PLATO'S THREEFOLD CITY AND SOUL

Plato's *Republic* constructs an ideal city composed of three parts, parallel to the soul's reason, appetites, and fighting spirit. But confusion and controversy have long surrounded this three-way division and especially the prominent role it assigns to the angry and competitive spirit called *thumos*. In *Plato's Threefold City and Soul*, Joshua I. Weinstein argues that, for Plato, determination and fortitude are not just expressions of our passionate or emotional natures, but also play an essential role in the rational agency of persons and polities. On the *Republic*'s account, human life requires spirited courage as much as reasoned thought and nutritious food. The discussion ranges over Plato's explication of the logical and metaphysical foundations of justice and injustice, the failures of incomplete and dysfunctional cities, and the productive synergy of our tendencies and capacities that becomes fully evident only in the justice of a self-sufficient political community.

JOSHUA I. WEINSTEIN is a senior fellow at the Herzl Institute, Jerusalem.

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JOSHUA I. WEINSTEIN
The Herzl Institute, Jerusalem

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Introduction

1 A Curious Pair

In one of the more curious passages of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates explains to Glaucon the double reason for which philosopher-kings need to engage in mathematical studies. The two have already agreed that the budding philosopher, like the prisoner escaping from the cave of unreflective opinion, must turn from the realm of sensory change to that of timeless thought. They now consider the intricate process through which this may be accomplished. The soul's turn toward true being, Socrates suggests, begins from the experience of opposite qualities – like heavy and light, big and small – combined in a single sensible object. The experience of such contradictions leads the soul into perplexity and confusion, and thereby awakens the search for intelligibility and clarity. Glaucon, grasping how such puzzlement can serve as a spur to thought, agrees with Socrates' suggestion that the study of arithmetic can serve this subtle intellectual function, since "we see the same thing simultaneously as one and as of unlimited number."[1] If arithmetic and calculation can turn one toward the truth, Socrates feels he can draw the following conclusion about these disciplines: "The warrior must learn them for marshalling his troops and also the philosopher because he must emerge from the world of becoming and grasp reality" (525b).

Glaucon continues on gravely, but at this point we may find it hard not to laugh. True, Socrates has already declared that he is seeking a dual-purpose education and has trotted out the absurd thought that Agamemnon would not have been much of a general if he could count neither his men nor his feet. Indeed not. But even if we concur that mathematics can provide philosophers-to-be with certain intellectual benefits, there is still

[1] Slings (2003) at 525a. Parenthetical citations are to this edition. Translations are based on Grube (1974), though Reeve's revision in Cooper (1997) and Bloom (1968) have been consulted, and many further changes have been made.

something jarring in Socrates' juxtaposition of the dialectical search for true reality with the military head-count. The philosopher-kings' higher studies will eventually lead from arithmetic and calculation, through geometry and astronomy on to dialectic and knowledge of the good, but as many of these steps as possible must, apparently, be useful for both thinking and fighting. What are we to make of this perplexing combination?[2]

The pairing of the contemplative and the violent actually runs through the dialogue. Indeed, the initial arrival of the *Republic*'s discussants at the home of Cephalus is due to some combination of force and persuasion (327c–328b). Then, as the dialogue's developing city acquires a cadre of military guards, the main qualification for this role is a nature both philosophic and high-spirited.[3] Later, these guards are provided with a physical and artistic education to promote toughness and flexibility, harmonizing intellectual proclivities with military fierceness. The polis eventually selects its rulers, who are identified as philosophers-in-training, for the combination of sharpness of thought with burly hardiness, of quick learning and good memory with steadfastness on the battlefield. Finally, Socrates summarizes his conclusions regarding the ideal city by calling its rulers those who are "the best in philosophy and warfare" (543a).

