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# The Tripartite Theory of Motivation in Plato's *Republic*

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Abstract

Many philosophers today approach important psychological phenomena, such as weakness of the will and moral motivation, using a broadly Humean distinction between beliefs, which aim to represent the world, and desires, which aim to change the world. On this picture, desires provide the ends or goals of action, while beliefs simply tell us how to achieve those ends. In the *Republic*, Socrates attempts to explain the phenomena using a different distinction: he argues that the human soul or psyche consists in reason, spirit, and appetite. It is initially tempting to assimilate Socrates' picture to the standard belief/desire model, and to think that reason's role in motivating action is restricted to calculating the best means for satisfying spirited and appetitive desires. But this would be a mistake, since Socrates thinks that each element in the soul is capable of setting the ends of action. But then how exactly should we understand these elements? My aim in this essay is to introduce the reader to Plato's theory of the tripartite psychology. In part 2, I present Socrates' argument for the claim that the soul has three elements. In part 3, I provide a general characterization of reason, spirit, and appetite, respectively. I then turn to discuss two central interpretive issues. In part 4, I discuss the sense in which Socrates considers the appetitive and spirited elements to be non-rational. And in the final part of the essay, I discuss the issue of how we ought to conceive of the parts of the soul, and more specifically, whether we should think of them as agent-like parts, or in some other way.

## 1. *Introduction*

Many philosophers today approach important psychological phenomena, such as weakness of the will and moral motivation, using a broadly Humean distinction between beliefs, which aim to represent the world, and desires, which aim to change the world. On this picture, desires provide the ends or goals of action, while beliefs simply tell us how to achieve those ends. In the *Republic*, Socrates attempts to explain these phenomena using a different distinction: he argues that the human soul or psyche consists in reason, spirit, and appetite. It is initially tempting to assimilate Socrates' picture to the standard belief/-desire model, and to think that reason's role in motivating action is restricted to calculating the best means for satisfying spirited and appetitive desires. But this would be a mistake, since Socrates thinks that each element in the soul is capable of setting the ends of action. But then how exactly should we understand these elements?

In this essay, I introduce the reader to Plato's tripartite theory of human motivation in the *Republic*. In part 2, I present Socrates' argument for the claim that the soul has three elements. In part 3, I provide a general characterization of reason, spirit, and appetite respectively. I then turn to discuss two central interpretive issues that bear on how these elements are best understood. First, Socrates characterizes the appetitive and spirited elements as non-rational; in part 4, I consider the issue of how we should understand this claim. Second, Socrates often describes the elements in terms that we would use to describe individual agents, in so far as each seems to have its own goals, thoughts about

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how to achieve these goals, and particular desires; in the final part of the essay, then, I discuss the issue of how we ought to conceive of the parts of the soul, and more specifically, whether we should think of them as agent-like, or in some other way.

## 2. *Plato's Argument for Soul Division*

Socrates first explicitly introduces the parts of the soul in *Republic* IV, where they are identified and distinguished through a complex argument revolving around the phenomenon of psychological conflict. Almost everyone has experienced the phenomenon that Socrates discusses. We are familiar with the experience of deciding to do something because we think it is best overall, for example, eat healthy food, or work hard to finish a project, only to experience a competing desire to eat dessert, or watch a movie instead. When this happens, we may experience a psychological conflict or an internal struggle, as we grapple over which action to take. Similarly, we are familiar with the experience of having an emotional response to something, but then thinking that we should not have such a response. Sometimes, for example, we have the experience of feeling insulted by someone's comment or action, and so become angry and consumed with ideas of retaliation. But we may also think that our reaction is not reasonable; perhaps, there is not enough evidence for thinking that we really were insulted, or perhaps we think that it is petty or small-minded to worry about a small slight, and so we should brush it off instead. Again, in these circumstances, we may feel a struggle between our experience of anger and our reasoned assessment of the situation.

What do these experiences tell us about our psychology? According to Socrates, these experiences tell us that our thoughts, feelings, and assessments of the world are not always unified; instead, the same situation can produce radically different and even opposed reactions. This suggests that within each of us there are distinct and deeply embedded ways of responding to the world. But what are these distinct ways of responding?

