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INNER HARMONY AND THE HUMAN IDEAL IN *REPUBLIC*
IV AND IX

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ABSTRACT. This paper presents an interpretation of Plato's moral psychology in two books of the *Republic* that construes Plato as adopting a strong unity for the moral agent. Within this conception reason influences both emotion and action directly. This view is contrasted with the current prevailing interpretation according to which all three parts of the soul have their own reason, feeling, and desire. The latter construal is shown to be both philosophically weak, and less plausible as a historical reconstruction.

KEY WORDS: agent, agency, desire, good, goodness, harmony, harmonious, Plato, reason, *Republic*, unity, unified

Different kinds of moral philosophies have taken different starting points. Some look for very general rules from which concrete maxims can be derived. Others take our intuitions about particular cases as starting points, while still others construe the specification of excellent character (a character of virtues) as our key moral problem. In this paper I shall present an interpretation of the ethics of two books of the *Republic* according to which for Plato the most fundamental question of ethics was: what kind of a person and agent should we try to be. Answers to this question should, then, provide guidance for self-improvement, achieving good relationships with others, and rules for good conduct, specified within the variety of contexts that confront humans in their daily struggles.

If this general account is sound, one can see why in the texts to be examined, Plato's main interest, at the most fundamental level, is not in rules of action, but in what philosophers call today moral psychology. According to Plato, a sound moral psychology must underlie any adequate account of what we should or should not do. The link between the most general specifications of moral psychology and advice for action is the notion of a good human agent. Such an agent is described by the ways in which various inner qualities interact and by the general features of his modes of deliberation and decisions. This is, then, the framework within which the ethics of Books IV and IX will be presented.



I. TYPES OF AGENCY

The texts under consideration present that aspect of Platonic ethics that is concerned with the everyday functioning of a good human. The moral psychology must meet two conditions. First, it has to explain in terms of a conception of our inner qualities what Plato takes to be certain types of key conflicts that we confront frequently. Secondly, it must also provide the foundation for the distinctly ethical articulation of the good agent; in terms of what has been called “the list of Platonic virtues.” We shall start with the first of these dual roles.

Conflict involves basically a clash between different desires, values, or judgements. Needless to say, these conflicts are typically multifaceted, pitting thought against desire, valuation against real or imagined need. Resolution requires – according to Plato – a way of reconciling the different inner qualities so that there should be a unified response by these to the conflicts in the world that we encounter. In short, we need a unified agent in order to resolve conflicting claims on what we are to do.¹ There are better and worse ways of unifying the ethical self. Success depends on more or less unity, and on more or less adequate overall orientation.

There is general agreement among the interpreters on the rough outlines of Plato’s scheme. It is an articulation of harmonious cooperation among the parts of the soul that leads also to a unified agent. Such an agent can resolve important conflicts between courses of action with which life confronts us. Thus we move from harmonious cooperation among psychic parts to a unified agent, ending up with a life without conflicts and with proper aims.

This paper deals with an important disagreement among interpreters. The disagreement is about the nature of the unity that Plato posits for a good agent. The nature of unity can be construed as a strong unity, with a part of the soul in firm control of the others. Alternatively, one can interpret the unity as the function of cooperation between parts that have analogous structures. We shall label this the weak unity interpretation. The proposed model for the unified agent must carry out two tasks. It must be an explanatory scheme for how agents resolve adequately conflicts within themselves, and it must work also as the ethical theory of virtues as guidelines.

Our interpretation and comparison of the two models construes Plato as working with two notions of what underlies actions. One of these is agency. An agent chooses between alternatives, considers their values, and

¹ I am indebted to an unpublished paper by C. Korsgaard on this topic: “Unity of Agency.”

can take on responsibility. The other is the notion of a mere source for action or process. A source is a salient causal antecedent of the action under consideration. This is a very general notion. Every agent is also a source, but not every source is also an agent. For example, a cobbler is both the source and the agent underlying the production of shoes. Sunshine is merely a source for heat and light, and various processes in clouds are sources for rain. In the body, various parts are sources for various fluids. Applying this to the soul, we obtain the following possible differences. The whole soul is the agent underlying certain actions. Perhaps one of the parts, rationality, might be construed in this way as well. But we can also construe a part, for example, the appetitive part, as a mere source and not as an agent for certain actions. We can also distinguish the claim of the appetitive part generating desires from saying that this part has desires in the same sense in which an agent has desires.

Within the moral psychology of the strongly unified agent, there is only one agent, namely the soul. The soul is construed in the relevant texts the way Plato and his contemporaries would typically use this notion. It is a self-moving, holistic entity, greater than the mere sum of its parts. The self-moving aspect of the soul is not treated in our passages in great detail. We shall not raise modern issues about thought causation and the autonomy of reason here, since these topics are not relevant to the interpretive problem we address.

