The school of Hypatia and the problem of the gendered soul

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THE SCHOOL OF HYPATIA AND THE PROBLEM OF THE GENDERED SOUL

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It would be hardly an exaggeration to say that Hypatia is the most famous woman philosopher in antiquity and one of the more widely recognizable ancient philosophers in general. As the notoriety of her death turned the person into a legend, Hypatia became a stand-in figure in various, and often conflicting, discourses and narratives. For example, in the fierce argument between John Toland and Thomas Lewis in the eighteenth century, the former extolled Hypatia in order to criticize the church clergy, while the latter, in his attempt to refute Toland's criticisms of the church, chose to do so by attacking the figure of Hypatia.[1] The representations of Hypatia as a philosopher are just as variegated as the representations of her as a historical figure. By some she is lauded as a trailblazer and one of the most outstanding philosophers and/or mathematicians of her day, by others as someone hopelessly behind the contemporary innovations.[2] The reason for such diversity of readings is simply the lack of direct extant sources: hardly any actual works of Hypatia survive. Some of her mathematical writing is extant,[3] but no sources ascribe to her directly any specific philosophical views. Often, the main source for conjecturing Hypatia's views are anecdotes, but, as Edward Watts points out, these come from late sources, both temporally and culturally removed from Hypatia's lifetime.[4] A feasible reconstruction of Hypatia's views requires evidence from her immediate environment. In this chapter, I argue that the lack of evidence is not quite so dire and I explore the methods by which the views that circulated within Hypatia's school can be reconstructed.[5] These methods are illustrated by the case study, the problem of the gendered soul, which shows what the reconstruction of these views might look like.

1 Methodology

Hypatia is not the only philosopher from antiquity whose views are not extant. The same is true of, for example, Socrates and Pyrrho; neither of whom wrote any treatises. Many others have only fragmentary evidence, sometimes no more than a few lines of text. Yet Socrates' thought is studied extensively and Pyrrho, although a significantly less prominent figure, also has several works dedicated to the study of his thought and contribution to philosophy.[6] Although neither Socrates nor Pyrrho wrote any treatises themselves, their thought is studied via the works of their pupils. Hypatia had a large and thriving school, and there is no reason why her thought could not be studied through the works of her pupils too.

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One might object that the views circulating in the school are not necessarily identical to the views of the head of the school. While the distinction between the head of the school and the pupils can be pertinent in some cases, this is not always so and this potential pitfall can be taken into account quite easily. The ground for such an optimistic view is the possible scope of disagreements. While the members of the same school can and often do disagree on certain points, the degree of their differences is quite small compared to the differences with other schools. For example, while the Stoic Cleanthes and Chrysippus had slightly different takes on the post-mortal existence of the soul, they both agreed that the soul survives the separation of body,[7] unlike their rivals the Epicureans.[8] Even in more significant divergences, certain unifying features of the school remain; for example, although Aristo of Chios had a radical interpretation of the central Stoic tenet concerning the so-called indifferents,[9] the divergence from mainstream Stoicism was a matter of how to interpret this tenet, not a subscription to an entirely different view.[10] Thus, as long as the focus of the study is the key commitments and central tenets, the differences between individual members can be acknowledged without threatening the viability of the project in general. The current chapter is dedicated to one such general commitment and, as I will argue in more detail below, the philosophical problem will concern both Hypatia herself and her pupils equally, thus allowing us to look for a unified position of the school as a whole.

In addition to the sources that come directly from the school, I will also make use of supporting sources. In order to differentiate the significance and the reliability of the sources, I will use a fourfold division of the sources denoted as follows:

Type A: sources from the school;
Type B: philosophical tradition and affiliation of Hypatia's school[11];
Type C: the philosophical rivals, both historic and roughly contemporary; and
Type D: corroborating sources.

This division represents the connection with the school (and, thus, the reliability) of the sources in a descending way. Type A sources come from the school and therefore are directly representative of the views of the school. Types B and C represent the background against which the views of Hypatia's school ought to be understood. There is, however, a significant different between the two categories: while the Type B sources allow us to contextualize the views coming from the school (primarily by determining what influenced them and how these views differ from the tradition), Type C sources not only supply information about the polemical context but could also be potential sources of new fragments.

Polemical sources have proved to be some of the richest sources for reconstructing the views of Hellenistic schools (for example, the Stoics), and they could be equally informative with respect to Hypatia's school. Polemical sources have to be handled with care and the possible critical (mis)representations have to be taken into account, but these problems can be addressed by analysing Type C sources against the background of the A-type sources, thus ensuring that the readings can be corroborated by the texts coming from the school itself. Finally, the Type D sources are corroborating sources, primarily anecdotes and the accounts of the views of the school coming from significantly later sources. These texts are often quite far removed from the school itself but can nonetheless be useful for making comparisons or as corroborating evidence.

When combined together, all these types of sources present a multi-faceted and reliable reconstruction of the views of the school. In this chapter, I will use this methodology to reconstruct the view concerning the gendered soul. When citing sources, the letter in brackets

denotes the type of source, while the number is used simply to distinguish between different passages of the same type.