The proper interpretation of Socrates' long and complicated argument for the claim that the soul is complex is the subject of considerable controversy, but its rough outline and the intuitive motivation behind it are clear enough.[1] Socrates begins by asserting the principle that the same thing cannot do or be the subject of opposite things in the same respect, in relation to the same thing, at the same time (436b–c). Socrates defuses apparent counter-examples to the principle to illustrate and defend this point. He argues, for example, that while it might seem that a man who is both moving his head and hands but standing still is an example of a single thing that exhibits opposites, it is more accurate to say that he is moving in one respect of himself and still in another (436c–d). Socrates' basic point, then, seems to be that a *simple* thing cannot exhibit the relevant opposites; if something does exhibit such opposites, we should conclude that it is complex or made up of different elements or parts, each of which can function at least somewhat independently, and so can either do or be the subject of opposite things in the same respect, in relation to the same thing, at the same time. Next, Socrates claims that desiring something and rejecting it are opposites (437b–c). He then presents three different sorts of cases where the soul both desires and has an aversion to the same thing to show that the psyche contains at least three distinct elements.[2]

Socrates first notes that it is often the case that a thirsty man who longs to drink is opposed to drinking (439c). Unfortunately, Socrates does not tell us exactly why the thirsty man is opposed, but he does tell us that the desire to drink is due to feelings and diseases, and that the opposition is due to reasoning (439c–d). It is clear, then, that Socrates wants us to envision a case where a man is thirsty, but has calculated that it is

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best not to drink in these circumstances, and that this conclusion opposes the desire to drink. Since a simple thing cannot do or undergo opposites, we ought to conclude that the soul is not simple, but instead has different elements, each of which is responsible for the opposing desires: the rationally calculating element and the appetitive element, which, according to Socrates, feels thirst, hunger, and lust as well as other similar appetites.

Socrates' point here is plausible enough. He is not simply drawing our attention to the obvious fact that we often have simultaneous desires for different objects and that in many cases it is not possible to satisfy both. Instead, he is noting that there are two different *kinds* of desires that can influence our action: unreflective or impulsive desires and desires based on our reasoned assessment of the worth of those impulses. Certainly, we can simply be struck by a desire for something, say an ice cream, and then decide upon reflection that we should not act on the desire, usually because it conflicts with something else we think is more important, like our health. In some cases, the impulsive desire desists with the assessment that it should not be acted upon, but sometimes it persists, and conflict occurs.

Next, Socrates provides examples of a different sort of conflict to show that there is a third element in the soul, the spirited element, which he initially describes as the part in virtue of which we get angry (439e). Since anger can, like the appetites, have an impulsive quality, he needs to show that the spirited and appetitive elements can conflict. Thus, he provides the memorable case of Leontius, who has a strong appetitive desire to look at some recently executed corpses by the side of the road, but at the same time is angry and disgusted at himself for having this morbid interest (which may be sexual in nature) and thinks he should turn away (439e–440a). According to Socrates, it is Leontius' spirit that gives rise to his anger and opposes the appetite.

To show that the spirited element is distinct from reason, Socrates claims that animals and small children have spirit, but not reason (441a). He also describes an example taken from Homer's *Odyssey*: Odysseus returns home after a long absence to find that his maids are flirting with his enemies in his own home; he is ashamed at this disloyal and insulting behavior and wants to retaliate immediately, but his spirited desire is opposed by his rational assessment that he should not act on his anger at this point in time (441b).

Again, Socrates' point with these examples is intuitive enough. He is drawing attention to the fact that it is not just reason that can oppose appetite, but that we can have a more emotional response – as Leontius does – to these appetites. Similarly, it is not just our appetites that can conflict with reason, but strong emotions, such as those experienced by Odysseus, can conflict with reason as well.

Socrates' argument paints a rough and intuitive picture of the psychic elements and the sense in which they can conflict, but the exact nature of each, and in particular what distinguishes them from one another, is far from clear. Fortunately, Socrates' conception of the parts of the soul is greatly enriched throughout the remainder of the *Republic*. In the next section, I draw on this material to present Socrates' characterization of the rational, spirited, and appetitive elements of the soul.

## *3. Socrates' Characterization of Reason, Spirit, and Appetite*

### 3.1. THE RATIONAL ELEMENT

Socrates depicts the rational element in two related ways. On the one hand, he characterizes it in terms of its practical abilities and function. He says that the rational element

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reasons about what is truly good for the soul. It exercises foresight and knows what is advantageous for each element and for the whole, which is the community of the parts (442c). Thus, Socrates says that reason ought to rule the soul, or, less metaphorically, make the decisions and direct the actions of the person (441e). On the other hand, Socrates says that the rational element is wholly aimed at knowing the truth, and thus that it is appropriately called learning- and wisdom-loving (581b). He describes an individual who is ruled by reason as a lover of wisdom, or a philosopher, and says that this person takes great pleasure in learning (581c).