The affinity of thinking and fighting defines the *Republic* on a deeper level as well, since the political discussion connects to the account of the human psyche. Just as the guards of the polis divide into two classes, the philosopher-rulers and their military assistants, so do the guards of the soul divide into two: the truth-loving, thinking aspect of the psyche and its competitive, spirited element. Just as the city's thinkers and planners are responsible for its laws and policies and its armed forces for ensuring their implementation, so too the reasoning element of the psyche aims to ascertain which path is best while the spirited element sees to it that these conclusions are executed in practice. The twofold guards keep an eye on the third and largest part of the city, its productive economy. This last serves a genuine purpose so long as its enterprise remains within limits, and so, similarly, do the appetites, the third element in the soul, support healthy functioning when properly bounded. The *Republic*'s city and soul are thus threefold, with the responsibility for properly setting and enforcing these bounds falling to the deliberation and judgment of reasoning, stiffened

[2] Annas (1981, 275) calls this pairing "utterly grotesque" while Burnyeat (2000, 10–11) is more attuned to the humor in this passage and to the shifts in Glaucon's responses: from immediate military application to awe at Socrates' synoptic program of mathematical sciences (73).

[3] Schofield (2006, 49 n. 67) gives sound rationales for preferring "guards" as a translation of *phulakes* to the traditional "guardians." The latter is therefore only used when it is contextually appropriate.

and supported by the spirited aspect that Socrates calls *thumos*. Curious the partnership of thought and force may be, but it cuts to the core of the *Republic*'s account of political and ethical virtue.

2 The Obscurity of the *Republic*'s Tripartition

While it takes only modest familiarity with Plato's writings to have encountered his analysis of the soul into reasoning, spirited and appetitive elements, it would be difficult to overstate the extent to which this psychology has elicited puzzlement, confusion and outright disbelief. Since the dialogues present triplicity in a few different ways – while also offering additional accounts of the psyche – it is unclear to what degree even Plato himself was committed to the *Republic*'s version.[4] Aristotle, for his part, clearly sympathizes with certain aspects of this view. In practice, however, he mostly shoehorns it into his distinction between the part of the psyche that speaks with *logos* and the part (or parts) that do not – and this reason/non-reason bipartition has dominated the interpretation of Plato ever since.[5] Among contemporary thinkers, some may prefer to leave the mind's "encapsulated modules" open-ended in number, but the presumption in favor of some two-way division – thought and passion, belief and desire, duty and interest – has become so strong that many, even inadvertently, see the *Republic*'s picture through the lens of bipartite presuppositions. Taking Plato's point on its own terms may require some suspension of our accustomed self-understanding.

The problem, put simplistically, is spirited *thumos*. In the context of a two-part psyche – of late more often Humean or Kantian than Aristotelian – no one knows just what to say about this source of anger, determination and plain old pugnacity. Socrates describes it as that aspect of ourselves through which we respond with pride, censure and shame, exhibit competitiveness and ambition and are prepared to persevere and defend our principles, if necessary fighting, suffering and sacrificing. Of course, no one would deny that we get outraged at injustice, feel ashamed of our missteps and enjoy winning. The question is whether the aggregate of these

[4] Even the most basic questions regarding the *Republic*'s tripartition continue to be re-asked. Gill (2013) raises some of these issues, such as the degree of coherence or development between the picture of the soul in book four and that in books eight and nine. Barney (2016) wonders to what degree the *Republic*'s project may be comparable to contemporary work in the neurosciences.

[5] Though Aristotle suggests that nothing really turns on whether one classifies the soul as having one rational part and two nonrational parts, or two rational and one nonrational (*N. Ethics* 1102b13–1103a3), his subsequent *usage* consistently follows the first division. Vander Waerdt (1985a) and (1985b) document Aristotle's influence on the ancient (mis)understanding of Platonic tripartition.

can really be said to total up to anything interconnected and identifiable, something which is meaningfully "a part" of human life, as one might say of "the life of mind." Since the expression "life of the spirit" already means something else in English, at issue is whether we really have *thumotic* lives.[6]

