SOUL IN THE CHARMIDES: AN EXAMINATION OF T.M. ROBINSON'S INTERPRETATION

Richard Hogan

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Abstract:

T.M. Robinson, in Plato's Psychology, concludes that an examination of the Charmides shows that soul is (1) a cognitive principle, (2) a moral principle, (3) to be equated, together with the body, with the self or person, (4) related to the body by "mutual entailment." I argue that (4) is not implied by the text and that Robinson's interpretation rests upon illegitimately pressing an analogy presented therein, and that even if the analogy could be pressed, that Robinson's view (which seems to embody a confusion over the nature of 'entailment') would still not be defensible. I argue further that (3) depends upon an unjustifiable equation of 'self' with 'whole man.' I accept (and present additional evidence for) (1) and (2) as true of soul in the sense I take to be implied by the text. But the evidence for (1) and (2) further damages Robinson's claims (3) and (4).
In this paper I wish to re-open the question of the evaluation of the evidence concerning the nature of the soul and its relation to the body which is presented in Plato's *Charmides*. I proceed by way of a critical examination of a recent interpretation.

In Chapter 1 of *Plato's Psychology*¹ ("The Socratic Dialogues"), T.M. Robinson examines the notion of 'soul' (ψυχή) as it emerges from *Charmides* 156Dff. His study leads him to the following conclusions:

1. The 'soul' is a cognitive principle (p.7)
2. The 'soul' is a moral principle (p.7)
3. "...any talk of the self or person involves talk about both body and soul..." (p.8)
4. The relation between body and soul is one of mutual "entailment" (p.8)

I will attempt to show that (4) is not implied by the text, and that (3) depends upon an unjustified equation of 'self' with 'whole man.' I accept (1) and (2) as true of 'soul' in the sense I take to be implied by the text. But the evidence for (1) and (2) further damages Robinson's claims (3) and (4). I begin with (4), the most controversial of Robinson's theses.

I.

The relevant text is *Charmides* 156D6-157B1:

The Thracian said that the Greek physicians were right to speak in the way I have just described. But Zalmoxis, he said, our king who is a god, says that just as one should not undertake to cure the eyes without curing the head, nor the head without the body, one should also not undertake to cure the body without the soul. This is why many diseases elude the Greek physicians, for they neglect

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¹University of Toronto Press, 1970. The book is an attempt, in the author's words, "...to fill what seems to be an important gap in current literature on the philosophy of Plato." (p.vii) It is largely due to the truth of Robinson's diagnosis that I think it is important to dispute an interpretation which, in my opinion, would fill the 'gap' mistakenly.
the whole (τοῦ ἅλλον)² which they should make their
concern, for if it is not well, the part can never be.
For all things, he said, flow from the soul, both the
good and evil of the body (τοῦ ἅλλον) and of the
whole man (τοῦ ἅλλον τῶν ἀνθρώπων)³ and overflow from
it as from the head into the eyes.⁴ Thus it is necessary
to treat this first and foremost, if both the head and
the rest of the body (τοῦ ἅλλον τῶν ἀνθρώπων) are to be well.
And the soul is treated, most fortunate one, he said,
by means of certain charms, and these charms are fair
words (ἀγάλλως ἀλλασμάτως). And from such words temperance
is produced in souls, which arising and abiding there
makes it easy to provide for the health both of the
head and the rest of the body (τοῦ ἅλλον τῶν ἀνθρώπων).⁵

²This passage is often brought into connection with Phaedrus 269-70
(Cf., e.g., Festugiere, Hippocrate: L'Ancienne Medecine, Etudes et
Commentaires IV, Paris: 1948, pp.64-5), where the interpretation of
τὸ ἅλλον and its implications regarding Hippocrates has been the source
of considerable controversy. (For a review of the main positions and
an exhaustive discussion of the literature on the problem, see R. Joly,
"La Question Hippocratique et la Témoignage du Phèdre," Revue des Etudes

³Cherniss ("The Sources of Evil According to Plato," reprinted in
Vlastos (ed.), Plato II, New York: Doubleday, 1971) cites this passage as
evidence for the claim that"...Plato does categorically declare that soul
is the cause of all good and evil in the phenomenal world." (p.252) But
note the qualifications in the text, i.e., "of the body and of the whole
man." This passage, then, does not seem to support a claim as strong as
that which Cherniss makes.

