

## **Plato and Psychic Harmony: a Recipe for Mental Health or Mental Illness?**

The main purpose of this paper is, firstly, to outline Plato's identification in the *Republic* of both virtue and happiness with a conception of psychic harmony, and, secondly, to delineate some of the strengths and weaknesses of this theory and its implications for contemporary bioethics. Such a wide-ranging enquiry necessarily entails that many key issues, which in other contexts would merit a paper or book of their own, are allocated only a brief discussion. Nevertheless, I believe that there is need of an overview of Plato's theory and its potential contribution to current debates as, in contrast to Aristotle, Plato's model is a relatively untapped resource in bioethical studies.<sup>i</sup> This matters, as Plato certainly has much of substance to contribute, whether one agrees with his ideas or not. Both physical and psychic health in humans are, for Plato, intrinsically rich and necessarily value-imbued concepts which involve far more than the mere absence of illness or disease;<sup>ii</sup> he would not be sympathetic to current attempts to articulate and defend supposedly value-free conceptions of either physical or mental functioning, whether that functioning is directed at individual survival or the reproduction of the species.<sup>iii</sup> For Plato, the understanding and achievement of both physical and psychic health involve nothing less than a full and conscious appreciation of what it is to be human.<sup>iv</sup> As he also believes that almost all humans need to live within society out of both economic and political necessity, he holds in consequence that the full physical and mental health of an individual cannot be properly considered, let alone achieved, outside the appropriate social, political and artistic conditions: the realisation of one's humanity cannot usually take place outside of such a framework and true, positive health is thus by no means just a matter for the medical profession.

In the *Republic*, such 'appropriate social, political and artistic conditions' refer to the ideally just state, governed by Philosopher-Rulers, that the character of Socrates constructs within the dialogue. However, while that political set-up is certainly of the greatest importance, I also wish to draw attention to a point that receives far less attention: namely the fact that the dialogue itself takes place within the very different social and political environment of Socrates' Athens, and that the conception of psychic harmony that Socrates proposes may look very different, and be achieved very differently (if necessarily imperfectly), when transposed from the ideally just state to a far more compromised world where no *ideally* rational beings exist. The fact that Socrates argues that ideally rational harmony can only exist in an ideally rational state does not mean that Plato thinks that the concept has no use or application if imperfectly realised in an imperfect state. It should never be assumed that the character of Socrates is simply a mouthpiece for Plato (still less a portrayal of the historical Socrates), even if he is probably closer to that role in the *Republic* than in many of the dialogues. The conception of psychic harmony may in consequence be more flexible than it first appears in Socrates' hands.

Due to constraints of space, I shall concentrate on the notion of psychic rather than physical health (though, as the opening comments suggest, there are some notable similarities between the two notions in Plato's thought). In order to keep to my two central aims, I shall not be critically assessing the arguments in the *Republic* which attempt to establish the notion of psychic 'parts', a notion which clearly underpins the very possibility of psychic harmony.<sup>v</sup> These arguments are important and controversial, but to focus on them here would be a distraction. Instead, I shall start

by describing briefly the comparison Plato makes between the parts of the *psychê*<sup>vi</sup> and what he believes to be the three natural classes of the ideally just state. Again, the purpose of this brief description is not to analyse the validity of the comparison in any detail – also a task for a different study<sup>vii</sup> - but rather to try to understand why Plato thinks the notion of psychic harmony can only properly be understood by placing it first in the ideal political and social setting (even if one then proceeds to adapt the perfect model to less than ideal settings).

### **The Theory of Psychic Health**

Let us begin, therefore, where Plato begins his account of psychic harmony in *Republic* Book IV, namely with the structure of the ideally just state. In *Republic* I, the sophist Thrasymachus claims that injustice pays the agent better than justice and that justice is simply for naïve fools (336b-354b). Two other interlocutors, Glaucon and Adeimantus, accordingly challenge Socrates to show that being just and virtuous truly is to the agent's advantage. Socrates replies that it will be easier to spot justice, and evaluate its advantages and disadvantages, on the larger canvas of the *polis*, the community or state, and from *Republic* 368e he accordingly sets about constructing a simple community based on the need for economic exchange and the principle that each person should perform only one job: specialization both accords with the natural distribution of skills and allows the citizens to concentrate on perfecting one particular task. Initially this community is classless: everyone is both a producer and a consumer of basic goods and services. Glaucon, however, complains that such an austere existence catering solely to basic physical needs would be fit only for pigs (372d), and in response Socrates allows the introduction of more sophisticated goods and pursuits. As the community expands, it comes into conflict with its neighbours and an army is required; on the principle that no-one should perform more than one job, this army will form a separate class, termed Guardians (374a-e).<sup>viii</sup>

From *Republic* 376c-412a Socrates lays down strictures for the early education of these Guardians: it is above all crucial that the potentially aggressive instincts necessary for fighting foreign enemies are carefully controlled by a programme of literary and musical studies and physical training, so that the Guardian soldiers do not without cause turn on their own people in peacetime.<sup>ix</sup> Then, in 412b, Socrates proceeds to divide the Guardian class into two: those responsible for military, policing and executive duties are now termed Auxiliaries, and are to assist an elite group of Rulers, whose task it is to care for the state as a whole. Socrates then goes on to locate the virtues of the state in the functions performed by its three classes and in the relations between them. It is owing to the wisdom of its rulers that the state as a whole will be wise, and owing to the courage of its Auxiliaries that the state as a whole is courageous. Moderation or self-control in the state results when all three classes agree about who ought to rule (431d-e), and the appetites and desires of the majority of the citizens are controlled by the rational desires and wisdom of the Rulers (431c-d). Finally, justice is the condition which makes all the other virtues possible: namely the condition that each individual perform his or her own job and not interfere with anyone else. And if each person is performing his or her job, then, even more critically, each class will also be performing its proper function. It is this maintenance of the proper divisions between classes that can strictly be termed justice in the state (434b-c).

Justice, therefore, appears on this account unquestionably beneficial to the state: it makes for peace and security, wise ruling and concord between the classes. Without it, the state would simply fall apart (434b). Thrasymachus' challenge, however, was directed at justice in the individual. If Socrates is to prove that, *pace* Thrasymachus, justice in fact benefits its possessor, then he must show that justice in the individual operates in a similar way.

