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Platonic and Aristotelian Views on Body-Soul Relationship: A Comparative Approach

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Abstract: This article deals with the relationship between body and soul according to Aristotle and Plato. The body-soul relationship presented in Plato's *Phaedo* and appears in Aristotle's thesis *On the Soul* and is unequivocally criticized by both. Plato's, epistemological and ethical arguments ascertain the dualistic nature of soul and body. Aristotle insisted that the human being is consists of body and soul and that the soul is inseparable from the body. The two intangible approaches to the mind-body problem by Plato and Aristotle have been established throughout history. Plato observes human (matter) as split into two or more divisions, while Aristotle perceives the human as a basic unity. Both Plato and Aristotle excellently contend that the soul and body are two different kinds of entities. They also see that the materialistic body and immaterial soul and are able to act and be acted upon because there is a communality between the

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soul and body. Our purpose here is to address the different aspects of the philosophy of mind and matter of Plato and Aristotle. We also discuss the active and passive capabilities of the soul and body according to Plato and Aristotle. This article shows that Plato almost agrees with the relational feature of mind and matter as active and passive. But Aristotle attempted to fine-tune the mind-matter issue with a ‘middle-path psychological theory,’ the two extremes of ‘crude materialism,’ and a ‘pure immaterialism.’

Keywords: Body-Soul Relationship, Plato, Aristotle, Crude Materialism, Pure Immaterialism.

Introduction

THE BODY-SOUL relationship presented in Plato’s *Phaedo* and in Aristotle’s thesis *On the Soul* is unequivocally criticized by both. Plato’s, epistemological and ethical arguments ascertain the dualistic nature of soul and body. Aristotle insisted that the human being consists of body and soul and that the soul is inseparable from the body. The two intangible approaches to the mind-body problem by Plato and Aristotle have been established throughout history. Plato observes human (matter) as split into two or more divisions, while Aristotle perceives the human as a basic unity. Both Plato and Aristotle excellently contend that the soul

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and body. Our purpose here is to address the different aspects of the philosophy of mind and matter of Plato and Aristotle. We also discuss the active and passive capabilities of the soul and body according to Plato and Aristotle.

The Dualistic Approach of Plato

The dualistic claims of Plato are based mainly on two arguments: metaphysical or epistemological and ethical. Platonic dualism is supposed to be the coexistence of two different levels – physical reality and a metaphysical realm, one of which is invariably compromised. According to Plato, the metaphysical dimension is superior; this is to the impairment of the body, of earthly life, of relational ethics, and politics.

One of the most vital Platonic passages dealing with this philosophical interpretation is the famous parenthesis in the *Theaetetus*. According to Plato the aim of human life is grasped to accord with man's integration to God: ¹

And therefore we ought to try to escape from earth to the dwelling of the gods as quickly as we can; and to escape is to become like God, so far as this is possible; and to become like God is to become righteous and holy and wise. But, indeed, my good friend, it is not at all easy to persuade people that the reason generally advanced for the pursuit of virtue and the avoidance of vice – namely, in order that a man may not seem bad and may seem good – is not the reason why the one should be practised and the other not; that, I think, is merely old wives' chatter, as the saying is. Let us give the true reason. God is in no wise and in no manner unrighteous, but utterly and perfectly righteous,

and there is nothing so like him as that one of us who in turn becomes most nearly perfect in righteousness.

If there is an active–passive relation between the soul and body the soul, even in Plato’s works there is a certain co-dependence relation between them.

According to Plato, the soul (ψυχή) has more superiority than the body and it is separable from the body. It

implies that the soul is in an ethereal and purely spiritual condition and it can also exist on its own. There is a possibility that the soul may lead an improved life in ethereal form. The life of a bodiless soul or the ethereal soul is a form of life unknown to us but entirely different from the life in the world which we experience. This valuable property of the soul makes it ‘more treasured’ than the body.² Plato distinguishes the soul from the living body and he argues that the soul rules over the body. Socrates proposes the following interpretation of what the separation of body and soul (death) is:

Is it anything other than the separation of the soul from the body? And that being dead is this, the body’s having come to be apart, separated from the soul, itself by itself, and the soul’s having come to be apart, itself by itself, separated from the body? Can death be anything other than this?³

