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THE ETERNAL RETURN OF THE SAME INTELLECTS

A NEW EDITION OF GIROLAMO CARDANO'S *DE IMMORTALITATE ANIMORUM*⋆

GUIDO GIGLIONI

More than a *quaestio* or a commentary on the most vexed questions of Aristotle's psychology, Girolamo Cardano's *De immortalitate animorum* (1545) looks like a literary pastiche: the disposition of the arguments *pro* and *contra* the thesis of the soul's immortality gives the impression of a collage in which various elements of the debate are placed synoptically before the eyes of the reader, rather than being deployed in series of increasingly cogent arguments. Inevitably, a degree of ambiguity and elusiveness remains attached to the work. As a whole, Cardano's attitude towards some of the most critical aspects in the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is ecumenical and selective at the same time. Everyone has the opportunity to express his opinion – philosophers and physicians, Aristotelians and Platonists of all denominations, poets and tellers of tales – and yet the argument constantly goes back to the original point, in the almost obsessive manner that is typical of Cardano. And the point is: why should one assume the existence of a universal active intellect when such an intellect is supposed to be the very core of the human soul? The discussion alternates between focus and blur, another characteristic mark of Cardano's writing. Of the various branches in the Aristotelian genealogical tree, the main ramifications investigated by Cardano are the lines 'Plato-Aristotle-Plotinus-Themistius-Simplicius-Ficino', 'Aristotle-Alexander of Aphrodisias-Pomponazzi', and 'Aristotle-Themistius-Averroes and his Renaissance followers'. However, Cardano also betrays a special penchant for Theophrastus that cannot be passed over in silence. Defiant as usual, Cardano measures himself against an imposing tradition of interpreters and commentators. With respect to the immortality of the soul, none of them «has understood Aristotle's opinion», says Cardano without any concern for false modesty (p. 259). He exploits all the advantages and immunities that one can derive from presenting himself as an interpreter rather than an author. As he states at the beginning of the treatise, the aim of the *De immortalitate animorum* is to define Aristotle's specific position on the survival of the soul. In chapter 11, the same declaration of intents is repeated: «now it is not the moment for discussing what we would like to demonstrate (*desiderium nostrum*), but what was Aristotle's opinion and what one should maintain if he wishes to rely on reason» (p. 341). Here Aristotle's and mankind's reasons are equalled. Elsewhere, though, Cardano cautions the read-

⋆ I would like to thank Colin Homiski for revising the English of my text.

er against mixing up two very different *quaesita*: the hermeneutical task (*Quid senserit Philosophus?*) and the philosophical assessment of the limits of natural reason (*Quid ex ratione naturali sit manifestum?*) (p. 254). This means that for Cardano any identification by default of Aristotle's philosophy with human reason is not valid anymore. (In a sense, he is saying that Pomponazzi's tricks to save one's face in front of the Church are no longer needed.)

1. The Platonic subtext in Cardano's *De immortalitate animorum*

In his account of the Aristotelian doctrine of the soul, Cardano's starting point is the early-Renaissance division of the faculties of the soul into *formae informantes* and *formae assistentes* according to hierarchical levels of complexity. Such an arrangement was particularly popular at the universities of Padua, Pavia and Bologna. Cardano distinguishes between the intellective soul as a *forma informans* and the active intellect as a *forma assistens*: «the intellective soul is the form of man, the material form is the form of the body, both are subject to corruption; the form, act and principle of the intellective soul, whereby we perform all our functions, is the active intellect we are talking about, and it is truly immortal and incorruptible» (p. 351). The distinction between the intellective soul and the active intellect is crucial. Unlike Aquinas and like Pomponazzi, Cardano considers the intellective soul to be mortal. Unlike Averroes, he considers the active intellect to be an integral part of the development of man's self. The key point is to assess the extent to which Cardano manages to reconcile the self and the universal, life (*anima*) and knowledge (*intellectus*). He insists that the intellect does not come from outside (in a transcendent sense), that it is separable but not already separated, that it not an accident of God's substance, rather it is itself a substance (*aliquid a Deo tanquam radius fluens*) (p. 234). The intellect is within us (*est in nobis*), being a part of our selfhood (*intellectum agentem nostri esse partem*) (pp. 244, 245). In Cardano's view, the active intellect is one universal force that pervades the whole universe and is distributed to each single human being in the same way as a common source of light, while being refracted through various media, produces colours of differing kinds (p. 350). Cardano is part of the intellectual milieu so vividly and acutely described by Bruno Nardi in his studies on the conflation of Neoplatonic and Averroistic motives characterising some influential early-Renaissance authors, like Giovanni Pico.