Ultimately, it is the soul that initiates actions. It considers various ethical judgments, deliberates, and makes choices. Our questions concern the various roles that the different parts of the soul play in these processes. Within the strong unity interpretation in the conflict between reason and appetite two different sources are involved, but not two agents. Furthermore, the interpretation rejects the claim that reason can conflict directly only with reason, and desire with desire. Reason and appetite are viewed as two separate entities that are two sources for various processes. The two elements can conflict directly with each other, have elements within them conflict with each other. The appetitive part is the source for a large variety of desires.² This does not mean that it is an agent of some type. Within the strong unity interpretation the appetitive part does not have the capacity to set itself aims and to make decisions. The rational part, on the other hand, is the source of judgments, explanatory schemes, and concepts, together with other cognitive phenomena. Only the soul is an agent. Reason does

² See J. Cooper, "Plato's Theory of Human Motivation," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* I (1984), pp. 3–21, for arguments that not just physically originated desires are at issue.

not have its own desires. This interpretation will be defended later, dealing with texts that might suggest otherwise.

Plato posits three parts for the soul. For purposes of sharpening the exposition of the interpretation, we shall deal only with the conflicts between reason and appetite. But the extension of the view to the intermediate part does not cause any problems.

Plato does not suggest that the division into three parts is exhaustive.³ He uses this trichotomy because it serves the purpose of explaining how reason rules within the unified agent. Indeed, we have good reasons to think that there are at least two more psychic factors involved in decision making and desire developing that are in our texts assumed by Plato as background. We find these elements also in the purification account of the *Phaedo*. Likewise, we can assume that the theory of recollection, articulated in the *Meno* and *Phaedo*, underlies also the account of ascending cognitive processes in the *Symposium* and the *Republic*.

There are two kinds of processes of cognition that are taken as assumed by Plato in his analysis of conflict and the parts of the soul. One is perception, and the other purely instrumental reasoning. Perception is an ongoing process through life. Perceptions enter our minds constantly. This process need not be on the conscious level, and it is not within our power to have it or stop it. The other process is the purely instrumental reasoning that is also not within our power to have or not to have, and manifests itself, for example, in the ways in which humans can find the means to satisfy given desires and needs, such as thirst, or hunger. This reasoning need not be conscious, and need not involve envisaging alternatives. It can function on the trial-and-error model and animals most likely possess it too.

These processes are not to be ascribed to any of the parts of the soul that Plato talks about in the texts of the *Republic* under consideration. These parts are invoked in explanations of the resolutions of certain types of conflicts in the soul. Perception and purely instrumental reasoning do not play distinctive positive roles in these processes.

In considering the interactions between the different parts we will first look at the relation between reason and desire. Within the strong unified view this relation is direct. This view contrasts with the one according to which each part has its own reason and desires, and the relations involved in Plato's theory of conflict resolution are between the desires of reason and the desires of the appetitive part, as well as between the reasoning processes of reason and those of the appetites.

³ For a defense of this view see N.R. Murphy, *The Interpretation of Plato's Republic* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1951), p. 29.

The direct view has been maintained already by others.⁴ Some of the other views have some similarity to the direct contact of our view, but differ in some ways. For example, Richard Kraut maintains that the job of appetites is to be ruled, and this entails that reason prevails in proper conflict resolution, leading often to the rationality of reason persuading the rationality of the appetitive part.⁵ While in general our view agrees that the appetites are to be ruled, it does not see the need to introduce special reasoning to the appetites. For the reasoning these need is already given by the all purpose instrumental reasoning, which we posited outside the tripartite division.

There is also partial agreement between our view and that of Julia Annas who holds that reason has a motivational force of its own, and hence Plato's model differs from that of David Hume.⁶ But within the strong unity model we need not posit a special desire of reason that manifests itself as the love of truth. We can say that there is a general desire for well being that manifests itself in different ways at different levels. On the purely appetitive level it may be simply for pleasure, and on the highest level this desire is given the appropriate object by reason. This will include truth. R.C. Cross and A.D. Woozley also ascribe a general desire to reason, namely the desire to control the soul.⁷ On our interpretation this will be analyzed in the same way as the alleged love of truth.

Perhaps the differences in interpretation can be seen in the clearest way when considering John Cooper's view according to which there are three kinds of desires peculiar to each part of the soul, and thus we can see reason having desires.⁸ My interpretation admits that Plato maintains the first part of this conception, but denies that the second one follows. I shall give a more detailed interpretation of the relevant passages later in this essay. Within the strong unity view there are various ways in which reason affects the desires directly. First, reason can modify or replace certain objects of appetite. One may start with sheer thirst, and thus have instrumental reasoning help provide the wide range of objects that satisfy this need. But under the influence of non-instrumental reason we may adopt new aims, some of which lead us to good and healthy drinks as new objects of desire.