In *Phaedo* Plato organized his points of view regarding the state of the soul before, during and after its incarnation: the Cyclical Argument (69e6-72e1)⁴, the Recollection Argument (72e3-78b3)⁵, the Affinity Argument (78b4-84b4)⁶ and the Final Argument (102a10-107b10)⁷. In these urgings, Plato endeavours to establish the immortality of the soul. The Affinity

Argument has been regarded as Plato's weakest proof for the soul's immortality by some of his commentators.⁸

If there is an active-passive relation between the body and soul, even in Plato's works there is a certain co-dependence relation between them. It is asserted by Plato that there is no active without passive or passive without active.⁹

Plato identifies a variety of views about the soul in *Phaedo*. The first one is clearly a philosophical view about the soul, but the rest of them are more compatible with the general or customary view.¹⁰ These views are discussed below.

(1) The soul is the rational faculty.

The soul is responsible for our intellectual or cognitive functions. The soul, he claims, grasps the truth (65b9)¹¹; reasons (65c2-5)¹²; has knowledge of the forms (76c2-5)¹³; and has wisdom (76c12)¹⁴. It opposes the affections of the body like hunger and thirst (94b8-10)¹⁵ as well as its passions and fears (94d5)¹⁶.

(2) The soul is the person.

The soul, both personified and spiritual has the same character (81e2-82b2)¹⁷.

(3) The soul is the subject of conscious states.

Plato describes the embodied soul can get confused (66a5-6)¹⁸; has wanted, desires and fears (66c2-3, 83b5-7)¹⁹; can become confused and dizzy (79c7-8)²⁰; and can suffer pain and pleasure (83b5-7; 83c5-6)²¹. The soul is the seat of conscious states both in a living human being and in an ethereal soul. According to Plato, the soul has very little difference between the soul in person and incorporeal life.

(4) The soul is the cause of life.

Plato treats the soul as the 'animating agent'²² of the body it inhabits. This plays a prominent role in the Final Argument for the immortality of the soul (102a10-

107b10)²³. In the course of the Cyclical Argument (69e6-72e1)²⁴, Plato seems to attribute souls to human beings as well as plants and animals (70d4-e4)²⁵.

(5) *The soul is (or can be) spatially extended.*

Plato describes the soul as spatially dispersed throughout the body and can be haggard and collected together (80d8-84b8).²⁶

Hence, for Plato, the possibility of separation between the soul and body constitutes both the basis for future eternal life and the most operative and explicative model to understand and standardize the life of man in his present condition of the body. When we look at each claim Plato makes, the soul has four properties which it shares with the forms: (i) When soul and body are present in the same thing, nature ‘orders’ (ἡ φύσις προσιτάττει)²⁷ the latter to be ruled and to be a slave (τῷ μὲν δουλεύειν καὶ ἄρχεσθαι).²⁸ (ii) The soul, in being intangible, is unchanging,²⁹ invisible³⁰ and divine³¹ and the body is mortal.

For Plato the possibility of separation between the soul and body constitutes both the basis for a future eternal life, and the most operative and explicative model to understand and standardize the life of man in his present condition of the body.

In accordance with Plato, illogical wants are related to the body, not to the soul³², and the body is avowed to be interference for attaining truth and wisdom; it is nothing but a source of confusion and real evil.³³ Since the body needs nurturing, it fills us with erotic desires, appetites, fears, fantasies, the pleasures of food and drink,³⁴ sex,³⁵ fine clothes,³⁶ shoes or other bodily adornments.³⁷ Therefore body acts as an irritating element because it averts us from having wisdom (φρονῆσαι) and its appetites (ἐπιθυμῖαι).³⁸ Plato has put this point rather fervently,

asking whether the body helps or hampers the soul's attempts to gain wisdom:

Do sight and hearing offer any truth to people or, as the poets are always saying these sorts of things that we neither hear nor see anything accurately? And yet if these among the bodily sense are neither accurate nor clear, the others can hardly be; for they are somehow worse than these.³⁹

The soul suffers from both the proficiency and sequence of opposites. Plato responds to the retaining of the same state by the soul in this way:

When the soul investigates by itself, it passes into the realm of what is pure, always existing, immortal and unchanging and on account of its kinship with it, always stays with it, whenever it comes to be itself by itself and is able to do so; it ceases from its wandering and always stays in the same state on account of its laying hold of things of the same kind and this condition of it is called 'wisdom.'⁴⁰

The Integral Approach of Aristotle

According to Aristotle, the soul (form) and the body (matter) are intimate, inseparable and reciprocally interdependent constituents of the living compound. It is difficult to speak about the soul as a "material (or embodied) form", or about the body as an "informed (or animated) substrate." Aristotle articulated two concepts of the soul using the methods of division and induction and

they are complementary to each other. In the first notion, the soul is defined as “substance in the sense of being the form and the first actuality of a natural body potentially possessing life; and such will be any body which possesses organ.”⁴¹ The principle and first cause of the faculties of the living is given as, “whereby we live and perceive and think in the primary sense”⁴².

According to Aristotle the soul is not blended with the body and is not a body. It is always ‘located’ in a body and exists through a body.

According to Aristotle the soul is not blended with the body⁴³ and is not a body. It is always ‘located’ in a body and exists through a body (de An. 403a16–19, 414a19–20). Aristotle challenges Plato’s ‘substance dualism’, according to which the soul exists independently of the body (Pl. Phd. 78c-79b). Aristotle also believes like Plato that body and soul are different entities. But he argues that the soul cannot advance in its vital functions autonomously of the body.⁴⁴

Plato splits the ever-moving phenomenal world from the true and everlasting ideal truth. But Aristotle proposes that the ideal (essence) was found “inside” the phenomena, the universals “inside” the particulars. Aristotle’s views on the body and the soul are briefly described in the passage:

Substances are, by general consent, [taken to include] bodies and especially natural bodies; for they are the principles of all other bodies. Of natural bodies some have life in them, others not; by life we mean self-nutrition and growth (with its correlative decay). It follows that every natural body which has life in it is a substance in the sense of a composite. But since it is also a body of such and such a kind, viz. having life,

the body cannot be soul; the body is the subject, or matter, not what is attributed to it. Hence the soul must be a substance in the sense of the form of a natural body having life potentially within it. But form is actuality, and thus soul is the actuality of a body as above characterized.⁴⁵

There are several definitions of the soul by Aristotle (or different interpretations of Aristotle's definition of the soul) that are found inconsistent with each other by some scholars. The ambiguity in different definitions can be explained as follows:

The divergences between the definitions arise not from an incoherent notion of soul, but from ambiguity in Aristotle's use of the Greek word for 'body'. Sometimes the word means the living compound substance: in that sense, the soul is the form of a body that is alive, a self-moving body. Sometimes the word means the appropriate kind of matter to be informed by a soul: in that sense, the soul is the form of a body that potentially has life. The soul is the form of an organic body, a body that has organs, that is to say parts which have specific functions, such as the mouths of mammals and the roots of trees.⁴⁶

The affections of the soul listed are passions (*pathe* in the strict sense of the word, or *pathemata*), such as anger and fear,⁴⁷ and all the characteristic activities ("any function or affection") of the soul as perceiving and thinking.⁴⁸ He attributes some of the affections exclusively to the soul and not to the body which may influence the very explanation of the soul.⁴⁹ However, "it is evident" (*phainetai*) that most of them involve the body.⁵⁰ The sub-class of affections of

the soul “anger, gentleness, fear, pity, courage and joy, as well as loving and hating”⁵¹ are “associated with the body.”⁵² Experiments show that they comprise “simultaneously” (*hama*) body and soul, “for when they appear the body is also affected.”⁵³

There is good evidence for this. Sometimes no irritation or fear is expressed, though the provocations are strong and obvious; and conversely, small and obscure causes produce movement, when the body is disposed to anger, and when it is in angry mood. And here is a still more obvious proof. There are times when men show all the symptoms of fear without any cause of fear being present.⁵⁴

Aristotle describes perception (*to aisthanesthai*) as the exercise that involves the sense organs. In this exercise, the discernment of sensory variances is created by the contact of the sensible object with the sense organ through a medium and the sense organ receives the sensible qualities “without the matter.”⁵⁵ The perceiving is described as a process that is fundamentally focused on the understanding of an end, that is, as a “completion” (*teleiosis*).

