

How Smart is the Appetitive Part of the Soul?

There has recently been a surge of interest among Plato scholars in the tripartition of the soul in the *Republic*. Particular attention has been paid to the nature of the three soul-parts, and whether or not each part is agent-like. That Plato treats the soul-parts as though each were an agent (or a person) is a sensitive proposition, since this would arguably lead to an infinite regress. For the tripartite soul is introduced to explain various kinds of complex behavior generally attributed to the whole person. The three soul-parts, each of which has a different function, enable Plato to explain, for instance, *akrasia* or other forms of psychic conflict. But if the soul-parts themselves contain all the elements required for agency, it seems that the kinds of phenomena the theory was supposed to explain will be reproduced at the level of the soul-parts, calling for a partitioning of the parts themselves, *ad infinitum*.¹

The question whether each part is agent-like arises because various passages in the *Republic* suggest that (a) each part has its own desires (*epithumiai*), and (b) each part is equipped with, or has access to, significant cognitive and conceptual capacities. Scholars generally agree on (a), though that too has been challenged.² My concern in this paper, however, will be (b), whether the non-rational parts of the soul are indeed equipped with, or have access to, significant cognitive and conceptual capacities, which are normally associated with the rational (*logistikon*) part. That this is the case, and that the non-rational parts cannot be devoid of such capacities, is the widely accepted view, shared by Annas, Bobonich, Cooper, and Irwin among others. A number of scholars, however, have recently criticized this reading of Plato's tripartition, and have argued that the text does not in fact support the attribution of such capacities to the non-rational parts.³ I believe that the weight of evidence remains in favour of the mainstream view, despite the interesting objections raised by the critics. In this paper I will focus on the appetitive (*epithumētikon*) part of the soul, since it seems to be the stronger candidate for lacking the capacities in question, given Plato's characterization of it in Book IV as a brutish drive. If even the appetitive part has, or has access to, the capacities in question, then the case for the spirited (*thumoeides*) part will be relatively easy.

I

Starting with how Plato introduces the appetitive desires in Book IV, we find that he mentions hunger and thirst as the clearest (*enargestatas*) examples (437d3). Thirst is discussed at some length, and it is characterized as a simple and brutish craving: it drives and drags the person to drink like a wild beast (439b3-5, 439d1-2), is present due to affections and diseases (439d1-2), and is excitable (439d7-8). This characterization is presented as applying to all appetitive desires, and the appetitive part itself is said to be irrational (*alogiston*) (439d7).⁴

Plato offers hunger and thirst as the clearest examples of appetitive desire, but he also makes it clear that there are other appetitive desires besides these. We are told at 439d6-7 that the appetitive part is that part with which the soul "lusts, hungers, thirsts, and gets excited by other appetites"⁵. Later, at 580e3-5 Plato explains that the appetitive part is so called because of the biggest and strongest thing in it: its desires for food, drink and sex. Besides these three, then, there must be many other appetitive desires, including at least such bodily urges as the desire to sleep, to be warmed when cold, and to avoid pain.⁶ It needs to be added that certain other more complex desires can be treated as transformations of these and other such appetites: thus all particular likes and dislikes in food and drink.⁷ Most scholars, however, maintain that these cognitively impoverished desires "cannot be the whole story"⁸.

II

One of the crucial points made in favor of a more sophisticated view of the appetitive part is that it seems to be capable of engaging in instrumental (means-end) reasoning. Scholars have supposed that appetite has this capacity since Plato

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¹ See, for instance, Annas 1981, 142-6 and Bobonich 2002, 247-54. Annas calls this the "Homunculus Problem", but defends Plato's tripartition against it. She argues that the agent-like soul-parts do *not* lead to a regress because "the homunculi are simpler than the whole person". (144) Bobonich, however, takes to be serious flaws in the *Republic* not only a version of the regress problem but also that agent-like soul-parts destroy the unity of the person. (254-7)

² Moravcsik (2001) and Stalley (2007) have argued that the soul-parts do not have desires of their own, and that the complete soul is the subject of all desires. I leave this issue aside for the present purposes.