⁴ Murphy, *The Interpretation of Plato's Republic*, p. 29.

⁵ R. Kraut, "Justice in Plato: Republic," in A. Mourelatos, E. Lee and R. Rorty (eds.), *Exegesis and Argument* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1973), p. 208.

⁶ J. Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), pp. 133–134.

⁷ R.C. Cross and A.D. Woozley, *Plato: Republic* (London: Mc Millan, 1964), pp. 118–119.

⁸ Cooper, "Plato's Theory of Human Motivation," p. 5.

Reason functions also as presenting certain objects already encountered as good and choice worthy. One such example is health. We may know experientially what health is, but it takes rational reflection, not only of the instrumental sort, to construe health as one of the final ends in a well lived human life. Plato argues in various places that health has objective value, and is not be confused with pleasure.⁹

The third role is the negative part that reason can play in deliberation. It can show that some proposed actions are not to be done, and that certain desires in given contexts should not be satisfied.

In some cases reason produces a value judgement of a negative type, and if the soul is harmonious in the Platonic sense, this judgement will render the conflicting desire inoperative. Within this model the conflicting parts are of quite different natures. Both their constitution and their activities differ radically. This feature separates the strong unity view from the weak unity conception. Within the weak unity conception we need to insert an additional desire into the process. Thus reason engenders a negative desire, and this negative desire overwhelms – if all goes well – the positive desire of the appetitive part. Within our favored model the negative judgement directly renders the positive desire non-functional. Both conceptions – and any others? – have a place somewhere in the scheme where reason affects a desire directly. The difference is as to the location of this process.

Let us look now in greater detail at the weak unity conception of agency. Within this conception all parts have reason, feeling and desire, but e.g., the reasoning capacity of the appetitive parts is weaker than that of the rational part. One can label this the “committee view,” because each part has the same manifold of parts as the others. Since each part has its own reason and desire, each part is an agent of sorts.¹⁰ Thus they undergo analogous processes.¹¹

This conception is open to the “homunculus” charge. That is to say, it looks like we are explaining one tripartite structure in terms of other, smaller tripartite structures with the same conceptual anatomy. It has been suggested that we might adopt Daniel Dennett’s view according to which at times an explanation of a very complex cognitive structure can be aided by positing a plurality of simpler such structures, i.e., “Homunculi.”¹² But this suggestion does not help. For in our case the structures to be explained and

⁹ For evidential backing, see J. Moravcsik, “Health, Healing, and Plato’s Ethics,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 34 (2000), pp. 7–26.

¹⁰ Christopher Bobonich, “Akrasia and Agency in Plato’s *Laws* and *Republic*,” *Archive für die Geschichte der Philosophie* 76 (1994), p. 4.

¹¹ T. Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 217.

¹² Annas, *An Introduction to Plato’s Republic*, pp. 144–145.

the structures supposedly doing the explaining are isomorphic. Thus the question emerges: what rules out conflicts within the particular parts? And if there are such, how do we interpret those except in terms of still smaller but isomorphic homunculi? And so the process can go on *ad infinitum*.

The variations offered by different versions of holders of the committee view do not affect this main argument. To be sure, some interpreters might think that the committee view has the following advantages. First it presents an interpretation according to which we can still hold Hume's "reason is but a slave of the passions," view. Secondly, the view is more compatible with the philosophies of mind developed in recent analytic philosophy (naturalistic, causalistic, etc. views). Thirdly, the committee view can interpret much of what Plato says in Book IV as literal descriptions, while the "strong view" has to take these accounts as metaphorical. I do not regard either the first or the second point as in favor of the committee view, but that is a larger issue, beyond the scope of this essay (my rejection of naturalist accounts of cognition, is in my two books on philosophy of language).¹³ The third point is important and we shall address it in the next section. I shall argue that the literal interpretation has problems of intelligibility, and that we can give independent reasons for taking much of what Plato says as metaphorical. We shall turn now to an examination of the relevant texts concerning moral conflict in the agent, and also the very important medical analogy in Book IV. After this, we shall sum up the advantages and disadvantages on both sides.

II. PLATO'S DESCRIPTION OF THE CONFLICTS

Plato does not give accounts of all kinds of mental conflicts, but only of those in which the conflict cannot be analyzed as merely a power struggle between elements of similar nature, that is, conflicts of basically different elements.

In the texts to be surveyed there are disputed descriptions. For some have taken these to be metaphorical.¹⁴ Others, however, opt for non-metaphorical readings,¹⁵ and ascribe to parts of the soul intentional acts.¹⁶ The interpretation of this essay takes the description of moral psychology in the *Republic* as metaphorical.