According to Aristotle *phantasia* acts as a “bridge” between sensory knowledge and the activity of thought. Malcom Schofield started a heated debate regarding the exact definition of the notion of *phantasia* according to Aristotle.⁵⁶ The schematic definition of the term *phantasia* is: “that by virtue of which x appears or presents itself to y as z” where x is the object of a perception and it is qualified as “post-perceptive” (“imagination”, y the perceiving subject, and z the mental picture.⁵⁷ So also *phantasia* “seems to be a certain movement (*kinesistis*).”⁵⁸ According to Aristotle, it is “the movement produced by the perception in act.”⁵⁹ The sensory impressions

are fixed in mental pictures only after they have been transmitted to the “central sensorium” (the heart) and there, they leave a kind of “imprint” or “likeness” (*typos*).⁶⁰

In the third book of *De Anima*, Aristotle explained that the activity of thought that is not possible without imagination.⁶¹ Aristotle used the analogy of painting to explain the connection between the mental picture reflected “in itself” and the mental picture reflected “in relation to something else” which is a “portrait” (*eikon*).⁶²

In so far as we consider it in itself, it is an object of contemplation (*theorema*) or a mental picture (*phantasma*), but in so far as we consider it in relation to something else, e.g., as a likeness (*eikon*), it is also an aid to memory (*mne-moneuma*). Hence when the stimulus of it is operative, if the soul perceives the impression as independent, it appears to occur as a thought (*noema*), or a mental picture.⁶³

Mental pictures can be endangered to a succeeding noetic process that leads to the development of perceptions:

We have already dealt with imagination in the treatise *On the Soul*. It is impossible even to think without a mental picture. The same affection is involved in thinking as in drawing a diagram; for in this case although we make no use of the fact that the magnitude of a triangle is a finite quantity, yet we draw it as having a finite magnitude. In the same way, the man who is thinking, though he may not be thinking of a finite magnitude, still puts a finite magnitude before his eyes, though he does not think of it as such. And even if the nature of the object is quantitative but indeterminate, he still puts

before him a finite magnitude, although he thinks of it as merely quantitative.⁶⁴

Thus, we come to the conclusive thesis of the compulsory participation of mental pictures in the activity of thought:

Since apparently nothing has a separate existence, except sensible magnitudes, the objects of thought—both the so-called abstractions of mathematics and all states (*hexeis*) and affections (*pathe*) of sensible things—reside in the sensible forms. And for this reason (...) no one could ever learn or understand anything without the exercise of perception (...).⁶⁵

Subsequently, it would be unbearable either “to learn” or “to understand” anything without perception,⁶⁶ which is the basis of imagination and, therefore, of thought.⁶⁷

The Convergences and Differences

Plato believes in a different entity of soul which is completely different from the materialistic world. He proposes the cave analogy to elucidate his theory of dualism. According to him there are two distinct realms, the realm of the forms and its reflection, physical realm. He assumes that the reason for the commonality between body and soul is that they have both passive and active capacities. The soul is more valuable, because of the active property of the soul. Plato believed that after the death of bodies, the soul goes to the realm of the forms to gain wisdom. According to him, the body is constantly changing while the soul is immortal and unchanging.

As a materialist, Aristotle holds a different view of the body and the soul. According to him body and soul are interconnected and they cannot be separated. The soul is manifested by conscious bodies of appropriate structure and provides abilities to the body. According to Aristotle, there are different kinds of souls depending on the specific case of corporeal bodies, i. e., plants, nonhuman animals and human beings. He clarifies that the soul is

As a materialist, Aristotle holds a different view on the body and the soul. According to him body and soul are interconnected and they cannot be separated. The soul is manifested by conscious bodies of appropriate structure and provides abilities to the body.