To do this, he must clearly first demonstrate that the individual's *psychê* is also somehow divided into three parts, and it is these contentious arguments (434e-441b) which I am here granting Socrates so that we can concentrate on our main aim of exploring the bioethical implications of psychic harmony. Let us move to 441c, therefore, where we find Socrates claiming that he has established that there are 'the same three elements in the *psychê* of the individual as there are in the state',<sup>x</sup> i.e. reason (analogous to the Rulers); a spirited element (*thumos*, or *thumoeides*, analogous to the military Auxiliaries); and the appetites for food, drink, sex and money (analogous to the economic Producers).<sup>xi</sup> He accordingly proceeds to analyse the virtues of the individual along the same lines. It is owing to his reason that the individual is wise, and owing to his *thumos* that he is brave; simply possessing reason and *thumos*, however, will not be enough: they must also be performing their proper functions. Reason must be in control of the *psychê* as a whole, and *thumos* must be supporting reason's orders. Similarly, the individual will be self-disciplined when all three parts of his *psychê* are in 'friendly and harmonious agreement' about which part ought to rule - that is, reason - and there is no 'civil war' amongst them (442c10-d1). And justice in the individual will again be the condition which makes such harmonious agreement possible, namely the condition that each part perform its own proper function and not try to usurp the function of any other part. Socrates sums up their conclusions so far in a key passage from 443c-444a; it is so central to our inquiry that it is worth quoting in full:

'Justice, therefore, we may say, is a principle of this kind; its real concern is not with external actions, but with a man's inward self, his true concern and interest. The just man will not allow the three elements which make up his inward self to trespass on each other's functions or interfere with each other, but, by keeping all three in tune, like the notes of a scale (high, middle, and low, and any others there be), will in the truest sense set his house to rights, attain self-mastery and order, and live on good terms with himself. When he has bound these elements into a disciplined and harmonious whole, and so become fully one instead of many, he will be ready for action of any kind, whether it concerns his personal or financial welfare, whether it is political or private; and he will reckon and call any of these actions just and honourable if it contributes to and helps to maintain this disposition of mind, and will call the knowledge which controls such action wisdom. Similarly, he will call unjust any action destructive of this disposition, and the opinions which control such action ignorance.'

As justice in the state brought about peace, security and concord, so justice in the individual allows him to keep 'all three [elements of himself] in tune, like the notes of a scale.' He can live at peace with himself, and channel all his energies into achieving his overall goals, because he has 'become fully one instead of many'. Injustice, on the other hand, is said to be a 'kind of civil war' which occurs when the elements of the mind are 'confused and displaced' (444b).<sup>xii</sup>

Justice is thus, Socrates claims, unquestionably to the benefit of the individual as well as the state, and injustice is unquestionably to the individual's detriment: there is 'no difference between physical and psychical states of health and sickness' (444c).<sup>xiii</sup> Exactly as 'health is produced by establishing a natural relation of control and subordination among the constituents of the body, disease by establishing an unnatural relation', so 'justice is produced by establishing in the *psychê* a similar natural relation of control and subordination among its constituents, and injustice by establishing an unnatural one' (444d). Consequently 'it seems, then, that excellence (*aretê*) is a kind of psychic health or beauty or fitness, and defect a kind of illness or deformity or weakness' (444d-e).<sup>xiv</sup> And given that Glaucon and Socrates go on to agree that we all want psychic health at least as much as we want bodily health, there is the very strong implication that this state of psychic harmony can also be identified with *eudaimonia* (flourishing or happiness): Glaucon certainly says explicitly that our lives would not be worth living if our psychic harmony disintegrated, and Socrates concurs (445a). Although neither Socrates nor Glaucon directly mentions Thrasymachus at this point, the inference that we are supposed to draw seems clear: in contemptuously dismissing the value of justice, Thrasymachus was also unwittingly dismissing the value of psychic health and happiness. If he had known what he was talking about, he would not have said what he did.<sup>xv</sup>

There is a further vital point to note at this juncture. When Glaucon says that mental health is essential if our lives are to be worth living, this may plausibly be thought to imply that mental health is crucial for a worthwhile *human* life: there is absolutely no reason to suppose that he is only referring to men.<sup>xvi</sup> This implication appears to be confirmed by 588d, where Socrates likens the rational part of the *psychê* to a little human (*anthrôpos*): we can only live a truly human life if our reason is in control. To be ruled by our *thumos* or our appetites is to be ruled, respectively, by a lion or a many-headed monster.

### **Problems with the Theory**

Such a conception of psychic harmony, however, plainly raises at least as many questions as it purportedly answers: it is keenly debated, for instance, whether Socrates' theory really does answer Thrasymachus' challenge, or whether Socrates is guilty of equivocation.<sup>xvii</sup> In this paper, however, I wish to concentrate on two sets of questions in particular:

- i) Firstly, I wish to raise the issue of the problematic nature of all proposed norms of bodily and psychic health, and to ask specifically why Plato is so sure that psychic harmony can only exist if reason is in control.
- ii) Secondly, I want to highlight the clear scope for political, social and medical abuse following any identification between wrong-doing and unhappiness on the one hand and illness on the other, and to explore whether a measure of autonomy can be built into Plato's model in order to help safeguard against such potential abuse.

### **The Question of Norms**

There is no question that Plato's proposals for psychic health in the *Republic* are overtly and deliberately value-rich: to be a healthy human, in both body and mind,<sup>xviii</sup> is for Plato to be both a flourishing and a good human (444d-445a). For some readers, 'value-rich' will undoubtedly be interpreted as 'value-laden'. Who knows, or could know, what the flourishing and good psychic or bodily norm might be? Who knows, or could know (so the argument runs), whether norms are or should be linked to values at all? Even the notion of a physical norm of health is tricky enough: what kind or degree of bodily alteration, for instance, is to be regarded as damage or harm, and is 'harm' in this context to be regarded as an objective or a subjective term? People voluntarily alter their bodies in many ways: by going to the dentist or hairdresser, opting for adult circumcision, visiting a tattoo parlour, taking up boxing or engaging in sado-masochistic sex. Who is to say, and according to which criteria, when such bodily alterations are to be regarded as harmful? If physical norms are, for example, to be wholly or partly defined in terms of the capacity to fulfil certain functions, aims and tasks, then who is to say what these functions, aims and tasks are or should be? Not all people place great value on individual survival or the reproduction of the species, and even if they do, they still may not place great value on a function which may be thought to further survival and reproduction, at least at a general level: one only has to consider the recent debates over whether deaf parents should be allowed to refuse a deaf child to undergo an operation which would restore her hearing. Furthermore, even if one does focus on the goals of survival and reproduction, one still has to ask whether different environmental circumstances mean that the norms, and the definitions of norms, will also have to be variable to accommodate these changing circumstances. And to what extent, if any, should different historical and cultural circumstances be taken into account? Yet if norms of bodily health are so difficult to determine, then how much more difficult will it be to decide on norms of mental health.