¹³ *Thought and Language* (London: Koutledge, 1990), pp. vii, 283; *Meaning, Creativity and the Partial Inscrutability of the Human Mind*, CSLI Lecture Notes, no. 79, Stanford, California, 1998 (distributed by Cambridge University Press).

¹⁴ Cross and Woosley, *Plato: Republic*, p. 128.

¹⁵ Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, passim.

¹⁶ Bobonich, "Akrasia and Agency in Plato's *Laws* and *Republic*," pp. 4–6.

In one passage the soul is described as the agent for desiring food and drink.¹⁷ If there is no conflict in the soul, then the soul is said to be assenting as if it were answering a question (“Shall I drink?”). In case there is a conflict, in the typical case the rational part dissents, and it persuades the reasoning of the appetitive part.

The metaphorical reading construes “dissent” as a metaphor here. By implication, the same holds for “assent.” Why should Plato use this metaphor here? First, taking the sentences at face value, there is no need to posit an agent other than the soul. We can then construe “assent” as involving the whole soul. It is not just an intellectual assent to a proposition but pragmatic assent involving all aspects of the soul; judgment, desire informed by reason and action. The point of the metaphor is to take our ordinary narrow and purely intellectual conception of consent and widen it so as to represent the whole response of the soul, leading to and including action. Thus veridicality, in this wide metaphorical sense, can apply also to a whole agent, and not just to the rational part of the soul. “Assent” is process-product ambiguous. According to the interpretation presented, the metaphorical force pervades both uses in this context. The total pragmatic assent as a proposition- analogue is metaphorically so. And our “assenting” is only metaphorically that. It is what the whole soul does that is in practical contexts analogous to assenting in the purely mental, cognitive sense.

The negative case is described as the soul “pushing and driving things away.”¹⁸ This too should be taken as metaphorical. A literal reading would have to be a description of a physical process. But with the soul as the agent, within the Platonic framework it would be difficult to represent the movements of the soul as physical processes. In our interpretation the force of “dragging” and “pushing” is to indicate whatever is the metaphorical analogue to the deterring and pushing elements in the physical realm. These things determine what path an element should take, without leaving any possibility for resistance.

The same point emerges later where the soul is described as “impelled” towards drink when it is thirsty.¹⁹ Other words, like “drawn toward,” would not be strong enough to represent the force of these basic desires and their power over the soul when there is nothing in their way to fight them. Within this passage, at *Republic* 439b3, this power is described also as something that “can drive like a beast.” Plato claims that, and possibly rechannelled,

¹⁷ *Republic*, 437d7–c10.

¹⁸ *Republic*, 437c8–10.

¹⁹ *Republic*, 439a9–b6.

if a negative verdict is to be come effective, this task must be performed by a part of the soul with different structure dispositions.

Still later, a straightforward conflict is described.²⁰ This conflict involves the desire to drink and another part of the soul that prevents (*kooluein*) the agent from drinking. In the case in which the prevention is successful, it must be that the rational part of the soul has overruled the appetitive part. What drives us at times to drink can be what we called earlier sources. We can see from subsequent passage²¹ that the causal element need not be an agent, since among the candidates not only desires but also disease is mentioned. Disease is clearly not an agent by our definition. So why should we read desire as such? Alternatively, it has been suggested that maybe disease generates desires, and among these is the desire to drink, that leads to drinking. But there is no evidence that Plato speaks here elliptically, and that we need to introduce additional desires into the picture. Being thirsty is a state that can be caused by diseases. In that state a need must be fulfilled. So the disease is the real source of the drinking.

The two parts we treat in this reading are described as the rational part “with which” we reason, and the appetitive part “with which” we thirst. We should not interpret this as ascribing different instruments to the soul. If we did, we would end up with an absurd “homunculus” problem. The soul would have to be interpreted as a separate super agent, ruling over the parts. Within a more reasonable interpretation the source, in the sense explained already, of the various cognitive processes such as judgements and concept formation is the rational part. It generates the non- instrumental, aim setting judgments. The agent carrying out the verdicts is the soul; the harmoniously functioning unit we call the soul that is constituted of three parts. Likewise, the appetitive part is not an agent but a source for our desires and wishes. When the appetitive part is described as if through its driving it were commanding us to drink, this is not to be taken literally.²² Taking the command (*keleuoo*) literally would suggest that the appetitive part commands the whole soul to drink, and the various parts would obey too. How could a part command the soul except through reasoning? So we need to posit the intervention of the reasoning of the appetitive part. It is quite unclear what would enable it to do so. For on the one hand, how could the inferior reasoning power of the appetites command the whole soul, its rationality included? How could the limited, purely instrumental, rational

²⁰ *Republic*, 439c2–d2.

²¹ *Republic*, 439d2.

