

Introduction to De anima

The ideas of the various Gnostic heretics seem to have resonated with people in the ancient world because they syncretized Platonic and Christian thought. For that reason alone Hermogenes, Valentinus and Marcion would have been a threat to Christianity. Were they not popular, and intellectually attractive, it is unlikely that Tertullian would have devoted so much ink and effort to fighting them.

The challenges from these heresies presented major problems for the Catholic church, in particular a church of martyrs like that in North Africa. If Marcion, Valentinus, Apelles, and the rest were correct, the Incarnation was a sham and Christ did not really suffer. If Christ did not suffer, why should a martyr?

Plato's ideas about the soul, laid out in the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus*, form crucial support for these heresies. In the *Phaedo*, Plato offers a theory in which the soul pre-existed the body and, in its existence in the spirit world, could apprehend the Forms and thus there possessed true knowledge while in that world. However, this knowledge was lost at birth:

“But the return to life is true, and the living come into existence from those who have died, and the souls of those who have died still exist...[and] if it is true that learning is, for us, nothing other than recollection, this would be impossible unless the soul that is in us existed somewhere before it took human shape.”
(Plato, *Phaedo*, 72d-e¹)

¹ ἀλλ' ἔστι τῷ ὄντι καὶ τὸ ἀναβιώσκεισθαι καὶ ἐκ τῶν τεθνεώτων τοὺς ζῶντας γίγνεσθαι καὶ τὰς τῶν τεθνεώτων ψυχὰς εἶναι...εἰ ἀληθὴς ἔστιν...ὅτι ἡμῖν ἢ μάθησις οὐκ ἄλλο τι ἢ ἀνάμνησις τυγχάνει οὐσα...τοῦτο δὲ ἀδυνάτον, εἰ μὴ ἦν που ἡμῖν ἢ ψυχὴ πρὶν ἐν τῷδε τῷ ἀνθρωπίνῳ εἶδε γενέσθαι. All references to the works of Plato are to *Platonis Opera*, ed., J. Burnet, vols. I-IV(Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1977). All translations are by the author of this paper.

From these ideas comes the conclusion that this material world is inferior to the world of the spiritual. This idea, running from Plato through the Neo-Platonists, was one of the pillars of Gnosticism and of Marcionism, and threatened the Catholic ideas about the Incarnation. Moreover, the ideas of rewards and punishments for the soul's behavior outlined in the *Timaeus*² were completely incompatible with Christianity. Finally, the eternity of the soul would have eliminated the need for salvation.

Tertullian, as he tells us at the beginning of *De anima*, had already written a treatise against Hermogenes on the origin of the soul³. However, that treatise had not dealt with all the issues that needed to be handled. Tertullian, therefore, sets out to kill two birds with one stone. He will attack the ideas of Plato and the Platonist philosophers⁴, the ideas by which the heathen are captured, and by which the faithful are lead astray by heretics.⁵ Tertullian's method for doing so will require him to lay out his case as persuasively as he can. This requirement will mean that he must build a treatise that uses the forms and structures of classical rhetoric.

The following table attempts to create a detailed outline of *De anima*, in terms of its rhetorical structure and topical content.

² *Timaeus* 42b.

³ *De anima* 1:1. All Chapter:Section references refer to, and all Latin quotations are drawn from, Tertullian's *De anima*, ed. J.H. Waszink, *Corpus Christianorum Latinorum*, vol. 2 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1953-). English translations are the author's. The *Corpus Christianorum Scriptorum* will be abbreviated *CCL* hereafter. The *CCL* edition of *De anima* treatise will be abbreviated *De anima* hereafter.

⁴ In *De anima* Tertullian calls "Platonist" those philosophers who, at least generally, accept Plato's views on the soul. This paper will use Tertullian's classification. Modern scholars would probably call these philosophers "neo Platonist".