I do not dispute that Plato has pressing questions to answer. However, the (Platonic and undeniably controversial) point I wish to emphasize here is that so too does any theorist or practitioner who works with any model of physical or mental health, whether explicit or implicit, *even if* that theorist or practitioner believes their model to be value-free. The claim I wish to support is that absolutely all models of psychical or physical health are imbued with values and in almost every case this is because such models at least implicitly appeal to or rely on some notion of what it is to be a human being and to lead a fully human life; and this notion, I would further contend, is never value-free. Plato is simply making transparent a truth that is often concealed. This truth holds whether your model of health is based on a notion of appropriate functioning conducive to the survival and reproduction of self or species, or on Plato's conception of the harmonious, beneficial and praiseworthy interaction of parts. The real difference between Plato and a number of his readers today does not in fact lie in the question of whether a concept of health ultimately assumes an ideal of the human – all concepts of health must assume some such ideal, even if the assumption goes unrecognized – but what the theorist or practitioner of health believes this ideal of the human to be, and perhaps too whether they conceive of it as objective or subjective. For whichever model of physical or mental health you select or assume, there will always, somewhere, be someone who disputes it, someone who argues that they cannot, or choose not, to reproduce, or exercise all their faculties, or function in ways that their surroundings would seem to require. 'Does this mean', the disputant will challenge, 'that you therefore think I am a damaged human, or even that I am not fully

human at all?' Plato would almost certainly reply that he does think this of those who reject his model of psychic harmony achieved through rational control: as we have seen, at *Republic* 588d Socrates crucially compares the rational part of the *psychê* to a human being, and the inference is that it is only those who accord with his rationally-controlled model of mental health who achieve full humanity: those who are dominated by their spirited part or appetites are ruled by their inner lion or many-headed monster. Such a view also helps explain Socrates' uncompromising treatment of those who are, according to his model of health, impaired.<sup>xix</sup> In contrast, modern readers may have more qualms about explicitly claiming objectivity for their ideal of the human (even if in practice objectivity is precisely what is usually assumed).

In short, although there are many reasons why one may object to Plato's conception of psychic health as psychic harmony – and we shall be considering a number of them – it is not fair to dismiss his theory out-of-hand simply on the grounds that it is value-laden. He is only making explicit what every theorist and practitioner of health is doing, whether they are aware of it or not. We all, whether knowingly or not, depend on and operate with assumptions about what it is to be human which can never be disassociated from values and ideals, and it is preferable that such assumptions are uncovered, debated and reflected upon, as Plato at least encourages us to do. His clarity on this vital issue is to be commended, not spurned in a fruitless attempt to disentangle medical 'facts' from values, whether those values are absolute or relative, objective or subjective.

### **The Rule of Reason**

If value-rich ideals of health are inevitable, what of Plato's particular ideal of mental health, namely that it consists of an inner harmony which can only come about when reason is in control? It certainly seems to be an undemocratic model, to say the least: just as the Producers have no political voice in the state, so their psychic counterpart, the appetites (for food, drink, sex and money) have only a minimal say in the structure of the personality: when reason is in control, the most that the non-rational desires can hope for is that reason will seek to satisfy the 'best and truest' amongst them (586e-587a). Plato, of course, ever the arch-critic of democracy,<sup>xx</sup> might not be unduly bothered by this accusation, but it may well give us pause for thought. If anti-democratic sentiments are taken to an extreme, then might not the control of reason lead to the unacceptable repression of many of our appetites and desires? Could Plato not be charged with creating the conditions for mental illness rather than mental health?

This objection has a Freudian ring,<sup>xxi</sup> and, appropriately enough, an immediate response to it makes use of a Platonic notion which Freud himself (explicitly if rather optimistically) compares to his own key theory of sexual sublimation.<sup>xxii</sup> For Plato suggests that there is an important difference between the simple blocking of desire and its rechanneling onto different objects: at *Republic* 485d, for instance, Socrates says that,

'But we know that if a man's desires set strongly in one direction, they are correspondingly less strong in other directions, like a stream whose water has been diverted into another channel.'

Furthermore, in some passages – though as we shall see by no means in all – Socrates makes it clear that it is rechannelling rather than blocking that is the ideal. *Republic* 485d connects with the culmination of Socrates’ recounting of Diotima’s speech at *Symposium* 210-2, in which the prophetess tells Socrates how erotic love (*erôs*) can, if appropriately obedient to accurate rational apprehensions of an object’s true worth, be directed away from particular, beautiful bodies to ever more abstract and general objects of desire until finally it reaches the ultimate erotic object, the Form of Beauty itself, which the subject contemplates in a state of bliss: ‘do you call it a paltry life for a human to lead, to be looking in that direction, gazing on it by the appropriate means and in intercourse with it? ... If anyone is, such a human is immortal.’<sup>xxiii</sup> In both these passages in the *Republic* and the *Symposium*, desire is to be viewed as a single stream of energy which, preferably with the appropriate guidance and training, can be rechannelled towards different objects. The consequence is that, if reason directs operations successfully, those appetites which reason deems it inappropriate to satisfy will not simply be blocked and thwarted, with potentially damaging results, but diverted onto more constructive and wholesome goals. In theory, then, the appeal to rechannelling rather than just blocking (whether of an appetite, or a thumoeidic impulse, or even of a normally rational desire for truth which reason does not deem it appropriate to fulfil in the immediate context) goes some way to countering the charge that the rule of reason could lead to mental illness rather than mental health. Is such rechannelling, however, a real possibility in practice? There are, I believe, two main difficulties that Plato needs to overcome.