A classic version of this complaint was already voiced by Cornford (1912, 262) a century ago: "The distinction between Reason and Appetite, a rational part and an irrational, is well established. . . . But this third, intermediate part is novel, and, when we look into it, factitious. It has all the air of being invented to suit some foregone conclusion."[7] In a somewhat later version, Hardie (1936, 142) doubts that thumos merits any separate status: "No adequate reasons are given by the discussion in the *Republic* for thinking that this is so, or for modifying the opinion, so strongly supported both by plain men and philosophers, that the fundamental division here is into two and not three." Penner (1971, 112–13) simply declares that "Plato's arguments for the existence of *thumos* as a third part of the soul are singularly few and weak." Despite some recent work that takes the spirited part of the soul quite seriously, there remains a solid suspicion that Plato is simply wrong here, both in his conclusions – since purported spirited phenomena do not form a unified, natural class of their own – and in the reasoning by which he reaches them.[8]

Now the *Republic*'s conclusions and reasoning are obviously interdependent, but the difficulties with them need to be approached somewhat differently. As far as the conclusion is concerned, we need to deal with the cultural fact that the place of fighting and war in most parts of the West today is very far from what it was in Plato's time. Despite Socrates' proposal that his ideal city should have a professional army, citizen armies were very much the rule in classical Greece and most male citizens experienced some of the military life. Socrates himself apparently served with some distinction in a number of Athenian campaigns. Consequently, aspects of thumotic life that would have been obvious for Plato's contemporaries are often rather distant from the experience of today's readers of the *Republic*. Where Socrates and Glaucon share a set of background assumptions, and so speak briefly or obliquely, we are left wanting illustrations, explanations and analysis. Most especially we are lacking an account of how the many

[6] Just as *Logos* and *logic*, *Eros* and *erotic* have become naturalized English words, let us do the same with *thumos* and *thumotic*. This helps to clarify the discussion, though Plato's own language is admittedly more complicated.

[7] Cornford (1930) seems to recant some of this from this skepticism.

[8] Among the recent works that take seriously the role of thumos in the *Republic* are Hobbs (2000), Moss (2005), Brennan (2012), Singpurwalla (2013) and Wilburn (2015).

different phenomena that the interlocutors treat as thumotic without comment or discussion – anger and revenge, music and gymnastics, aesthetics and legalism, nobility and stubbornness – can be seen as hanging together in a coherent way. Various approaches have been suggested by commentators, but so far with limited success. Of the numerous lacunae here, some can be filled by examining other Greek authors and some will require our own creative thinking. Making sense of thumos is essential for interpreting the *Republic*, but our historical situation compels us to go somewhat beyond the boundaries of Plato's text. Other difficulties with understanding the role of thumos will be taken up in Section 6 of this introduction.

Turning to the arguments, we have the (perhaps opposite) problem of narrow overfamiliarity. After Socrates and his companions have identified three classes in the polis and used them to explicate its virtues, the question arises of what this has to do with the soul of the individual. So they set out to identify the very same three forms in the individual soul, appealing to the opposed motivations we experience in moments of inner conflict (435e–441c). This intricate and ingenious passage offers the *Republic*'s explicit or official argument for the triplicity of the psyche, and over the past decades it has been repeatedly subjected to careful and detailed scrutiny. Indeed, such lavish scholarly attention has been accorded to this passage that the consensus takes the division of the soul to stand or fall on this one, all-too-familiar argument alone.[9]

Unfortunately, this argument presents difficulties both rhetorical and logical. On the rhetorical side, we find that Socrates and his companions have been discussing an ideal polis, its citizens and its institutions for more than two books (sixty pages) before they turn back to the individual psyche and its structure. Though Socrates is careful to note that justice *might* turn out to be different in an individual than in a polis – so that this latter really needs its own, independent investigation – the overall situation makes this admission appear a tad disingenuous. Sophisticated as the argument from opposed motivations may be, it is still not even a tenth as long as the preceding political discussion. One could be forgiven for suspecting that this passage has been rigged to yield the outcome at which Socrates has clearly been driving. Worse yet, Socrates almost says as much. His discussion of the psyche is prefaced with the caveat that, while the approach he proposes to pursue fits with the preceding discussion, precise results would