⁵ *De anima* 3:3 "ut et illa quibus ethnici a philosophia capiuntur...et haec quibus fideles ab haerisi concutiuntur".

Rhetorical and Topical Outline of De anima

Exordium

The first three chapters of *De anima* comprise the *exordium*⁶. Tertullian first declares that he will be jousting, mainly, with philosophers⁷. He considers, first, Socrates. He notes that the account of the soul given by Socrates in prison is hardly a disinterested exposition: Socrates is facing death, and thus can be expected to want to maintain his composure and comfort his friends. Tertullian asserts that truth can only come from God by revelation. It is better not to know God, if He does not reveal Himself, than to know about God through human presumption.⁸

Tertullian considers other sources of knowledge, principally philosophy. He acknowledges that philosophers occasionally hit upon the truth.⁹ However, no one ought to investigate farther than that which has been said by God, because what God has said is everything: “Porro non amplius inueniri licet quam quod a deo discitur; quod autem a deo discitur, totum est.”¹⁰

⁷ “nunc ad reliquas conuersus quaestiones plurimum uidebor cum philosophis dimicaturus” (*De anima* 1:1)

⁸ *De anima* 1:6.

⁹ *De anima* 2:1.

¹⁰ *De anima* 2:6.

Next he considers the question “why does heresy exist”, the same question that will be considered in detail in the first chapters of *De Praescriptione haereticorum*. Tertullian asserts that philosophers are the patriarchs of heresy.¹¹ He also asserts that philosophy would “blackmail”¹² the truth: “siquidem et ab apostolo iam tunc philosophia concussio ueritatis prouidebatur.”¹³

Tertullian sarcastically notes that Christian doctrine suffers because it comes from Judea, not Greece, and was spread by fishermen instead of sophists.¹⁴ The exordium concludes at the end of Chapter 3, with a mention of his earlier work against Hermogenes on the origin of the soul. Tertullian now wishes to move on to other questions.

Narratio and Propositio

The *narratio* explains the nature and background of the case that Tertullian will make. Tertullian summarizes what he hopes to accomplish next in the first line of Chapter 4: “Post definitionem census quaestionem status patitur. Consequens enim est, ut ex dei flatu animam professi initium et disputaremus”.¹⁵ If the soul comes from the breath of God, it has a beginning. Plato, on the other hand, would have it be unborn and unmade, that is, fully eternal.¹⁶

¹¹ *De anima* 3:1.

¹² Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, definition of *concussio*, definition 2, p. 406. Tertullian also uses the word in *Ad Scap.* 4, which is the citation for this definition.

¹³ *De anima* 3:1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:3.

¹⁵ *De anima* 4:1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Plato's idea is a problem for Tertullian, because its eternality would put the soul on par with God. Tertullian is here practicing a technique called "innoculation", in which the most potentially damaging piece of evidence against the author's case is brought forward early, and dealt with expeditiously. Tertullian deals with this problem, and strikes his first real blow at Plato, by bringing forward a number of Stoic philosophers who assert the soul's corporality. He cites, specifically, Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus and Lucretius.¹⁷

The following arguments are given: the corporality of the soul is shown by the fact that death results when the soul leaves the body [Zeno]; family likenesses include characteristics of both soul and body [Cleanthes]; only a body can touch and be touched [Lucretius]; when the body deserts the soul, the body dies [Chrysippus]¹⁸.

The *narratio* uses only pagan sources to refute Plato, and to prepare the ground for Tertullian's thesis, which is presented in one succinct sentence at the end of Chapter 5: "Therefore, the soul is body, since, if it were not corporeal, it could not desert the body".¹⁹

¹⁷ *De anima* 5:1-6.

¹⁸ *De anima* 5:6.

¹⁹ *De anima* 5:6: "Igitur corpus anima, quae nisi corporalis corpus non derelinquet."

