

Fourth congress of the ‘Gesellschaft für antike Philosophie’ (GANPH)

University of Munich (LMU), 7-11 October 2013

Body***Σῶμα* and *corpus* in Ancient Philosophy and Literature**

The body presents itself like Proteus, i.e. in manifold ways: as an anchor of reality as well as a prison of our existence; as something separate, yet for the same reason dispersed into the infinity of space and time; as something visible and tangible, but also as a mere transient shadow; as a unity which is at the same time prone to division. The body is an indubitable force of action as well as of passion, thereby constituting the subject of beauty and life. *Σῶμα* stands for our self but also for the dead remains of which Heraclitus said that they are “more fit to be thrown out than dung”. The body is admirable and abject, sick and healthy, sound and corrupt, object of desire and receptacle of lust. Some think of it as a mere appearance, others as the only true being. Our conference will explore this Proteus in all its dimensions and perspectives in ancient philosophy, as a mathematical and physical, astronomical and medical, ontological and poetical entity, as a subsisting and at the same time ephemeral form of reality.

The planned sections are arranged as follows:**1. *What is the body?*** Questions concerning the nature of the body

What are bodies when they are viewed in the light of general philosophical principles? This question was answered in a variety of ways depending on the framework in which it was posed. Within these different frameworks, the answers given usually raise several further questions of major import, e.g.: How are we to understand the relationships which exist between space/time, part/whole, matter, becoming, causality, life and sensual accessibility on the one hand, and the nature of the body on the other hand? And how are these concepts themselves interrelated?

2. *Bodies in motion:* The body in the workings of nature

A general understanding of bodies runs like this: they are three-dimensional entities existing in space; they constitute an overarching nexus by their movements, which are ruled by the laws of cause and effect; because of these features they are subject to empirical observation. This section will focus on issues which come close to the modern scientific investigation of the body by comparing the ancient perspective with our contemporary one: To what extent are the questions raised here similar? Where do the approaches differ completely?

3. *Human bodies*: A special case?

What is the relationship of our own (certainly somehow ‘special’) bodies to the bodily world in general according to ancient philosophy and literature? Some think of the human body as a mirror of the whole universe in which the divine order of the whole is concentrated; others see it as a product of formative organic processes, i.e. as a paradigm work of *φύσις*. Or is the human body, as some suppose, only a chance result at the mercy of elementary forces from which it can emancipate itself only by strenuous efforts?

4. *Healthy bodies*: Medical science and therapeutic practice

The human body is at the same time needy and fragile as well as capable and highly organized. These features do not only call for care and healing but also result in the scientific investigation and the technical manipulation of the body in order to ensure its successful workings. Without knowledge about the internal balances of the human body as well as its relationship to its external surroundings its health can neither be maintained nor restored.

5. *Heavenly bodies*: The body as an object of astronomical observation

It is one of the distinctive features of ancient philosophy and science to inquire into the regularities and laws of the motions performed by the heavenly bodies. Because of their inalterability and their periodic re-occurrence they seem for many to be divine and far removed from the reality accessible to us. Are there truly specific laws in play which have nothing in common with the sublunar sphere? Or can heavenly bodies still be understood as homogenous or at least continuous with earthly nature because of their causal connection with us and the geometrical relationships which hold in all bodies?

6. *Sensual bodies*: Aesthetic experience and artistic design of the body

Sensual experiences, the perception of beauty and ugliness, the tempting force as well as the creative aspects of bodies are recurrent and fruitful issues for ancient literature and philosophy. This is not limited to the external body and its representation in art and architecture but also holds for the relationship to one’s own body, e.g. in gymnastics and cosmetics.

7. *Mathematical bodies*: The body as an object of mathematical theory

The body is not only a tangible phenomenon, which is at its root sensual and opaque, but it is also something which bears examination by the most critical *λόγος* and seems to obey the strictest rules of intellect. This section will focus on the mathematical and geometrical understanding of bodies which was frequently debated already in Antiquity in connection with the issues raised in section 2 above, i.e. the regular motions of bodies and the laws governing them.