[9] An extreme, and influential, example of over-rating the argument from opposition is Moline (1978, 6): "The sole ground on which Plato distinguishes parts of the psyche is the psyche's susceptibility to internal conflict." Although Moss (2008, 35) claims to find three different arguments for soul-division in the *Republic*, these are all founded on the logic of opposition.

require a "longer and fuller road" (435d). This warning is apparently lost on Glaucon, who pushes Socrates to continue anyway. We are left wondering whether Glaucon would have done better by taking for himself the encouragement he immediately offers to Socrates, that is, to "investigate" rather than "growing weary."[10]

As discouraging as the literary framing of this famous argument may be, its logic suffers from an even more grievous flaw. Socrates claims to be identifying three elements in the psyche, like the three classes of the polis, but his key move is to appeal to the incompatibility of opposites, e.g. a single indivisible thing cannot simultaneously move both toward and away from the same something else. The interpretation of this central principle remains highly controversial, but even when it is read in the most favorable light, these opposites come in twos, not threes. True, Socrates produces and distinguishes three such opposing pairs, but this merely shifts the problem to explaining why there are precisely *three* such pairs to consider. Socrates' explanation of the number of oppositions, whatever we take it to be, cannot itself rest only on the binary logic of opposition. The *Republic*'s marquee argument is thus so strategically flawed as to constitute not so much a failure as a nonstarter.

These and other difficulties have, not surprisingly, led many interpreters to distance themselves in various ways from the *Republic*'s arguments. In one version of this, Socrates' account of the three-part psyche is taken as a beautiful and evocative figure, but one we should not take too seriously. Since we already know that the only real actor in the real world is the individual person – who we already know is a one, not a many – we can safely treat Platonic triplicity as "just" an extended metaphor and not worry too much about the logic or the details (which are probably wrong anyway).[11] Another option is to stress the overall dialectical character of

[10] Note that we do not hear Glaucon saying things like: "Socrates, surely you would not wish to deny us the most complete account possible of such great matters. Even if the way is longer and harder, we must neither weary nor be daunted." Such diligence in pursuit of the argument is in fact exhibited by Glaucon and his comrades at various other points in the dialogue, such as on the matter of holding wives and children in common (449b–450a). Moreover, others of Socrates' interlocutors would not have let such a heavy hint go unappreciated (one thinks perhaps of Theaetetus). What really is the "longer road"? Speculations abound – see, e.g. Miller (2007). Some thoughts on the matter will emerge through the rest of this study.

[11] This is stated explicitly by Cairns (2014, 73) and implied to various degrees in others, many of whom wish to emphasize the continuity between the *Republic* and the so-called "Socratic" unity of the soul argued for in book ten and in other Platonic dialogues, most prominently the *Phaedo*. Recent versions of this approach include Shields (2001), (2007) and (2010), Rowe (2007, 164–85), Gill (2013) and Gerson (2014). Closely related is the suggestion in Whiting (2012) that divisions in the soul are at most contingent.

the Platonic dialogue. The most we should expect from any given argument, on this approach, is just what Plato shows us: Socrates persuading a particular person under specific circumstances. The entire exercise is, in a sense, *ad hominem*, strictly dependent on the other characters in the dialogue. Again, we should not expect the logical details to tally up precisely.[12] A further option, especially for one who is willing to take a three-way psychological division seriously, is simply to write Socrates' arguments off as hopeless and go looking for other approaches. After sketching some of the problems with the book four argument from opposition, Burnyeat (2006, 4) prefaces his own account of "The Truth of Tripartition" thus:

> So I shall not discuss the proofs. Please do not press me to 'come to the aid of those arguments'. They are not what I want to discuss. Instead, I shall try to find other reasons that Plato could give in favour of dividing the soul. Even better, I shall look for reasons that we too could endorse, or at least entertain with some sympathy.