How are these characterizations related? Socrates does not explicitly answer this question, but it is likely that the latter grounds the former. Socrates thinks that if someone loves something, they love the whole of it and everything of that kind (474c–475d). Thus, if the rational element loves the truth, then it will motivate us to discover all kinds of truth, including the truth about how we ought to live. Moreover, since the rational part loves truth and reality, it will provide motivation for us to live in accordance with these discoveries. Thus, the rational element is the source of our desire to understand the world, including our place in it and the best life for us, and to live in accordance with this understanding. We might say, then, that the rational element is the source of our impulse toward objectivity: it motivates us to try to understand the world as it truly is and, where relevant, to live in accordance with that conception, despite whatever distorting biases or feelings we may have. It may be for this reason that Socrates says that some people never acquire reason, while others do so quite late in life (441a–b).

### 3.2. THE SPIRITED ELEMENT

Socrates initially characterizes the spirited element of the soul as that with which we get angry (439e). It is tempting to think of the spirited element as the emotional element in us, but this is too general. The spirited element does not seem to be the source of every possible emotion, for example, sadness and joy, but only a smaller range of emotions, such as anger, shame, and pride. But then how should we characterize this part? In fact, Socrates ascribes a motley crew of motivations to the spirited part of the soul, and for this reason some commentators, although not all, have questioned whether it truly captures a psychological unity.[3]

Socrates talks about spirit in three main ways that may initially seem to be in some tension. Sometimes he speaks of the spirited element as the source of irrational, aggressive desires. As we have seen, he introduces it as the element with which we get angry (439e); he also says that small children and animals have spirit, but not reason (441a); and he describes Odysseus's anger as a strong impulsive emotion that conflicts with his reason (441b). But Socrates also stresses that the spirited element has a special relationship to reason; indeed, he calls it the natural ally of reason (440a–b, 441a), and he illustrates this alliance with various examples. A noble person who believes he has been unjust, for example, will refuse to become angry when he suffers painful punishments, while someone who believes that he has been treated unjustly will boil with anger and fight against the injustice until his reason commands him to stop (440b–d). Socrates also says that spirit makes the person courageous by preserving reason's beliefs about what should and should not be feared in the face of physical dangers and hardships (442b–c). Finally, Socrates characterizes the spirited element in terms of a love of victory and honor. He claims that the spirited element's aim is victory, mastery, and high repute, and so thinks it is appropriate to call it the victory- and honor-loving part (581a–b).

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Accordingly, he describes the individual who is ruled by his spirited element as a lover of victory and honor, proud, highly status oriented (he is submissive to rulers but harsh to slaves), and a lover of physical training and hunting, with strong abilities in war (548e–550b).

It is clear that Socrates is highlighting prevalent aspects of our psychology, for we can see their manifestations in a variety of contexts, such as the admiration and emphasis on glory in sports culture, and on honor in the military ethos; or in the person who flares up and lashes out at the slightest insult; or in the person who is constantly worried about how others see her; and so on. The question is: Do all of these attitudes and behaviors emanate from a single source? Socrates seems to think that spirit's fundamental aims are victory and honor (581a–b). Thus, the spirited element wants to assert itself against an opponent and triumph, and, equally if not more importantly, it wants to be recognized and admired for this. We might say, then, that the spirited element is the source of an assertive desire to be seen both by oneself and others in a positive light, or, more specifically, as being an honorable person or achieving an honorable aim. This desire explains why the person who is ruled by the spirited element will value war and sports: there is no clearer venue for asserting oneself, winning, and being honored by others for your achievements. But of course, there are other ways of asserting oneself for the sake of being honorable and honored: you could attempt to fight your baser urges for the sake of living in accordance with your rational conception of what is decent or right (Leontius), or you could retaliate against others who have insulted or dishonored you and so regain your status as superior (Odysseus), or you could fight against your fears for the sake of a noble aim (courage). In sum, then, spirited motivations revolve around our own self-conception in the first instance, but equally around our appraisal of the perceptions others are likely to have of us. Since having a positive self-perception (our pride) is dear to us, spirit can flare up aggressively when it senses a threat to our sense of self. Socrates seems to think that this drive, which may initially manifest in animals and small children as a basic impulse toward self-preservation, can be channeled in more and less beneficial ways.