### **The Education of Desire**

Firstly, whether such a model will work surely depends on whether our appetites for food, drink, sex, money and the like can appreciate (what Plato conceives as) the beautiful and the good, at least in some sense, because if the appetites are entirely unresponsive to such values – if they simply want what they want, irrespective of its goodness or beauty – then it is not clear how they could be persuaded, by reason or anything else, to accept any other objects of desire on the grounds that these new objects were more perfect instantiations of goodness or beauty. On this crucial point the *Republic* appears to be profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand, we have already noted two key passages (442c-d and 443c-444c) in which the appetites (together with the desires of the *thumos*) are portrayed as living in harmonious agreement with the rule of reason. On the other, *Republic* 439a-b says bluntly that

‘thirst in itself is the desire not for ... good drink or bad, or, in a word, any *kind* of drink at all, but for drink, pure and simple ... The mind [*psychê*] of the thirsty man, therefore, in so far as he is thirsty, simply wants to drink, and it is to that end that its energies are directed.’

So depicted, the appetites of the *Republic* do not seem to offer the potentially re-educable response to beauty provided for (if not adequately explained) by the stream of *erôs* in the *Symposium*. It is difficult to see how the fierce and indiscriminating appetites of 439 could be persuaded into the harmonious acceptance of reason’s rule cited in 442-4.<sup>xxiv</sup> Furthermore, this ambivalence concerning the nature of the appetites is intertwined with a similar ambivalence concerning the nature of the economic Producers: are they to be perceived as responsive to appeals to goodness and beauty, and hence open to education and persuasion, or must they simply be

repressed by intimidation and force? Again, Plato's position does not appear to be consistent. The Producers are said to be repressed at *Republic* 434a-b and enslaved at 590c-d; in contrast, at 432a *sôphrosunê* in the state is defined as all three classes agreeing about who ought to rule, and at 430e and 431e-432a this agreement is termed 'harmony' and 'concord'.<sup>xxv</sup>

The second difficulty returns us to Freud. For the post-Freudian will say that, in partial contrast to Freud's notion of sublimation, Plato's conception of the (preferably rational) rechannelling of desire can only take place, if it takes place at all, in respect of those desires that are conscious; and to this extent the influence of reason must always be limited. This, however, is not a point that Plato makes, and, short of inventing the terminology himself, he lacks the resources to do so. The closest he comes to a theory (or even articulated conception) of the unconscious is an intriguing passage at *Republic* 571b-572b where Socrates speaks of 'violent and unnecessary desires' that

'arise while we sleep, when the reasonable and gentle part of us is still asleep and its control relaxed, and our fierce bestial nature, full of food and drink, rouses itself and has its fling and tries to secure its own kind of satisfaction. As you know, there's nothing too bad for it and it's completely lost to all sense and shame. It doesn't shrink from attempting intercourse (as it supposes) with a mother or anyone else, man, beast or god, or from murder or eating forbidden food.<sup>xxvi</sup> There is, in fact, no folly or shamelessness it will not commit.'<sup>xxvii</sup>

However, Socrates also claims in this passage that the person whose waking life is guided by reason will retire to bed with his rational element awakened and his thumoeidic and appetitive elements quietened and will in consequence not be disturbed by such lawless desires in his dreams. In other words, in so far as Plato does approach a concept of the unconscious, he appears to believe that reason can still have influence over it, albeit indirectly. Whether this belief is over-optimistic is plainly a moot point: some unconscious appetites may remain stubbornly intractable, just as others may be blithely indifferent to the goodness or otherwise of their objects. This second difficulty, in short, can again only receive a partial and ambivalent solution from within the text of the *Republic*. If we consider both problems together, we can see that the possibilities for the productive rechannelling rather than the dangerous blocking of harmful desires appear to be decidedly limited. Limited, however, is not the same as altogether hopeless: Plato's model of rational psychic harmony does not absolutely inevitably lead to repression and illness. It is just possible that true concord between the parts as he describes them may come about.

### **The Superiority of Reason**

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the ideal of psychic harmony through rational control will be at best extremely difficult to achieve. It is now time to consider at more length precisely why Plato is nevertheless so keen to achieve it. To do this, we need to consider in more depth precisely what he means by the rule of reason, and this depends in turn on a deeper understanding of his conceptions of both reason and the two non-rational aspects of the *psychê*, the appetites and the *thumos*.

The immediate point to emphasize is that all three parts of the *psychê* possess their own objects of desire (580d-581b): the appetites for food, drink, sex and money; *thumos* for honour, victory and success; and reason for truth and reality. However, only the person in whom reason rules, claims Socrates, has the intelligence, knowledge and experience of all the desires to make an informed choice about their relative value and consequently to judge which way of life is the most pleasurable (582a-d). Simply being content with one's current lot is not enough: we also need to know whether our lives would be pleasanter and happier<sup>xxviii</sup> if we were experiencing another kind of pleasure and life, and only reason, Socrates believes, has access to this knowledge. This is largely because reason is the only element which can apprehend the perfect, eternal, immutable, non-sensible explanatory principles that Plato terms 'Forms'; above all, it is the only element that can apprehend the Form of the Good. Reason is thus the only part that is concerned for the good of the *psychê* as a whole (441e). As we have seen, its job is to assess the desires of each part and seek to satisfy the 'truest' and 'best' of those desires (586e-587a) and, in so doing, it will quite properly give priority to its own desires for knowledge and reality. This is partly because, in a highly contentious move, Socrates claims that only the pleasures of reason are truly real because only they are directed towards real objects, namely the Forms (583b-587b).<sup>xxix</sup> The appetites, on the other hand, are naturally greedy and insatiable (442a; 580e; 586a-b) and, if left to their own devices without rational control, will rapidly lead to an upsetting of our ideal internal balance (587a). They always want more and they focus obsessively on their object without paying regard to the object's true worth (437e-438a). In contrast, the kind of order which stems from rational control imitates the order of the realm of the Forms (500c-e), particularly the Form of the Good, 'which they can take as a pattern for ordering their own life as well as society and the individual' (540a-b).

