

Plato's psychology – the tripartite soul



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Plato presents a complicated theory of human psychology spread out amongst his various works. In Republic, Phaedo, Phaedrus, and others, Plato develops a view of human psychology centered on the nature of the soul. He presents the bulk of his argument in Republic and Phaedo, introducing the ideas of the immortal soul and the tripartite division of the soul. At times, however, he appears to contradict his views. It seems possible that Plato is not being entirely truthful about his beliefs in at least one, if not both of the descriptions. The most important belief of Plato's psychology was the idea of the tripartite soul. A soul, Plato believed, did not consist of a single part, but instead was composed of three distinct elements. This tripartite view of the soul is developed through an allegory to the ideal city, presented throughout the Republic. Plato hoped that by looking first at the composition and origins of justice in a city, he could discover the virtues that lead to justice in the individual. His ideal city consists of three distinct classes of individual, each of which, he argues, is crucial to the functioning of the city. Each of these three classes, in turn, exemplifies a virtue that is crucial for a city to function. The most important class in Plato's city is the ruling class, which he refers to as the "guardians" of the city (Republic 374e). The ruling class is responsible for ensuring the safety and well-being of all the members of the city. Plato argues that "philosophy, spirit, speed, and strength must all, then, be combined in the nature of anyone who is to be a fine and good guardian of our city" (376c). Importantly, the ruling class is not a privileged class. Rather, Plato argues that the guardians should eschew the trappings of status and wealth, noting that "they work simply for their keep and get no extra wages as others do" (419). Under such a system there would be no motive for individuals to aspire to the ruling class, leaving only those who are

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most suited to the task to perform out of a sense of duty to their fellow citizens. Plato associates the virtue of wisdom with these ideal rulers. Wisdom represents the epitome of the logic and reason that rulers should strive towards. Plato argues that "it is guardianship" that illustrates a city "has good judgment and is really wise" (428d). A city is "wise because of this smallest class and part in it, namely the governing or ruling one" (428e). Only when the guardians of a city have its best interests in heart can wisdom be achieved. The city is dependent upon the rulers for oversight, but Plato argues that a second class, the soldiers, is needed to defend it and ensure its ultimate survival. Well-trained warrior athletes will "be able to fight twice or three times their number" (422c), fending off any attack. When the soldiers are well trained and carry out their duties effectively, they represent the virtue of courage. Plato asks, "Who, in calling the city cowardly or courageous, would look anywhere other than to who fights and does battle on its behalf?" (429b). The virtue of courage is dependent upon the soldiers, just as the virtue of wisdom was placed upon the rulers. The third class of the city, the merchants and citizens, is by far the most numerous. Their specific jobs range from carpentry to banking and beyond, but they each serve a vital role in the functioning of the city. However, "one finds all kinds of diverse desires, pleasures, and pains" in this group, desires that do not necessarily coincide with what is best for the city (431c). Instead, it is the "wisdom and desires of the few," the rulers, that makes the city run smoothly (431d). Thus, the third class must embody the virtue of moderation. Plato notes that "unlike courage and wisdom, each of which resides in one part... moderation spreads through the whole" (431e). The vast majority of the city's citizenship is in this third class, and the virtue of

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moderation, while spread amongst all three classes, depends most heavily upon them. It is when all three classes are in balance, and their respective virtues are in evidence, that Plato's true goal emerges. He argues that the successful combination of the three virtues within the city leads to the expression of the ultimate virtue, justice. When the classes interfere in each others work, the city cannot carry out its responsibilities effectively. Plato notes that " meddling and exchange between these three classes, then, is the greatest harm that can happen to the city" (434c). Only when each class pursues its own purposes and works towards achieving its own specific virtuosity can the city become just. Having thus fully explored the origins of justice within the larger entity of the city, Plato turns his attention to the individual. He expresses hope that " if we first tried to observe justice in some larger thing that possessed it, this would make it easier to observe in a single individual" (434e). However, Plato here encounters a conundrum. In order to relate justice within the individual soul to justice in the city, the soul must possess divisions mimicking the three classes of the city. This implies a tripartite soul, with each section having its counterpart in the classes of the ideal city. Plato examines the problem of division in the soul through the example of a thirsty person restraining themselves from drinking (439c). Plato argues that when a thirsty person does not choose to immediately satisfy that thirst, " there is something in their soul, bidding them to drink, and something different, forbidding them to do so" (439c). These two separate thoughts, Plato argued, must be produced in two distinct sections of the soul. He claims that the thirst came from a part of the soul that desires and feels, while the restraint in not drinking came from a rational section of the soul (439d). Following this same reasoning, he argues that the