⁴The translation remains somewhat obscure, but the sense seems to be
that the soul is the source of good and evil for the body, just as the
head is for the eyes. Cf. Croiset (Bude edition), "comme la tête l'est
pour les yeux."

⁵My translation.
In this passage Socrates describes a conversation he once had with one of the Thracian physicians of Zalmoxis. After having promised to cure Charmides of his headache, he produces his advice on the authority of the foreign doctor. Just as one cannot satisfactorily cure the eye without the head, nor the head without the body, so also one cannot cure the body without the soul. From this piece of advice Robinson concludes that the conception of 'soul' here presented is a "mitigated monism" (p.14), and that 'body' is not excluded from 'soul', but rather that 'body' is an integral and inalienable 'part' of the 'soul', which, in turn, is equated with the 'self' or 'person.' (p.8) The relationship between 'soul' and 'body', furthermore, is analogus to and is illustrated by both the relationship between the body and head and that between 'convex' and 'concave.' (p.6) There is no question here of a "ghost" or "duplicate" theory and no question of the possibility of disembodied existence for the 'soul.' (p.6) I examine Robinson's arguments for this view, commenting on them as they are presented.

Robinson begins:

If the Thracian doctor's language is meant to be anything like exact, the relationship of soul and body is clearly not one of simple numerical addition, the combination equalling the 'self' or 'whole man.' The key to the relationship (and to the concept of the soul itself) seems to be the phrase 'because they disregard the whole.' This 'whole' could conceivably refer to two things: (a) the whole body; (b) the whole man, that is, body and soul combined. (p.5)

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6 Herodotus (IV, 94-96) tells us that Zalmoxis was a Thracian slave of Pythagoras, according to legend. Obtaining his freedom, he returned to Thrace where he taught the doctrine of immortality. In proof of his contention, he supposedly hid himself in an underground chamber for three years and, when he emerged, claimed that he had been in the other world. Cf. Guthrie, The Greeks and Their Gods, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), pp.174-6.
It seems obvious that (a) cannot be intended. 'The whole' is mentioned (156E4) as opposed to 'the part' (E6), where the context makes clear that 'the part' is the body. It seems, then, that (b) is the intended sense.

This, Robinson supposes, indicates that Socrates is here advancing a theory of the psycho-somatic aetiology of disease. "This, if true, is a piece of medical insight antedating a great deal of supposedly modern findings in the field of psychology..." (p.5) Cf. W.H.S. Jones, Philosophy and Medicine in Ancient Greece (Supplement of the Bulletin of the History of Medicine, No.8, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1946): "...the thoughtful reader is simply astounded by its [the theory's] modernity, which makes him wonder how such a profound scientific thought could be born at such an early period in the history of research [sic] ...Strictly speaking, of course, this statement is not true; aspirin, without psycho-analysis, will cure (or at least relieve) most headaches. But the principle (or principles) involved, that successful treatment of disease must not be limited to local symptoms, but must be based on a knowledge of the real cause or causes, physical or psychological, is of fundamental importance and profoundly true...Here we have yet another example of a guess verified and found correct by modern research." (p.16) These statements seem misconceived for several reasons. On the one hand, they take Socrates language with a degree of literalness far beyond what seems to be intended, and in so doing appear to misunderstand the nature of the use of ancient medicine by philosophers. As Edelstein has put it, "The true contribution of medicine to philosophy, I venture to suggest, lies in the fact that philosophers found in medical treatment and in the physician's task a simile of their own endeavor. The healing of diseases, as well as the preservation of health, provided an analogy which served to establish the truth of philosophy; therein consisted the most fruitful relationship between ancient medicine and ancient philosophy...From the fifth century B.C., that is, from the time when the discussion of ethical problems became an integral part of philosophy, medicine propounded the doctrine that the body needs conscientious care if it is to perform its functions properly. Philosophy therefore found in medicine a basis for exhortation which appealed strongly to the Greeks." ("The Relation of Ancient Philosophy to Medicine," in Ancient Medicine: Selected Papers of Ludwig Edelstein, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1967, pp.350,361). The question of the adequacy of Edelstein's general view about the relation of Greek medicine and philosophy may be left to the specialists. It should be obvious, however, that his interpretation makes excellent sense in the context of the Charmides. The statements of Robinson and Jones also illustrate a common mistake made by commentators who compare ancient and modern 'science'; the almost total neglect of the differing theoretical backgrounds, procedures and assumptions underlying them. (Cf. Jones' talk of 'research').
But after having concluded that (b) is the sense implied by the passage, i.e., in Robinson's words, that the 'whole' referred to means "the whole man, that is, body and soul combined," he proceeds to argue that "...in this context, 'soul' and 'the whole man' appear to be interchangeable terms." (p.5) That is to say, (b), which referred to body and soul combined, gives way to 'soul' alone. Now it is the latter which is equated with 'the whole man."

