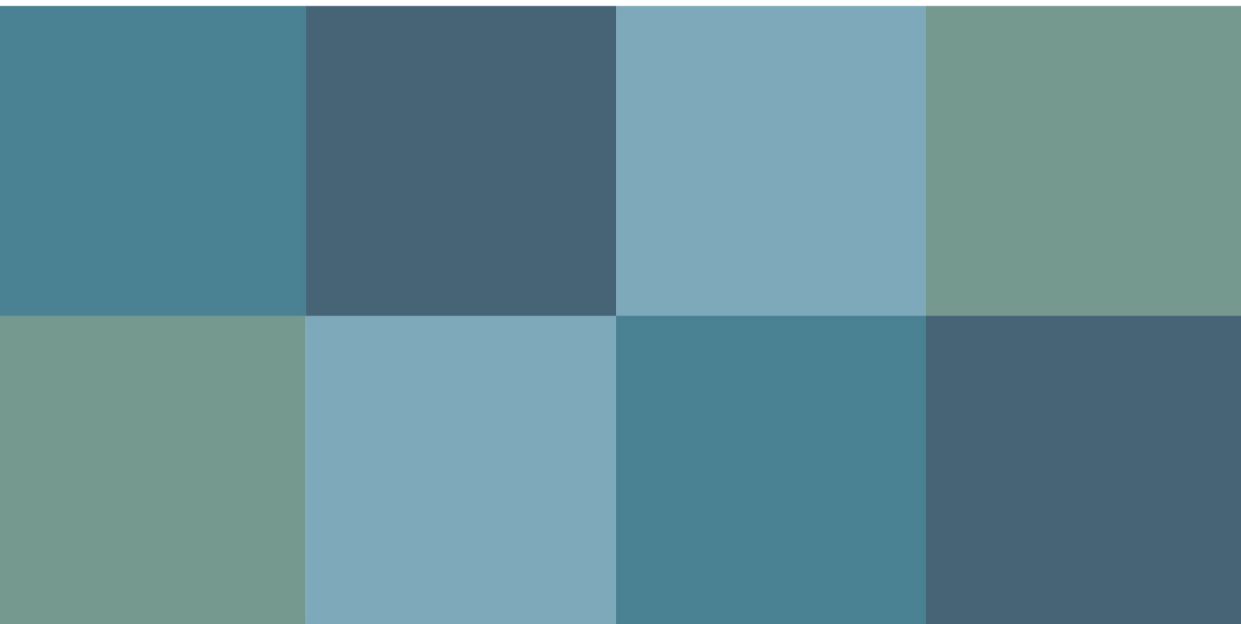


Natural Spectaculars

Aspects of Plutarch's Philosophy of Nature



Michiel Meeusen and Luc Van der Stockt (eds)



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Edited by

MICHIEL MEEUSEN and LUC VAN DER STOCKT

Leuven University Press

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Chasing Butterflies: The Conception of the Soul in Plutarch's Works*

ISRAEL MUÑOZ GALLARTE

It is well-known that numerous ancient cultures represent the human soul's wandering from life to death by means of various theriomorphic figures. Indeed, bears, ravens, mice, wasps, bees, dragonflies, or even dung-beetles may symbolically embody the soul on its ultimate journey. Strikingly, however, this is not the case in ancient Greece, in so far as we know from Plutarch's works, although his interest in the human soul is an undisputed fact and can be seen in numerous of his writings (where he deals with its creation, form, internal dichotomy, substance, origin, and destination)¹.

Usually, when confronted with the need to represent such a scene, ancient Greek artists resorted to the so-called *eidolon*, a figure that appears more often than some scholars may expect. Thus, for example, the Dutch scholar Jan Bremmer, who, in his *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul*², after describing the *eidolon* as "a being that looks exactly like a person ... generally conceived of as a shadow"³, asserts that even this representation is rather uncommon⁴. However, souls as *eidola* are well attested in Greek art, for example, on funerary *lekythoi*, even if in general these rarely portray eschatological scenes. As has been pointed out⁵, this might be due either to the desire to remember the deceased individual as he or she was while alive, or to the predominance of a realistic style. In

* I am grateful to Professor Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta (University of Groningen) for his invariably stimulating suggestions.

¹ Perhaps the three most interesting passages on this issue are Plutarch, *De sera* 563F–568A; *De facie* 943A–945C; *De genio* 590B–592E. For an overview, see Hirsch-Luipold (2014) 171–175.

