

The Socratic Soul
A Defensible Paradox

Introduction

Many scholars argue that there is a significant degree of conceptual development within the Platonic corpus. Gregory Vlastos, for example, underscores the vast difference between the Socrates presented in the shorter elenctic dialogues and the Socrates represented in the “middle” and “later” dialogues:

In different segments of Plato’s corpus two philosophers bear that name...But in different sets of dialogues he pursues philosophies so different that they could not have been depicted as cohabiting the same brain throughout unless it had been the brain of a schizophrenic. They are so diverse in content and method that they contrast as sharply with one another as with any third philosophy you care to mention, beginning with Aristotle’s. ¹

Similarly, Terence Irwin, following Aristotle’s *Magna Moralia*, emphasizes that the character Socrates portrayed in the “earlier” aporetic dialogues represents closely the historical philosopher himself, while the character by the same name appearing in the “middle” and “later” dialogues is used as a mouthpiece for Plato’s theories and beliefs:

In Aristotle’s view, Socrates reduced all the virtues to knowledge and did away with the non-rational part of the soul, feelings, and character, whereas Plato rightly recognized the non-rational part of the soul, but wrongly contaminated his ethical discussion with speculations about the Forms (*MM* 1182a15-30). ²

Christopher Rowe advocates a moderate approach, avoiding extremist doctrinal unitarian and developmentalist views. Unitarian views, expounded by Charles Kahn ³ and Paul Shorey, ⁴ hold that we can find

¹ Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Cornell Studies in Classical Philology (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 46.

² Terence Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 9.

³ Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue : The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xiv.

conceptual unity among the dialogues, but that they are primarily the notions of Plato. Developmentalist views, advanced by Vlastos⁵ and Irwin,⁶ on the other hand, assert that there is a gradual maturation in Plato's philosophical concepts over the course of his writing.⁷

What is particularly interesting in Rowe's approach is the assertion that Plato's new theoretical formulation concerning the soul, first presented in the *Republic*, is the *source* of other developmental changes in Plato's thought, causing him to separate himself from his mentor in new ways:

What really divides Plato from Socrates, on the non-standard version of "developmentalism" that I am advocating here, is that Plato came to think of human beings as a permanent combination of the rational and irrational. The version I prefer instead sees the introduction of irrational parts of the soul – argued for specifically in Book IV of the *Republic* as (a) the *source* of many other changes (see especially Rowe 2003); and (b) as leaving other parts of the Socratic position to a surprising extent untouched.⁸

While Rowe provides an interesting theory, I believe that he goes too far in concluding that there is significant development in Plato's thought with respect to the soul. I will seek to demonstrate the possibility that Plato's "later" dialogues reframe his argument which he had stated in "earlier" dialogues. The "Socratic" dialogues are more nuanced than are often given credit; the "later" dialogues are quite consistent with these "earlier" expressions.

⁴ Paul Shorey, *The Unity of Plato's Thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1903), 129-31.

⁵ Vlastos, 46-47.

⁶ Irwin, 8-15.

⁷ J. Angelo Corlett, *Interpreting Plato's Dialogues* (Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2005), 7-8.

⁸ Christopher Rowe, "Interpreting Plato," in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh H. Benson (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 19.

Soul as a Simple Unity

Because Rowe presents an “attenuated version of the developmentalist approach,”⁹ we must take into account the difficult and controversial issue with respect to the dating and sequencing of the dialogues in the Platonic corpus. For the purposes of this study, let us assume that Rowe is correct in placing the *Cratylus* and the *Phaedo* in the earliest collection of dialogues. Based upon these assumptions, let us consider Rowe’s conception of the “early” and Socratic view of the soul that he considers so different from what we find in the *Republic* and “subsequent” works:

Socrates had held to the disconcerting, but – as one might think of it – optimistic, view that we are all fundamentally *rational*...Each and every one of us desires his or her own good, or happiness, the nature of which – starting from where we are now – is in principle discoverable by philosophical reasoning.¹⁰

Note that Rowe assumes that Socrates is referring *solely* to rationality when he uses the phrase “philosophical reasoning.” The etymology of the term “philosophical” that is used in Rowe’s argument – the *love* of wisdom – provides an important clue as to why this assumption may turn out to be mistaken.