### 3.3. THE APPETITIVE ELEMENT

Socrates says that the appetitive element is multi-form, but because it is the source of intense desires for things like food, drink, and sex, and since these desires are most easily satisfied by money, it can be called money-loving element (580d–e). It is tempting to think that the appetitive element is simply the source of bodily desires, but in fact Socrates attributes a far wider variety of desires to it. He argues, for example, that some individuals who are ruled by their appetites come to love money for its own sake, and not simply as a means to satisfy their bodily desires (553b–555a). And he argues further that other individuals who are ruled by their appetites pursue whatever catches their fancy, including listening to the flute, physical training, military pursuits, politics, and even a degenerate form of philosophizing (561c–d). But then what exactly does the appetitive element pursue?

Since Socrates describes the appetitive element as multi-form and capable of pursuing so many different things, we should conclude that the appetitive element pursues whatever it happens to experience as attractive or desirable. And surely Socrates is correct to note that sometimes things just occur to us as appealing, or strike us as attractive, and in many cases, this is enough to engender a desire to pursue them.

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## 4. *Rational and Non-rational Desires*

### 4.1. GOOD-DEPENDENT VERSUS GOOD-INDEPENDENT DESIRES

Now that we have some sense of how Socrates characterizes the elements, we can turn to two central interpretive issues to come to a more precise conception. The first issue concerns rational versus non-rational motivation. Socrates argues that the desires that flow from the rational element are due to calculation, and he sometimes characterizes those that stem from the appetitive and spirited element as 'without reason' or non-rational. But what, exactly, does he mean by this? What makes the desires of reason rational and the desires of the other elements non-rational?

According to one influential line of interpretation, Socrates thinks that a key difference between the elements is whether or not they aim for the good.[4] According to this view, the desires of reason aim for what we think is best, and thus are the result of rational calculation about what is good. The desires of the appetitive element, in contrast, are simply feelings of desire for a certain object that neither arise from nor respond to our thoughts about what we ought to do, or about what is good; instead, they are indifferent to considerations of goodness. The primary evidence for this interpretation is the way Socrates characterizes the appetites during the course of his argument for soul division. Socrates argues that appetites, such as thirst, are only for their object, drink, and not for a tall drink, hot drink, or good drink (437e–439a).

Defenders of this interpretation argue that spirited desires occupy a middle ground. Spirited desires seem to be based on some sort of evaluation: Leontius, for example, thinks that it is shameful to look at corpses, and Odysseus thinks that he is being treated badly by his maids. But spirited desires cannot be based on all-things-considered evaluations, for Socrates argues that Odysseus's spirited desire conflicts with his more rational outlook. Thus, some have argued that spirited desires are dependent on partial or incomplete assessments of a situation. In this sense, spirited desires might be seen as examples of the wider class of emotions, which seem to be associated with what we might call quick or 'knee jerk' evaluations, and as such occupy a position somewhere in between blind, thoughtless impulses and rational desires.

This interpretation provides an intuitive and elegant account of the difference between rational and non-rational desires. There is, however, considerable evidence for thinking that this account is too roughly hewn at the least, since it appears that Socrates *does* conceive of appetitive desires as involving beliefs about value.[5] First, in *Republic* VI, Socrates argues that each soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake (505d). This strongly suggests that Socrates thinks that we always pursue what we think is good – a thesis he explicitly defends in other dialogs, such as the *Meno*, *Protagoras*, and *Gorgias*. But if we always pursue what we believe is good, then this suggests that even when we are motivated by the appetitive part, we are led by our beliefs about value, and this in turn suggests that the appetites crucially involve beliefs about value. Second, in *Republic* VIII, Socrates argues that someone who comes to be ruled by his appetites lacks knowledge and because of this his appetites are able to fill him with false beliefs about value (560b–c). But if appetites are the sort of thing that are capable of generating our beliefs about value, then it is likely that they involve some conception of the value of their objects; more specifically, it is likely that they are at the least representations of value and perhaps beliefs about value themselves.[6] Finally, also in *Republic* VIII, Socrates criticizes an individual for controlling his appetitive desires through compulsion and fear, rather than persuading them that it is better not to act on them, or taming them with arguments

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(554c–d). Socrates thinks, then, that it is possible to use reason and argument to quell the appetites. But if the appetites are the sort of thing that can be eliminated through rational persuasion, then, again, it is likely that they crucially involve beliefs about value, and more precisely, that they are either dependent on or constituted by our beliefs about value. To sum up, then, Socrates thinks that we are always motivated by our beliefs about the good, and that appetites are capable of affecting and being affected by our reasons or beliefs about value. All of this suggests that appetites involve beliefs about value, since it is otherwise difficult to explain the tight relationship that Socrates describes between appetites and beliefs. Together, these textual points make a strong prima facie case for rejecting the idea that the appetitive desires are independent of considerations of value. But if appetitive and spirited desires do involve considerations of goodness, then in what sense are these parts non-rational?