² Cf. Bremmer (1987) 64.

³ Cf. Homer, *Il.* 10,495; 11,207f.

⁴ Cf. Bremmer (1987) 79.

⁵ Cf. Díez de Velasco (2013) 190.

fact, only one hundred of the two thousand white background *lekythoi* portray purely eschatological scenes (representations of the daily Greek life predominate in the others)⁶. Among the former, two kinds of figures represent the soul of the deceased individual: either small human-like figures, or winged *homunculi* that fly around the heads of the corpses and of the underworld characters. In my view, both representations should be related to the *eidola* described by Bremmer⁷ (see fig. 1). In any case, what seems clear is that there is no place in Greek pottery for animals or insects as symbolic representatives of the human soul⁸.

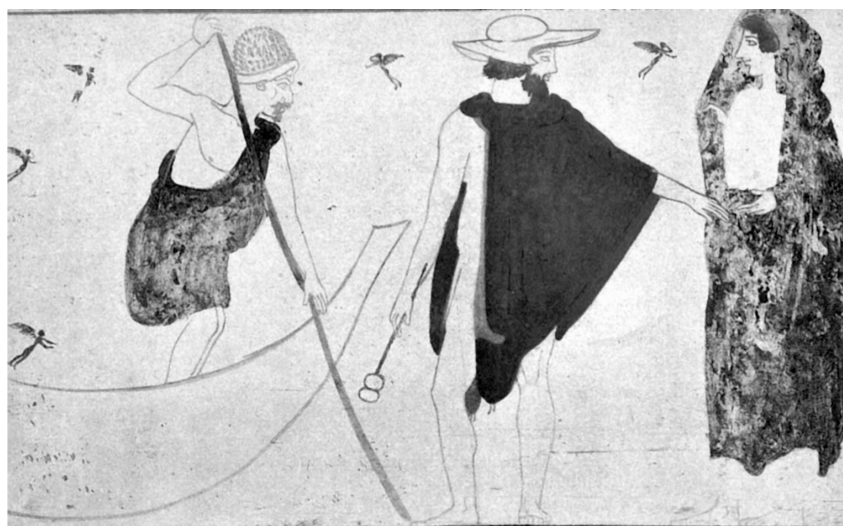


Fig. 1. Athens, NM 1928 by the painter of Sabouroff; reproduced by permission of the museum.

Beside the *eidolon* in all of its variations – be it as a pure *eidolon*, a human-like figure, or a flying *homunculus* –, Bremmer still posits two other possible representations of the soul in its post-mortal state, even if the evidence is in these cases somewhat problematic. Thus there is, for example, the Greek belief that, after death, the soul could turn into

⁶ A good example is the anonymous MN 1814 (CC1662) in the National Museum of Athens, cf. Díez de Velasco (2013) 189, n. 15.

⁷ Cf. Díez de Velasco (2013) 207–208.

⁸ Many thanks to Professor Pedro Marfil (University of Cordoba) for calling my attention to this interesting point.

a snake⁹, and in Aristotle's *Historia Animalium* there is a passage that seemingly associates the human soul with a butterfly (551a13–27)¹⁰. In this passage, the philosopher uses the Greek term *psyche* to denote a species of butterfly, the *pieris brassicae*, a usage which allegedly can be traced back to the Minoan age, although, as Bremmer himself concedes, there is still no solid evidence for this¹¹.

This discussion has been reopened in recent scholarship. Indeed, Verity Jane Platt has argued that some butterfly-like figures that appear on certain Greek gems should be interpreted as souls¹². In her view, this is the case in a small number of examples in which the gems depict an Eros burning a butterfly with a torch (see figs. 2 and 3). According to Platt, the representation does not echo the well-known myth of Eros and Psyche¹³, but rather shows the background of magical love spells: when torching the butterfly, Eros incarnates the 'power of desire', which by means of the fire captures the will of a human soul¹⁴. While this may be an original and attractive interpretation, the textual evidence in support of it is tenuous. In fact, besides the mention of the scene in PGM 4,1724–1731¹⁵, the author only provides the aforementioned passage of Aristotle's *Historia animalium*¹⁶.