Confirmatio: Origin, Nature and Faculties of the Soul

The discussion Tertullian's *confirmatio* in *De anima* will demonstrate his use of a "tripod" to support his arguments: philosophy, Scripture, and medicine. He will not allow any of his assertions to be supported only by Scripture, but uses it as a secondary support. This technique allows Tertullian to address both pagan and heretical objections in terms that pagans and heretics can accept.

Chapters 6-10: Contra Platonem

Chapters 11-16: Taxonomy of the Soul

Chapters 17 and 18: Heretical Objections

Chapters 19-21: Development of the Soul

Chapter 22: Summary of the Confirmatio

Refutatio

Barnes states²⁰ that it would be natural to follow the summary what Tertullian has proved with a peroration. He attributes the fact that Tertullian continues for another 36 chapters to a perception of fragility in Tertullian's argument thus far.²¹ Barnes calls what follows, that is, Chapters 23-57, an "amplificatio".

Barnes' logic is suspect for four reasons. First, these chapters constitute the majority of the work. They do not appear to be an after-thought. Second, the topics discussed in them are mainly objections that heretics might advance against Tertullian's thesis. This choice of topics contrasts with the topics of the *confirmatio*, as we have seen, which are focused on pagan philosophy in general and on Plato in particular. Third, where Platonic ideas are discussed (for example, anamnesis and metempsychosis),

²⁰ Barnes, p. 207.

²¹ Ibid.

Tertullian will frame the problems in terms of the roots of heresy. Fourth, in Chapters 23-57 Tertullian will use, primarily, philosophy and medicine as tools in his arguments, since the heretics would not accept his Scriptural canon, and since he does not believe that heretics have any right to Scripture.

All these factors lead to the conclusion that the primary intended audience of *De anima* is heretic, not pagan, and what has been discussed in the *confirmatio* is simply preparation for the ideas he will now introduce. For these reasons, Chapters 23-57 are better termed a *refutatio* whose purpose is to refute objections that his true opponents, the heretics, might make. This large section is the true heart of *De anima*.

Chapters 23-24: Introductory Attack on Anamnesis

Chapters 25-27: Origin of the Soul and Attack On Metempsychosis

Chapters 28-35: Additional Refutations of Metempsychosis

Chapters 36-41: Properties of the Soul

Chapters 42-49: Discussion of Sleep

Chapters 50-57: Death

Peroratio

The concluding chapter of *De anima* treats the status and fates of souls waiting in Hades for the final judgment through a dialogue with an imaginary interlocutor.²² The theme in this series of questions is that souls *should* receive a foretaste of their final reward or punishment. The soul cannot, by nature, remain static, so must stay in motion in Hades. In addition, it would be quite unfair for the evil to fare well in Hades, while the good worry about their ultimate fate.²³ The soul, moreover, is capable of sinning without the aid of the body, as Christ Himself pointed out in Matthew 5:28.²⁴ Therefore, it does not have to wait to be reunited with the body for punishment to begin.²⁵ This point, Tertullian notes, has been stressed by the Paraclete.²⁶

To conclude the treatise, Tertullian makes two related points. First, “necessariae curiositati satisfacimus”²⁷, that is, “we have satisfied the necessary curiosity”. This curiosity, as discussed in *De Praescriptione haereticum*, is that which stops seeking after it has found.²⁸

²² An example of *contrapositio*, as noted in *Barnes* p. 208.

²³ *De anima* 58:3.

²⁴ *De anima* 58:6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *De anima* 58:8: “Hunc etiam paracletus frequentissime commendavit.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ See the previous discussion of *De Praes. haer.* Chapter 11.

Second, and finally, that curiosity that is extravagant and idle will still lack information.²⁹ This self-willed curiosity is Tertullian's idea of the motivation of heretics. The closing slap against heretics reinforces the impression that the real target for this treatise is the heretic. The destruction of the claims of philosophers in the *confirmatio* of *De anima* is intended to cut down the intellectual scaffolding that supports heresies.

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²⁹ *De anima* 58:8.