2 The Case Study: The Problem of the Gendered Soul

The problem, which, for the sake of this chapter, I call the problem of the gendered soul, is a well-known issue in Platonism post-Plato. It arises from a seeming inconsistency in the dialogues. In the *Meno* (73A) and the *Republic* (451C–457B), gender is said to be irrelevant to virtue.[12] In the *Timaeus*, meanwhile, people are said to be born women owing to moral failures in their previous lives (42B–C).[13] This inconsistency naturally leads to the question of whether there is any connection between the gender and the moral standing of the soul or not; in other words, whether the souls are gendered.[14] 'Gendering' is not meant in the sense that souls themselves are assigned female or male properties; instead, it can be understood as a moral indexing of the soul. Souls that exhibited one set of properties are indexed as 'male' and are matched with a male body, while souls that exhibit the other set of properties are indexed as 'female' and are matched with a respective body.

The inconsistency in the dialogues, which raises the problem of the gendered soul, is discussed extensively in the Platonist tradition. The Neoplatonists took different positions on this matter. For example, Dirk Baltzly showed how Theodore of Asine and Proclus adopted the opposite positions in regard to this problem.[15] A very similar debate also took place outside Platonism: nearly the same disagreement emerges in the different stances adopted by the Peripatetics and the Stoics.[16] This debate was, of course, not entirely divorced from Plato and the influence of Platonic texts.[17] Nevertheless, it is worth noting that these schools approach the issue as a philosophical problem in general, not as a matter of interpreting Platonic dialogues, like later Platonists do. At the same time, later Platonists might have been influenced by the way in which the Peripatos and the Stoa approached this problem,[18] and therefore, it is worth taking into account this layer of the tradition as well.

Thus, the problem of the gendered soul is a fairly substantial matter of contention by the time Hypatia's school was active, not only because of the disagreement in the Platonic texts but also owing to the attendant tradition that developed post-Plato. The problem acquires a greater urgency when considered by the school whose head was a woman. The claims in the *Timaeus* are especially problematic. It would have been difficult for Hypatia to assume authority and teach, if she maintained that being born as a woman is a result of moral failures in a previous life. More pertinently for the purposes of this chapter, the very same problem must have arisen for her pupils. If they subscribed to the view that there is a causal link between moral failure and being in a female body, why would they study under the female philosopher? This particular issue, therefore, is a fairly straightforward case of the unified commitment, that is, the stance that we can reasonably expect to be adopted by all the members of the school with no significant divergences.

Before delving into the sources, it is important to address one final methodological issue. Given the problems springing from claims made in the *Timaeus* for the members of the school, it might seem only natural to assume that they would adopt the position of the *Republic* and the *Meno* instead. However, it would be poor scholarly practice to start with the conclusion that seems fitting rather than suspending expectations and seeing what conclusion is revealed by the evidence. It is worth bearing in mind that what someone in Hypatia's position might have found acceptable/unacceptable regarding gender can be very different from what a contemporary person might think. Furthermore, the school could have reconciled the *Timaen* views with the fact that the head of the school was a woman by arguing that she is an

exception, a female with a male mind. For this reason, it is best to avoid starting with any assumptions that pose a risk of imposing bias onto this already complex material. This concern is especially pertinent in the case of Hypatia who has been used by various writers as a mouthpiece or a symbol for a wide variety of ideas and ideologies, as noted in the introduction. It is perhaps time to try and find the actual views of Hypatia and her school, whatever they may be.

Finally, the late antique philosophical traditions are notorious for syncretizing and finding reconciliation between even fundamentally different positions.[19] It would be reasonable not to assume that this school eschewed the position of one dialogue in favour of another. The ultimate position might very well be a combination of elements from both the *Republic*/ the *Meno* and the *Timaen* view. In the remainder of the chapter, I present a discussion of the central pieces of evidence, organized in accordance with the scheme explained above, and suggest some possible reading of the material pertinent to the question of how the members of Hypatia's school tackled the problem of the gendered soul.

3 The Reconstruction

The key starting point to reconstructing how Hypatia's school tackled the problem of the gendered soul is the account of the process by means of which the souls are assigned to bodies. There is nothing resembling the myth of Er in the fragments from Hypatia's school, but Synesius of Cyrene, probably the most prolific of Hypatia's pupils, supplies us with some pertinent information in his writings. He makes consistent claims about the generation of humans as ensouled bodies in several different works within his corpus, which suggests that his claims are underpinned by a single established theory. A section of Hymn 9 shows the process of emanation by means of which the human souls come to inhabit the material realm as follows:

> (A1) ὁ καταιβάτας ἐς ὕλαν νόος ἄφθιτος, τοκήων θεοκοιράνων ἀπορρώξ, ὀλίγα μέν, ἀλλ' ἐκείνων. ὅλος οὗτος εἷς τε πάντῃ, ὅλος εἰς ὅλον δεδυκώς, κύτος οὐρανῶν ἑλίσσει· τὸ δ' ὅλον τοῦτο φυλάσσων νενεμημέναισι μορφαῖς μεμερισμένος παρέστη, ὁ μὲν ἀστέρων διφρείαις, ὁ δ' ἐς ἀγγέλων χορείας· ὁ δὲ καὶ ῥέποντι δεσμῷ χθονίαν εὕρετο μορφάν· ἀπὸ δ' ἐστάθη τοκήων, δνοφερὰν ἤρυσε λάθαν, ἀλαωποῖσι μερίμναις χθόνα θαυμάσας ἀτερπῆ, θεὸς ἐς θνητὰ δεδορκώς. Ἔνι μάν, ἔνι τι φέγγος κεκαλυμμέναισι γλήναις· ἔνι καὶ δεῦρο πεσόντων ἀναγώγιός τις ἀλκά, ὅτε κυμάτων φυγόντες βιοτησίων, ἀκηδεῖς ἁγίας ἔστειλαν οἴμους πρὸς ἀνάκτορον τοκῆος.
>
> The undecaying Mind, descending to matter, broken off from the divinely ruling begetters, is small but a part of them. This one whole universal mind, this whole diffused into the whole, turns the vault of the heavens, and keeping guard upon this very whole is ever present, parted into shapes diverse. The one is the convoying of stars, another turns to the dances of angels, yet another has found an earthly form by a bond descending; severed from its parentage, it has drunk dark oblivion and wondered, in its blind tormenting cares, at the joyless earth, a god looking at mortal things. There is still some light in its veiled eyes, there is some courage even in those who have fallen here below, that summons them above, what time that, fleeing from out of the waves of mortal life, they enter free from the case on the sacred paths that lead to the palace of their begetter.[20]

Individual minds are offshoots of the universal mind that end up taking an earthly form as a part of the process of generation. Divine generation produces different forms, including the

earthly ones. The purpose of this generation is explained in a number of claims that describe human souls as handmaidens/servants/hirelings, as follows:

(A2.a.) σὺ γὰρ ἐν κόσμῳκατέθου ψυχάν, διὰ δὲ ψυχᾶς ἐν σώματι νοῦν ἔσπειρας, ἄναξ. Τὰν σὰν κούραν ἐλέαιρε, μάκαρ. Κατέβαν ἀπὸ σοῦ χθονὶ θητεῦσαι, ἀντὶ δὲ θήσσας γενόμαν δούλα· ὕλα με μάγοις ἐπέδησε τέχναις.

For you placed down the soul in the cosmos, and through soul sowed mind in the body, Lord. Take pity on thine handmaiden, Blessed One. I descended from you to be a servant of earth, but instead of living as a hireling, I became a bondslave. Matter fettered me with magic arts.[21]

And as follows:

(A2.b.) θῆσσα γὰρ κατιοῦσα τὸν πρῶτον βίον ἐθελοντὴς ἀντὶ τοῦ θητεῦσαι δουλεύει·

For, descending into the first life voluntarily as a maid of service, this soul, instead of serving, becomes enslaved.[22]

The association of some forms of the mind with matter is a part of the cosmic generation plan; the souls, then, are servants because they enable the presence of the mind in the matter. To put it simply, the souls potentially make the material world better by acting as 'agents' of the divine mind.

The descent of the souls has not only cosmological but also ethical consequences. Having descended to the earth with this purpose, the souls can become enslaved by the matter and lead a life of misery, unless they remember their purpose and turn their focus towards lofty matters. In some instances, Synesius laments the misery of his own and others, describing the matter as ensnaring, but also regularly noting that turning one's gaze away from the matter and towards the divine leads out of this misery,[23] with philosophy as the main guide.[24]

These claims paint human fate as a uniform challenge. There is one passage, however, which addresses the fact that humans are born into different material circumstances, regardless of the seeming similarity of their ontological status from the cosmological perspective. In *On Providence*, Synesius writes that specific circumstances in which humans find themselves are like wearing a mask in a theatre as follows:

(A3) ἅπας γὰρ βίος ἀρετῆς ὕλη. Καθάπερ ἐπὶ σκηνῆς ὁρῶμεν τοὺς τῆς τραγῳδίας ὑποκριτάς· ὅστις καλῶς ἐξήσκησε τὴν φωνήν, ὁμοίως ὑποκρινεῖται τόν τε Κρέοντα καὶ τὸν Τήλεφον, καὶ οὐδὲν θἀλουργῆ τῶν ῥακίων διοίσει πρὸς τὸ μέγα καὶ καλὸν ἐμβοῆσαι καὶ καταλαβεῖν ἠχοῖ τοῦ μέλους τὸ θέατρον· ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν θεράπαιναν καὶ τὴν δέσποιναν μετὰ τῆς αὐτῆς ἐπιδείξεται μουσικῆς, καὶ ὅ τι ἂν περιθῆται προσωπεῖον, τὸ καλῶς αὐτὸν ὁ χορηγὸς τοῦ δράματος ἀπαιτεῖ· οὕτως ἡμῖν θεὸς καὶ τύχη περιτίθησιν ὥσπερ προσωπεῖα τοὺς βίους ἐν τῷ μεγάλῳ τοῦ κόσμου δράματι, καὶ οὐδέν τι μᾶλλον ἕτερος ἑτέρου βίος βελτίων ἢ χείρων, χρῆται δὲ ὡς ἕκαστος δύναται. Δύναται δὲ ὁ σπουδαῖος ἁπανταχοῦ καλῶς διαγίνεσθαι, κἂν τὸν πτωχὸν κἂν τὸν μόναρχον ὑποκρίνηται· διοίσεται δὲ οὐδὲν περὶ τοῦ προσωπείου. ἐπεὶ καὶ ὁ τραγῳδὸς γελοῖος ἂν γένοιτο, τὸ μὲν φεύγων, τὸ δὲ αἱρούμενος· καὶ γὰρ ἐν τῷ τῆς γραὸς εὐδοκιμῶν, στεφανοῦταί τε καὶ κηρύττεται, καὶ ἐν τῷ τοῦ βασιλέως ἀσχημονῶν, κλώζεται καὶ συρίττεται, ἔστι δὲ ὅπῃ καὶ λίθοις βάλλεται. βίος γὰρ οὐδεὶς οἰκεῖος ἡμῶν, ἀλλοτρίους δὲ ἔξωθεν περικείμεθα· ἡμεῖς δὲ τὸ χρώμενον ἔνδοθεν ἀμείνους καὶ χείρους αὐτοὶ ποιοῦντές τε καὶ δεικνύντες, ἀγωνισταὶ ζώντων δραμάτων. ταῦτ' ἄρα ὥσπερ ἐσθῆτας ἔστιν αὐτοὺς ἀμφιέσασθαι καὶ μεταμφιέσασθαι.