⁹ Cf. Bremmer (1987) 77–78 and 80–81. See also, Hultkrantz (1953) 465. *Contra* Cook (1925) 645 n. 4.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *HA* 551a13–27: "The so-called *psyche* or butterfly is generated from caterpillars which grow on green leaves, chiefly leaves of the raphanus, which some call crambe or cabbage. At first it is less than a grain of millet; it then grows into a small grub; and in three days it is a tiny caterpillar. After this it grows on and on, and becomes quiescent and changes its shape, and is now called a chrysalis. The outer shell is hard, and the chrysalis moves if you touch it. It attaches itself by cobweb-like filaments and is unfurnished with mouth or any other apparent organ. After a little while the outer covering bursts asunder, and out flies the winged creature that we call the *psyche* or butterfly. At first, when it is a caterpillar, it feeds and ejects excrement; but when it turns into the chrysalis it neither feeds nor ejects excrement".

¹¹ Cf. Bremmer (1987) 82.

¹² Cf. Platt (2007) 89–99.

¹³ Cf. Apuleius, *Met.* 4,28–6,24; *Myth. Vat.* 1,231; Fulgentius, *Myth.* 3,6. See also Ruiz de Elvira (*2000) 495–496.

¹⁴ Cf. Platt (2007) 94–96.

¹⁵ PGM 4,1716–1870, namely, "Sword of Dardanos", 1730–1735: "and below / Aphrodite and Psyche engrave Eros standing on the vault of heaven, holding a blazing torch and burning Psyche", cf. Betz (1986) 69–71.

¹⁶ Also, *Greek Anthology* 16,198; Gow and Page 1968, vol. 2, 317; Platt (2007) 94 and 96. Regarding the argument of *similia similibus formula*, cf. Faraone (1991) 5.



Fig. 2. Bath, The Roman Baths Museum 1983.14.d.9; reproduced by permission of the museum.



Fig. 3. Italy Gallery, Ashmolean Museum. Beazley Archive 44b; reproduced by permission of the museum.

Can Plutarch help us to shed some light on the relationship between Greek art and the literary sources that allegedly supported them? Interestingly, among his numerous works, scholars believe to have found three pas-

sages in which the butterfly motif represents the human soul departing from the body after death. My analysis in the following pages will therefore attempt to determine if we are dealing with the survival of ancestral beliefs and motifs, or whether the butterfly is a mere metaphor symbolizing life's breath departing from the body.

The first of the sections that may suggest a connection between soul and butterfly is *Quaest. conv.* 636C, in which Plutarch deals with the old Orphic-Pythagorean discussion of whether the egg was created earlier than the hen. Through his interlocutor Firmus, the Chaeronean expounds his hypothesis that simple elements precede complex ones. In order to explain his position, Firmus begins with the Atomistic theory. He then goes on to assert that the seed comes before the egg, and the hen after that, due to the fact that what is simple always comes first. Firmus bolsters his opinion with an ethical metaphor: “as development admittedly exists between innate merit and perfected virtue”. In his view, therefore, the egg should be considered as the intermediate element between the seed and the formed animal. The argument proceeds with a biological analogy. In his opinion, several components of the human body, such as arteries and veins, should exist before the bodily whole has been perfectly shaped¹⁷. This is also the case in art, where shapeless and undefined forms precede the artist's finished work. It is in this moment that Plutarch introduces the metaphor we are dealing with, illuminating the similarities between caterpillar and egg, and, supposedly, between human soul and butterfly. In Plutarch's own words:

ὥς δὲ κάμψη γίνεται τὸ πρῶτον, εἴτ' ἐκπαγεῖσα διὰ ξηρότητα καὶ περιρραγεῖσ' ἕτερον πτερωθὲν δι' αὐτῆς τὴν καλουμένην ψυχὴν μεθίησιν, τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον ἐνταῦθα προϋφίσταται τὸ ὦδον οἷον ὕλη τῆς γενέσεως.

And just as the caterpillar exists first, then, made brittle by dryness, it bursts asunder and itself releases another creature, winged, the so-called *psyche* (butterfly); so in like manner the egg here exists first, as material of generation¹⁸.

The exposition continues with the reference to other zoogonic similes, namely, a comparison with bark-beetles and woodworms¹⁹. Even if

¹⁷ Cf. *Quaest. conv.* 636A–B. The paragraph could be an interpolation, cf. Teodorsson (1989) 217–218.

¹⁸ Clement – Hoffleit (1969) 149–151.

¹⁹ Cf. *Quaest. conv.* 636D. Teodorsson (1989) 220, highlights that the focus of the text is the question of how insects are born, whether through autogenesis or copulation, following the aforementioned quotation of Arist., *HA* 551a13–27. See also *Geop.* 15,1,21; *Quaest. conv.* 637B; Arist., *HA* 539a; *GA* 715b27.