²² *Republic*, 439c.

power of the appetitive part overcome the aim setting and orientation determining power of the rational part?

The appetites are described as driving and dragging us to drink, thus overpowering – not persuading – the rest of the soul. Reason is described as forbidding drinking, but the Greek here (*kooluoo*) can also be read as preventing. Reason forms a judgment, and this – if all goes well and there is harmony and unity in the soul – prevents the appetitive part from satisfying the desire to drink. This prevention can be interpreted directly. The normative judgment, in this case a negative one, engenders in the soul a reorientation. On this view, certain thoughts can affect appetite. Alternatively, in the case of the positive normative judgments, the rational part can form new objects for desire; hence the sources of the newly formed desire can be located in the conjunction of the appetitive and rational.

One might try the alternative of positing a desire of the mind between the judgment and the appetites so that one could construe the conflict between one desire and another. Still another suggestion would posit two kinds of reasoning, one for the rational part and one inferior – to the appetitive part, and have the rational persuade the appetitive. But how could the reason of the appetitive part understand the reasoning of the rational part? If it cannot, then there can be no persuasion. With regard to the positing of a desire not to drink, we must ask where this desire would originate. If it is evoked by the judgments of the rational part, why are we conceptually better off than when we simply posit the rational part through its reasoning evoking an appropriate desire (of the appetitive part) and give it the right object?

Another tack would be to posit an innate desire of reason for goodness, or rational self-love.²³ These suggestions do not ameliorate the conceptual problems. If the desire for goodness is only in reason, then it must be for the objective good. But how will this help explain how, e.g., injunction to drink can dominate the soul? If the judgment itself cannot do the job, a rational self-love or desire for objective good will do no better.

Plato writes elsewhere about humans aiming at goodness. But this can be explained with reference to the texts under consideration as a series of desires, depending on the level and part under scrutiny. The desire for good by the appetite is simply the desire for pleasure. Analogous provisions can be made for the second part of the soul. The desire for goodness on the rational level is the desire for harmony and unity. But this is generated by judgments about the goodness of these qualities.

In any case, there will be points in any reasonable scheme where reason and desire must fit together; either in terms of object assigned or in terms

²³ T. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), p. 319.

of reason evoking appropriate desires. One of these points is: how desire and its object, e.g., healthy drink, fit together. The other will be how a judgment about what is good in a context evokes appropriate positive desire, be this a desire of the appetitive or rational part. These links need be seen as primitive, no worse than the primitives of modern belief-desire models.

According to one proposal, reason has to persuade the rational part of appetite, the appetites are said to be capable of reasoning about what is good for the appetitive part, but not about the good of the whole soul.²⁴ But it is difficult to see how the reason of the rational part can persuade the reason of the appetitive part unless the latter has a conceptual grasp of the good of the whole. But our characterization of the reasoning of the appetitive part, however, seems to rule this out. Any rational persuasion of the lower part by reason would have to include the teaching the lower part the nature and importance of the good of the whole, and its priority over the goods of the parts. We cannot understand these structures without understanding the nature of the whole human, in our case the soul. If the two reasonings differ, it must be that the lower part either cannot reason about the good of the whole at all, or can grasp it in general but not be able to reason about its detailed composition. But this conflicts with the Platonic view that if one understands something good and harmonious, then one will also know how to analyze it, and develop manifestations of it.

Another difficult notion in relation to which the different models for conflict resolution need be compared is ruling. In one place reason is described as ruling over the soul when the soul functions well.²⁵ Elsewhere, we are told that the good agent rules over himself and creates order in himself.²⁶ The good agent thus unified will not want bad things such as theft, adultery, or promise breaking.²⁷ Thus if we have a society of harmoniously functioning humans, imperatives forbidding murder and theft are superfluous. In such idealized societies the goodness of the agents function as powerful inspirations, making mere rule following superfluous.

Within the weak unity theory of the agent the references to ruling would have to be taken literally. Reason rules, and thus the other parts must also have some forms of rationality so that they can “listen to” and “obey” the dictates of the rational part. This runs into difficulties, as we saw.

Within the strong unity conception, however, we take the ruling metaphorically. Thus in this sense ruling is the domination of an element in

²⁴ I am indebted to comments by Bobonich here.

²⁵ *Republic*, 441e4–5.

²⁶ *Republic*, 443d4–5.

²⁷ *Republic*, 443a2–b2.

terms of causal contributions to final decisions to act. Plato does use ruling in connection with relations in which the ruled are not rational agents. In the shepherd analogy the sheep are not rational agents, yet the shepherd rules over these.²⁸ Applied to humans, this amounts to saying that reason can formulate principles that will – under favorable conditions – evoke the appropriate positive dishes and attitudes from the other parts of the soul.