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emotional part “ by which we get angry” is a third part, as “ anger sometimes makes war against the appetites” (440a). Plato believes that in the city it is the different parts which meddle with and contradict each other, thus when contradictions arise in the soul it must be do to different parts of the soul. Plato's derivation of the tripartite soul through the idea of restraining a desire suffers from a troublesome flaw. If, as Plato claims, any contradicting thoughts must come from different parts of the soul, there must be far more than three different parts. For example, when a person watching a play or other performance is thirsty, but does not wish to leave his or her seat due to a desire to continue watching the play, this contradiction does not appear to come from two different elements. Both the thirst and the intention of watching the play are desires, seemingly from the appetitive part of the soul, yet they are clearly in opposition. In Plato's system this seems to imply that there are in fact two different appetitive parts of the soul for these two desires, just as there are different parts for other desires, ad infinitum. This is clearly absurd, yet the decision to group all of these apparently contradictory thoughts into the single entity of the appetite undermines Plato's premise. If these contradictions can be grouped together, it seems entirely arbitrary to divide the soul into three parts at all. Why is there a need for disparate parts when contradictions can arise within the parts as well as between them? Yet Plato's idea of a tripartite soul is not lost. Plato might argue that the contradictions within the sections are not true oppositions, but merely competing thoughts. When a thirsty person decides not to go to the store for a drink in the middle of a blizzard, their rationality is overruling their desire. When they choose to get a drink and miss the play, they are simply deciding that the drink is more desirable at

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that particular moment, and no contradiction or overruling within the soul becomes apparent. In this way, Plato can defend his division of the soul and move on to finish his allegory to the city. With the divisions of a tripartite soul securely established, Plato applies the ideals derived from the discussion of the city to his view of the soul. He first addresses the rational part of the soul. Its ability to control the other parts makes it a natural candidate for the position of the rulers and the virtue of wisdom. Plato asks “Isn't it appropriate for the rational part to rule, since it is really wise and exercises foresight on behalf of the whole soul, and for the spirited part to obey and be its ally?” (441e). Next, Plato looks at the spirited part of the soul, which he associates with the soldiers and notes that “it is because of the spirited part^{2E}.. that we call a single individual courageous” (442b). Finally, he examines the appetitive part of the soul, relating it to the general population of the city (442c). Plato again argues that a person is moderate in as much as all three parts of the soul realize their proper places, placing the greatest burden on the larger appetitive soul (442c). Finally, when the rational, spirited, and appetitive souls are in harmony and do not interfere with one another, the soul embodies justice. Plato's derives his tripartite theory of the soul in Republic through a search for the ideal of justice. Moving from justice in the city to justice in the individual, Plato provides a convincing argument for his theories. In Phaedo, Plato also examines the nature of the soul, but he does so without a specific goal in mind. As a result, his findings in Phaedo show a simpler, more universal nature of the soul. The contrast between the two is most clearly evident in Plato's application in Phaedo of the same idea of restraint from desires as he used in Republic. Plato uses the example of a thirsty individual restraining himself from

drinking in Phaedo and in Republic (Republic 439c, Phaedo 94b-c). In Phaedo, he introduces the argument in support of his ideas on the immortality of the soul. Plato believes that the immortal soul existed before it had life in the body, and will continue to exist after the body's death. Looking first at the pre-existence of the soul, he introduces the idea of recollection, noting that "we must at some previous time have learned what we now recollect. This is possible only if our soul existed somewhere before it took on this human shape" (73a). This argument calls for the existence of the human soul before it entered the body, but it does not satisfactorily prove the immortality of the soul, nor does it establish that the soul lives on after death. To address these concerns, Plato turns to the somewhat unconvincing idea that the soul is a Form. Here he argues that the soul "is most like the divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always the same as itself;" in essence, that it is most like a Form (80b). This somewhat unconvincing argument is exploited by the antagonists in the dialogue who point out that a soul in this sense would be independent of the body, but the soul seems to act more in harmony with the body, overseeing it and looking after its health (86b). Here we have the introduction of Plato's idea of the thirsty soul restraining itself from drink once again. Plato notes that "if the soul were a harmony, it would never be out of tune with the stress and relaxation of the elements... it would follow and never direct them" (94c). The idea that when a body is thirsty it can be restrained by the soul contradicts this idea of harmony. The soul is not "following" the body, but rather it "appear[s] to do quite the opposite, ruling over all the elements of which one says it is composed" (94d). This observation adequately defends Plato's position in the Phaedo, but it raises some questions about Plato's true