### 4.2. REASONING VERSUS APPEARANCES

As we have seen, in *Republic* IV, Socrates says that the desires of the rational element are due to calculation (439c), and he characterizes the desires of the appetitive and spirited elements as due to feelings or passions (439c–d, 439eff). Thus, perhaps the relevant difference lies in the origin of the desires: rational desires are due to our considered judgments of value, while appetitive and spirited desires are due to our immediate feelings and passions, where these feelings bring considerations of value along with them. But how might they do that? A relatively neglected passage in *Republic* X provides an answer.

In *Republic* X, Socrates argues that imitative arts like painting and tragedy have a bad effect on our psychology. During the course of this critique of the arts, Socrates presents two further arguments for the view that the soul is complex (although here he simply divides the soul into the rational and the inferior parts). He begins the first argument by drawing attention to the fact that the appearance of something can vary with the different perspectives we can have of it. The same object, for example, can appear to be different sizes depending on whether we are near or far from it; or the same object, such as a stick, can look crooked when seen in water and straight when seen out of it (602c–d). Socrates notes that in these situations we use rational calculation – measuring, counting, and weighing – to attain the true conception of the object (602d). Nonetheless, he argues, sometimes even when the rational element has calculated that some things are larger or smaller or the same size as others, the opposite appears at the same time (602e). Since, as we have already seen, it is impossible for the same thing to do or be the subject of opposites in the same respect, in relation to the same thing, at the same time, we must conclude that there are two elements in the soul: the rational element, which puts its trust in calculation, and the inferior element, which forms beliefs in accordance with the appearances (602e–603a). Socrates concludes that since painting uses tricks of color and shading that makes things appear to be other than they truly are, it appeals to the inferior element.

Tragedy, according to Socrates, also appeals to this inferior element. Tragedy imitates human actions and the results of those actions in terms of the characters' beliefs about whether they are doing well or badly and their experience of pleasure and pain (603c). But, as we have seen, we are typically not of one mind with respect to these matters. For example, a father who has just lost his child may have conflicting reactions: he may want to lose himself in grief but also realize that he must accept what has happened and plan for the future (603e–604b). Again, these conflicting inclinations show that there are two elements in the soul: the best part, which is willing to follow rational deliberation, and

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the irrational element, which is the source of feelings and experiences that lead us to give in to our grief (604b–604d). The poet imitates individuals who are ruled by this inferior element, and thus watching tragedy appeals to and strengthens this element in the soul (604d–605c).

These arguments in *Republic* X provide us with two alternative characterizations of the non-rational element. According to the first, it bases its beliefs about properties such as size and shape on appearances, and according to the second, it bases its beliefs about value on feelings and experiences. Clearly, then, Socrates thinks that appearances and feelings or experiences bear some relationship to each other. But what is this relationship? And how is all of this related to desire? In the *Protagoras*, Socrates also suggests that there are strong links between appearances, beliefs, and desires. More specifically, he suggests that to be attracted to something just is for it to appear good; if we assent to the appearance, then we believe that the object of attraction is good, and this belief motivates us to act.[7] Socrates seems to have the same sort of idea in mind in the *Republic*: feelings or experiences of attraction or aversion just are appearances of a certain kind, namely, appearances of value; the non-rational element forms beliefs or judgments of value based on these appearances of value; and these beliefs about value are desires.[8]

On this interpretation, the difference between rational and non-rational desires is that rational desires are beliefs about value based on reasoning, while non-rational desires are beliefs about value based on the relevant feelings and experiences, which are appearances of value. This conception of non-rational desires can explain Socrates' view that feelings or experiences can engender beliefs about value, for feelings of attraction or aversion just are appearances of value, and it is often a small step from something appearing good to believing it is good. This view can also explain how reasoning and argument can quell non-rational desires: if desires just are beliefs about value, then they can be affected by reasoning, even if their origin lies elsewhere.