Central to García Valverde's interpretation of *De immortalitate animorum*, in his new critical edition of the text,[1] is the notion that Cardano solved the question of the destiny of the human soul by appealing to the Pythagorean-Platonic notion of metempsychosis and by transforming it into an Aristotelian construct. Admittedly, in *De immortalitate animorum*, Cardano does consider Aristotle to have assumed the existence of a finite number of individual active intellects, each of them corresponding to a human self, subject to a ceaseless process of reincarna-

[1] G. Cardano, *De immortalitate animorum*, ed. by José Manuel García Valverde, Milan, Angeli, 2006.

tion. García Valverde argues that Cardano arrived to this position through a chain of inferences drawn from Aristotle's cosmology and metaphysics: the world is eternal; the number of the intellects in the universe is finite; the characterising feature of the intellect is to be a conscious self, therefore an individual mind. For the sake of logical consistency, the only tenable conclusion that one can draw from these Aristotelian premises is that the same number of minds, each one characterised by numerical individual identity, is being continuously and cyclically reincarnated. «I have no doubt», states Cardano confidently, «that for this reason Aristotle established a finite number of souls going back into the bodies, according to the opinion of the poet: *Rursus et incipiant in corpora velle reverti*». (p. 334). The reference to the renowned locus in Virgil's *Aeneid* (VI, 751) should leave no doubt about the extent to which Cardano espoused the doctrine of the descent of the souls.[1] In *Contradicentium medicorum libri*, he is even more explicit and he adds that even Pomponazzi, in his *De immortalitate animae*, had already admitted that 'for he who wishes to defend the immortality of the soul there is no way of escaping the doctrine of παλινγενεσία'.[2] In García Valverde's opinion, Cardano's reinterpretation of characteristically Aristotelian tenets led him to believe that Aristotle advocated a sort of eternal return of the same intellects, that is, a doctrine of metempsychosis based on the Aristotelian cosmology of the eternal world and eternal generation. There is no doubt that here, once again, Cardano shows flair and inventiveness (to the point of hermeneutical recklessness) in matters of philosophical exegesis. He reads Aristotle as if he is championing metempsychosis, a view that blatantly goes against all textual and doxographic evidence.

Pace Cardano, the doctrine of metempsychosis is in opposition to one of the basic tenets of Aristotle's theory of the soul: the soul is the form of an organic body, therefore the relationship that connects the soul with the body is one of perfect complementarity and mutual functionality. As a result, a soul cannot just be reincarnated in whatever body it happens to enter, no matter if the body is a human body. Cardano's hermeneutical effrontery raises the question of the extent to which he seriously thought he was still faithful to Aristotle (after all, he prided himself on limiting his interpretation to Aristotle's real opinion). For the historian, the point is not to judge the tenability of Cardano's Aristotelianism, but the reasons behind his over-interpretation of the Aristotelian text. In this respect, the reference to Virgil mentioned earlier should alert the reader to the real direction in Cardano's exegesis. The time-honoured tradition of using poetry as material for philosophical critique resonates with Platonic tones. Like Porphyry's allegorical interpretation of Homer, Servius' and Macrobius' readings of Vergil's *Aeneid* had established a current of Platonic allegorical exegesis (still recognisable in Fulgentius' and Bernard Silvester's commentaries on Virgil). García Valverde tends to see Cardano as too much of an Aristotelian, whereas if there is a guideline to

[1] See also *Theonoston*, in *Opera omnia*, Lugduni, sumptibus Ioannis Antonii Huguetan & Marci Antonii Ravaud, 1663, II, p. 408a: «unde contingit ponentibus aeternitatem mundi, ut necessario cogantur admittere palingenesiam, quam Virgilius toties repetit».