Such an approach makes sense if we are already confident there is no room for sympathy with – not to mention any tendency to endorse – the reasons Plato actually does give. But before we distance ourselves so decisively from Socrates' arguments, we should make every effort to ascertain as precisely as we can just what these arguments actually are.

That effort is the main aim of the present work. Such is the nature of a Platonic dialogue, especially so intricately structured a dialogue as the *Republic*, that it is no mean task simply to identify these arguments. In the case of the three-part soul, we are confronted with no less than three different lines of reasoning, each with its own logic, founded on different facts and experiences, appearing in various passages of the text and making its own contribution to the overall aims of the dialogue. As a preliminary overview, we can say that the argument from *diversity of character* articulates the plurality of human life-possibilities, the limited variety of options we all face; the argument from *opposition of motivation*, in turn, shows that these options cannot always integrate smoothly, and therefore confront us with conflicts and genuine decisions; and the argument from *sufficiency of function* shows the role each aspect of ourselves must play to make an integrated human life possible. Socrates deploys not just one but three different arguments in his overall strategy to answer the dialogue's main questions. Only once we have clarified this large-scale strategy and the details of its implementation will we be in a position to assess our measure of sympathy for – perhaps even endorsement of – the *Republic*'s three-part psychology.

[12] Examples of this approach include Roochnik (2003) and Dorter (2006).

3 Life-Choice, Justice and Tripartition

"Attempting to determine the way to live," Socrates is sure we will agree, is no "slight matter" (344e). Though this longest of Plato's Socratic dialogues takes up a bewildering variety of topics and themes, through them all it pursues the overarching concern of how to live. From Cephalus' opening remarks on what lies ahead in old age to Odysseus' concluding choice of reincarnation into a quiet, private life, Socrates and his friends systematically explore the options we face and map out the principles by which we can choose among them. The main conclusion – demanded by Glaucon and Adeimantus in book two, announced provisionally in book four and confirmed triumphantly at the end of book nine – is that, no matter what our circumstances, the right life is the life of rightness, of justice and integrity, the life guided by our ability to think about what is good. Ultimately, this is the life of philosophy.

Plato, in his various dialogues, presents Socrates exhorting to the philosophic life on a number of different grounds – divine signs in his *Apology*, as the highest form of Eros in the *Symposium* – but the account presented in the *Republic* turns on a parallel between an independent polis and the human soul. Just as calamity befalls a city when civil war tears it apart, as rival factions grasp power and suppress their opponents, so too does misery strike a person whose life is torn apart by conflicting goals and plans, urges and impulses. Conversely, blessing comes to both a city and a person governed with justice and knowledge, with all abilities contributing to a unified life in harmony and cooperation. Living well simply is living according to justice – to the extent that each of us is like a governed city.

How *is* each of us like a governed city? Of course, Socrates suggests that the ideal polis is composed of three classes, parallel to the human psyche composed of three elements. The city contains productive craftsmen, fighting warriors and guiding rulers while the human psyche consists of bodily appetites, spirited thumos and guiding reason. These are the "factions" whose infighting brings misery and whose proper integration and unification underwrites both justice and well-being.

But the political parallel as such does not require a division into three. Glaucon and Adeimantus challenge Socrates to defend the life of justice as choiceworthy in its own right, and the political analogy helps him argue for this. But it seems that any number of parallel parts in the soul and the polis would be compatible with this overall strategy. If the right number turned out to be seven, then injustice understood as seven-sided civil war in the psyche would remain one's most personal evil while justice understood as

seven-fold harmonious activity would still be one's greatest good. At this level of abstraction, the political parallel is so formal as to remain empty. Unto itself, it is not an argument for tripartition.

