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Antiquity Revisited: A Discussion with Anthony Arthur Long

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Abstract

*A discussion on antiquity with Anthony A. Long, one of the most distinguished scholars in the field of ancient philosophy, would be engaging in any case. All the more so, since his two recently published works, *Greek Models of Mind and Self* (2015) and *How to be Free: An Ancient Guide to the Stoic Life* (2018), provide the opportunity to revisit key issues of ancient philosophy. The former is a lively and challenging work that starts with the Homeric notions of selfhood, and leads the reader all the way*

through classical and Hellenistic philosophical psychology; the latter is a profound analysis of the Stoic ethics that focuses in particular on its foundation and principles, followed by Long's re-worked translation of Epictetus' *Encheiridion* and carefully selected parts of his *Discourses*. Anthony Long kindly accepted the invitation to discuss several issues that are in the core of scholarly concern, sharing interpretations and thoughts that originate from his long acquaintance with the ancient literary tradition.

Key-words: antiquity; Stoic ethics; Homer; Plato; Aristotle; soul; polis; philosophical psychology; freedom

I. Homer revisited

Despina Vertzagia: Taking into consideration their diametrically opposed ontological and psychological background, to what extent would it be promising to compare Homer's and Plotinus' views on the immortality of the soul? For example, in the instance from *Odyssey*, where Plotinus claims that Hercules is portrayed as having "bifurcated identity," his "divine essence" doesn't seem to "focus on the life of the mind" inasmuch as Hercules "takes

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delight in feasting with gods."^{1, 2} Could you please explain which is the common place between Plotinus and Homer?

Anthony A. Long: The common point between Homer and Plotinus is simply the notion that a human soul (e.g. the soul of Hercules) can be in Hades after death as a shade, and simultaneously enjoy a divine immortal existence. However, Plotinus states at *Ennead I* [6.8] that Hercules was not a contemplative person; that is why only a part of him is with the gods. Plotinus clearly liked Homer's bifurcated Hercules, because he alludes to him again in *Ennead IV* [3.27]. There he uses the story of Odysseus's escape from Calypso, to illustrate his own recommendation to turn from physical beauty to spiritual beauty. Ancient philosophers often drew on

Homer metaphorically or playfully to align him with their own system, as Plotinus does here.

Despina Vertzagia: If we compare Aristotle to Homer, could we assume that Aristotle partially restores the Homeric tradition due to the fact a) that his psychology does not recognize a human soul independent of the body, nor does he speak of immortality and post-mortem survival of the soul, b) that his perception of politics and his conception of courage remind us of the Homeric man? In your opinion how 'Homeric' could Aristotle taken to be?

Anthony A. Long: Aristotle reveres Homer as a great poet and likes to quote him. In the ways your question indicates, they do share a "psychosomatic" view of human identity to some extent, but I don't think Aristotle saw himself as going back to Homer, but rather as rejecting Plato's dualism. The Homeric psyche leaves the body at death for Hades, but it does survive as a ghost. There is nothing like that in Aristotle. For Aristotle the psyche is "the form of the body"³ and the functioning of the living body. Homer never speaks of psyche in this way. His principal words for the mind are thumos and phrenes, which are not terms of Aristotelian psychology. As for politics and courage, I am not sure what Aristotle says that reminds you of Homeric man. Homer hardly talks about "politics," and I don't think he anticipates Aristotle's notion of courage as intermediate between rashness and timidity.

Despina Vertzagia: The memories or the words of the Homeric post-mortem "ghost"⁴ aren't products of thinking or cognition? And if not, what

¹ Homer, *Odyssey*, 11, 601-602.

² Anthony A. Long, *Greek Models of Mind and Self* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 19-20.

³ Aristotle, *De anima*, 2, 1, 412a20.

⁴ Long, *Greek Models of Mind and Self*, 30.





is their status, to the extent that their words actually have a meaning? And what about their instant “revival by blood?”⁵ Could we assume that it stands for a kind of embodiment or resurrection? What is the precise status of the post-mortem Homeric soul?