³ Most notably, Lorenz 2004, 2006, Moravcsik 2001, and Stalley 2007. (Parts of Lorenz 2006, chs. 2 and 4, are slightly revised versions of Lorenz 2004.)

⁴ Many scholars (e.g., Irwin 1995, 215) also maintain that appetitive desires are not guided by a conceptualization of the agent's, or even the appetitive part's, good. I leave this controversial matter aside for the present purposes: appetite may have significant cognitive and conceptual capacities whether or not appetitive desires are 'good-independent'.

⁵ In this paper I use the Grube-Reeve translation of the *Republic*.

⁶ Cf. Annas 1981, 129; Cooper 1984, 128.

⁷ Cf. Cooper 1984, 128.

⁸ Annas 1981, 129.

repeatedly attributes to it the love of, and a strong desire for, money or wealth,⁹ and, moreover, he explains that “we also called it the money-loving part, because such appetites are most easily satisfied by means of money” (580e5-581a1). These passages have been taken to show that the appetitive part desires money as a *means* for the satisfaction of the basic appetitive desires, and that it therefore has the cognitive and conceptual resources to engage in instrumental *reasoning*.¹⁰ This mainstream reading, however, has become increasingly controversial in recent years.

Penner and Rowe (2005) have rejected the notion that the appetitive part can engage in instrumental reasoning, arguing that “[w]hat Socrates says [at 580e5-581a1] is that this third part is called the ‘money-making’ part because it is money with which we purchase what the third part desires. This precisely does not say that the third part desires money”. (103, n16) Penner and Rowe choose to translate ‘*philochrēmaton*’ at 580e5 as “money-making”, but this is an odd way to translate the word, inexplicably ignoring its first part and the meaning of *philein*; ‘*Philochrēmaton*’ should rather be (and is commonly) translated as ‘money-loving’, which suggests that the appetitive part has love, in other words desire, for money. Aside from this particular passage, we saw above that there are many other passages where Plato attributes to the appetitive part a love of, and desire for, money. It therefore seems implausible to deny the appetitive part instrumental reasoning on the grounds that it does not desire money at all.

Lorenz presents a more compelling criticism of the mainstream reading, without denying that the appetitive part desires money. His view is, rather, that the desire for money is not formed as a result of reasoning that it is a means for food, drink, sex and the like. (2004, 110-4; 2006, 47-51) According to Lorenz, the passage in question should rather be understood as suggesting that the appetitive part can “form intense desires for things like money” as a result of “suitable habituation and acculturation”. (2006, 47-8) On Lorenz’s view, therefore, money is valued directly and not instrumentally. Lorenz concludes from this that there is no evidence for the claim that the appetitive part has the ability to engage in instrumental reasoning.

It seems to me, however, that this argument for denying that the appetitive part can engage in instrumental reasoning is quite problematic. Leaving aside the fact that the *Republic* provides no evidence at all for Lorenz’s complicated explanation of how an unreasoning appetitive part can come to be attached to money,¹¹ this interpretation faces several difficulties. The first is a problem about whether Lorenz’s account of the desire for money is plausible given the variety of new ways in which wealth can be acquired. Since Lorenz takes the appetitive part to be entirely unreasoning, the “habituation and acculturation” he refers to must be unsophisticated processes, requiring minimal cognitive capacities. Through this sort of process, we may be brought up to desire money in familiar forms, such as notes and coins, recognizing those as desirable objects. But I do not see how Lorenz could explain desires for new forms of wealth, which one has not been habituated and acculturated to desire since childhood. Take someone previously uninformed about the stock market finding out the monetary value of having stock in a profitable company. Supposing that such a person’s appetite could quickly come to desire the possession of such stock, we would have to explain this desire in terms of her ability to reason that such promising stock is a good means for acquiring wealth. For her upbringing has not in any way instilled in her a direct desire for stocks in companies. The possibility of such cases, then, suggests that contrary to Lorenz’s view, the desire for money and wealth *does* provide evidence that the appetitive part can engage in instrumental reasoning.