Firmus does not explicitly mention that both kinds of insects hatch from eggs, he nevertheless makes use of them to explain that “the form from which a change is made necessarily precedes the form which results from change”. Plato’s words in the *Timaeus* provide the necessary support and bring this section to a close: “and matter is all from which whatever is created has its substance”²⁰. Finally, Firmus refers to the myth of the orphic egg, which provides the logical conclusion. Firmus here defends the view that the egg existed not only before the hen, but also before the whole of creation. Additionally, the egg is, in his words, the consecrated symbol of Dionysus, one that produces and contains everything²¹.

On the basis of this section of *Quaestiones convivales*, Pearson suggested an emendation of two Plutarchean passages – namely *Cons. ad ux.* 611F²² and fr. 177 Sandbach – in arguing that they both identify the human soul with the butterfly. The former is very lacunary and runs as follows:

ἡ δὲ ληφθεῖσα μὲν ... ὑπὸ κρειττόνων ἔρχεται [ἔχεται Wyttenbach], καθάπερ ἐκ καμπῆς [κάμπης Pearson] ὑγρᾶς καὶ μαλθακῆς ἀναχαιτίσασα²³ πρὸς ὃ πέφυκεν.

[Whereas the soul that tarries] after its capture [but a brief space in the body before it is set free by higher powers]²⁴ proceeds to its natural state as though released from a bent position with flexibility and resilience unimpaired²⁵.

Pearson accepts most of Wyttenbach’s proposals for the text, admitting both the *ἔχεται* and his hypothesis that the lacuna after *ἡ δὲ ληφθεῖσα μὲν* should contain a description of the soul, which has spent a short time in its corporeal environment²⁶. Pearson’s innovation, however, concerns his preference for *κάμπης* (‘caterpillar’) over *καμπῆς* (‘bending’ or ‘flexion’), which, even if based on a minute change, introduces an important semantic shift. He translates: “like a butterfly shaking itself free from the supple and yielding caterpillar into its natural element”. Indeed,

²⁰ Cf. Plato, *Ti.* 49a; 51a; 52d. See also Teodorsson (1989) 221.

²¹ Cf. Teodorsson (1989) 221–224. Bernabé (2008) 295–296, regarding its implications, see 44 n. 44. See also Roig Lanzillota (2010) 115–141.

²² Cf. Pearson (1907) 214.

²³ Pearson accepts, however, that the use of *ἀναχαιτίζειν*, with a wide range of parallels among Plutarch’s works, makes preferable the option of *καμπῆς*.

²⁴ Wyttenbach supplies *μένουσα δὲ βραχὺν ἐν τῷ σώματι χρόνον ἐλευθερωθεῖσα*.

²⁵ De Lacy – Einarson (1959). See also the parallels they adduce on p. 603, n. b.

²⁶ Cf. Pearson (1907) 214.

whereas the edition of Wyttenbach perfectly fits Plutarch's conception of the transmigration of the soul after death, the amendment by Pearson supposes a metaphorical use here, a simile by which the soul leaving the human body is compared to a butterfly emerging from a caterpillar's cocoon.

It is important to note that, in this work, Plutarch is trying to comfort his wife upon the death of their daughter, Timoxena. The main purpose of the Chaeronean is to explain that Timoxena's soul has moved on to a better, painless state, and consequently the sorrow of her loss should not affect her parents (611C). In addition, however, Plutarch deals with the change of state of the soul, from this life to death, also engaging with Epicurean theories on the subject. In Plutarch's opinion, the soul is immortal and hence its material life is like that of a bird in a cage (ταῖς ἀλισκομέναις ὄρνισι). Just like a bird is domesticated through habit, the soul may become used to this life and become entangled in material passions and changes of fortune due to its consecutive reincarnations. In order to avoid this, it is best for the soul to leave this life at the earliest opportunity and to regain its pristine state, freed from the human body. The broader thematic context, to be sure, is the transmigration of the soul after death, clearly paralleled in Plato's *Phaedo*, especially in its understanding of the soul's residing in a physical body as an imprisonment²⁷. Wyttenbach completed the *lacuna* after μέν, correctly in my opinion, suggesting that Plutarch inserted here a description of the soul that spends only a short while in its corporeal environment. In this context, Wyttenbach's interpretation appears plausible.