Anthony A. Long: The question about the status of the “post-mortem Homeric ghost” is very interesting. It is called an eidolon, i.e. an unsubstantial form or phantom. It has a shadowy existence, but it is not alive. It can appear as a dream, and talk to the dreamer, as the shade of Patroclus appears to Achilles.⁶ Odysseus revives the “souls” temporarily by giving them sacrificial blood to drink when they appear before him like vampire bats.⁷ Based on their responses to him, they are frozen in time. They have a past but no future; so they are not “resurrected” or re-embodied. Their words have meaning but their speakers are said to be “mindless.” Homer, however, is not a philosopher, and so his poems resist generalization or questions like “What is the precise status of these ghosts?” The shade of Teiresias is able to prophesy to Odysseus, and the hero converses with the shades of his mother, Agamemnon, and Achilles, as if they were temporarily with him as intelligent persons.⁸ Their words are needed to advance the story, but like all the shades they are mere ghosts, imaginary rather than real.

Despina Vertzagia: Is there a concept of justice in the Homeric corpus? Leo Strauss claims that philosophy, natural right and justice emerged due to the questioning of the primeval identification of the good with ancestral.⁹ As long as Homer is under the constellation of this notion, could we assume that there is a Homeric concept of justice?

Anthony A. Long: Yes. There is legal justice, requiring compensation for injury. It initiates Telemachus’s anger with the aggressive suitors in the *Odyssey*. On the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* a trial over homicide is depicted. Moral justice in Homer is what is socially approved or expected, with shame as its sanction. Homeric

persons are expected to take responsibility for their actions, and when they do not, they suffer consequences in the form of human and divine disapproval. I don't think that Strauss's views are applicable to Homer.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁶ Homer, *Iliad*, 23, 60ff.

⁷ Homer, *Odyssey*, 11, 146ff.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11, 388ff, and 11, 467ff.

⁹ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), 86.



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II. The dawn of the classical period

Despina Vertzagia: In the end of the chapter “Intimations of Immortality” you claim that “Heraclitus originated the ideal of the contemplative life.”¹⁰ Could you please elaborate on this?

Anthony A. Long: Heraclitus sought to interpret the Delphic maxim, “know yourself,” by challenging his listeners to reflect on life and death, and to use their minds to investigate the nature of things, both the external world and ourselves as thinking beings. That is what I mean by saying that he originated the ideal of the contemplative life.

Despina Vertzagia: Soul-body dualism emerges in its clear form through the conflict between rhetoric and philosophy, as you claim in the chapter “Bodies, Souls and the Perils of Persuasion.”¹¹ Could you provide some brief further justification for this claim?

Anthony A. Long: In Plato’s early works, notably the *Apology*, *Gorgias*, and *Phaedo*, Socrates draws sharp contrasts between body and soul. The contrast had been made before, but its philosophical significance emerges with great clarity when we read these texts alongside Plato’s account of the sophists Protagoras and Gorgias (who were experts in the art of persuasion) and Gorgias’s *Encomium of Helen*. Gorgias had proposed that souls are unable to resist powerful rhetoric or the charms of beautiful bodies. On this view souls are naturally weaker than bodies. That is the reverse of the Socratic recommendation to subordinate body to soul. Thus Plato’s dualism, with its elevation of rational soul over bodily desire, emerges as a major weapon in his focus on the perils of persuasion.


III. Plato and Aristotle on the soul and the polis

Despina Vertzagia: In the Preface of your *Greek Models of Mind and Self* you make reference to David Furley’s advice that you should write a paper on Plato’s psychology without even mentioning the word soul.¹² Could you elucidate on the reasons why you constantly refer to Furley’s advice?

Anthony A. Long: The word “soul” has very different connotations in modern English from those of psyche in ancient Greek philosophy. Modern English speakers use the term “soul” chiefly to refer to the

¹⁰ Long, *Greek Models of Mind and Self*, 85. ¹¹ Ibid., 88-124.

¹² Ibid., xiii.



emotional aspect of human nature (hence we speak of “soul” music) as distinct from rationality, or we may use “soul” to express the essence of something (saying, for instance, “she is the soul of discretion”). In Greek thought psyche refers primarily to the principle of biological life (hence Aristotle discusses psyche in his writings on nature), including the life of animals and even plants. In the case of animals psyche includes emotion, perception and desire, in the case of human beings it includes thought as well, and in all living creatures it is the source of metabolism and reproduction. By recommending us not to use the word “soul” in our essays on Plato, Professor Furley wanted his students to understand that Plato was exploring the foundations of human identity, not starting from an agreed sense of the meaning of psyche. When Plato writes about “immortality of psyche,” it’s OK

to say “immortality of soul” because we do use the word “soul” to refer to a human being’s spiritual identity. But psyche is also Plato’s word for “mind,” and we don’t say “immortality of mind.” There is no exact equivalent to ancient Greek psyche in modern science or philosophy of mind.