If the Thracian doctor's language means anything at all, soul is to body as head is to eye, or body is to head. The analogy, if seriously meant, is a startling one, and would compel us to see soul as the 'whole' being, of which body is a 'part' (in some sense of the word 'part.') (p.5)

But let us examine the sense in which the doctor's analogy is to be taken. The language of the passage seems to imply exactly the content of Robinson's (b), i.e., that the 'whole man' is a combination of the 'body' and the 'soul', which are separable 'parts.' With a view to showing that this is not the case, Robinson seems to press the soul:body:body:head:eye analogy too far. It should be kept in mind that Socrates' report of the Thracian's remarks is given in a context where the primary concern is the 'healing' of the 'patient.' The remarks contain information relevant to the conduct of treatment and make no pronouncement upon the metaphysical relationship between the entities involved. All that is being pointed out is that there is a causal relationship between the state of the 'soul' and the physical health of the 'body', and that this relationship may be illustrated by that between the eye and the head or that between the head and the body. The passage implies that soul and body are 'the whole' which must be treated if 'the part' (i.e., the 'body') is to be well, but does not imply anything about the ontological status of either nor about the nature of the relationship between them, except that it is causal (in a medical sense). It is certainly not implied that the 'soul' is 'the whole' of which the 'body' is a 'part.' Nothing is said which would prevent us understanding that the 'soul' could exist independently of the 'body', although it is indicated that the 'living body' is dependent for its health on the 'soul.' The 'soul' forms, in conjunction with the 'body', the 'whole man.' That this interpretation is correct may be confirmed, I believe, from a closer examination of the text. (1) 156E1-2:
This passage gives a recommendation about medical treatment and does not imply that an analogy is being drawn between any further aspect of the relationship produced for illustration.

The 'whole' here seems to consist of body plus soul. It is contrasted with the 'body', which is its 'part.' Naturally if this whole is not well, the 'part' (i.e., the 'body') is unlikely to be. That the 'soul' (= 'soul' with 'body' as 'part') cannot be intended is shown by what follows.

Here we have the implication that there are three different 'things' in question: (a) the 'soul', (b) the 'body', (c) the 'whole man.' All that seems to be implied here is that they are different and that there is a causal relationship between (a) on the one hand, and (b) and (c) on the other. It is further implied that the good and evil of the body are not necessarily identical with the good and evil of 'the whole man.'

This suggests that the relationship between the health of the soul and that of the body is similar to the relationship between the health of the head and that of the eyes. But nothing is said that would necessitate, or even suggest, applying the analogy to the metaphysical relationships between these entities.