If we consider evidence from the “earlier” dialogues, we find that Aristotle’s characterization of the so-called Socratic paradox appears to be uncharitable. In the *Protagoras*, for example, we find a clear application of the Socratic notion that wisdom, properly applied, *can* overcome desires or fears. Yet this does not mean that Socrates is unaware of the obvious influence of our desires.

Socrates notes that we do not demonstrate weakness of our will when we act in a way that is contrary to our long-term goals; rather, our will shifts from one desired object to another. We always want to have what seems *at the time* best to us. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates contrasts his belief with the

⁹ Rowe, 17.

¹⁰ Rowe, 18.

belief held by most individuals. While the *hoi polloi* consider the emotions to be the primary motivating power of the soul, Socrates argues that the rational powers *can* take command, provided that they are appropriately developed and oriented toward what is best. This is a capacity; not a necessity: “knowledge is a fine thing *capable* of ruling a person” (*Protagoras* 352c, my emphasis).

Socrates brings up the important principle of *measurement* which causes his main point – the inappropriateness of *akrasia* – to appear to be not only non-paradoxical, but reasonable instead. Even if a person wants to maximize pleasure or avoid pain as far as possible, s/he will need to calculate whether a particular action will provide more or less pleasure than a different action.

Applying this principle of calculation, Socrates argues that it is ultimately not our weakness of will that causes us to act against our better judgment, but it is our inability to properly make use of the art of measurement that causes us to stray from the best course of action. In this sense, it is not the case that the will is weak; rather the pleasure that is in clear view (close to us) appears as *larger than it really is* when considered from the perspective of long-term benefits:

While the power of appearance often makes us wander all over the place in confusion, often changing our minds about the same things and regretting our actions and choices with respect to things large and small, the art of measurement in contrast, would make the appearances lose their power by showing us the truth, would give us peace of mind firmly rooted in the truth and would save our life (*Protagoras* 356d-e).

The Multipartite Soul

As we consider the apparent “development” of Plato’s concept of the soul, we begin with Rowe’s description of the introduction of a “newer, more elaborate” conception of the soul that appears in the *Republic*. Instead of

describing the soul as a simple unity as in the “earlier” dialogues, Socrates describes the soul that has “parts” – the cognitive part as distinguished from the emotional and spirited “parts”:

In Book IV of the *Republic*, by contrast, Socrates argues for the existence of three parts to the soul, one rational and two irrational, the latter capable not only of preventing the agent from carrying through with decisions apparently made by the rational part, but of distorting it on a permanent basis, so diverting it from its natural projects. One of the two irrational parts is associated with anger, or more generally the competitive-aggressive aspects of human existence, the other with our appetitive drives for food, drink, and sex.¹¹

David Roochnik cites Terence Penner in pointing out that this new formulation of the soul – the tripartite model – is meant to amend the naïve and problematic account which was seen in the “earlier” dialogues:

Many chronologically minded commentators believe that this is Plato’s attempt to correct his earlier (or Socratic) denial of *akrasia*, or weakness of the will. Penner puts it thus: “The parts-of-the-soul doctrine is intended as a refutation of Socrates’ view of *akrasia*” (1990, 96). If calculation and desire are two separate powers, it becomes possible to explain what seems to be an undeniable human experience: namely, knowing what is right but not doing it. This separation allows for the possibility of being overpowered by desire, a possibility seeming denied in, for example, the *Protagoras* (see 352d-357).¹²

Thus, Roochnik follows the majority of scholars in that he considers the simpler Socratic soul oblivious to the power of the irrational part of the soul. More importantly, Roochnik and others *assume that the tripartite soul model resolves the ultimate issue*. It does not. Ultimately, Socrates wants us to be able to consistently do what is best. The tripartite model of the soul articulates the issue more clearly, but does not necessarily overcome the possibility of *akrasia* for the majority of individuals.