Despina Vertzagia: You argue that Aristotle is an exception to the philosophical background of his time to the extent that he doesn’t perceive the soul as a thing assigned in “a definite location within the body,” or within the universe.¹³ a) Do you believe that in Plato’s view the soul is extendible? And if not, to wit if Plato’s soul is just independent and separable from the body, b) how would you interpret Aristotle’s controversial reference to the active mind (nous poiêtikos) in *De anima* [III, 5]. Is this just a “Platonic slip” of Aristotle?

Anthony A. Long: According to Plato the psyche is an incorporeal substance. In the *Timaeus*, however, he gives the three parts of psyche bodily locations – brain, heart, and belly¹⁴ – but psyche is not extendible in the sense that you could measure its size or divide it up. I don’t think that Aristotle’s “active intellect” is a “Platonic slip,” as if Aristotle had forgotten his notion that the soul is the form of the body.¹⁵ Just as actual objects outside the body are needed to activate perception, so (Aristotle reasons) an active (poiêtikos) intellect is needed to activate the embodied mind’s capacity to think. Aristotle’s philosophy of mind depends upon the notion that our embodied mind requires an external intellect that is already thinking, so as to actualize its own potentiality. My response is of course much too brief to do full justice to Aristotle’s idea.

¹³ Ibid., 24.

¹⁴ Plato, *Timaeus*, 69e3-71b1.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *De anima*, 2, 1, 412a20.





Despina Vertzagia: Unlike Aristotle, Plato gives priority to the intellectual rather than the ethical function of the soul.¹⁶ Do you think that for Plato the intellectual is more important because it is a presupposition of the ethical, or both are perceived as completely identical functions of the soul?

Anthony A. Long: For both Plato and Aristotle, knowledge of changeless truths is the highest activity of the soul. The difference between them turns on the fact that, for Plato, such knowledge includes the spheres of ethics and politics, whereas for Aristotle these are branches of “practical” knowledge and not “pure science.” For Plato, then, ethical understanding has a theoretical/mathematical basis (knowledge of the Forms). In Aristotle moral virtue depends on a combination of good habits and making the correct moral choices.

Despina Vertzagia: In the beginning of the chapter “The Politicized Soul and the Rule of Reason” you claim that Plato “was not committed to a single model of the mind/body relation and the structure of human identity.”¹⁷ Is it the tripartite theory of the soul that you have in mind? In your opinion, is it a different model that Plato provides in regard to the relation between the soul and the body, or just an elaboration of the ‘mind-and-body-distinction’ theory? And where could the body be ‘located’ in that context? Could we assume that it (the body) is identical with the appetitive part of psyche?

Anthony A. Long: As I explain at the end of my book’s third chapter, Plato revised the extreme body/soul dualism of the *Phaedo*.¹⁸ In that dialogue appetites are described as functions of the body. In the tripartite model (see *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and *Timaeus*) appetites are functions of the soul. In this model, the soul (or the ego) is the agent of all desires; so you can’t just say: “O, it was my body that made me do that greedy or lustful thing. No, it was I myself who did it because I wanted to.”

Despina Vertzagia: You claim that Plato possibly “was not completely committed to the literal immortality of individual souls.”¹⁹ Is this doubt of yours based exclusively on *Timaeus* [90b-d], or is immortality of the soul in general a secondary

issue for the Platonic psychology in your view? Is the theory of the immortality of the soul an enlarged allegory?

Anthony A. Long: In the *Symposium*, immortality is presented as the object of all mortal creatures' erotic desire to procreate. Being mortal, they cannot live forever, so they beget offspring as surrogates. There is no

¹⁶ Long, *Greek Models of Mind and Self*, 121. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.



mention here of the soul's immortality. I think Plato would like to believe in that, but I don't think he proves it to his own satisfaction. Where he dwells on it at length in the *Phaedo*, its literal truth seems less important than the philosophical soul's affinity to the eternal Forms as distinct from the body and physical objects.