> For every life is material for virtue; just as with the tragic actors whom we see on the stage, whosoever has trained his voice well, will likewise take the parts of Creon and Telephus, and in no way the purple of the robes will make a difference to the greatness and the nobility of his declamation or to his success in bringing down the house by the sound of his strains. He will portray the handmaiden and her mistress alike with the same learnedness, and whatever mask he puts on, the manager of the theatre demands of him that he use it aright. In a like manner God and Fortune bestow upon us lives, as it were masks in the great drama of the universe, and no better or worse is one life than another; but each man makes such use of it as best he may. The earnest man can everywhere succeed in life, whether he act the pauper or king. As to the mask, it makes no difference. Indeed the tragic actor who shirked from one mask and preferred another would become ridiculous. Even in the role of the old woman, if he shines in his art, he is crowned and heralded abroad, while if he disgraces himself in the role of a king, he is hooted and hissed, and on occasion is even stoned. For no life is properly our own, but are we are dressed externally with the lives of others, and we, the better and the worse of us when we act and reveal the inner voice, are actors of living drama. These lives, then, we have only to put on and take off, as garments.[25]

The very same motif is found in Epictetus (B1).[26] Although Epictetus' point is didactic/advisory in nature, and Synesius' point is descriptive, they both arrive at the same striking point: material circumstances are like garments, *any soul can use any social status, circumstance or gender*.

Synesius and Epictetus are separated by around 300 years, and it is likely that the mask motif is not a result of Synesius' reading the texts of Epictetus in isolation. The Stoic views of freedom and personal responsibility played an important role in shaping the views on Plotinus, the only philosopher who is named as an influence on the school of Hypatia in the extant sources. Socrates Scholasticus[27] gives the following brief biography of Hypatia:

> (D1) Ἦν τις γυνὴ ἐν τῇ Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ τοὔνομα Ὑπατία. Αὕτη Θέωνος μὲν τοῦ φιλοσόφου θυγάτηρ ἦν, ἐπὶ τοσοῦτο δὲ προῦβη παιδείας, ὡς ὑπερακοντίσαι τοὺς κατ' αὐτὴν φιλοσόφους, τὴν δὲ Πλατωνικὴν ἀπὸ Πλωτίνου καταγομένην διατριβὴν διαδέξασθαι καὶ πάντα τὰ φιλόσοφα μαθήματα τοῖς βουλομένοις ἐκτίθεσθαι.
>
> There was a woman in Alexandria by the name of Hypatia. She was the daughter of Theon the philosopher, and she exceeded in her learning so much as to outdo the philosophers of her time. She succeeded in leading the Platonic school of thought descended from Plotinus, and she delivered all the philosophical teaching to those who wishes to hear them.[28]

As Ursula Coope has recently shown, Plotinus adapted the Stoic views to his own metaphysics, maintaining that only the undescended soul, the ever-contemplating part of us, is properly free. Those who do not cultivate this part of themselves are subjected to the domination of the bodily desires.[29] There is a remarkable resemblance between the Plotinian account and the key claims in Synesius' passage.

This point complements the passages of Synesius discussing the uniform task of all the souls descending to the material world. The soul assignments, just by themselves, do not carry moral significance. It seems only natural to draw the conclusion, in line with Epictetus' point, that regardless of whether a person is born a man or a woman, one ought to practice virtue the best one can in the given circumstances. Material circumstances of the existence

have no impact on the person as a moral agent. It is worth noting that it could be true that souls bear full moral responsibility for their actions *once* born into a body, while at the same time maintaining that the body is predetermined by the actions of the previous lifetime. But the argument is at pains to portray these role assignments as arbitrary (καὶ οὐδέν τι μᾶλλον ἕτερος ἑτέρου βίος βελτίων ἢ χείρων). It is neither a punishment/reward nor is it predetermined by moral factors in any other way. Ultimately, the passage shows that the practice of virtue is entirely divorced from the material circumstances.

The evidence in Synesius suggests that the life in the realm of becoming starts, from the moral point of view, as a *tabula rasa*. The actions and dispositions of the person determine the kind of life a person will have posthumously. To some extent, this account seems to be a reverse of the Platonic picture: whereas in the *Timaeus*, life in the material world is a consequence of prenatal choices and dispositions, in Synesius, the life in the material world is antecedent. It is the actions a person takes during this life that determine the kind of existence the soul will have post-mortem.