Of course one immediate question is whether the inferior element discussed in *Republic* X is the same as the appetitive element, the spirited element, both, or neither.[9] Although this issue is disputed, it is likely that the inferior element includes both the appetitive and spirited elements, since Socrates says that poetry strengthens the non-rational element by nurturing appetites such as sexual desire and anger (606c), which are clear examples of attitudes stemming from the appetitive and spirited parts, respectively. Thus, the picture that emerges is nicely illustrated by Socrates' characterization of the soul in the *Phaedrus*, where he likens the soul to a charioteer (the rational element) and his team of winged horses (the spirited and appetitive elements) (246aff), in so far as the spirited and appetitive elements have more in common with one another than with the rational element. It is also similar to Aristotle's characterization of the soul in the *De Anima*, where he divides the soul into the rational and non-rational parts, and assigns rational wish to the rational element, and appetitive and spirited desires to the non-rational part (432b6).

## *5. The Nature of the Elements*

### 5.1. A PUZZLE

The characterization of the parts of the soul in *Republic* X prompts an additional question about how, exactly, we should conceive of the elements. Throughout most of the *Republic*, Socrates characterizes each element as the source of desires aimed at a certain object. This comes out most clearly in *Republic* IX, where Socrates characterizes each part of the soul in terms of an attitude of love toward a certain object: the rational part is described

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as loving learning and wisdom, the spirited part as loving victory and honor, and the appetitive part as loving money, since this is the best means for satisfying its desires for whatever it finds appealing (580d–581b). Moreover, he argues that when an individual is steadily ruled by a certain part of the soul, he values the object associated with that part of the soul and organizes his life around its pursuit. This suggests that we should think of the parts of the soul as representing deeply embedded drives or values, which color our perception of the world, as well as direct our actions. It is because these values can conflict that we experience motivational conflict of the sort described in *Republic* IV.[10] But Socrates' characterization of the elements in *Republic* X casts doubt on this simple picture, since he describes the elements as forming beliefs about matters of fact that have nothing to do with what we desire, such as the size or shape of physical objects (602c–603a). This suggests that the parts of the soul must be something more than embedded drives or values, since at the least it is unclear why having the aim of gratification or honor would engender a belief about the relative size of objects. It seems, then, that the elements of the soul can form beliefs about matters that do not concern what we value, and are also the source of desires. But this gives rise to two questions: how are these two aspects of each part of the soul related? And what, exactly, is a part of the soul anyway?

### 5.2. HOMUNCULI

One response to the issue of how these two aspects of each part of the soul are related is to suppose that Socrates simply couples what he thinks of as degenerate forms of desire and degenerate forms of reason in the inferior elements in the soul, and the right forms of each in the superior element. On this picture, we ought to think of the parts as agent-like, or as homunculi, complete with their own particular aims and rational abilities.

And indeed, long before *Republic* X, Socrates personifies the elements. As we have already noted, in *Republic* IX, Socrates states that each element of the soul has its own fundamental goal, aim, or value, along with its own particular desires (580d–581b). Moreover, it appears that each element can engage in reasoning of more and less sophisticated kinds. As we have seen, Socrates says that the rational element bases its beliefs on reasoning, but he also says that the appetitive element desires money since it is a means of satisfying its other desires. This suggests that the appetitive element can engage in at least some means/end reasoning. Socrates also portrays the elements as capable of communicating with one another, at least in so far as they attempt to persuade one another, and can all agree (442b–d, 554c–e, 589a–b). And finally, in *Republic* IX, Socrates explicitly characterizes the elements in the soul in terms of agents. He argues that we can think of the human soul as composed of a human being, a lion, and a many-headed beast; and he goes on to argue that we should think of the human being within the human as the rational element, the lion as the spirited element, and the many-headed beast as the appetitive element (588c–590b). There is little doubt, then, that Socrates characterizes the elements in many of the same ways that we characterize individuals. For this reason, some commentators have argued that Socrates conceives of each element in the soul as an agent, and thinks that the soul as a whole is composed of three agent-like parts.[11]

Other commentators, however, have thought that this conception of the psyche is deeply problematic.[12] I will briefly describe three objections here. First, some argue that this account leads to an explanatory regress. The elements are introduced to explain psychological conflict. But if each element has its own overall aim, its own calculations about how to achieve that aim, and its own particular desires, then it seems possible that each element could also experience a conflict between what it thinks it ought to do to best

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satisfy that aim and an opposing desire, and thus that we would have to introduce further elements within each element to explain the conflict; if those elements were also agent-like, then it is possible that they could experience conflict, and we would have to distinguish further elements, and so on.[13] Second, this conception of the psyche makes it difficult to account for the unity of the person. On this view, Socrates thinks that what appears to be a single person is actually three distinct and independent agents, each of which is the subject of different beliefs and desires. Nonetheless, Socrates treats the soul as a unity in so far as the elements share or are aware of the same environmental inputs or information and each element is immediately aware of the desires of the others. But on the view that the soul is composed of three agent-like parts, what could explain this unity? Third, this conception of the psyche raises puzzles regarding how we should conceive of the self. If the person is actually constituted by three separate and distinct agents, then where in all of this is the self? As we have seen, in *Republic* IX, Socrates likens the rational element to a human being, and this suggests that he thinks of the rational element as the self. But if this is true, then what attitude should we have toward the spirited and appetitive elements? Why should we care, as Socrates says the rational element does, about their well-being? And in what sense are we responsible for actions stemming from those elements?