Despina Vertzagia: It is commonly argued by scholars that the polis to Plato is an enlarged soul. But couldn't it be the other way around? That is, is it possible that Plato conceived the structure of the psyche as in accordance to some patterns of the polis?²⁰

Anthony A. Long: The *Republic's* analogy between the city and the soul has generated great scholarly discussion. I think the analogy works both ways. Socrates moves from the city's proposed three parts to the parts of the soul, but as I argue in my book, he politicizes the soul by distinguishing its proper ruler (reason) and its properly subordinate populace (appetites).²¹ So, I agree that his account of the soul's structure presupposes these political concepts.

Despina Vertzagia: Is the *Republic* a political dialogue? Aristotle argues that Plato's political thought is despotic, because Plato discusses the polis by exactly the same terms he uses to discuss the oikos.²² In your opinion, is Aristotle right in his view that Plato's political thought is despotic, or even authoritarian?

Anthony A. Long: Plato's political thought is unquestionably authoritarian, but authority in the *Republic* is based on reason's right to rule because only reason can organize the state so as to ensure the happiness of all. This sense of authority is not despotic in the modern sense of being simply based on power. Aristotle, however, thought that Plato was unduly committed to the unity and unification of the state as the condition of its stability.

Despina Vertzagia: In the chapter "The Politicized Soul and the Rule of Reason" you claim that reason in Plato has desires.²³ Does this also imply that Plato understands all the parts of the soul in terms of desire, or would such an inference be challenged as explaining Plato through Stoic lenses? Furthermore, in the case we assume that reason is in fact a rational and hence a noble desire, how is it possible, as Plato says, that reason is also used "for wrongful purposes?"²⁴

²⁰ Ibid., 150.

²¹ See Chapter 4: "The Politicized Soul and the Rule of Reason," in Long, *Greek Models of Mind*

and *Self*, 125-161.


²² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1, 1252a8-18. See also Plato, *Statesman*, 258e-259c. ²³ Long, *Greek Models of Mind and Self*, 140-141.

²⁴ Ibid., 141.



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Anthony A. Long: Plato uses the word *epithumetikon* to refer to the “appetitive” part of the soul that desires food, drink, etc. But he also, a bit confusingly, attributes desires to all parts of the soul: the rational part properly desires wisdom and the spirited part desires honour. So Plato does understand all parts of the soul in terms of desires. If people allow their appetites to govern their lives, they misuse reason by treating it instrumentally as the slave of their passions. As you rightly say, his giving desires to reason influenced the Stoic doctrine that passions are misjudgments by the rational faculty as distinct from irrational urges.

IV. Stoic Ethics

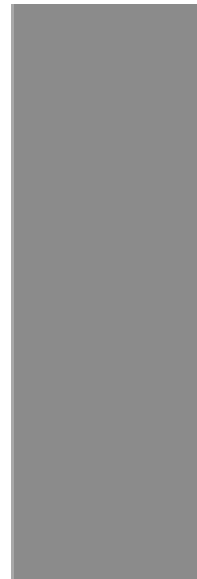
Despina Vertzagia: In both your *Greek Models of Mind and Self* and *How to be Free* you focus on the Stoic concept of assent (synkatathesis).²⁵ Do you think that this is a key concept for the psychology of the Stoics? What is its relation to the Socratic elenctic method?

Anthony A. Long: The mental function of assent (synkatathesis) is absolutely central to Stoic moral psychology. It signifies agency, decision, “going for something,” commitment, determination. It has an affinity to what Aristotle calls “deliberative desire” (bouleutike orexis)²⁶ and also to what Cicero and Seneca call voluntas. It is the ancestor of our notion of the “will.” Assent has a Socratic origin in the notion that our actions are always determined by what we accept as the best thing for us to do in our present circumstances. Thus Medea (the Stoics’ favourite example of moral error) mistakenly assented to the thought that killing her children was the best thing for her to do, and therefore she acted accordingly.

Despina Verzagia: In your *Hellenistic Philosophy*, in the “Stoic Ethics” chapter in particular, you dedicate a few lines to the concept of opportune or timely behavior and action.²⁷ Could you provide an explanation of this notion in the context of Stoicism? To what extent does this notion explain the Stoic attitude? Is it inconsistent with the stoic teaching that we should accept all events in life as they are?

²⁵ Ibid., 188; Anthony A. Long, *How to be Free: An Ancient Guide to the Stoic Life, Epictetus, Encheiridion and Selections from Discourses* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 123-135; 115. See also Anthony A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 91.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139a23. ²⁷ Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 206-207.