[2] *Contradicentia medica*, in *Opera omnia*, VI, p. 479b.

follow in the interpretation of Cardano's strikingly incorrect reading of Aristotle, this is definitely of a Platonic nature. It is true that García Valverde, mindful of Nardi's studies, emphasises Plotinus' and Simplicius' influence on Cardano. The individual nature of man's intellect is the result of a process of increasing definition and actualisation caused by the exercise of his intellective power throughout his life, a process that continues indefinitely after man's death. On the other hand, the active intellect, by projecting itself onto man's soul, forms with this an indissoluble and unitary bond. The union of the active intellect with the human souls follows the pattern of alienation and self-return illustrated by Simplicius in the form of a cyclical process of individualisations and returns to the original undifferentiated unity of the mind. Cardano, argues García Valverde in his introduction, «opta por la pervivencia de la individualidad y, para robustecerla, formula el otro círculo, en este caso, el de los intelectos agentes individualizados reencarnándose continuamente y perfeccionando con su virtualidad las facultades naturales del alma humana, de manera semejante a como en Pico el intelecto revitaliza y perfecciona las almas vegetativa y sensitiva» (p. 68).

What we might call the Platonic subtext in *De immortalitate animorum* (and in Cardano's work as a whole) becomes more obvious when we compare, as García Valverde does, *De immortalitate* with the later dialogue *Theonoston*. Here Cardano's latent Platonism becomes more visible. García Valverde points out that in the third book of *Theonoston* Aristotle's presence, which was so dominant in *De immortalitate*, becames tenuous, to the point of disappearing completely. He argues that in *De immortalitate* Cardano was still responding to the immediate challenge represented by Pomponazzi's mortalism, a position that had created a situation of emergency. Instead, when he wrote the third book of the *Theonoston* the threat represented by Pomponazzi had become less pressing. However, in García Valverde's opinion, there are still valid reasons to argue that, even in *Theonoston*, Cardano maintained his loyalty to the Aristotelian theory of the mind. «[D]onde debe estudiarse bien la influencia aristotélica es en el tipo de inmortalidad que le otorga Cardano al alma humana en el *Theonoston*: si somos capaces de leer en sus líneas una solución como la que aparece finalmente en el *De immortalitate animorum*, no cabe duda de que el paradigma volverá a ser Aristóteles» (p. 86). This statement is problematic for two reasons. The first is that the idea of the intellects' reincarnation is not Aristotelian, but it is an interpretative device through which Cardano smuggles Pythagorean and Neoplatonic motifs into the Aristotelian arena. The second reason is that such a statement advocates, once again, the persistence of the Aristotelian paradigm in Cardano's theory of the intellect. To find in *Theonoston* a confirmation of the thesis of the palingenesis of the active intellects means for García Valverde to verify the assumption that Cardano maintained his original view consistently throughout his intellectual career and that that view was in the end Aristotelian. García Valverde believes that Cardano's position remained fundamentally the same, with the only difference that the continual return of the active intellects (*regreso continuo de los intelectos agentes a los cuerpos*) argued in the *De immortalitate* became the returns of the identities (*regreso de identidades*) in *Theonoston* (p. 90). He acknowledges that the notion of self outlined in *Theonoston* does not overlap completely with the no-

tion of the active intellect. In *De immortalite*, the palingenesis concerns the active intellect, while in *Theonoston* it concerns the individual as a σύνολον of the mind and the body. However, he thinks that, ultimately, such a difference is not important enough to work as conclusive evidence, as it is not an indication of «a radical change in Cardano's thought», but «the manifestation of an evolution», the definition of a personal conviction that in *De immortalitate* was only sketched (p. 92). García Valverde then interprets Cardano's perseverance as a form of loyalty to a kind of ineradicable rationalism: «el deseo de mantenerse dentro de los límites de la razón para explicar la naturaleza del alma y su inmortalidad se realiza siempre con los presupuestos teóricos del Estagirita por delante, incluso se profundiza en ellos y se introducen elementos no tenidos en cuenta antes y que pueden modificar, como han modificado, la solución que da Cardano al problema de la inmortalidad» (pp. 92-93). Cardano's departure from Aristotle's noetics becomes even more apparent in the fifth book of *Theonoston*. While the view held by Cardano in the third book of that work can be somehow reconciled with the position maintained in the *De immortalitate*, such reconciliation becomes untenable when one reads the fifth book of the *Theonoston*. Here, through the words of the Hermit, one of the characters in the dialogue, Cardano seems to endorse the theory of the fully-fledged immortality of the individual soul, with all the attached corollaries, such as the rewards and punishments in the hereafter and the recollection of the species assimilated during the course of the earthly life.