Although it may be possible to respond to each of these philosophical problems with the agent-like view of the parts of the soul, these issues have led some to argue that we should look for a more charitable interpretation: we should understand the language of personification as metaphorical. Of course, defenders of this view owe us an explanation for why Socrates uses this sort of language. Some have argued that this is a natural way of describing our mental life; it is quite typical, for example, to chastise the 'proud' or 'shallow' parts of ourselves.[14] Others have noted that the language of personification is evaluatively loaded – for example, the appetitive element is characterized as a many-headed beast, the spirited element either as a noble lion, or groveling ape, the rational element as a human – and have concluded that Socrates' aim in personification is to encourage us to identify with some aspects of ourselves and to develop the appropriate attitude toward other aspects of ourselves. On this view, the significance of personification lies not in a theory of the mind, but rather in Plato's larger aim of urging people toward a rational and philosophical way of life.[15]

But if the language of personification is mere metaphor, then how should we conceive of the elements? Unfortunately, we cannot retreat to the view that they simply represent our various drives or values and the particular desires associated with them, since we still have to account for Socrates' characterization of the elements in *Republic* X as forming beliefs about matters that have nothing to do with what we value. And it is difficult to discount this characterization as mere metaphor, since he uses this distinction to both show that the soul has parts and to characterize essential features of those parts. Can we explain why Socrates characterizes the elements as having both beliefs that have nothing to do with what we desire and desires without relying on the claim that he conceives of the elements as agents? I conclude by briefly sketching one such explanation, which I hope sets the stage for further research in Plato's tripartite psychology.

### 5.3. SOURCES OF JUDGMENT

One explanation has already been suggested in our discussion of Socrates' conception of non-rational desires. As we have seen, in *Republic* X, Socrates characterizes the rational part as the part that forms beliefs based on reasoning, and the non-rational part as the part

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that forms beliefs based on appearances. When these judgments are practical, they are desires and so motivate us to act. Perhaps, then, we should think of the rational element simply as the part of us that is prone to make judgments on the basis of reasoning, and the non-rational element as the appearance-responsive part of us, or the part that is prone to make judgments on the basis of how things appear. On this view, we need not explain the fact that each element has both beliefs about matters that have nothing to do with value and desires by claiming that each part is agent-like, with separate faculties for reasoning and desire. Instead, each element is simply a distinct source of judgments about the world, some of which are practical and so motivational.

This view has affinities, which are worth further investigation, with what some contemporary philosophers and psychologists call the dual-process theory of judgment. According to this theory, humans have two reasoning systems, one whose processes are slow, deliberate, and conscious, and another whose processes are fast, automatic and non-conscious.[16] Some moral philosophers and psychologists have argued further that in the case of value judgments, our slower, more deliberately formed judgments are due to reasoning, while our immediate and automatic judgments (often called intuitions, because of their perception-like quality) are emotionally driven, with positive or negative affective valences.[17] Like Socrates, these contemporary theorists think that the judgments of the two systems can conflict.

This interpretation of how we should understand the parts, however, raises one obvious question. As we have seen, throughout most of the *Republic*, Socrates characterizes the non-rational or appearance-responsive part as including the spirited and appetitive parts, and he characterizes those parts in terms of their characteristic aims: honor and gratification. But why would Socrates divide the appearance-responsive element in this way? One reasonable conjecture is that Socrates thinks that honor and gratification consistently appear good to us; accordingly, the appearance-responsive part of us is prone to assent to these appearances and generate desires for honor and gratification. Our feelings of attraction for honor and gratification, then, and our subsequent desires, form strong, easily identifiable drives, which Socrates, with his ultimate emphasis on the motivational power of the parts of the soul, highlights by further dividing the non-rational part in this way.