4 The Christian Concern

One possible concern about Synesius' report is the Christian influence. He was a Christian and his writing might be shaped more by religious beliefs (and the philosophical views consistent with those beliefs) rather than his philosophical affiliations with Hypatia's school. I would argue that this is not a significant concern for two reasons. First, Hypatia had many Christian students[30]; so we know that the school's curriculum must have been compatible enough with Christianity. The compatibility between Platonism and Christianity, especially in the late antique period, was not unusual.[31] Synesius' passages discussed so far show how such confluence is possible. His account of the ascent of the virtuous soul could easily be a reading of the *Timaeus*, glossing over the claims about the gender and previous lives in general. After all, the *Timaeus* contains the claim that the kind of life one leads results in posthumous consequences: while unjust souls are reincarnated, the virtuous ones return to their respective stars (42B–C). Reincarnation is a potential problem for a Christian text, but Synesius' claims about the entrapment of matter could very well be an adaptation and reinterpretation of this notion. Whether the souls are reincarnated or trapped by matter, the result is that they are forced to stay in the material realm.

Second, it is also worth noting that Synesius' passages discussed so far show clearly recognizable Platonist motifs, including such highly philosophical notions as emanation (A2.a). Synesius was evidently comfortable enough with such views; if he had been intent on 'editing' out anything not Christian, we surely would not find any references to such concepts as emanation.

Ultimately, in the ancient debate concerning the question of whether virtues are gendered, regardless of whether we frame it as a conflict in the Platonic dialogues or as a debate between the Stoics and the Peripatetics, the texts coming from Hypatia's school side with the former. There seems to be a strong focus on the nature of the human as a variegated being, both in the body and in the soul, with a strong encouragement to focus on the most lofty part of the soul, the mind, which has connection to the higher levels of the cosmos. The circumstances in which humans find themselves are like theatre masks, a motif clearly originating from Stoic philosophy. It is perhaps not surprising to find that a school led by a woman sided with the part of the tradition that advocated for an egalitarian understanding of moral agency. At the same time, it is not the case that the school eschewed gendered language altogether. Some A-type passages employ the gendered language. These texts are helpful in adding more nuance to our understanding of the general stance of the school.

5 The Gendered Language

Although the terms 'male' and 'female' do not occur very frequently in Synesius' texts, the occasions on which they are used deserve a closer look. In the allegorical treatise *De Regno*, a short passage invokes a number of philosophical motives, comparing the human being with the multi-headed hydra as follows:

> (A4) καὶ ἐσμὲν ὕδρας, οἶμαι, θηρίον ἀτοπώτερον καὶ μᾶλλόν τι πολυκέφαλον. οὐ γὰρ ταὐτῷ δήπου νοοῦμεν καὶ ὀρεγόμεθα καὶ λυπούμεθα, οὐδὲ ταὐτῷ καὶ θυμούμεθα, οὐδὲ ὅθεν ἡδόμεθα καὶ φοβούμεθα. ἀλλ' ὁρᾷς ὡς ἔνι μὲν ἄρρεν ἐν τούτοις, ἔνι δὲ θῆλυ, καὶ θαρραλέον τε καὶ δειλόν, ἔνι δὲ τὰ παντοδαπῶς ἀντικείμενα, ἔνι δέ τις ἡ μέση διὰ πάντων φύσις, ἣν νοῦν καλοῦμεν, ὃν ἀξιῶ βασιλεύειν ἐν τῇ τοῦ βασιλέως ψυχῇ τὴν ὀχλοκρατίαν τε καὶ δημοκρατίαν τῶν παθῶν καταλύσαντα.
>
> I think we are a beast stranger than the hydra and even more multi-headed. For, of course, we do not think and yearn and feel pain with the same part, nor do we feel anger with the same part, nor do we feel pleasure and fear from the same source. But you will see that there is a male element in them on the one hand, and the female element on the other, and also bravery and cowardice, and there are opposites of all sorts, and there is some medial nature in all, which we call mind.[32]

The claim is motivated by pointing out that humans have different parts for different purposes. The various parts are represented by their respective activities. The text looks like a long list of the variety of activities/affections, but the negation at the beginning of each clause divides these parts responsible for the activities into three categories: the parts with which we think (νοοῦμεν), desire (ὀρεγόμεθα) or suffer distress (λυπούμεθα); the parts with which we feel anger (θυμούμεθα); and the parts with which (ὅθεν) we feel pleasure (ἡδόμεθα) and fear (φοβούμεθα).

Thus divided, the activities reflect the Platonic[33] tripartition of the souls into the desiderative, the spirited and the rational. The passage vaguely alludes to the organs in which these souls are located. It is worth noting that although Plato does mention regions of the seat of the soul, the later tradition, especially such writers as Galen of Pergamum,[34] interpreted these passages as referring to specific organs. The medical interpretation of Plato extolled by Galen became increasingly influential after the death of the latter, and it gradually grew to be ubiquitous in late antiquity, including the texts of the Neoplatonists.[35]