One would, of course, currently be hard pressed to find anyone who believes in the Form of the Good. Yet I still hold that Socrates' main stipulation has much to offer: the stipulation that only reason can offer any hope at all of harmony and stability because only reason has any chance of considering the good of the *psychê* as a whole. And at the heart of this promise of harmony and stability is the crucial connection Socrates makes between the rule of reason in the *psychê* and psychic freedom. This connection is possible because he is not primarily concerned with freedom in terms of lack of interference from others (though he is perfectly aware that that is how the term is often interpreted),<sup>xxx</sup> or with freedom in the (arguably incoherent sense) of 'could have done otherwise';<sup>xxxi</sup> what he is interested in is freedom in terms of acting according to one's true wishes, where 'true wishes' are not the whims of the moment (often translated by *epithumia*), but arise as a result of informed reflection on the nature of one's overall best interests (*boulêsis*). At 577e, for example, we are told that the *psychê* which is tyrannized by the rule of one of the irrational desires will be

'least able to do what, as a whole, it wishes (*boulesthai*), because it is under the compulsive drive of madness, and so full of confusion and remorse.'<sup>xxxii</sup>

These informed wishes are wishes that we *want* to have, that accord with what are now termed our second-order desires;<sup>xxxiii</sup> they are wishes that only reason can help us arrive at. For Socrates, the psychic harmony that only reason can create and which is constitutive of both flourishing (*eudaimonia*) and moral goodness (*aretê*) is, precisely, the state of psychic freedom. Neither the morally wicked person nor the mad person

is free: both are in the grip of irrational desires and obsessions, and in extreme cases of moral wickedness (such as that of the tyrant), wickedness and madness will coincide in culpable mania.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

### **Reason and Society**

If the rule of reason in the *psychê* is, in Socrates' eyes, the cause of inner peace and unity, happiness, goodness and freedom, it is clearly vital to consider what social and political conditions are needed for reason to mature and flourish to the extent needed for it to gain and maintain control of the non-rational (and sometimes positively irrational) *thumos* and appetites. Socrates is admirably clear about this: whether reason can take the required objective overview of all the soul's desires will depend not just on its existence, but on its ability to function as ruler. If reason has been able to develop to its full potential, then (through its kinship with the divine Forms), it will be able both to pose and to reflect on fundamental ethical questions in comparative freedom (in both 'positive and 'negative' senses),<sup>xxxv</sup> and see beyond immediate cultural influences. Precisely such a beneficent environment is lyrically described at *Republic* 401c-402a, where the *polis* is adorned by works created by artists and craftsmen 'capable of perceiving the real nature of what is beautiful'. In this *polis*,

'our young men, living as it were in a healthy climate, will benefit because all the works of art they see and hear influence them for good, like breezes from some healthy country, insensibly leading them from earliest childhood into close sympathy and conformity with beauty and reason ... when reason comes he will welcome her as a familiar friend because of his upbringing.'

But if *thumos* or the appetitive part is in control, and reason is weak and undeveloped (smothered by the barnacles of its temporary incarnation, as Socrates puts it graphically in 611b-e), then these fundamental ethical questions will either not be asked at all, or will be answered according not to rational but to thumoeidic or appetitive objectives. And given that the precise nature of these thumoeidic and appetitive objectives is formed by the immediate cultural and physical environment, the answers of the enslaved reason will be similarly confined. In the depictions of imperfect states and individuals in *Republic* 8 and 9, Plato gives us some vivid and depressing portraits of what happens to reason when it is stunted or perverted by its environment; he leaves us in absolutely no doubt that, when embodied, 'divine' reason is very much at the mercy of the material world. So, in Plato's view, if one is to ensure that appropriate answers are given to what he perceives to be the basic ethical questions concerning how to live and what sort of person to be,<sup>xxxvi</sup> then it is vital that one ensure the right social and political setting. In other words, the links between individual and state go much deeper than the surface analogy may suggest. The ideal, rationally-controlled individual can only arise in the ideal, rationally-controlled society.

### **Reason and Social Control**

This profound link, however, raises a very serious problem. So far, we have largely been considering the ideal rule of ideal reason (as Plato conceives it) in the individual, most notably in the philosopher. In the ideal state, however, the philosopher is not permitted to be solely a philosopher: he or she must take on the political role of

Philosopher-Ruler. What, precisely, are the implications of this for the meaning of the ‘rule of reason’ in the two lesser ranks, namely the Auxiliaries and the Producers? Socrates’ response is unequivocal. For lesser beings to be *truly* ruled by reason, their own weaker rational powers must rationally agree (and desire) to be ruled by the superior reason of the Philosopher-Rulers (590d-e); and if the Auxiliaries and Producers do not willingly submit (which Socrates emphasizes is the preferred option), they must be made to submit by force.

The darker side of the identification of goodness and happiness with psychic harmony and health thus becomes only too apparent. Whether the Philosopher-Rulers are as well-intentioned as Socrates claims or not, the disquieting possible consequence is still the same. It is up to the Rulers, not the subjects, to decide whether the subjects are as good or as happy as they could be, given their more limited rational capacities: if the Rulers decide that a subject could improve their goodness or happiness, then that subject is deemed in imperfect mental health and must, if possible, be *cured* by the philosophers’ healing wisdom. In the ideal state, the philosopher is thus arbiter and doctor of both virtue and happiness.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Outside the controls and checks of the ideal state (where Rulers are not allowed to possess any property or wealth whatsoever), the potential for the medical, social and political abuse of the identifications between goodness and health, and badness and illness, becomes even more chilling: the identifications seem to offer complete *carte blanche* for social engineering.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Plato, of course, does not appear to see social engineering and manipulation *per se* as necessarily abusive at all: it all depends on who is doing the manipulation, how they are doing it, and why.<sup>xxxix</sup> At any rate, Socrates is consistently made to say that morality and happiness should be matters for expert technicians: they are simply too important to be left to the average citizen. Yet Solzhenitsyn, for one, has borne eloquent witness to the scope for catastrophic damage to the individual when ideals of psychic health are commandeered by politicians.<sup>xl</sup> In any case, even if the political doctor and social engineer is genuinely well-intentioned, skilled and well-informed, we may still justifiably protest that the need of each individual to direct his or her own life – the need for autonomy – is simply too important to be overridden.