2. *Mihi unus Theophrastus sufficiet pro omnibus in Aristotelis sententia declaranda*: the place of Theophrastus' noetics in Cardano's argument

Taking our cue from Cardano's apparently odd suggestion to 'Pythagorise' Aristotle, one may choose to follow an interpretative path that is different from the one oriented towards Aristotle and to explore instead the Pythagorean and Platonic components in Cardano's view of the soul. After all, he is using Aristotle to rescue Plato and Pythagoras, not the other way around. His appreciation of Theophrastus' contribution is part of this exegetical strategy since his most significant fragments on the intellect could be found in the works of Themistius, Simplicius and Priscianus Lydus, who presented Theophrastus' fragments as key evidence to defend a Platonic interpretation of the νοῦς. Cardano, too, has no qualms about the relevance of Theophrastus' legacy in order to provide a correct interpretation of Aristotle. «Of all», he says in the middle of his discussion on the nature of the active intellect, «Theophrastus is the only one I need in order to make clear Aristotle's opinion» (p. 257). By all means, Cardano is aware that one can never be sure to be voicing Theophrastus' real opinion about the intellect because «his books that were devoted to the soul got lost» (p. 352). However, Cardano's statement that Aristotle should be interpreted in the light of Theophrastus is valuable and needs to be taken seriously. He argues that, by being a direct and close disciple of Aristotle («he was such a passionate student of Aristotle that he is said to use to fall asleep at his feet», p. 256), Theophrastus could not equivocate

his teacher's ideas concerning the immortality of the soul. It was Alexander of Aphrodisias who twisted the original and clear meaning of Aristotle's theory and befuddled the whole matter, driven as he was by an uncontrollable desire to become famous (*gloriae cupiditas*). By showing that he had understood Aristotle better than Theophrastus (Aristotle's favourite pupil), Alexander thought he could achieve eternal glory. In so doing, he became guilty of truncating the regular transmission of Aristotle's genuine thought (p. 253).

Among other things, by examining the way Cardano read Theophrastus, one can shed further light upon the reception of Theophrastus in the Renaissance.[1] The re-emergence of Theophrastus as a philosophical and scientific authority dates back to the fifteenth century, when some of his manuscripts were recovered, edited, translated and published. Among the illustrious translators, were Theodorus Gaza, Cardinal Bessarion and Marsilio Ficino. Ficino, in particular, translated Priscianus Lydus' *Metaphrasis in Theophrastum*, which included some valuable fragments from Theophrastus' psychological works. It is also worth pointing out that the recovery of Theophrastus' scattered excerpts from Themistius' and Simplicius' commentaries on, respectively, Aristotle's *De anima* and *Physica* added significant elements to the post-Averroean and post-Pomponazzian debate. Trained in scholastic philosophy at Pavia and Padua (Cardano counts Branda Porro, Francesco Taeggi and Giovanni Montesdoch called 'lo Spagnolo' among his teachers),[2] Cardano knew that in matters of exegesis, the solid Aristotelian tradition of commentaries could address difficult questions of Platonic derivation better than Plato's own texts, riddled with imaginative and elusive remarks. Like Themistius, Cardano, too, was of the opinion that 'it is better to quote Theophrastus's account of the potential and actual intellects'.[3] He believed that Theophrastus could be used as a reliable source and as a privileged point of view to interpret Aristotle's notoriously convoluted and obscure *loci* concerning the nature of the intellect. In particular, he focused on two fragments by Theophrastus as reported by Themistius in his commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*.[4] There he could find the definition of the material intellect as 'the bosom of forms, similar to that faculty in the things that consist of matter, which is the substratum of their constitution' (*pro formarum gremio, qualis in rebus materia constantibus fac-*

[1] C. B. Schmitt, *Theophrastus*, in *Catalogus translationum et commentariorum: Mediaeval and Renaissance Latin translations and commentaries*, Washington, The Catholic University of America Press, 1971, II, pp. 239-322.