More pertinently to the purposes of this chapter, the passage also presents the further division of all the organs into male and female aspects, bravery and cowardice and many opposites of every sort (τὰ παντοδαπῶς ἀντικείμενα). This sentence can be read in two different ways, with different consequences for how the gender is understood. First, it would be possible to read the two pairs as being parallel: male–female corresponds to bravery–cowardice. According to this reading, the text leans into the long tradition associating femininity with the lack of courage.[36] Such a reading is possible, especially given that it is a prominent motif in the existing tradition, however, the comment at the end of the sentence about the opposites of every sort suggests an alternative reading. This comment puts an emphasis on the contrast between the properties rather than on the parallelism between the contrasting pairs. The male and the female are just contrasting properties, inherent in the parts of a single human being.[37]

The pairs of opposites seem to be a reference to the so-called Pythagorean pairs, noted in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.[38] Aristotle's list also has male and female as one of the pairs, as well as motion and rest, square and oblong, good and evil. In the context of Synesius' work, the motif is properly identified as Neopythagorean, rather than Pythagorean, as the former tradition

became a prominent strand of Platonism from the first-century CE onwards.[39] It is also an important motif in Plotinus. In *Ennead* 2, for example, the mind is said to find the duality of the composite body as follows:

> (B2) οὐδέποτε γὰρ ἄνευ μορφῆς, ἀλλ' ἀεὶ ὅλον σῶμα, σύνθετον μὴν ὅμως. Καὶ νοῦς εὑρίσκει τὸ διττόν.
>
> For neither is sensible matter ever without a shape; rather, there is always a whole body – and, surely, a composite one no less. Intellect finds out the duality of the composite body.[40]

Synesius' passage (A4) makes a strikingly similar point: the mind running through the individual unifies the opposing elements, also described as male and female. The similarities and the potential differences between the broader metaphysical commitments manifest in these passages deserve a detailed analysis which is outside the scope of the current chapter. For current purposes, it suffices to note that the Plotinian background, especially the dyad and its role in variegating matter with form,[41] is pertinent for unpacking the claims in passage (A4).

Gender is thus used as an ontological binary: one of the many binaries that form the variegated nature of the material world. This reading is corroborated by the way the binary is used in the passages addressing theological matters. In his Hymns, Synesius uses gendered language more than once to refer to the divine creator. For example, by stating the following: (A5) 'You are the Father, and you are the Mother, you are the Male, and you are the Female, and you are Voice, and you are Silence, the nature of the fruitful nature' (σὺ πατήρ, σὺ δ' ἐσσὶ μάτηρ, σὺ μὲν ἄρρην, σὺ δὲ θῆλυς, σὺ δὲ φωνά, σὺ δὲ σιγά, φύσεως φύσις γονοῦσσα).[42] These descriptions can be read on a number of levels. From a theological point of view, they show God as the sole source of all creation. From a metaphysical point of view, the descriptions invoke the Neoplatonist account of the generation of plurality from the unity and, less directly, the derivation of the Infinite Dyad from the One.[43] God or the One is the sole source all the variegated forms in existence, underscored by the fact that it is the source of the opposites. Both the theological and metaphysical perspectives go hand in hand.[44]

All in all, the passages with gendered language point towards the gender, and especially the gender binary, being used for the sake of denoting variegation. It is especially striking that this variegation takes place not only at the cosmic level but also at the level of a single human being, as stated in (A4). There is also no suggestion of adopting the 'exceptional female' stance, in the sense of making Hypatia an exception to the rule that women's bodies generally are indications of moral failings. Such an argument might have been made in non-extant sources, but it is worth noting that it would not be consistent with the approach to gender that we find in the sources discussed here. All the evidence seems to point towards the gender being treated as an accidental, rather than an essential feature. The accessibility to virtue and the responsibility for moral development is clearly placed in every individual's power, regardless of their gender or other material circumstances. In the context of Platonic dialogues, this conclusion aligns the stance the school of Hypatia with the *Republic* and the *Meno* rather than the *Timaeus*; in the context of the Greek philosophical tradition, with the Stoics rather than the Peripatetics.

6 The Polemics

This stance puts the school at odds with those Neoplatonists who ended up on the other side of the debate, e.g. Proclus.[45] Neither Hypatia nor her school are mentioned directly by

the rival Athenian Neoplatonists, although we can speculate about some indirect references. The main clue is the Stoicising motifs which play a fairly prominent role in the Type A passages discussed so far. While discussing the problem of the gendered soul in his commentary on Plato's *Republic*, Proclus describes the positions in the debate as follows: those in Peripatos claim that women and men share the form but differ in virtue, and those in the Stoa claim that women and men share virtues but differ in form as follows:

> (C1) …τῶν μὲν ἀπὸ τῆς στοᾶς κατ᾽ εἶδος διαφέρειν οἰομένων τὸ θῆλυ καὶ τὸ ἄρρεν, ἀμφοῖν δὲ ὅμως εἶναι τὴν αὐτὴν ἀρετήν, τῶν δὲ ἐκ τοῦ περιπάτου κατ᾽ εἶδος μὲν εἶναι τὰ αὐτά, τὰς δὲ ἀρετὰς αὐτῶν εἶναι μὴ τὰς αὐτάς·
>
> The Stoics maintain that the female and the male differ by form, but the virtue is the same in both equally; meanwhile the Peripatetics maintain that they are the same by form, but their virtues are not the same.[46]

It has been pointed out by Dirk Baltzly that the description of the Stoic position is odd: it is certainly true that the Stoics maintain that all the virtues are the same, but the second half of the claim cannot be corroborated. It is presumably this discrepancy with the other reports of the Stoic view that led von Armin to omit this passage from his collection of the Stoic fragments. Baltzly himself suggests that 'Proclus just wants a label for an opponent, and finding that the Stoics satisfy half the bill, he assigns them the whole of it'.[47]

The Stoicising motifs found in the views of Hypatia's school raise the possibility that the opponent in question could be a member or members of this school. Such a reading requires evidence from Hypatia's school for the two-partite claim recorded by Proclus: first, that both genders have the same virtues and, second, that the two genders have different 'forms'. The first part of the claim can be supported by the evidence discussed so far; the position adopted by Hypatia's school maintains that external circumstances are divorced from a person's moral standing *per se*. In the case of the second part of the claim, some evidence can be found in the terminology in the Type A passages.