We can discern the *Republic*'s various arguments for tripartition while fleshing out this empty formalism, beginning from the simple fact that the benefit of justice is not simply the negation of the detriment of injustice. Socrates describes injustice in the soul as the condition in which elements "meddle" in what is not their business.[13] But the absence of meddling, while necessary, is still insufficient for well-being and justice. This latter Socrates describes as the positive condition in which each element actually "does its own," that is, carries out the activity, function or task to which it is naturally fitted.[14] Looked at on the political side, a city at peace does not suffer from the calamities of civil strife, but if it is nevertheless moribund and unengaged, its talents will lie wasted and it will still fail to be a happy, successful or prosperous polity. Nothing is torn down in such a city, but then again, nothing is built up either. In parallel, one whose psyche suffers from injustice will be divided against oneself, constantly regretting one's choices and sabotaging one's own achievements. The absence of such internal clashing is clearly necessary for a life worth choosing, but this need not provide for the productive engagement and integration of one's capacities. Depressed appetites may be insufficient to support healthy bodily functioning, a weak thumos may be incapable of carrying through on even the most trivial plans, and a flaccid intellect may find thinking through goals of any but the smallest scale tedious or boring. Indeed, a dead man is the source of no injustice, but he has no justice either. Internal quiet is surely needed, but no matter how many elements the soul turns out to have, more is needed to account for the excellence of the psyche that is justice.[15]

The *Republic*'s account of life-choice thus breaks into positive and negative branches, each of which depends on an argument for tripartition. The self-harm involved in injustice comes from the parts of the psyche meddling and clashing with one another. Precisely this eventuality features in

[13] *Meddling* here translates *polupragmonein*, 443d.

[14] Various forms of this locution appear throughout the *Republic*. A representative version is *to ta hautou prattein* (433b).

[15] This distinction differs from that deployed in Brown (2012) between the virtuous soul's "earned" unity and the pre-existing "unearned" unity that makes the various parts a single soul. While the former is due to virtues like justice, moderation and agreement, the latter Brown grounds in a number of causal processes that make it possible for the parts to be "organized in relation to each other and to the whole in such a way that the whole is able to perform its function" (66–7). Earned unity is thus the full realization of the soul's fundamental potential (70). This accounts for justice as harmonious functional integration, but has little to say about the infighting Socrates calls injustice, which would need to be called something like "earned disunity."

the rightly famous argument from opposition of motivation. But the miseries of injustice follow not merely from psychic opposition *per se* – which might be brief and trivial – but from deep and endemic oppositions, from the conflicts that arise when the character of one's whole life might be at stake. The three oppositions that appear in book four Socrates takes to represent the three main possibilities open to us when we choose how to live our lives: the life of acquisition, the life of ambition and the life of curiosity. These overall orientations express a character or ethos, the sort of thing that can seem to give life, both personal and collective, a systematic coherence and unity. But Socrates' point here is precisely that, without justice, they do no such thing. Our life-circumstances are too varied to be lived simply and smoothly by a single character, ethos or orientation. This clash of life-possibilities thus makes injustice a permanent threat – and in particular, means that the civil war of the soul will feature precisely three contestants.

So too on the positive branch, we find that justice as the most choiceworthy life depends on a three-way analysis of our proper functioning. Put very schematically, we live our lives on three different time-scales simultaneously: the finite or short-term; the open-ended or long-term; and the infinity of all possible time. In the immediate term, our very existence depends on attending closely and strictly to the ever-changing needs and experiences of our fragile, sensitive bodies. Over the long term, we are inevitably part of larger things, beginning from a more-than-bodily conception of our own social and mortal self, through the family, community and polity in which we have grown and on perhaps to greater plans and ideals. Lastly, as speaking and thinking creatures, we are in touch with the non-sensible aspect of reality, thoughts with their own articulation and richness, obeying their own rules such as truth, coherence and clarity. For a life to be genuinely human it must, at a minimum, include all three. But for a human life to be worth choosing, these three need to work together in some coherent fashion. This threefold temporal schema – short-term/long-term/all-of-time – will be fleshed out in greater detail as we analyze justice understood as sufficiency of function.

4 Character and Opposition

Let us now look a little more carefully at the logic of injustice. The argument from character, as noted, begins from the matter of life-choice. Just as there are multiple actions we can perform, multiple goals we can pursue