¹¹ Rowe, 19.

¹² David Roochnik, *Beautiful City: The Dialectical Character of Plato's "Republic"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 13.

Socrates argues in several dialogues that the intellect, even if it is well developed, is not always a sufficient condition of virtue and justice. In *Lesser Hippias*, for example, Socrates brings to light the fact that we can possess the truth about a particular matter and yet such a possession of information does not necessarily lead to moral behavior. If we know the truth about a particular subject, we are, Socrates points out, in the best position to be able to consistently speak falsely about the subject:

If someone were to ask you what three times seven hundred is, could you lie the best, always consistently say falsehoods about these things, if you wished to lie and never to tell the truth? ... Don't you think the ignorant person would often involuntarily tell the truth when he wished to say falsehoods, if it so happened, because he didn't know; whereas you, the wise person, if you should wish to lie, would always consistently lie (368e-367a)?

***Erōs*: The Wings – A Fourth Part of the Soul**

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates highlights an important point about the non-lover highlighted in the first two speeches, which he later exposes as being a lover in disguise. He makes clear that *reason is always motivated by desire*. The development of reason, without adequate consideration of non-rational motivating factors, will *not* necessarily provide an adequate foundation for moral behavior.

Socrates highlights how the wings represent a special aspect of the soul which is quite different from the other parts. He makes clear that the wings represent *Erōs* since they seek to reorient the more lowly human aspects of our nature toward the divine realm:

By their nature wings have the power to lift up heavy things and raise them aloft where the gods all dwell, and so, more than anything that pertains to the body, they are akin to the divine, which has beauty, wisdom, goodness, and everything of that sort. These nourish the soul's wings, which grow best in their presence; but foulness and ugliness make the wings shrink and disappear (*Phaedrus* 246d-e).

Charles Griswold appears to be the only philosopher who takes adequate notice of the significant role of the wings as an aspect of the soul, such that it should be considered a fourth “part” that is distinct from the intellectual, the appetitive, and the spirited aspects:

Since the wings are nevertheless distinguishable from the remainder of the soul, we may say that in the palinode the soul is *not tripartite but quadripartite* (charioteer, two horses, and wings). Socrates’ original question [whether man is complex beast like *Typhon*] or simple (230a) has been answered: he is complex.¹³

Although I consider Griswold’s analysis to begin correctly, I believe that he comes to a conclusion that is partially incorrect when he states that the soul is complex. While Griswold appears to be correct in considering the quadripartite soul as potentially complex, he seems to me to be incorrect in assuming that it must necessarily *remain* complex. We will see how this apparent complexity becomes unified into an organized whole, analogous to the “simple soul” of the “earlier” dialogues.

Conclusion

Now that we have reviewed the different models of the soul, let us consider whether the “earlier, unipartite” model represents one that is “deficient” in the manner suggested by Aristotle, Irwin, Penner, and Rowe. Then we can determine whether there has been “development” in the way typically described.

As we have seen by examining the *Protagoras*, the “earlier” dialogues demonstrate that Socrates was quite aware of the important role of emotions and will in human psychology. Although he argues that proper rational calculation can lead to more complete success, he is quite aware

¹³ Charles L. Griswold Jr., *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 94.

that this is the ideal rather than common practice. Moreover, both “groups” of dialogues – from the *Lesser Hippias* to the *Laws* – underscore the point that reason is not a sufficient condition for the actualization of behavior if it is not oriented toward what is best in the fullest sense.