The term used by Proclus, *eidos*, refers to forms immanent in matter.[48] Synesius uses this word by way of a standard terminology too, for example, when writing in (A2) the following: 'Thus what was postulated by us will be demonstrated: that the soul holds the forms of things that come into being' (οὕτως ἂν ἀποδεδειγμένον εἴη τὸ ὑφ᾽ ἡμῶν ἀξιούμενον, ὅτι τὰ εἴδη τῶν γινομένων ἔχει ψυχή·).[49] As shown in the discussion of the pairs of opposites, the male and the female are one of the contraries produced by the One. They are, thus, the forms. As *eidos* is the form manifest in matter, then the same is true of the *eidē* of male and female.

The key point concerning this kind of forms, as emphasized in the Hymns, is that both are derived from the One and ought to strive to come back to the One. Metaphysically speaking, gender as it is manifest in the material realm is the result of the variegation of matter into opposites; the important point here is *that* there is a variegation not *what kind* of variegation it is. Thus, there is also notable parallelism between the cosmological and individual levels in Synesius' texts. The Mind running through the body unifies both the female and male parts (A4), just as the Mind also produces and then unifies the diverse elements of the cosmos as a whole.

Conclusion

Being born a certain gender is neither a prize nor a punishment, and thinking of birth in this way is a misunderstanding of its purpose altogether. People are born in order to render a service, to make the material realm more intelligent. It is true that they are born in different

forms, and it might be true that the female form comes with a propensity for certain properties, such as cowardice. At the same time, the mask imagery clearly paints a picture of such material circumstances being of marginal significance. Furthermore, the variegation of matter assigns both gender properties to every individual. Therefore, all humans are at least to some degree female in this sense.

The emerging picture does not so much erase the difference between the male and the female, with the attending cultural expectations, as shifts the focus towards the difference between the life of the body and the life of the mind. The latter is equally pertinent to both genders, and if there are differences between the two, they are of small significance, at least as far as advancement, both ethical and ontological, is concerned. The adoption of the Stoicising tradition is thus very fitting to the woman-led school for the purposes of self-representation. At the same time, this need not viewed as a calculated decision. The Stoic position was a prominent part of the tradition in the discourse of the genders, and members of Hypatia's school were simply anchoring themselves in this tradition. If anything, this shows that there were ways for women philosophers to fit into and navigate ancient philosophical traditions which were often openly misogynist.

More importantly, the case of the gendered soul shows how the views that circulated in the school of Hypatia can be reconstructed and examined by using the proposed methodology. Thus, we can not only conclude that women philosophers found ways of anchoring themselves into the existing philosophical traditions in antiquity, but also that their views are not always as obscure as might seem at first sight. In the case of Hypatia's school especially, recovering what is lost is a matter of willingness.

Notes

1 For the extensive discussion of this and other cases of the appropriation of the figure of Hypatia, see Watts (2017: 135–137); see also Rist (1965: 214–215).
2 Rist (1965: 218–219), for example, argues that Hypatia's teachings must be primarily associated with Middle Platonism which was very much behind the current philosophical innovations.
3 See Cameron (2016) for the seminal discussion.
4 See the discussion in Watts (2017).
5 Whether these views can be attributed to Hypatia herself or not is a matter of discussion outside the scope of this paper; at the same time, even the case study of moderate length presented in this paper shows that the views from Hypatia's school, her most immediate philosophical environment, can certainly be reconstructed.
6 The most recent is the revised edition of Decleva Caizzi's *Pirroniana* (2020). A lot of significant work has also been done studying the thought of schools and/or traditions on the basis of fragmentary evidence, e.g. Long and Sedley on the Hellenistic schools (1987); Boys-Stones on Middle Platonism (2018).
7 See Čelkytė (2020).
8 Lucretius 3.417–462=LS 14F.
9 Sextus Empiricus *M* 11.64–67=*SVF* 1.361=LS 58F. See also Bénatouïl (2019); Brennan (2005: 142–143, 214–215).
10 For example, by making out pleasure to be the good, like the Epicureans (e.g. Cicero *Fin*. 1.29–32=LS 21A).
11 For the sake of brevity, the texts in this category are not cited in full, but the references are provided in the appropriate section.
12 See Scaltsas (1992) for the argument that this is consistently the Socratic position. For Plato's inclusion of women to the guardian class in the *Republic*, see also the entries of Jill Gordon and Emily Hulme in this volume.
13 See Schultz (2018).
14 For a discussion of how this problem can be solved *within* the Platonic dialogues, see Harry and Polansky (2016).