Here again it seems that 'soul' and 'body' are different. We are told only that we must care for the 'soul' if the 'body' is to be well. There is a relationship between 'soul' and 'body', but we are told no more about it than is necessary to know in order for treatment to commence.

In spite of this, Robinson wishes to press the analogy, here given plainly only as a piece of ethico-medical advice, in order to extract metaphysics.

...the eye and the head can no doubt be viewed as two substances, but the former only has meaning when seen in terms of the latter; and the same can be said of the substances head and body. In either case, the former is seen to depend on the latter for being an intelligibility. Similarly with the relationship of body and soul: body is part of soul, and to deny it the 'broader context' of soul is as absurd as to treat the head as a subsistent whole without reference to the living body of which it forms an inalienable part. On this analysis, to say that the 'person is the sum total of body plus soul is as absurd as to say that head equals eye plus head or that body equals head plus body. (pp.5-6)
He continues:

The attempt to 'add up' head and body or eye and head is to fall into a category mistake...Similarly with attempts to 'add up' body and soul. They may both be substances, in some sense of the word 'substance' but the first is dependent on the second in a way that other substances are not. If this is true, we seem to be precluded from taking the soul as some sort of ghost or duplicate enjoying substantial existence in addition to the body; one cannot cut away the body it seems, and find oneself left with a complete psychic substance qualifying for the name of the person or the 'real self.' (p.5-6)

I have argued that the analogy cannot be pressed on the issue of metaphysical status. Nevertheless, even if the analogy could legitimately be taken as throwing light upon the metaphysical relation between 'soul' and 'body', Robinson's conclusion would still not be substantiated. This can be shown by examining Robinson's remarks about "entailment", which appear to embody considerable confusion.

Robinson writes:

Nowhere had it been affirmed that the soul is both the principle of cognition and the 'total' self, a being entailed in any affirmation that such-and-such is a living body as an eye functioning as an eye entails a head. (p.8)

And,

Head and body entail each other as concave does convex, and the same can be said of body and soul. (p.6)

But of course this last claim is not correct. If it makes any sense at all to talk of a head 'entailing' a body, this is surely a different sense from the one in which concave 'entails' convex. The relation between a (functioning) body and a (functioning) head is that one is physically necessary for the other. The relation between concave and convex, on the other hand, is a quite different one. Concavity and convexity analytically imply each other, in the same sense that being a brother implies being a male sibling. Given our concepts of concavity and convexity, it is necessarily true that something is concave if and only if it is convex. But the relationship between (functioning) heads and (functioning) bodies is contingent.

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8On p.8, Robinson states his conclusion using the word "entailment", and calls the relation "philosophically more respectable" than the "crude one of numerical addition and subtraction. The use of the term "entailment" as well as such expressions as "ghost" and "category-mistake" prepare the reader for the inevitable. But this aura of suggestion becomes concrete only in the convex-concave example, to be presently discussed.
Washington Irving's Headless Horseman is a biological, not a logical, freak. So, if the relationship between the head and the body be taken as providing material for a characterization of that between the 'soul' and the 'body' (as I have argued it should not be), we would still have no warrant for ruling our dualism. It is perfectly possible that 'soul' and 'functioning body' might stand to each other in the relation of 'necessary condition' while still being 'separable' in some sense which does not involve the commission of a category mistake.

Robinson's examples and language lead to the suspicion that he has mistakenly supposed that the analogy between the head and body and soul entitled him to conclude that there was a relation of 'entailment' between body and soul in the sense envisioned by some recent British theory of mind. This sense is (very roughly) that having a mind 'necessarily' entails having a body, because the former is equatable with certain types of behavior of the latter. But of course this sense is not suggested by Socrates' examples, which neither illustrate any 'logically' or 'conceptually' necessary relations, nor any which imply the impossibility of dualism.