The second problem is one that Lorenz himself tackles, though unconvincingly in my view. Lorenz explains the potential problem by giving the example of someone who has a rational aversion to smoking on the grounds that it is harmful, but at the same time has an intense occurrent desire to have a cigarette, and reasons that the easiest way to obtain cigarettes is to go to the shop around the corner. Now given the aversion to smoking, she forms a rational aversion to going to the shop. But if there is a desire to go to the shop as a means to obtaining cigarettes, Lorenz’s view of appetite entails that such a desire can only belong to reason, thus forming a rational desire/aversion pair to the same thing and leading to a division of reason, and undermining the tripartite account of the soul.¹² Lorenz’s solution to this is to argue that the desire to go to the shop does not belong to reason either: it does not exist at all. He argues that to suppose the existence of this desire relies on the dubious assumption that “any desire for x, together with the thought that z is the way to obtain x, yields a desire of some kind or other for z”. (2004, 114)

But this puts the burden of proof on the wrong side: Lorenz’s critics do not need to show that the means to a desired end is *always* thereby desired. For the purposes of rejecting Lorenz’s account, it is sufficient that *some* means to desired ends are thereby desired. It is Lorenz who needs to defend the strong claim that ‘any desire for x, together with the thought that z is the way to obtain x, *never* yields a desire of some kind or other for z’, and this he does not attempt.¹³ By way of support, he claims that it is “quite unattractive” to assign to reason a desire to go to the shop, with which I agree.

⁹ See, for instance, 442a5-7, 581a3-7 and 581c11-d3.

¹⁰ Annas 1981, 130; Cooper 1984, 128.

¹¹ Lorenz concedes this, but argues that we may fill this gap in the *Republic*. (2004, 112)

¹² On Lorenz’s view of tripartition, which he calls the “simple picture”, such a desire/aversion pair is sufficient to yield a division. The sort of “complicated” view Lorenz rejects is that endorsed by Irwin (1995), among others.

¹³ Lorenz only cites a passage in the *Gorgias* (467c5-e1) that seems to support such a view, but does not discuss it. (2004, 114)

The point, however, is that since this desire cannot belong to reason, it must belong to appetite, generated by its capacity for, or access to, instrumental reasoning.

In his book, Lorenz (2006) avoids the above argument, and offers an alternative solution to the problem. Lorenz suggests, on Plato's behalf, that appetite has

some kind of cognitive access to reason's judgement that the way to obtain cigarettes in the circumstances is by going to the shop around the corner and buying them there. This may be by way of a representation that in some way or other presents the whole course of action 'going to the shop, buying a pack of cigarettes there, and smoking a cigarette'. (50)

This does not involve, accordingly, appetite grasping that going to the shop is a means to the end of smoking. Together with the desire to smoke, Lorenz argues, this representation suffices to motivate the trip to the shop. To explain what sort of thing he takes such representations to be, Lorenz turns to the *Philebus*: at 32b9-36c2, where Socrates offers an explanation of anticipatory pleasure, we are told "that the ability to form desires of a particular kind depends on the actual possession of suitable [sensory] impressions, as preserved by memory." (103) Then, at 38e12-40c6, Socrates offers the simile of the illustrated book, according to which memory, perceptions and other impressions inscribe in our souls *logoi*, which may be true or false, depending on whether "our scribe" writes truly or falsely. In addition to the scribe, Socrates explains, there is also a painter "who follows the scribe and provides illustrations to his words in the soul"¹⁴ (39b6-7) and the illustrations will be true or false depending on what the scribe writes (39c4-5). The presence of a painter in the soul, Lorenz argues, not only serves Plato's purpose of showing how pleasures can be false, but also sheds light on how reason communicates with appetite. (106-7) The images created by the painter are, according to Lorenz, sensory forms of awareness "generated under reason's influence", which provides an explanation for the communication between reason and appetite that is assumed but not explained in the *Republic*. (107-8) Though appetite cannot be "persuaded by *arguments* that it should abstain from some objectionable course of action", Lorenz explains, reason can employ such images to "draw its attention to some pleasure that may accompany that course of action, or to some pain which that course of action may help avoid". (109-10) This, accordingly, is also how appetite acquires an awareness of the means to its ends, for instance being presented by reason with an image of the whole course of action "going to the shop, buying a pack of cigarettes there, and smoking a cigarette".