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beliefs on the matter. When compared directly with the passage in Republic, Plato's words are clearly contradictory. In Republic, he used the idea of restraint to show a conflicted, divided soul. In Phaedo, however, he uses it to show a strong, resolute, and most importantly unified soul. While the Republic suggests that the appetitive desires are contained within the soul itself, Phaedo seems to suggest that the desires are separate from and controlled by the soul. There is no rational soul overruling the appetitive soul in Phaedo, it is simply the soul overruling the body. In this way, the appetitive and spirited sections of the soul are moved into the body in Phaedo, yet they are incorporated into the soul in Republic. This confusion regarding the parts of the soul does not necessarily present a contradiction. Throughout Phaedo, Plato discusses the idea that the soul and the body are linked. If the soul and body are linked, then perhaps the soul contains in itself the desires and emotions of the body, at least for such time as it is alive and residing within the body. This would appear to reconcile the conflicting arguments presented in Phaedo and Republic. He even obliquely references this with the comment that the soul's purpose lies in "ruling over all the elements of which one says it is composed" (94d). This statement generates conflicts of its own, as it implies that the soul rules over itself. Plato argues in Republic, however, that all three of the parts of the soul are equal, with no part controlling the other. Plato actually works to resolve some of these contradictions in Phaedrus, where he introduces the image of the rational soul as a charioteer commanding the spirited and appetitive souls. Phaedrus is beyond the scope of this essay, however, and it nonetheless fails to fully rectify the contradictions Plato has created for himself in Phaedo and Republic. These contradictions raise the question of

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which underlying theory Plato ascribes to. Plato's discussion of the tripartite soul and the immortal soul presents two distinct views. In one, the soul is divided into separate but equal parts. In the other, the soul is, depending on your view, either composed of a single controlling part or composed of many unequal parts, controlled by the rational mind. Some of the contradiction found within the works can perhaps be attributed to their differing purposes. *Phaedo*, subtitled "On the Immortality of the Soul," had as its primary purpose an exploration of the nature of the soul's existence, specifically its immortality. It is possible that Plato, speaking through the persona of Socrates and confronted with challenging arguments against his ideas, simply modified his theories of the soul in order to more accurately defend the idea of immortality. More precisely, he may have presented only those parts of his concept of the soul that pertained to a defense of its immortality. Since the exact constitution of the soul and its parts was not the concern of the work, there was no need to formulate and defend the full range of his arguments. In *Republic*, subtitled "On Justice," Plato makes a more concerted effort to explore the origins of justice in the soul. Plato must be as specific in his arguments as possible in this work, as he is attempting to apply the complex concept of justice to the human soul. Perhaps Plato delved deeper into his ideas here, causing some of the apparent contradictions to develop. It is possible that these are simply two different underlying theories, but it seems more likely that they are simply different interpretations of the same theory. While there are differences between them, these differences are not so pronounced as to be irreconcilable. In looking at Plato's theories of the soul as presented in his works, chiefly *Phaedo* and *Republic*, it is apparent that two slightly different views on the

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soul are at play. Given the greater depth of the discussion in Republic, it seems that Plato may have considered this view to be more accurate than the one presented in Phaedo. No matter which one is considered “correct,” however, the fact remains that the two works present slightly different views on the soul. The differences in these views stem from the differing aims of their respective works, and while contrasting, they are not in total conflict. Rather, the two views represent different aspects of the same issue, and not two separate underlying theories. Plato's view of the soul is highly complex, and, like a good politician, he simply presents the reader in each case with whichever particular qualities of the soul are crucial to the understanding of his current argument.