One further point seems to tell against Robinson's thesis. After reviewing the examination of the concept of 'soul' in the early dialogues, he concludes that in the Protagoras we find a view of soul which completely excludes the body, in the Aicibiades I and Gorgias we also find that the soul excludes the body, although "...at least body is seen to have a 'special relationship' with soul not shared by other possessions." (p.20) In addition, there is the 'Orphic'-style view, (Gorgias, Meno) with its soma-sema picture and the familiar (at least to reader's of Plato's middle dialogues) doctrine of immortality, etc. (p.20). What all these views have in common, obviously, is that they are variations on a theme, and that theme is dualism, the claim that the soul and the body are ontologically independent. But the Charmides with its "mitigated monism" is supposed to provide an exception. Even if it were true that "...the Charmides suggests a fruitful and sophisticated approach to the problem of soul and body..." (p.8), its uniqueness in the face of the consistent dualism of the other early dialogues would need a good deal of explaining. And to assert that "...it seems that Socrates (or Plato) either failed to see its implications or, seeing them, rejected them for an alternative view, or perhaps a number of alternative views" (p.8) does not supply a plausible explanation. It seems much more reasonable to suppose, as I have tried to argue, that this view is not implied by the text at all.

II.

Robinson holds that 'soul' (in his sense, i.e. including 'body') is equatable with 'whole man,' which is, in turn, equatable with the 'self' or 'person'.

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9Cf. Ryle, The Concept of Mind (1949), Passim. It has been suggested to me (by an anonymous referee) that Robinson's discussion is here inspired by the Aristotelian doctrine of De Generation Animalium 726b22, that e.g., a hand is really a hand only in the context of a living body. But while this may be so with regard to the relation between the eye and the head, and the head and the body, the convex-concave example surely illustrates a very different relation.
...the phrase 'the entire man' (πᾶς ὁ ἅγιος) can only mean 'the person' or 'the whole man' in the sense we have already seen—that is, the 'soul'.

For the Socrates of the Charmides...the self is apparently the whole man (156E7-8), of which body is an integral and inalienable part. (p.8)

I have already argued that 'soul' is not to be identified with 'whole man' in the way which Robinson suggests. Assuming then, that 'whole man' is equivalent to 'soul' + 'body', is there any evidence that it is to be equated with 'self'; or 'person'? That is, does the Charmides furnish evidence for including 'body' as part of the 'self'? ('Self' here means, at least minimally, the seat of cognitive and moral activity).

(a) There is no explicit equation made or hinted at, between 'the whole man' and 'self'.

(b) The evidence which will later be cited to show that soul is a moral principle and an intellectual principle is situated in a context in which 'soul' is contrasted with 'body'. (cf. III.)

Thus, although nothing is stated here explicitly on the question whether the 'whole man' (= 'soul' + 'body') is the 'self', there is some presumption that it is not, but that the soul, sans body, is the 'self'. This presumption is strengthened by the conception unmistakable indicated by other early dialogues (e.g. Protagoras 313A1-C3) in which the 'soul' is equated with the 'self' and contrasted with the body.10

We seem left, then, in the Charmides with the distinction between 'soul', 'body', and 'whole man', and with some presumption that the 'self' is not to be equated with the 'whole man,' but rather with the 'soul'. This is further confirmed by what follows.

III.

Robinson holds that 'soul' (in his sense) is an intellectual and moral principle in the Charmides. I will argue that 'soul' is an intellectual and moral principle, but that the passages which imply that it is further imply that 'soul' is contrasted with the body.

Speaking of the employment of κυλεύ λόγοι, "the 'charms'

10 Cf. Robinson's discussion, pp.8ff.

11 'Robinson translates κυλεύ λόγοι as 'noble discourses.' I think that 'fair words' is better, since 'discourse' suggests that one person delivers a set speech to another. The sequel shows, however, that whatever κυλεύ λόγοι are, they cannot be restricted to one person talking or 'discoursing' to another. An essential part of the treatment, as Socrates' procedure shows, is that the patient himself participate in the production of the λόγος. If we look to what Socrates does in the dialogue it becomes clear that the κυλεύ λόγοι are words which transpire during the process of elenchtus. (This is confirmed at the end of the dialogue when Critias suggests that Charmides be further 'charmed' by Socrates). The elenchtus, which consists of λόγοι is κυλεύς because if it is conducted aright, it is a propaedeutic to temperance which is a κυλεύ (cf. 159D11, 159D8, et passim)
which Socrates holds to be cure for the 'soul', Robinson writes:

...the affirmation of the ἄγω by the charmer and their acceptance by the soul which is charmed is clearly a process of learning, and thus an activity that can be qualified as 'intellectual,' even though it undoubtedly involves other processes besides. It can also be qualified as 'moral', since the soul, or person, as distinct from a cat or a cabbage, can not only see the meaning and implication of 'noble discourses,' but can be changed for the better by them. This is in line with comments already noticed in the Crito and Euthydemus, where it was made equally clear that soul is in some classifiable as an intellectual and moral principle. (p.7)

Further confirmation that the 'soul' in the Charmides is a moral principle, in the sense of being the seat of virtue, is supplied by 157A-B1: ἐκ θε ἄγος τῶν τολμῶν ἄγων ἐν τεῖτοι γιατι ἰδιωτικὰ ἐνεβίατεῖν, ἢ ἐνεβίασεν τῷ ποιότερῳ ποιῶν ἰδιωτικά ἰδιωτικά τινὲς ἰδιωτικά τινὲς. This passage states that it is in the soul, that temperance resides—temperance is a quality or condition of the soul, rather than, e.g., being an abbreviation for the doing of separate acts. Thus soul is the seat of moral qualities. But the passage also implies that soul and body are distinct. What is said is that if temperance resides in the one (the soul), then it will be easy to provide health in the other, i.e. in the 'body'.

That the 'soul' is viewed as an intellectual principle seems further confirmed by 157C7-D1: "ἐπερμανύ..." γέγονεν ἢ ἐν ἢ ἂν ἄλλας ἡ δομήν ἢ ἑκείνη τῷ ἀνδρὶ καὶ τῷ ἢ ἄλλου βολήν γενέσθαι.

Here it is implied that 'soul' and 'ἄνθρωπος' are to be equated. The treatment of the head must proceed by the prior treatment of the 'soul'. That 'ἄνθρωπος' is naturally substituted by Critias forthrightly shows how prevalent the intellectual nature of the soul was, at least among Socrates' circle. But notice again, that there seems to be an implied difference between the 'soul' and the head. Nothing is suggested that would induce anyone to think that the head, being part of the body, is ipso facto part of the soul.

The evidence that the 'soul' is a 'moral' and 'intellectual' principle does not imply, but seems to contradict, Robinson's thesis that intellectual and moral qualities are here ascribed to the 'self' or 'person', understood as having the body as "an integral and inalienable part." 14

12 Perhaps the best translation here is 'understanding' (Lamb.). cf. Croiset, 'esprit.'
14 The whole effect, in fact, of the preceding conversation (where the context is moral-intellectual in nature) is to set up a contrast between 'body' and 'soul'. When Cherephon praises Charmides' body (154D), Socrates replies (154D) that the boy will indeed be incomparable if he has one thing in addition—if his soul is well formed. Socrates then suggests that 'strip' him in this respect. Socrates' method of doing this is talking (διαφωνεῖν). (154E) cf. Socrates' promise to the Thracian (157B-C) never to use the remedy for the head before undertaking to cure the soul.
We conclude that the following scheme may be elicited from this passage in the *Charmides*. There are three entities, 'soul', 'body', and 'whole man,' the first two comprising the third as its 'parts.' There is a medical relation between the soul and the body. The soul is viewed as a moral and intellectual principle and is probably to be equated with the 'self'. Further than this, however, the dialogue does not permit us to go. In particular, there is no evidence that the relation between soul and body is one of 'entailment.' No matter how 'philosophically respectable' a relation 'entailment' may be, we may be sure that Socrates is not employing it in this context.

Richard Hogan
Department of Philosophy
Southeastern Massachusetts University
North Dartmouth, MA 02747