This is, perhaps, the gravest charge of all that is levelled at Plato’s conception of psychic harmony: the charge that such harmony can only be achieved, both within themselves and for others, by an elite group of Philosopher-Rulers. And within the confines of the ideally just state outlined by Socrates in the *Republic*, the charge undeniably stands. I have no wish to deny that point, or to condone it. And yet, crucially, I do not believe that this need be the end of the story; I do not believe that the use Socrates makes of the conception of psychic health described in the *Republic* is the only use to which the conception can be put, or even the only use that Plato himself suggests (or implies) for the conception. Commentators on the *Republic*’s tripartite psychology tend to consider that psychology only as it is supposed to operate within the confines of Socrates’ imagined and ideally just state, and they conclude, rightly, that Socrates (and almost certainly Plato too) believes that the ideally rational individual can normally only arise in such an ideally rational society. And yet the dialogue as a whole explicitly places that imagined state within the context of a discussion taking place in Socrates’ Athens, and implicitly places it within the context of Plato’s Athens, and indeed within the context of the societies of all future readers

of the work: just as Socrates engages in discourse with Glaucon, Adeimantus *et al.*, so Plato is engaged in discourse with both present and future readers, who could be from anywhere. The key question now becomes, therefore, whether the notion of rational psychic harmony can still make any sense if it is not ideally instantiated in ideal conditions. We need to consider whether the doctrine of happiness and goodness as psychic harmony can usefully be transplanted from Socrates' imagined state to one of these other present or future imperfect societies, and how it might appear and operate if it could. And it is my contention that if we do this, we may well find that in cultures where no perfectly rational Philosopher-Rulers are available to take control, the notion of (not perfect but still recognizably rational) psychic harmony, and how it is to be brought about, looks significantly different.

So let us take the notion of psychic harmony achieved through rational control and abstract it from Socrates' political set-up. If we now ask whether this model of mental health necessarily *has* to lead to the dangers of political abuse and social engineering, then I believe the answer is no. Without the possibility of guidance from ideally rational Philosopher-Rulers, it is now perfectly plausible to argue that rational psychic harmony is best achieved (or at least approximated) through rational self-direction. Indeed, even Socrates in his description of the ideal state admits that rational autonomy is the ideal at 590d: it is simply that most people's rational powers are so inferior to those of the Philosopher-Rulers that, when Philosopher-Rulers are present, the wisest course is to hand over rule of one's self to them. But when they are not present, we may reasonably infer, then we have no option but to rely on our own rational resources as best we can and rule ourselves. If this is so, then it will clearly behove us to do everything we can to train and hone our rational powers to the highest peak that we can achieve, and the best ways of doing this may be rather different from the educational techniques that Socrates outlines, at least in *Republic* 2 and 3. If we take Plato's basic image of rational psychic harmony out of Socrates' republic (as opposed to the *Republic*), and relocate it in his Athens or ours, the consequent need to develop individual rational autonomy – true positive freedom<sup>xli</sup> – may well require abandoning the strict moulding that Socrates recommends for at least the two Guardian classes within his state, and the deceptions that he encourages to be practised by the Rulers on the non-ruling classes.<sup>xlii</sup> Developing rational autonomy will require more exploratory, aporetic, open-ended techniques, such as the elenchus and the dialogue form: the very methods, of course, that Socrates employs with his interlocutors and that Plato uses to address his present and future readers. After all, there is no escaping the paradox that the dialogue called the *Republic* would not be permitted into the supposedly ideally just state that it describes: it simply does not meet the rules of censorship that Socrates lays down. In an imperfect world, different educational techniques are required. Indeed, Plato may even want to prompt us to ask whether the ideal that Socrates describes really would be so ideal after all; but one does not have to take this radical stance to appreciate that Plato fully realises the necessity of adapting pedagogy to the circumstances. This does not mean that he has changed his mind about the importance of creating reason-developing and thereby health-promoting social and cultural conditions; it is simply that those conditions need not be precisely those adumbrated by the character of Socrates for the ideally just state. Even for those of us operating with imperfect rational faculties in an imperfectly rational world, a significant approximation to rational psychic harmony is still within our grasp.

## Conclusion

Nevertheless, some problems undoubtedly remain. Whatever context is envisioned for Plato's theory of psychic harmony, there is no escaping the fact that he is making both happiness and virtue depend on a normative conception of right reasoning in control of the soul, and that this conception can never be attained by all. Within the world of Socrates' ideally just state, only Philosopher-Rulers will achieve the best kind of rational self-control, while the most the other classes can hope for is the kind of second-best psychic harmony achieved by submitting to the superior reason of these Rulers. Yet even if we abstract the theory from the ideally just state and consider how it might operate today, many will still fail to meet this challenging normative conception: young children, for instance, or those born with learning difficulties, or those subsequently damaged by accident or illness. For Plato, psychic harmony, and hence virtue and happiness, can never be universal. I have no wish to sweep such facts under the carpet: there will always be elements of Plato's theory that many will find unpalatable. Above all, many will balk at the fact that Plato's identification of our rational element with a 'human' (*anthrôpos* 588d) means that those who are unable to reason fully or at all are less than human in Plato's scheme.

Yet I also believe that there is still much in this problematic and sometimes troubling theory from which we can still learn: the emphasis on starting with a notion of positive health, rather than simply viewing health as the absence of recognized diseases or illnesses; the impossibility of divorcing health and disease/illness (in both theory and practice) from social and political conditions and the resulting importance of creating a culture and society that promotes the notion of psychic harmony and helps prevent disharmony, fragmentation and illness arising (a society, in short, that focuses on prevention at least as much as cure); the inevitable consequence, both awkward and liberating, that doctors, nurses and health care professionals cannot work in isolation, but must operate in conjunction with, amongst others, educators, architects, town-planners, artists and politicians.<sup>xliii</sup> For the other side of the troubling exclusion from full humanity of many biological humans is perhaps Plato's most important message to us on these issues, if necessarily his most controversial one: namely that we cannot hope to know how to treat a sick human until we have a clear idea of what it is to be a healthy one, and we cannot know *this* until we have an understanding of what it is to be a human being at all. In a discussion of Kant, Beauchamp and Childress (1994: 62) write that 'we agree that concepts such as 'rationality' and 'humanity' are too thin a basis for a determinate set of moral terms.' It is my contention in this paper that, if they had focused on Plato rather than Kant in these respects, they would have found conceptions of rationality and humanity that, though certainly not without serious problems, are infinitely thicker and richer, and that offer a basis for a positive notion of health which at the very least deserves our careful consideration.<sup>xliv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Beauchamp and Childress (1979), for example, offers just two fleeting references to Plato, and while Kuczewski and Polansky (2000) refers to Plato often, it does not contain a sustained discussion of the *Republic's* model of psychic harmony. Contemporary work in the philosophy of psychiatry is certainly aware of the importance of Plato (see, for example, Fulford, Thornton and Graham 2006: 147-8), but, again, there is little in the way of detailed exposition and debate.