We need to deal also with a text that provides the relatively strongest evidence for the “weak unity” theory. It is said that self-control arises in the soul when there is an agreement between the ruler and the ruled that reason should rule, and there is no rebellion against this.²⁹ If we take “agreement” or, literally, “having the same opinion” then this would suggest that both the rational and the appetitive part have beliefs and hence each its own type of rationality. But once we have shown that “assent” and “dissent” is best interpreted metaphorically, or more strictly speaking, “pragmatically,” we are left with the same option here too. *Homodokeoo* can mean “agreement in opinion,” but also more widely, “unanimity.” Such pragmatic unanimity is achieved when reason rechannels our wishes, and provides for these new objects. In place of “wish to have appetite as the ruler of the soul” we now gain the modified/transformed wish “to have reason as the ruler.” As was pointed out above, to have this as a rational agreement would presuppose the kind of rationality, including understanding of the overall good, that the appetitive part could not have in Plato’s theory.

There is another set of texts relevant to deciding between the strong and weak unity models. These are the passages in which the structure of the soul and the harmonious unity of the good agent are shown to be analogous to the functioning of the healthy body. In the “medical analogy” Plato regards bad and appropriate actions as having the same effect on the soul as the healthy and unhealthy processes on the body.³⁰ Healthy processes result in health, and the unhealthy ones in illness. The same applies to appropriateness (righteousness?) and its opposite. The relations are given a more specific formulation in *Republic*, 444d3–d6. Whatever leads to health establishes in the body a relation of what should dominate what, according to its nature, while the body is in a state of disease when the relations of what rules what constitute an unnatural state (are contrary to nature). Thus bodily health is explicated as a state of hierarchical harmony in accordance with the nature (essence) of what it is to be a body (i.e., healthy body). In analogy with this, the excellence of the soul is its being in a health like state, i.e., the soul functioning at its best, while badness is the diseased and

²⁸ *Republic*, 343a–b.

²⁹ *Republic*, 442c10–d1.

³⁰ *Republic*, 444c5–e7.

weak condition. In this way, with radically different parts and processes, the soul is analogous to bodily constitution.

We need to decide how literally we take the analogy. Decisions on this matter bear crucially on the philosophical interpretation of Plato's moral psychology. When the soul functions harmoniously, with the right things doing the proper things and are in the appropriate relations of subordination, we have a unified and good agent. When this harmony is not present we have a bad soul, disharmonious and capable only of a fragile and misdirected harmony. This means that either the soul is not unified and thus agency deteriorates into the decisions about action reached by the whims of a variety of desires and false opinions, or there is a kind of unity, i.e., the complete domination of the soul by the appetitive part, such as in the case of an alcoholic. But such unity is fragile and fails to provide the consistency required for rational planning. The appetites can change, justification in this framework cannot be given, and the human agent swims on a sea of changing contingencies.

In a healthy body, according to Greek conceptions, the basic humors are different kinds of fluids. The ratios determining flow and interaction determine healthy functioning. Crucial to this conception – especially if viewed (as it should) as an explanatory scheme – is that the fundamental elements are essentially different in their nature and structure, and so are the basic fluids. If this is so, then the analogy must go with the strong unity thesis. For only within that thesis are the three parts radically different; e.g., reason and appetite, and only within that framework are the processes basically different. Reason reasons, appetite generates desires and wishes, thus mirroring the structure of the bodily constitution.

Within the interpretation of the weak unity thesis, the analogy is difficult to sustain. For within that scheme, each part has its own reason, desire, etc.: the only difference is the set of objects and range for these components. It could not be analogous to blood, yellow bile, phlegm, and black bile. Nor could the parts of the soul in that context be related to the key bodily parts, such as liver, etc. The medical analogy fits the interpretation of the unified agent within whom key processes take place within various proportion, and different key parts contribute in different ways. The committee view suggests a conception of bodily functions in which parts with the same basic structure but with modified ranges function “in agreement,” whatever this might mean.

Still, we are not out of the woods. For in Book IX we find discussions of what interpreters have labeled often as “the pleasures of the mind.” These texts have been seen as buttressing the weak unity interpretation. Hence we need to turn to this material.

The most relevant part of the passage starts where Plato announces that not only does the soul have three parts, but that there are three kinds of pleasures corresponding to the three parts, as well as three kinds of rulings.³¹ The last point is easy to understand, and to add to the account of the harmonious agent sketched so far. Limiting ourselves once more to the two parts of reason and the appetitive one, one can easily envisage what the rule of reason is like in the harmonious agent, and how the rule of appetite destroys the desired kind of unity. The case of the three categories of desires and pleasures is more complicated.