I believe, however, that this solution is unsuccessful for a number of reasons:

(i) Lorenz's reading of the *Philebus* offers an explanation of how reason can communicate with appetite in a non-rational way, and how appetite can be 'informed' about the means to its ends without actually grasping the instrumentality in question. But this does not at all address the issue that was troubling us, that there would be a *desire* for the means to appetite's end. Indeed, one might think that given appetite's desire to smoke, and its sensory awareness of going to the shop as the means to satisfying this desire, we get an appetitive desire to go to the shop. According to Lorenz, "the desire I act on in going to the shop, Plato might say, is simply my appetitive desire to smoke" and a desire to go to the shop is unnecessary. (50) But to avoid a serious blow to his view, Lorenz has to *show* that on Plato's view, it is *impossible* for there to be a desire to go to the shop¹⁵, and our appetite *never* desires the means to its ends as such. For otherwise we face the possibility of the sub-partitioning of appetite, as the same thing can be an object of both appetitive aversion and appetitive desire, on the grounds that it is a means to some appetitive end. In the example at hand, imagine that it is extremely cold outside and the person therefore has an appetitive aversion to going to the shop. The possibility of an appetitive desire to go to the shop, then, is tantamount to the possibility of dividing appetite, which Lorenz is at pains to avoid.

(ii) Turning to Lorenz's interpretation of the *Philebus* itself, we might begin by noting a key assumption in this interpretation, that appetite is incapable of dealing with *logoi*, and that "our scribe" writes only in the rational part. There is no evidence for this assumption in the *Philebus*, and Lorenz apparently employs it because he thinks, based on his reading of the *Theaetetus* and *Timaeus*, that Plato adopts this view in works written after the *Republic*. (74-94) I cannot address his reading of those two works here, but let me point out a problematic consequence of this assumption: we are told in the *Philebus* that the painter follows the scribe, which means that there are *logoi* corresponding to any images one might have in one's soul (unless preserved by memory). We are told, moreover, that false anticipatory pleasures are false because they involve images that are based on false *logoi*. But it follows from the above assumption that all these false beliefs, including the ones entertained by wicked people (40b), belong to the rational part.

(iii) Lorenz's reading may be able to explain how reason can appeal to appetite in a non-rational way to make it "acquiesce in the better course of action" (110), but I do not see how this model can explain appetite engaging in a course of action that is opposed by reason. In the example of the smoker, why would reason convey to appetite an image of "going to the shop, buying a pack of cigarettes there, and smoking a cigarette"? The smoker's reason cannot serve the interests of appetite as the oligarch's reason does (554a-555b), since the oligarch's reason has been enslaved and cannot even consider

¹⁴ Translation by D. Frede.

¹⁵ Unless, that is, the trip to the shop is desired as an end in itself, and is not merely a means.

anything besides money (553d), whereas the smoker's reason is capable of judging that smoking is bad, and of being averse to the course of action in question. It would be no better to claim that reason only generates such images, which appetite then takes and uses: why would reason identify the means to satisfy a desire it disapproves? Even if we construe reason as naturally inclined to solve the problems it encounters, it is implausible to claim that reason would proceed to identify the complex steps involved in satisfying an appetitive desire to which it is averse, such as embezzling money through fraud.¹⁶ For this suggests that reason is unaware of what appetite is up to and/or unable to restrain itself from helping appetite pursue bad ends.

It turns out, then, that Lorenz's sophisticated account of how we pursue our appetitive ends faces numerous serious problems, and thus fails to support his view of appetite as incapable of engaging in instrumental reasoning. The mainstream view that appetite *is* capable of reasoning, it seems, remains as the more plausible interpretation of Plato's text. To that extent, we also have good reason to construe the Platonic soul-parts as agent-like.

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¹⁶ Another question is why reason would generate *images* corresponding to this identification, so fully as to guide appetitive behavior.