<sup>ii</sup> Fulford (1998: 215-220) argues that illness should be understood in terms of failure of action and disease in terms of failure of function. See the papers of Megone, Fulford, Szasz and Hobbs in *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology* 5 1998: 187-224.

<sup>iii</sup> Boorse (1975) argues for a value-free definition of disease in terms of 'biological disadvantage'; this disadvantage is in turn analysed as the impairment of one or more of the functions which assist survival and reproduction. The belief in the possibility of value-free functions, and in consequence value-free definitions of disease, is also assumed in the 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (text revised) of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* of the American Psychiatric Association (2000). For an opposing view, see Fulford 2000: 77-94.

<sup>iv</sup> For possible distinctions between 'human being' and 'person' and their respective moral status see Megone 2000: 155-6 and 165-8. As will become clear, I am in accord with Megone that the core ethical concept for a consideration of human health and illness is that of the human being.

<sup>v</sup> For a discussion of the arguments see Hobbs 2000: 14-22 and 33-37; Annas 1981: 123-52; Cooper 1984; Irwin 1995: 203-9; 216-8; Woods 1987; Price 1990: 259-61; Robinson 1995: 39-46.

<sup>vi</sup> In order to avoid possible anachronisms, I shall employ *psychê*, rather than *psyche*, whenever I am explicitly referring to Plato's own theory or use of the term.

<sup>vii</sup> The comparison is perceptively discussed in Williams 1973: 196-206 and Lear 1992: 184-215.

<sup>viii</sup> The establishment of the original, simple community and its development into a state comprising more than one class is discussed in detail in Hobbs 'Plato on war' (forthcoming in Scott 2007). See also Schofield 2003.

<sup>ix</sup> The question of whether Plato thinks humans are born with aggressive impulses is explored in detail in Hobbs 'Plato on war' (see n.viii); as I argue there, I believe it is more accurate to talk of only potentially aggressive impulses being innate in the Platonic *psychê*.

<sup>x</sup> Translation adapted from Lee 1974. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the *Republic* are those of Lee.

<sup>xi</sup> The comparison between *psychê* and *polis* in the *Republic* is usually referred to by both commentators and translators as an 'analogy', and 'analogy' certainly captures at least part of Plato's view of the relation between the two; in this paper I employ both 'comparison' and 'analogy'. It should be noted, however, that Plato does not actually employ the term 'analogy' (*analogia*) himself in the *Republic*, and Lear (1992: 184-215) makes a persuasive case for a deeper interconnection between individual and state.

<sup>xii</sup> The notion that the parts of the virtuous human's *psychê* are in harmony also appears at 554c11-e5.

<sup>xiii</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>xiv</sup> Translation adapted from Lee 1974.

<sup>xv</sup> At 580b it is explicitly stated that the (rationally-controlled) philosopher-king is the happiest type of human (the fact that there are also to be philosopher-queens is here overlooked). In 583a it is further claimed that the rationally-controlled philosopher will also lead the most pleasurable life.

<sup>xvi</sup> Although Socrates and Glaucon do not explicitly refer to women in this passage and employ male linguistic forms, it is made absolutely clear by Socrates at 454d-e that the only significant difference between females and males is that the former bear and the latter beget offspring: the analysis of the tripartite *psychê* of Book IV, therefore, must be supposed to apply to women as well as men, and it is hence legitimate to talk of Socrates' and Glaucon's concern with a healthy 'human' life (and compare the many references elsewhere in Plato to how the (specifically) human being should live, such as *Apology* 38a and *Symposium* 211e and 212a; see my 'Female imagery in Plato' (forthcoming 2006 in Leshner, Nails and Sheffield). Nevertheless, it is still interesting how seldom women are explicitly included in this 'human' ideal, even in the *Republic*: it is for this reason that I have usually employed male pronouns.

<sup>xvii</sup> See Sachs 1963: 141-58; Annas 1981: 153-69.

<sup>xviii</sup> For the purposes of this paper, 'mind' translates *psychê*, and 'mental' equates to 'psychical'.

<sup>xix</sup> At 460c, 'defective' offspring of the Guardians are to be 'quietly and secretly disposed of'. This is probably an allusion to infanticide (a reasonably common practice at the time: see Golden 1990), though it is just possible that it refers to the children being brought up out of sight, perhaps by a shepherd's family; contrast the positions of Adam 1963 vol.1: 299 and Lee 1974: 244-6. Such 'defectiveness' seems to apply to both mental and physical conditions.

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<sup>xx</sup> See his coruscating attack on democracy in *Republic* 555b-562a.

<sup>xxi</sup> Freud discusses the dangers of repressing the appetites of the id in, for example, *On Narcissism* (1914), *The Ego and the Id* (1923) and *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930).

<sup>xxii</sup> Freud compares his theory of libido, including the sublimation of libido, to Plato's notion of *erôs* and its rechannelling onto different objects in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921): '...in its origin, function and relation to sexual love, the 'Eros' of the philosopher Plato coincides exactly with the love-force, the libido of psychoanalysis ...' (SE vol.xviii: 90-1). In *The Resistances to Psychoanalysis* (1925), he writes a little more temperately: '... what psychoanalysis called sexuality ... had far more resemblance to the all-inclusive and all-pervasive Eros of Plato's *Symposium*.' (SE vol.xix: 218; see also 1930 SE vol.xxi: 210). For further references of Freud to Plato on this supposed connection, see Santas 1988: 154-6 and 169-72 and Price 1990: 247-8 and 250-8. However, although both Santas and Price make a compelling case for Freud having read at least some Plato (rather than just relying on secondary sources for his references), they are also both careful to note the distinctions between the two theories as well as their correspondencies. For instance, in Plato the rechannelling of *erôs* and *epithumia* (desire) aims at a return to a prior, discarnate, non-sexual state in which our *psychai* inhabited the realm of the non-sexual, non-sensible, transcendent Forms, whereas in Freud sublimation involves a series of moves away from the naturally sexual states of both early childhood and mature adulthood towards artistic, moral or religious aims and objects of desire. Santas (1988: 172) writes of Plato: 'Far from sexualizing all love, it looks as though, in making eros proper a species of generic eros, he was trying to desexualize even sexual love. The Platonic lover is not driven by sexual desire, but pulled, attracted by immortality, beauty and the good.' Similarly, Price (1990: 254) holds that 'Plato and Freud come to share a conception of sexual sublimation as reinforcement; but to the original sublimation of the sexual in Freud corresponds the natal debasement of the spiritual in Plato. Thinking in similar ways from opposite premises, they can never wholly agree.' Compare Cornford 1950: 68-80.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Symposium* 212a (translation mine)