As Shaw points out, the process of guiding a student of philosophy toward grasping the joy of inquiry is not primarily intellectual in nature; it necessarily involves a reorienting of the *passions*:

Lacking an awakened *Erōs*, no amount of intellectual skill could benefit the soul. However brilliant it might be, such a soul remained fixed in the shadows cast by its own unrecognized aporia (*Rep.* 516d). Although Plato’s *paideia* was intellectually rigorous, it was even more demanding as a discipline of the heart, for it required souls to endure the insecurity and inferiority of not knowing...The evocative imagery of Plato’s myths were not intended to inform but to awaken and guide the soul’s *Erōs* to its original nature.¹⁴

Based upon these considerations, it becomes apparent that the “unipartite,” model of the soul found in the *Apology*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Protagoras* might not be as radically different from the “tripartite” model in the *Republic* and “quadripartite” model in the *Phaedrus* as Rowe and others have argued.

As the preceding evidence suggests, Plato’s Socrates demonstrates awareness of the rational, desiderative, spirited, and erotic capacities of the soul in the “earlier” dialogues as well as in the “later” dialogues. In both cases, we find that the ideal soul for Socrates is one that has single-pointed focus toward the Good and relates knowledge of what is best with respect to the current question at hand.

Even though we cannot know with certain where Socrates ends (if he, in fact ever does) and where Plato asserts himself to a greater extent (if he does so), the dialogues inspire us to orient our entire life toward what is best

¹⁴ Gregory Shaw, “After Aporia: Theurgy in Later Platonism,” *The Journal of Neoplatonic Studies* 5, no. 1 (1996): 8.

per se and not just what is best solely for our limited concerns. Such dedication does not come without a great deal of effort. Nor does it come by means of intellectual activity alone. As Graeme Nicholson points out, Socrates seems right to call *Erōs* his greatest helper:

Madness (*mania*), in the form of *Erōs* whether divine or otherwise, is a disorientation, or reorientation, of the *entire* soul that affects all the modes of perception and behavior, thought, and speech. It is not just an oddity expressed in one bit of behavior, but a pervasive and enduring condition of the entire person or soul... This soul is the unity of the conscious Socratic ego, to whom virtues can be ascribed, and an unconscious life whose urges are released through love, religion, and art – through madness. It is hard to deny the truth of Plato's view, hard to suppose that human experience is never more than the contrivance of calculation. There is nothing mythical or mad about the doctrine that the soul itself is this unity of conscious and unconscious experience.¹⁵

As Socrates emphasizes throughout many of the dialogues, from the *Apology* to the *Laws*, our highest priority should not just be to develop the rational aspect of our soul. Rather, we should strive earnestly to seek wisdom and practice justice. We should make every effort to develop our ability to discern the veracity of arguments. Socrates argues consistently that we must seek the truth in spite of wherever it leads and what consequences might follow our pursuit of such an honest pursuit.

In this zealous quest for wisdom and justice, we go beyond intellectualism; we have a strong will in seeking what is best in any situation concerning justice from the widest possible perspective – the Good itself. In this way, the tripartite soul, with the aid of the wings, is transformed from the complex untamed beast, the *Typhon*, and is now redirected single-pointedly toward the highest good. Paul Friedländer captures the important role of *Erōs* in the unfolding story that courses throughout the dialogues:

¹⁵ Graeme Nicholson, *Plato's Phaedrus : The Philosophy of Love*, Purdue University Press Series in the History of Philosophy. (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1999), 154-55.

While the image of “turning around” occurs only in the simile of the *Republic*, the ascent that follows, the “upward” movement is, with slight variations, a common characteristic of all other paths as well: the path of love in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, the path of death in the *Phaedo*, and the path of knowledge in the *Seventh Letter*. Everywhere, toil and labor accompany this striving...If *Erōs* is a mediator between gods and men, this defines his function as guide upward to divine beauty. At the end of the path it is expressly stated that *Erōs* is man’s best helper in attaining the highest form of being, beloved by the gods and immortal, in so far as this state is possible for human beings (*Phaedrus* 212a-b).¹⁶

¹⁶ Paul Friedländer, *Plato*, Bollingen Series ([New York]: Pantheon Books, 1958), 66-68.

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