As for the second emendation (fr. 177 Sandbach), Pearson included his proposal in his review of Prichard's *Selected Essays of Plutarch. Vol. II*²⁸. It concerns a fragment of Plutarch's lost *De Anima* 2, where Pearson again defends κάμπτῆς over καμπῆς, and resorts to *Moralia* 611F and 636C in order to support it (these are the passages from the *Consolatio* and *Quaestiones convivales* referred to above):

διὸ δὴ καὶ λόγον ἔχει καθάπερ ἐκ καμπῆς [κάμπτῆς Pearson] τινὸς ἀνείσης οἶον ἐξάττειν καὶ ἀναθεῖν τὴν ψυχὴν ἀποπνέοντος τοῦ σώματος ἀναπνέουσιν αὐτὴν καὶ ἀναψύχουσιν²⁹.

²⁷ Plato, *Phd.* 82c–83a; Brenk (1998) 29–30 and n. 5.

²⁸ Cf. Pearson (1919) 33–35.

²⁹ See also, Volpe Cacciatore (2010) 196 and 197: διὸ δὴ καὶ λόγον ἔχει καθάπερ ἐκ καμπῆς τινὸς ἀνείσης οἶον ἐξάττειν καὶ ἀναθεῖν τὴν ψυχὴν ἀποπνέοντος τοῦ σώματος ἀναπνέουσιν αὐτὴν καὶ ἀναψύχουσιν, “perciò è verosimile che l'anima, quando il corpo spira, scatti e rimblazi in su, come al rilascio di una molla, e riprenda fiato e vigore”.

Hence it is reasonable to believe that the soul, when expired by the body, shoots forth and races upwards, as if at the release of a spring, and itself draws breath and is revived³⁰.

Pearson again adjusts the text by correcting *καμπῆς* into *κάμπης*. He translates: “the soul darts out and runs upwards, as from a certain caterpillar from it had been released”. The context is again that of the soul’s transmigration. Here, Plutarch’s interlocutor, Timon, defends the notion that what is imperishable does not share anything with the perishable in what regards the dissolution of death. In order to substantiate his claim, he resorts to the etymology of the term *θάνατος* (‘death’), which he relates to *θέον ἄνω* (‘racing upwards’). In his opinion, it means that what remains of a deceased human being does not stay in the world nor descends below it, but rather ascends swiftly to the higher realm. In the same line, the term *γένεσις* (‘birth’) is linked to *ἐπὶ γῆν νεύσις* and interpreted as ‘earthward inclination’.

Pearson’s emendations are certainly plausible from a palaeographical perspective, as they only involve the change of one diacritical mark (*κάμπης/καμπῆς*). However, in my opinion, they are far removed from Plutarch’s view, as will be demonstrated further on.

Let us now return to the passage from *Quaestiones convivales* (636C). As Teodorsson argues, first of all, Firmus’s speech seems to reveal Plutarch’s intention to ridicule Epicurean theories³¹. Indeed, the conversation is related in a rather relaxed key, as follows: “after Alexander had ridiculed the inquiry on the ground that it yielded no firm solution, my relative Firmus said ...”. Subsequently, the speech no longer deals with the main topic outlined above – the creation of the world’s soul. Despite of this, Firmus goes on to deliver a speech, filled with Aristotelian terminology that propounds a zoogonical simile for the creation of all things³². Yet, even so his conclusions actually contradict those of the Stagirite. For example, in the specific case of the butterfly, the so-called *psyche*, Aristotle has his doubts regarding its birth, but he nonetheless proposes that butterflies are born by spontaneous generation: “The so-called *psyche* or butterfly is generated from caterpillars which grow on green leaves, chiefly leaves of the *raphanus*, which some call crambe or cabbage”³³. Aristotle mentions neither the seed nor the egg, nor the insect that is their result, as does Firmus: “as development admittedly exists between innate

³⁰ Sandbach (1969). See also Roskam (2007) 137 and n. 182.

³¹ Teodorsson, (1989) 215, supports his argument with direct quotations of Epicurus, such as *ἐμοὶ . . . ἀτόμους*, Epicurus, *Ep.* 2,41.

³² Cf. *Quaest. conv.* 636AB. See also Teodorsson (1989) 216.

³³ Cf. Aristotle, *HA* 551a13–27; *Geop.* 15,1,21. See also, Teodorsson (1989) 219.

merit and perfected virtue, so the intermediate development in nature's passage from the seed to the living creature is the egg³⁴. Similarly, we find significant contradictions once we arrive at the birth processes of bark-beetles and woodworms³⁵.