<sup>xxiv</sup> Annas 1999: 127-36 is particularly perceptive on this ambivalence in Plato's psychology on whether the non-rational parts can indeed live in harmony with the rule of reason or have to be dominated against their will.

<sup>xxv</sup> Socrates is notoriously silent about what formal education the Producers are to achieve, if any. For a discussion of the Producers' position, see Annas 1981: 172-8.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Perhaps an allusion to cannibalism; see Adam's note to 571d (1963 vol.2: 320).

<sup>xxvii</sup> Translation adapted from Lee.

<sup>xxviii</sup> The comparison of types of person (and by implication ways of life) is framed in terms of happiness at 580b.

<sup>xxix</sup> The notion of pleasures that are more and less real strikes most contemporary readers as decidedly odd, but even if we prefer not to articulate the debate in terms of the reality of pleasure, it still makes sense to ask what is the status and value of pleasure based on an illusion. See Gosling and Taylor 1982 ch. 6 and Appendix A: 429-53; Frede 1992: 442-456.

<sup>xxx</sup> An awareness manifest in his scathing analysis of democracy and its *laissez-faire* interpretation of freedom at 557b-e and 561d-e.

<sup>xxxi</sup> For a lucid discussion of the different ways in which 'freedom' has been interpreted in the free will debate, see Watson 1982: 1-14.

<sup>xxxii</sup> For the rule of reason offering freedom, see also *Republic* 591b. The clearest distinction in Plato between acting on a whim and acting according to one's 'true', informed, rational desire is in the *Gorgias* (466b-468e), where the distinction is clearly demarcated by a contrast between *epithumia* and *boulêsis*. In 'Two concepts of liberty', Berlin (1969: 118-173) explicitly draws on Plato's notion of rational autonomy for his own conception of 'positive' liberty: see in particular pp. 132 and 138.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> See the illuminating essays by Frankfurt and Watson in Watson 1982: 81-95 and 96-110. Watson explicitly acknowledges the Platonic roots to his conception of free agency.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> *Republic* 573a-575a.

<sup>xxxv</sup> As delineated by Berlin 1969: 121-2; see n.xxxii above.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> For evidence that these are regarded by Plato as the fundamental ethical questions, see Hobbs 2000: 50-2.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> The image of the harmonious or disharmonious soul in a state of mental health or illness clearly implies that the Rulers in charge of all their citizens' souls are psychic doctors. The point is made explicitly at *Republic* 389b, where rulers (not yet formally the Rulers who are distinguished from the Auxiliaries at 412b-c, but clearly in anticipation of them) are expressly called doctors who must administer medicine (*pharmakon*) to their subjects.

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<sup>xxxviii</sup> Kenny (1973) is particularly alert to such dangers. For a stark warning of the potential for abuse lurking in modern psychiatric theory and practice, see Szasz 1960: 113-18. For the anti-psychiatry movement in general, see Fulford, Thornton and Graham 2006: 14-18.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> As we saw in n.xxv, Socrates does not discuss what kind of formal education (if any) that the Producers are to receive, but they will certainly be partially moulded by the architecture and civic art that surrounds them. As for the question of deception, in the *Republic* 389 passage cited above (n.xxxvii), Socrates is quite happy to say that one of the medicines the doctor-rulers must sometimes administer is judicious falsehood; while in 414b-c the false foundation myth to be employed by the Rulers to promote a sense of unity and patriotism is called 'noble'.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> See, for example, *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and the *Gulag Archipelago*.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> See n. xxii and n.xxxv above.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> See n.xxxix above.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> The health care profession in Britain which is perhaps closest to Plato's thinking on these issues is arguably the socially embedded one of Health Visiting. The Health Visitor is explicitly charged with promoting the holistic well-being of individuals, groups and communities. In 1967 the Council for the Education and Training for Health Visitors (CETHV) was asked to define the role and function of the Health Visitor in its Third Report; their resulting statement was based on the International Definition of the World Health Organization on the role and function of the public health nurse:

'public health nursing ... functions as part of the total public health programme for the promotion of health, the improvement of conditions in the social and physical environment, rehabilitation and the prevention of illness and disability.'

(quoted in Owen 1983: 35)

Although for administrative purposes Health Visiting in Britain has now been subsumed under Public Health Nursing, this statement remains the clearest articulation of the Health Visitor's aims. Of particular relevance to our current concerns is the fact that a key element in prevention strategy is the encouraging and enabling of the individual to take responsibility, as far as possible, for their own health: in this context it is significant that Health Visitors are not allocated 'patients', but 'clients'. This emphasis on individual responsibility (if not the terminology of 'client') would accord with the more autonomous model of psychic harmony that I have been arguing Plato wishes to implement in the absence of ideal Philosopher-Rulers.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> An early draft of this paper was given at a seminar on the relations between ancient philosophy and literature and contemporary bioethics which was organized by the Center for Medical Ethics at Oslo University and took place at the Norwegian Institute in Athens in May 2005. I am indebted to all the participants of the seminar for their helpful comments and discussion; particular thanks must go to Tod Chambers, Øyvind Rabbås and Jan Helge Solbaak. I have also learnt much from discussions with Hilda Craig, Sarah Darton, Bill Fulford, John Meehan, Andrew Sandor, Tim Thornton and Simon Williams. Finally, I should like to express my deep thanks to Ron Polansky, both for his astute insight into Plato and for his wise editorial guidance and patience.

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