variety of theories about the nature of the soul. He begins with some general arguments against the view that the soul is any kind of body (IV.7.2). He argues that soul necessarily has life, so that this would have to be true of the body that one might claim is soul. It is not true of the elements, which always have life as something extraneous. Similarly any elements other than the usual earth, water, air and fire that have been put forward as even more basic constituents of these four, are described as mere bodies. And if none of these substances have life on their own account it would be ridiculous to claim that their coming together produced it. Those who do make this claim say that it does not apply to just any kind of combination or mixture, so that there must in fact be something that controls the mixture and is its cause. This would be soul. There would be no body of any kind without the presence of soul in the world: if it is a logos added

2 Sometimes it is more than just form that we receive from the world soul; see below 27ff.
3 Καὶ δῆλως τὰ περὶ φυχῆν πάντα φαινόμενα θαυμάστων ἄλλον τρόπον ἔχειν, ἡ ὥς ὑπειλήφα- σιν ὑπὸ τοῦ μὴ ἐξετάζειν ἄνθρωπος, ἡ ὥς πρόχειροι κύτωσι εἰπολοκαὶ ἐξ αἰσθητῶν ἐγγίνοντα ἰδιομοιοτήτων ἀπατώσαι.
4 Much of the material in chapters 1–8 of this treatise is traditional. This does not, however, detract from the validity of the arguments for Plotinus. For a discussion of the tradition, in connection with a similar treatment in Nemesius, de Natura Hominis ch. 2, cf. H. Dörrie, Porphyrios’ "Symmikta Zetemata" (Munich 1959) 111ff.
5 Some similar arguments, against soul as a combination of elements, appear in a compressed form at II.9.5.16–21: they are there aimed at Gnostics.