The lines quoted do not say that each part *has* its own desires/pleasures. Thus certainly from these lines alone one could not derive a view according to which each part must be treated like a mini-agent. The lines do not even say that each part is a “source” in the sense we defined this, for a unique kind of pleasure. In *Republic*, 580d10–e5 the three parts are once more characterized, especially the one “through which we learn,” and the appetitive parts, said once more to include a “great deal” that generates desires. We typically associate it with the basic physical desires. The sense of “through” used here was discussed earlier. We have also seen that the fact that in some cases the third part rules, does not make that part an agent. It is simply a force that dominates the soul in those cases. But later we are told that there are three kinds of pleasures, each residing in or “assigned to” (Grube/Reeve) one of the three parts.³²

It seems that there are three ways in which one could describe something as a “pleasure” of (or in) the mind. First, there are intellectual activities which we can enjoy, such as playing chess, doing mathematics, working in philosophy, etc. It is important to note that in these cases, as in many others, *the soul* enjoys, no rationality (my rationality enjoyed playing chess yesterday?). Still, one could say: the soul learns mathematics with the mind or reason, so why should we not say that it enjoys mathematics “with” reason? But this would suggest the odd picture that as the mind is the source (in our sense) of learning, so it is also the source of a certain kind of enjoyment. Is Plato committed to such a wrong-headed conception of enjoying chess or mathematics? In the case of learning, the object of the mind is the realm of numbers. In the case of the enjoyment, the object of it is the process of playing chess, reasoning, etc. There is a difference between the pleasure of my thirst being satisfied and the pleasure of the mere act of drinking (some people presumably do experience such pleasures). So the pleasures of the mind in these cases can be simply the pleasures we experience by partaking in certain intellectual activities. The

³¹ *Republic*, 580d7–8.

³² *Republic*, 581c6 (for “part” see *to meros* in *Republic* 581a6).

source of such a pleasure is complex. It is a desire and thus has its source partly in the appetitive part, but with reason having assigned to it a good object. It resembles in this way the pleasure of having a healthy drink, or of having good bodily health. General desire for pleasure, without reason modifying it to be desire for good pleasures, need not be conceptualized. But in the case of good objects like health and good drink the object need be conceptualized. It is also true that reason can be described as having objective needs. This, however, does not require that reason should have its own desires. So far then we need not posit for this kind of “intellectual pleasure” the reason part either as agent or even as a complete source.

The second type of case involves satisfying desires that we typically associate with the needs of the mind. These include curiosity, interest, and also learning. In these cases we do talk about, “satisfied my mind,” while “I enjoy playing chess because it satisfies my mind” seems odd, at least to me. Thus in these cases one might want to construe the mind as the source of certain pleasures, namely those linked to curiosity, learning, etc.

One might try to reduce what is described in this essay as the first type to the second by saying that I enjoy doing math as a means to satisfying my curiosity, interest, etc. So now the enjoyments of the first type become merely instrumental while the enjoyments of the second type are ends in themselves, constituting the good human agent. This conception does not seem plausible, and it is especially implausible as a view Plato might have held, given his way of describing the non-instrumental manner in which we are overwhelmed once we see the realm of Forms (in *Republic*, Book VII, outside the cave).

Thirdly, one could say that the mind does not merely provide for the needs of the soul, but *has* needs, unlike the appetitive part that does not *have* needs of its own, but contains the appetites that are the expressions of certain human needs (at best, see *Gorgias*).

In general, we can say on the one hand that the text does not require construing the mind as an agent with its own needs, but as a source of certain desires and pleasures. On the other hand, it is not clear that Plato saw the difference between the two ways in which one can talk about “intellectual pleasures.” One of these is specifying the object of the desires an intellectual activity, such as doing mathematics. The other is characterizing the minds as source of a desire like the one directed towards satisfying curiosity. Nor is it clear that there is a precise and well articulated conception of the mind in Plato’s writings such as *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, and *Republic*. At times Plato wants to treat the mind as “just another part” of the soul. But in other cases he seems to treat the mind as a substance inside the greater substance, i.e., the soul. Linking the moral

psychology to his conceptions of immortality complicates the picture even more.

We must not forget that the text in Book IX is a part of an argument to show that the pleasures of the mind are superior to the pleasures of the other parts, and that the lovers of wisdom have chosen the most rewarding life, not the lovers of prestige or money and physical satisfaction. For the purposes of showing this (if, indeed, the argument is successful?) the distinctions and complications presented here need not enter the picture. Still, it would be nice if one could get a consistent and sufficiently clear conception of Plato's moral psychology, at least in this one dialogue. Our considerations show that this may not be possible. But that by itself is not a reason to support the conception of the agent as embracing weak unity.