## *Conclusion*

In this essay, I have introduced the reader to Plato's tripartite theory of motivation. I first argued that Plato's explicit motivation for positing the tripartite theory is to explain the phenomenon of psychological conflict, and I proceeded to provide a characterization of the distinct aims and capacities of reason, spirit, and appetite. I then turned to two central and interlocking interpretive debates concerning how we should understand the elements. Plato intends the tripartite theory to capture the distinction between rational and irrational desires. I have argued that rational desires – those that emanate from reason – are evaluative beliefs that are based on reasoning about what is valuable, while non-rational desires – those that flow from the spirited and appetitive elements – are evaluative beliefs that are based on what appears valuable, where these appearances of value just are feelings or experiences of attraction. This conception of rational versus non-rational desires suggests a new way of understanding the nature of the parts of the soul. While some commentators have argued that we should conceive of the parts of the soul as agent-like, I suggested instead that we can think of the parts of the soul as distinct, deeply embedded ways of responding to the world, one based on reasoning, and the others based on the way things appear.[18]

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*Short Biography*

Rachel Singpurwalla received her PhD from the University of Colorado at Boulder and is an assistant professor in the philosophy department at the University of Maryland, College Park. She is currently writing a series of papers on Platonic moral psychology with the ultimate aim of showing that Plato's conception provides an attractive alternative to contemporary views. She is also interested in Plato's conception of unity and the role this concept plays in his ethics and politics. Recent articles include 'Soul Division and Mimesis in *Republic* X' in *Plato and the Poets* (Brill, forthcoming); 'Reasoning with the Irrational: Moral Psychology in the *Protagoras*' in *Ancient Philosophy* (2006); 'Are There Two Theories of Goodness in Plato's *Republic*?' in *Apeiron* (2006); and 'Plato's Defense of Justice' in the *Blackwell Companion to Plato's Republic* (Blackwell, 2006). Her research has been supported by fellowships from Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

*Notes*

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[1] See Bobonich, Lorenz, Price (1995), and Stalley for recent detailed analyses of the argument.

[2] Prior to presenting the examples of conflict, Socrates undertakes a lengthy and complicated analysis of the proper objects of the appetites. I discuss the significance of this feature of the argument in part 4 of the essay.

[3] Penner (1971) argues that the spirited element does not capture a psychological unity; but see Annas, Cooper, Gosling, and Kamtekar (1998), for examples of scholars who provide charitable interpretations of the spirited element.

[4] See Irwin, Penner, and Reeve.

[5] See Carone, Lesses, and Price (1995) for further discussion of the claim that the appetites involve beliefs about value, and for alternative readings of Socrates' claim that thirst is not a desire for good drink.

[6] There may, of course, be some other explanation for how a mental state without any cognitive content can cause a belief. But defenders of the view that Plato thinks of the appetites as independent of evaluative content have yet to propose an explanation. It is an advantage of the interpretation of the appetites offered in this essay that it does provide an explanation for how appetites can be so intimately related to beliefs.

[7] For a defense of this interpretation of the *Protagoras*, see Singpurwalla (2006).

[8] See Singpurwalla (forthcoming) and Moss for a further defense of this type of interpretation of the non-rational parts of the soul.

[9] Murphy and Nehamas have argued that the division of the soul into the part that forms beliefs on the basis of reason versus appearances marks a new division of the soul: a division within the rational element itself into its superior and inferior aspects. For an argument against this view, see Singpurwalla (forthcoming).

[10] We can go further and say that we have these particular drives because of the type of creature that we are (although we should keep in mind that Socrates suggests that there may be other elements in the soul as well (443d)). Thus, because we are rational, or capable of distancing ourselves from and evaluating our immediate thoughts and feelings to arrive at a more objective understanding, we desire to understand and live in accordance with the truth. And because we are capable of having a perception of ourselves, and a perception of ourselves in relation to others, we aim to have a positive self-perception and standing. And finally, because numerous things can strike us as attractive, we are capable of being pulled in a variety of directions for gratification. See Burnyeat for a defense of the claim that we have certain aims because of the type of creature that we are. But see Kamtekar (2009) for a nuanced challenge to the claim that the elements should be primarily understood in terms of the objects that they characteristically pursue.

[11] See, for example, Annas, Bobonich, Irwin, and Moline. See Shields (2001) and Shields (forthcoming) for an alternative view.

[12] Bobonich provides the most recent detailed and sustained attack on personification.

[13] See Annas, Irwin, and Lorenz for responses to this objection.

[14] See, for example, Price (1995) and Stalley.

[15] See Kamtekar (2006).

[16] See, for example, Chaiken and Trope.

[17] See, for example, Haidt.

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[18] I am grateful to Susan Dwyer, Jason Christie, Clerk Shaw, Christopher Shields, and Shelley Wilcox for comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

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