15 Baltzly (2013). For further discussions of Proclus position, see Schultz (2018); Layne (2021).
16 Aristotle's works present a hierarchy of gender, both biologically (*GA* 1.20 (728a17–20); 2.3 (737a28); for a study, see Connell (2016)) and politically (*Pol.* 2.5 (1264b2–3)). The latter is significant because it entails a commitment to gendered virtues (*Pol.* 2.5 (1277b21–24)). Although see also Sophia Connell's entry for this volume, *Aristotle on Women's Virtues*, for a reading which presents these claims as descriptive rather than normative. The Stoics, by contrast, are known for denying that gender is relevant for virtue. The most elaborate source for this is the work of Musonius Rufus' fragments; see the discussion in Nussbaum (2002). It is worth noting that Dutsch (2020) shows that the Neopythagorean writings were often Stoicising; for example, the pseudepigraphic letters of Theano (pp. 100–101, 134, 139) or the economic treatise of Bryson (p. 150), although on some occasions, the elements of both traditions are combined (p. 150).
17 The Stoic ethics especially are strongly influenced by Socrates, as mediated through the Platonic texts, see Schofield (2013).
18 Although critical of the Stoics, the Middle Platonists also appropriated some very distinctly Stoic notions, see Bonazzi and Helmig (2007: 9–10).
19 In Platonism, starting with the so-called Middle Platonists (Boys-Stones (2018: 50–57)); this period is also known for attempting to reconcile polemical traditions, see Karamanolis (2006).
20 Hymn 9.81–197 (Dell'Era). Translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise. This one and other translations of Synesius are after Fitzgerald.
21 Hymn 1.564–576 (Dell'Era).
22 *Insom.* 8 (Terzaghi), cf. *De regno* 10.40–45 (Terzaghi).
23 Hymns 3.40–51; 2.290–295 and 9.108–116 (Dell'Era). For the sake of this paper, I only use select passages from the hymn corpus, and therefore all the references are to the standard editions. However, Baldi (2011) showed that the current structure of the corpus is partly imposed by late Byzantine editors, and hymns were organised differently in the original manuscript.
24 *Prov*. 1.9 (Terzaghi).
25 *De Prov.* 1.13 (Terzaghi).
26 Epictetus *Dis*. 1.29.41; *Ench*. 17.1.
27 For the reliability of this account, see Watts (2017: 45–46). Baldi's (2011) careful philological reconstruction of Synesius' hymn corpus also finds Plotinian undertones of various claims.
28 Socrates Scholasticus *HE* 7.15.1.
29 Coope (2020).
30 See the extensive discussion in Dzielska (1995).
31 See, for example, Edwards (2011); Mansfeld (1996); Runia (2011).
32 Synesius *De regno* 10.10–15 (Terzaghi).
33 Although see also Philolaus fr. 13 (Huffman) for an early Pythagorean partition which makes the brain the origin of the human, the heart the origin of the animal, and the navel the origin of the plant; the partition also involves the reproductive system, common to all. As Huffman (2009: 24) points out, this is not a notion of a comprehensive soul, but, given the possible Neopythagorean connection to Hypatia's school that are discussed below, the Pythagorean background is also informative. It is worth noting, furthermore, that reading this passage against the Pythagorean background is not an alternative to reading it against the Platonist background. The two traditions were interlinked in some important ways, see O'Meara (1989, esp. Chapter1); Horky (2013); Huffman (2013); Palmer (2014).
34 In Plato *Timaeus* 70D-E, the physiological domain of the appetitive soul is located between the midriff and the navel. In Book 6 of his *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato*, for example, Galen presents an elaborate argument for locating the desiderative soul in the liver, see Tieleman (2003: 57–58).
35 Slaveva-Griffin (forthcoming) on Proclus.
36 Δειλία, the word used by Synesius here, is made an essential attribute of female in all the animals in Ps. Aristotle's *Physiognomics* 809b; cf. Alexander *Prob*. 4.151. Although it is not just Aristotelian association, see, for example Sophocles fr. 140 (Claverhouse Jebb, Headlam, and Pearson).
37 To some extent, the readings could be combined; the reader might be expected to spot the motif associating femininity and the lack of courage, given its literary and cultural prominence. However, the key point of the second reading, that is, the significance of the duality, is still the key point of the passage, given the comment about the opposites of every kind.
38 986a22, cf. 985b23.
39 The seminal study is O'Meara (1989); see also Dillon (1977: 341).

40 Plotinus *En*. 2.4.5, tr. (Gerson *et al*).
41 *En*. 2.4.11; 2.4.4; 2.4.9.
42 Hymn 5.63-66 (Dell'Era), see also Hymn 1.186 (Dell'Era).
43 *En*. 2.4.15.
44 This point reinforces the argument made above concerning the compatibility between Christianity and Platonist commitments of Hypatia's school. Such a stance would suit not just Synesius alone, but also the school as whole which, as mentioned above, included both Christian and pagan members.
45 For detailed discussions of Proclus' stance, see note 15.
46 Proclus *in Remp*. 252.19–31, see also Proclus *in Remp*. 237.5.13.
47 Baltzly (2013: n. 8).
48 See A2; cf. Plato *Parm*. 135A.
49 *Insom*. 4 (Terzaghi); cf. Plato *Parm*. 135A.

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