Just because we associate a pleasure with a bodily part, that does not lead us to say that the enjoyment is in the part, or that the part must be a mini-agent. For example, I enjoy hearing (listening to) classical music, but I do *not* want to say that the enjoyment is in the ear. The big difference between the mental and other enjoyments is that the physically based pleasures can be represented as sensations (perceptions for Plato) while within his conception of the mind, the intellectual pleasures cannot be so represented. We cannot say with any degree of confidence whether this led Plato to some form of proto-dualism, and if so whether this required him to construe the mind as a substance in its own right, and how such a view would affect the notion of a united harmonious human agent.

III. THE ETHICS OF A HARMONIOUS AGENT

We saw interpretations of harmony and unity in Platonic moral psychology. One use of this scheme is as an explanatory framework for analyzing mental conflicts of ethical import. The strong unity hypothesis explains the origin and resolution of these conflicts in the following way.

The conflicts arise because it is between different and at times incompatible psychological forces in the soul, e.g., between reason and the appetitive part. These conflicts are resolved when reason can reorient and give new objects to desire and wishes. This requires that the judgments and insights of reason have the power to draw the soul, or evoke from the soul the kind of hierarchical harmony in which the dictates of reason transform the desires and wishes of the appetitive part. This interpretation fits the medical analogy, for it represents the inadequate moral agent as analogous to the sick body. This, in turn, means for Plato the dissolution of the harmonious functioning of the main components and fluids of the body.

The interpretation of weak unity, in which each part has in some way all three of the components, fits less well the medical analogy, and has also problems explaining how a literal persuasion between reason and the appetite can take place without assigning too much rationality to the appetitive part. Finally, it is less adequate than the strong unity model as an explanatory scheme, since it is subject to the multiplication of “homunculi,” where these are in basic nature like that which they are supposed to explain, thus not fitting the account in which Dennett tries to defend the explanatory value of such devices.

We shall now turn to the examination of how the conception of the good agent can serve as the foundation for Plato’s specification of four key virtues as guidelines and descriptions of good human functioning. Plato assigns to each part of the soul, as distinguished in the moral psychology both in nature and function, its own peculiar virtue. But when we look at these (wisdom, inner strength (courage) and self-control), we see that these are not so much distinct character traits, but rather aspects of unity and harmony. In an adequate agent wisdom should inform the orientation of the appetitive and emotive parts, and the resulting hierarchical structure should amount to the harmony of a human exercising what is called by common sense “self control.” To clarify the status of the four virtues in the *Republic*, it is useful to contrast these with the many virtues in Aristotle’s ethics. Elementary textbooks teach us that while Plato had only four virtues, Aristotle had many more. But this superficial difference has an important difference in orientation underlying it. Aristotle’s list is not meant to be eliciting the unified agent who can resolve conflicts. It is a much more broadly designed project; the sketch of the outlines of good character in general. This will include sound agency, and also many other admirable character traits, e.g., magnanimity, that are constituents of what Aristotle held was the general challenge of human functioning (For instance, general advice of how to manage money). Plato did not overlook this problem, but in the context of his enterprise, it was sufficient to point out that the money-loving person will not have the kind of harmony and unity in his soul as the wisdom-loving person. Plato and Aristotle do not give two replies to the same question, but two answers to two different questions.

The list of virtues in Plato cannot be taught of as a complete ethics. By themselves the members of the list are not very informative. Only within the moral psychology we sketch and other elements of Plato’s philosophy treated in other passages (e.g., recollection, the striving towards higher goods, idealized agent-types, etc.) is the list informative. Within that larger framework the virtues provide general guidelines for how to maintain unity

and inner harmony. The list also helps to link Plato's ethics to some traditional notions in Greek culture (for example, in the *Symposium* Agathon treats the four virtues as already assumed within his audience as to be among the elements that should characterize a good and happy person).

Given this role of the list and its link to the partitioning of the soul, it seems that the strong unity model provides the more suitable account of the underlying moral psychology. For the "committee view" describes the relationship that maintains the harmony as some form of inner conversation. The strong unity model locates the inner conversations only *after* the basic unity has been established. Establishing ruling and subjugating relations do not seem to be matters of compromise and negotiation, for these relations are supposed to resemble the structures of health and disease. Only after the body is healthy can one describe the maintenance of health as analogous to some form of "conversation" between parts, and even then it is not a very suggestive analogue. The key task for the moral psychology in *Republic* IV and IX is to present a prescriptive structure for the conflict-resolving good agent. The description of the virtues serves to express in what was understood by Plato's audience as ethical language, general guide-posts and criteria of evaluation of human functioning as agents. These criteria are compatible with, and give further specifications of, the harmonious unity that Plato took to be at the heart what humans should be.³³

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³³ It would be interesting to explore the relationship between the thesis of strong unity in the good agent as advocated in this essay and the thesis of wisdom having a privileged status in Plato's account of the unity of virtues, as interpreted by Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, "Socrates and the Unity of the Virtues," *The Journal of Ethics* 1 (1997), pp. 311–324.