located and exists through a body and not blended with the body. Aristotle emphasizes the primacy of the soul and the co-dependence between soul and body. It is clear that Aristotle does not ratify substance interactionism, the causal powers of the soul over the body. Even though Aristotle and Plato believe that the body and soul are different in all aspects, Aristotle refutes the independent vital powers of the soul. The theoretical root for the difference is that for Plato, the soul is separable from the body whereas, for Aristotle, it is a form or act of the living organism.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the feature of the soul and body detailed by the two philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. Their teachings on the nature of soul and body are profoundly distinct. They explain the functional behaviour of the soul that acts upon the body, the body's capacity to receive the

soul's action, and vice versa. Plato almost agrees with the relational feature of mind and matter as active and passive. But Aristotle attempted to fine-tune the mind-matter issue with a 'middle-path psychological theory,' the two extremes of 'crude materialism,' on the one hand (the atomists), and a 'pure immaterialism' (Plato), on the other.⁶⁸

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Notes

- ¹B. Jowett (1976) The dialogues of Plato translated into English with analyses and introductions. Plato, *Theaetetus* (**Plat. Theaet.**) 176a8-c2
- ² B. Jowett (1976) The dialogues of Plato translated into English with analyses and introductions. (Plato, *Alcibiades*) Plat. Alc. I 129e-130c; D. Gallop(1975), Plato. *Phaedo*. Translation with Notes, Oxford: Oxford University Press (Plat. Phd.) 79e8-80a6.
- ³ Plat. Phd. 64c4-8
- ⁴ Ibid. 69e6-72e1. As a proof that the soul persists after death, Socrates offers a cyclical argument. He draws inspiration from the Greek myth that as the bowels of Hades are filled with the souls of the dead, so too is the land of the living repopulated from Hades.
- ⁵ Ibid. 72e3-78b3. Theory of Recollection, asserts that learning is essentially an act of recollecting things we knew before we were born but then forgot.
- ⁶ Ibid. 78b4-84b4. The Affinity Argument explains that invisible, immortal, and incorporeal things are different from visible, mortal, and corporeal things. Our soul is of the former, while our body is of the latter, so when our bodies die and decay, our soul will continue to live.
- ⁷ Ibid. 102a10-107b10. Plato claims that only by being free from the body can the soul attain desirable knowledge. His argument that the soul exists before and after death and argues the theory of forms, the existence of forms and our knowledge.
- ⁸ Bluck, R.S. 1957. claims that only the Final Argument is convincing. Hackforth, R. 1955. offers only a lame endorsement of the argument—"we cannot simply wipe it out as otiose and valueless." Gallop, David. 1975. Dorter, Kenneth. 1972. who takes the argument as logically flawed, but persuasive
- ⁹ B. Jowett (1976) The dialogues of Plato translated into English with analyses and introductions. (Plato *Timaeus*) Plat. Tht. 157a5–6
- ¹⁰ Gallop 1975
- ¹¹ Plat. Phd. 65b9
- ¹² Ibid. 65c2-5
- ¹³ Ibid. 76c2-5
- ¹⁴ Ibid. 76c12