[2] *De propria vita*, in *Opera omnia*, I, p. 26b. On Cardano's teachers, see the note by Alfonso Ingegno in G. Cardano, *Della mia vita*, a cura di A. Ingegno, Milan, Serra e Riva, pp. 222-223. See also B. Nardi, *Saggi sull'aristotelismo padovano dal secolo XIV al secolo XVI*, Florence, Sansoni, 1958, pp. 336-337.

[3] Themistius, *On Aristotle's* On the Soul, ed. by R. B. Todd, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 133.

[4] Theophrastus, frs 320B and 307A, in *Theophrastus of Eresus. Sources for His Life, Writings, Thought, and Influence*, ed. by W. W. Fortenbaugh, P. M. Huby, R. W. Sharples and D. Gutas, Leiden, Brill, 1992, II, pp. 53, 92. See Cardano, *De immortalitate animorum*, ed. García Valverde, pp. 255-256.

ultas illa est, quae constitutione earum insternitur).[1] The problem with Theophrastus is that, from an exegetical point of view, he had been used not only within the hermeneutical line 'Plato-Aristotle-Plotinus-Themistius-Simplicius-Ficino', but also within the line 'Aristotle-Themistius-Averroes'. In Averroes' interpretation, Theophrastus' solution allowed the material intellect to have absolutely no form and yet to be an entity capable of receiving every form («est quod ponere quod iste intellectus nullam habet formam necessarium est; et si non, non esset receptio neque preparatio»).[2] The important point is that, in both cases, as a vehicle of either Neoplatonic or Averroean ideas, Theophrastus played a key role in Cardano's noetics.

It is a characteristic feature of Cardano's philosophy the fact that, from the very beginning, his Aristotelianism was steeped in Platonic assumptions. His notion of nature is not Aristotelian (nature being not the autonomous principle of motion, but – according to the renowned adage *opus naturae est opus intelligentiae* – the instrument of the mind). His notion of the universe as a harmonious cosmos thoroughly pervaded by immaterial forces of celestial origin is typical of eclectic cosmologies that combine medical and Aristotelian themes on a Neoplatonic basis. His notion of dreaming is at the bottom not Aristotelian, but Synesian. Finally, his notion of memory is not Aristotelian, but Platonic. This becomes particularly evident in *Theonoston*, in which memory becomes the key factor to argue for a notion of selfhood characterised by self-awareness, power of unlimited persistence and individuality. In *De immortalitate animorum*, Cardano seems to be particularly intrigued by the role of memory in Aristotle's theory of the intellect. The active intellect is a constitutive component of man's individual self and it survives after man's death in the form of a self who has lost his memory because of the dissolution of the passive intellect (pp. 335-336). In *Theonoston*, the identification of the innermost core of the human self with an indestructible power of memory is brought to completion: «in our soul there is a principle where the memory of everything lies, and once this principle is delivered, we become master of all our knowledge, both of the senses and the intellect».[3] One's identity can thus be transcended through the absorption into an all-encompassing notion of life and reason.

[1] The original Greek reads: «ὡς ὑποκειμένην τινὰ δύναμιν καθάπερ και ἐπὶ τῶν ὑλικῶν».

[2] See E. Coccia, *La trasparenza delle immagini. Averroè e l'averroismo*, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2005, p. 101. Averroè, *Commentarium magnum in Aristotelis De anima libros*, ed. by F. S. Crawford, The Medieval Academy of America, Cambridge (Mass.), 1953, p. 399.

[3] *Theonoston*, in *Opera omnia*, II, p. 423a.

COMPOSTO, IN CARATTERE DANTE MONOTYPE,
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