Secondly, it is notable that Firmus's own arguments are contradictory. For instance, although he begins with the Atomistic theory, arguing that atoms are the first components of everything, he immediately forgets this, asserting the seed as the initial cause instead. In addition, as the speech further on suggests, if the seed comes first, then the hen exists beforehand³⁶.

The comic aspect of this *reductio ad absurdum* of Firmus's speech, which consequently has nothing to do with Plutarch's opinion, is evident at the end of his discourse, with the mention of Firmus's laughter, ἔφη γέλασας, "he added with a laugh"³⁷. If Plutarch and his wife were initiated into the Dionysian mysteries, as he affirms in his *Cons. ad ux.* 611D, Firmus's intervention lacks the serious tone it deserves. We can therefore conclude that Plutarch's intention is a parody and that the butterfly-soul is a mere metaphor. Consequently, the passage, far from showing the author's view, is a pastiche with Aristotelian echoes – and consciously deformed ones at that.

Let us now return to the second text of *Cons. ad ux.* 611F and review Pearson's arguments once again. His corrections to the text are supported mainly by three arguments:

1. The conception of the butterfly-soul is widely attested by anthropologists;
2. ψύχη was the name actually given to a certain species of butterfly, which seems to be confirmed by Aristotle's passage in the *Historia animalium*;
3. If any doubt remains, it may be assuaged by a comparison with *Quaest. conv.* 636C³⁸.

As for the first argument, Pearson does not provide any further information about which anthropologists attest the butterfly motif, and in which

³⁴ Cf. *Quaest. conv.* 636B.

³⁵ Cf. Teodorsson (1989) 220. Cf. *Quaest. conv.* 636DE; he also supports his view with Plato's theory on creation through imitation, cf. Plato, *Ti.* 49a; 50d; 52d. As far as this view is concerned, there exists a relationship between the first entity and the second one, as a result of the process of transformation. Moreover, Plutarch asserts that there exists a proportional relationship between the act of growing and the corruption by humidity.

³⁶ Cf. Teodorsson (1989) 216–217.

³⁷ Cf. *Quaest. conv.* 636D.

³⁸ Cf. Pearson (1907) 214.

culture(s). In any case, as Jan Bremmer maintains, this conception is not attested in Greek literature, while in the European context it has only been found in Irish and Estonian folklore³⁹.

As for the second point, the aforementioned Aristotelian passage is not definitive. The ancient Greek polysemy of a term referring at the same time to the human soul and to a species of butterfly could originate from an ancient belief, but its meaning bears no traces on Aristotle's works nor appears in those of Plutarch.

As for the third point, in my view, the *Quaestiones convivales* passage cannot be used in support of Pearson's conjecture in the other two passages, since they have rather different backgrounds. Whereas in *Quaestiones convivales* Firmus describes the soul's incarnation in the human body, Plutarch in his *Consolatio* discusses the opposite process: the transmigration of the soul after death. In what regards fr. 177 Sandbach, apart from referring to his own article, published several years ago, Pearson does not present any further solid evidence. As was the case in the *Consolatio*, the core of the fragment is the transmigration of the human soul after death. This prevents us from connecting one passage with the other, from considering them as parallels and, consequently, from assimilating butterfly and soul.

To conclude, it seems safe to affirm that Plutarch does not identify the soul with the butterfly: the only passage in which this happens is a parody filled with pseudo-scientific Aristotelian terminology. The only case in which the soul is related to the butterfly is found in *Quaestiones convivales*, where it serves as a simple metaphor. As a result, in my view, as far as the Greek literature is concerned, and excluding the testimony of Aristotle, we find only a mythological symbolism, that of Psyche, represented as a butterfly. Therefore, any further attempt to identify the human soul with the butterfly must be based on a solid textual foundation that is to include new texts, which up to now have not been taken into account. The artistic examples discussed above may show that winged *eidola* may be confused with butterflies, but, until new and solid evidence is provided, the hypothesis remains speculative⁴⁰.

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³⁹ Cf. Bremmer (1987) 64–65; Nilsson (³1967) 198. See also Lixfeld (1972) 60–107; Hultkrantz (1953) 278–279.

⁴⁰ Regarding the testimonies from Minoan and Mycenaean arts, see Dietrich (²1974) 121–122. Bremmer, (1987) 64–65, 82, also says: “[I]mportunely, there are no other indications of a possible connection between the butterfly and the soul of the living and the dead”. In fact, the only example he sees as being up for discussion is Lucian's *Panegyric to the Fly*, 7.

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