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- ¹⁵ Ibid. 94b8-10
- ¹⁶ Ibid. 94d5, Plat Rep. 4.435a-441b
- ¹⁷ Ibid. 81e2-82b2
- ¹⁸ Ibid. 66a5-6
- ¹⁹ Ibid. 66c2-3, 83b5-7
- ²⁰ Ibid. 79c7-8
- ²¹ Ibid. 83b5-7; 83c5-6
- ²² Borrowing the terminology of Bostock 1975.
- ²³ Ibid. 102a10-107b10
- ²⁴ Ibid. 69e6-72e1
- ²⁵ Ibid. 70d4-e4 Plat. Tim. 30c, 90c
- ²⁶ Ibid. 80d8-84b8 see also Rowe 1993, and Bostock 1986.
- ²⁷ Plat. Phd. 80a1
- ²⁸ Ibid. 78b4-79c4
- ²⁹ Ibid. 78c6-78e6; 79c2-79e8
- ³⁰ Ibid. 79a1-79c1
- ³¹ Ibid. 79e8-80a9
- ³² Ibid. 66b-d
- ³³ Ibid. 66a5-b6
- ³⁴ Ibid. 64d2-5
- ³⁵ Ibid. 64d6-7
- ³⁶ Ibid. 64d9-10
- ³⁷ Ibid. 64d10
- ³⁸ Ibid. Phd. 66b8-c7
- ³⁹ Ibid. 65b1-6
- ⁴⁰ Ibid. 79d1-7
- ⁴¹ De An. II 1, 412a19-b6. English transl. by W.S. Hett, in Hett (2000).
- ⁴² Ibid., 2, 414a12-13.
- ⁴³ See de An. 407b1-5, 429a24-25; cf. also Sens. 440b1-25, where it is also clear that mixture is among bodies.
- ⁴⁴ The problem that the soul can continue exerting its powers when separated from the body is envisaged by Plato as well; see especially Phd. 77c1-5.
- ⁴⁵ Brian Beakley and Peter Ludlow, eds., *The Philosophy of Mind: Classical Problems, Contemporary Issues*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, p.23.
- ⁴⁶ A Kenny, *Ancient Philosophy: A New History of Western Philosophy*, Volume 1, Oxford University Press, London (2006), p.242.
- ⁴⁷ Arist. de An. I 1, 403a5-8, 16-18. Aristotle's list of passions includes (but is not limited to) "desire, anger, fear, boldness, envy, joy, love, hate, lust, jealousy, pity and in general everything that is followed by pleasure and pain" (EN II 4, 1105b20-23; see also de An. I 1, 403a17-18; EE II 2, 1220b12-14; Rhet. II 1, 1378a20-23).
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- ⁴⁸ Cp. *ibid.*, 403a5-8; 4, 408b25-27; 5, 409b14-16; 5, 411a26-b5; III 3, 427b16-18; *Sens.* (*On Sense and the Sensible*)1, 436a6-10.
- ⁴⁹ Cp. *ibid.*, 403a3-5.
- ⁵⁰ Cp. *ibid.*, 403a5-7.
- ⁵¹ Cp. *ibid.*, 403a3-4., see *ibid.* III 10, 433b20; *Sens.* 1, 436a7-10; b2-3; *Mem.* 2, 453b11-14; PA I 3, 643a35- 36
- ⁵² see *ibid.* III 10, 433b20; *Sens.* 1, 436a7-10; b2-3; *Mem.*(*De memoria et reminiscentia*) 2, 453b11-14; PA I 3, 643a35- 36, *Ibid.*, 403a17-18.
- ⁵³ Cp. *ibid.*, 403a16-17., 403a18-19.
- ⁵⁴ *Arist. de An.* I 1, 403a19-24.
- ⁵⁵ As for the reception “without the matter” (*aneu tes hyles*) of sensible forms or qualities, see *Arist. de An.* II 12, 424a17-19; a32-b3; III 2, 425b23-24; 4, 429a13-18; 12, 434a27-30; 13,435a21-24.
- ⁵⁶ Schofield (1978) For a reconstruction of the debate, see Astolfi (2011: 15–29).
- ⁵⁷ Mingucci (2015)
- ⁵⁸ *Arist. de An.* III 3, 428b11.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 429a1-2. See also *ibid.*, 428b13-14; *Mem.* 1, 450a27-29; *Insomn.* 1, 459a17-18.
- ⁶⁰ *Arist. Sens.* 2, 439a1-2; *Somn. Vig.* 2, 455b34-456a6; *Juv.* 3,469a5- 23; 4, 469a23-27; b3-6; PA II 1, 647a24-33; 10, 656a27-29; III 3, 665a10-13; 4, 666a11-b1; IV 5, 678b2-4; MA 9, 702b20-21; 11, 703b23-24.
- ⁶¹ Cp. *ibid.*, III 7, 431a16-17; 431b2; 8, 432a8-9. See also *Mem.* 1, 449b31-450a1.
- ⁶² Cp. *de An.* 8, 432a12-14.
- ⁶³ *Arist. Mem.* 1, 450b25-29
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 1, 449b30-450a7.
- ⁶⁵ Ross, D. (1961). *Aristotle. De anima*, Edited with Introduction and Commentary. Oxford. Oxford University Press. *Arist. de An.* III 8, 432a3-9.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.* III. 432a7-8;
- ⁶⁷ *Arist. An. Post.* I 18, 81a39-41.
- ⁶⁸ Boeri M.D. (2018)
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