Anthony A. Long: The Stoics used the word *eukairos*²⁸ to describe their wise man's "timely" character and behavior. Chrysippus defined the Stoic goal of life as "living according to experience of natural events."²⁹ Such experience ideally equips people to be excellent judges of what it is appropriate or opportune for them to do by assessing their external circumstances, abilities and social roles and functions (duties). At the limit, you might need to decide, whether it would be better to die rather than to live. Epictetus gives copious examples of such "timely" behaviour. The essence of ancient Stoicism was not passively "accepting events as they are" (that is a modern distortion), but making best possible use of events: as Epictetus said with reference to Socrates, he always played the ball well, even in prison.³⁰

Despina Vertzagia: Since Stoic moral theory focuses on the integrity of the individual, would we be justified to consider it a self-centered ethics? How is the Stoic man related to the community and to the other? Is there any notion of altruism in the stoic moral universe, or is care for the family and the community just a reflection of instinctive self-preservation, as it is usually argued?

Anthony A. Long: All ancient ethical theories are "self-centered" in the sense that they recommend how to achieve *eudaimonia*, the best possible life for oneself. They are no less socially oriented because they all treat ethical excellence (*arete*) – courage, justice, etc – as either the most important ingredient of *eudaimonia* (Aristotle and Plato), or an essential instrument of *eudaimonia* (Epicurus), or entirely identical to *eudaimonia* (Stoicism). According to Stoicism, human beings are born with instincts both for self-preservation and for family and community life. In caring for other people, the ideal Stoic is also caring for herself, i.e. her own excellence as a virtuous person. She is motivated by the desire to activate her virtues because they are the basis of her living well and successfully. She is not altruistic in the sense that she acts for the sake of others instead of herself, or by sacrificing her own interest. In doing good to others and desiring so to act, she is simultaneously desiring and doing good for herself. There is of course, much more to say on this very big subject. Your readers might care to read what I have written in Chapter 7 of my book, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life*.³¹

²⁸ *SVF*, 3, 521.

²⁹ See for example *SVF*, 3, 5-6; 9-10. ³⁰ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1, 12.

³¹ Anthony A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 180-206.



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Despina Vertzagia: Health for the Stoics, and especially for Epictetus, is classified as a ‘preferred indifferent’ (adiaphoron), since it is not “up to us.”³² But it is a common ground that our health depends heavily on our life-style and nutrition choices and habits. To the extent that health is up to us, is it still morally indifferent?

Anthony A. Long: When the Stoics say that health is “a preferred indifferent” they mean that while we naturally prefer health to sickness, good health is not essential to living a good life: you can be a good and happy person even if you are a permanent invalid, and you can be a bad and unhappy person even if you have excellent health. The Stoics acknowledge the obvious fact that our state of health greatly depends on our life-style. Not only that, because good health is naturally preferable to sickness, it is incumbent on us to do everything possible to live a healthy life; otherwise we could not be living in agreement with our natural instincts. Trying to be healthy is morally correct for a Stoic. But the achievement of good health is morally indifferent because it depends on many things that are beyond our control.

Despina Vertzagia: What is the relation between “the Stoic model of mind and our own phenomenological experience,”³³ the comparison by which you conclude the last chapter of *Greek Models of Mind and Self*? How applicable is the Stoic model of life to a “disenchanted” world?

Anthony A. Long: The Stoic focus on the mind’s potential autonomy and inner freedom can be of great value today as we attempt to navigate the complexities of modern life. This is not simply my opinion. In the few years since I wrote *Greek Models of Mind and Self*, ancient Stoic writers, especially Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, have been enjoying an extraordinary renaissance as guides to life. Their teaching is incorporated in works on mindfulness, the search for meaning, self-help, and dealing with anxiety and other forms of mental trauma. What I myself want to emphasize most strongly, is Stoicism’s focus on human dignity and the mind’s emotional resourcefulness. Modern life imposes great strains on people, especially young people who are dealing with the difficulties of employment, personal relationships, and pressures on physical and mental health. While all too many people are victims of circumstances way beyond their control, Stoicism proves itself capable even in such cases of providing solace and inner strength. It challenges people to discover their privileged identity as the only animal with the capacity for self- determination.

³² Long, “Introduction,” in Long, *How to be Free*, xxvii-xxxv. ³³ Long, *Greek Models of Mind and Self*, 195.



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