

A History of Philosophy

08 Plato's Ethics

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We start, therefore, this afternoon with this business of a tripartite soul. Tripartite means three parts, which isn't quite accurate for Plato. He nowhere, I think, says three parts.

He does say three elements. Three elements. They are, I think, three functions.

Three levels of functioning, perhaps, in the soul. And those three levels of function, those three elements, are, respectively, the intellect, the spirited, translations often say spirit, but spirit in our idiom is a weasel word. If you're talking of spirit in, I suppose, a theological context, you're thinking of some immaterial being.

That's not what he's talking about here. If you talk about spirit in the context of German and European thought, you're talking about cultural activity. The life of the spirit is the life of the culture.

And that's not what he's talking about here either. The closest I can get, I think, is the spirited element. Spunk.

Initiative. Drive. In that sense, the conative.

We sometimes say will, but then we tend to narrow down the concept of will to simply making choices. So the spirited element, you know what a spirited horse is like. It's always rearing to go, lots of energy, lots of drive, lots of initiative.

The spirited element. And then thirdly, the appetitive element. Appetites, desires, wants.

And I suggest that these are three levels of the soul with corresponding activities. Because quite obviously, animals have desires. Wants.

Appetites. Instinctual drives. So forth.

And you could talk of a spirited horse, but not a rational horse. So, inasmuch as soul is a word that applies to all living things, when you're talking of humans, you have to recognize there's a level of soul in humans that doesn't exist in other living things. And that distinctively human level of soul is the rational.

So in these three levels of soul, three elements, if you like, it's the rational which distinguishes the human soul. When we get to Aristotle, we'll find that he talks of the

rational soul as distinct from the sensitive soul, the soul that has sense experience, as animals do. Yes.

But these three elements, then, and in characteristic fashion, because soul and body are united in this life, he locates these three elements in different parts of the body. So that the intellect, obviously, is going to be located in the head. The spirited, the spunk, in the chest, where the heart beats fast with excitement and expectation and energy.

And the appetitive in the stomach, the bowels, the viscera, the guts, are affected by our emotions. So this is his, if you like, primitive sort of psychology. It's sort of an anticipation of the three-faculty psychology that developed in the 18th century, if you're familiar with that.

Intellect, will, and emotion were the way they talked about it. But it's an anticipation of that, it's not the same. Now, inasmuch as these are three elements of the soul, there are, corresponding to each of the three elements, its appropriate activities.

And it's appropriate good. It's telos, it's goal. It's natural purpose.

It's natural good. You see? Where the telos, the goal for the intellect in its development, is to achieve wisdom. The good, the ideal for the spirited, is to be courageous.

And the good, the proper functioning of the appetites, is temperance. Or self-control, as it's called. And in that way, he identifies and begins to develop an ethic.

Because here are three virtues. Three of the classic four Greek virtues. Now, keep in mind that in the overall picture, the Greeks are interested in this notion of an ordered unity with the idea of cosmic justice.

A cosmos that has such ordered harmony, balance, and unity that you can call it a just universe, cosmic justice. And a city-state that is harmoniously ordered and unified, so you can call it a just society. Likewise, a human being, an individual, the elements of whose life, soul, are so harmoniously ordered and balanced that you can call this a just person.

So the just person is one in whom these three elements perform their respective functions aright. With the result that you have a harmoniously ordered life. And to perform their functions aright, the intellect, of course, reason, must rule.

That is to say, must guide, give guidance to the spirited. So that the spirited doesn't run off in all directions without rhyme or reason, but is guided by reason, given direction. Boundless energy without rational direction is asking for trouble.

Boundless energy without rational direction tends to come under the control of the emotions, the passions, the desires. You see. And so, the spirited has to be guided by the intellect, and then the spirited can bring its energies to bear as rationally directed in controlling the appetites.

The control of the appetites. And the overarching concern that runs all the way through Plato's Republic is the question of how, in a just society, are we going to control human desires and appetites and self-interest? It's the big issue for political thought. How can we prevent egoism from getting out of hand? And that's still with us, whether we're talking of the banking industry or problems with the distribution of health care in America.

Didn't Coopsey, or was it Johnson, who said on Monday night that all five elements in the picture are to blame? Self-interest out of hand. You see. The big question.

So, this is his analysis of the human soul. Now, the papers I just collected, your outlines of the Phaedrus, should show that you know all about that. Because while he lays it out in this fashion in the Republic, it's reflected in the Phaedrus, in that myth of the winged horses.

Do you remember? Here is a chariot being drawn by two winged horses, guided, steered by a charioteer, soaring aloft towards the untrammelled, unhindered, uninterrupted vision of the sun, in all its brilliance and beauty. The trouble is that one of the horses is always unruly, running off after this, that, and the other, whatever it wants. You see.

The appetites. And the other horse has the strength to control it. But in driving the team, which is an art that in modern society we know nothing about, driving a team of horses.

Has anybody here ever driven a team of horses? Well, one, two, notice that they're the senior citizens. In driving a team of horses, I'm told, you have to give the lead to the one who's naturally the lead horse, who has the strength to control the others. Takes the initiative.

So the charioteer represents the intellect. Driving the team aright gives the lead to the spirited horse, that's able to control and give lead, that's the term, to the appetitive horse. So that the thing is able not just to stay afloat, but make progress.

And of course, remember that when they flub, down they come crashing. And if they really crash land, they have to start all over again, and if it were, begin another life. The picture of successive incarnations.

So that myth of the charioteer is his graphic way of talking about the struggle of the human soul. The quest for the good. Well, the tripartite soul, then, occupies his attention.

And notice that the soul is not just, accordingly, a passive kind of thing reacting to environmental circumstances. The soul is an active thing seeking its aim, its good, its goal. It's goal-oriented.

Teleological. Well, the remaining item about the soul is this business of two loves. That's already implicit in the discussion in the *Theatras*, isn't it? That if the appetites are set on what's below, down you come.

Baby cradle and all. You see. But if the love, if the desire, is on things above, you see, thanks to the guidance of intellect, with eyes on those ideal forms and eventually on the form of the good, that which is beauty itself, you see, eyes on the goal, eyes on the prize, then you make progress.

Two different loves. The word for love that he uses in both cases is the term *eros*. Desire.

The question is what you desire. What you want. What is the highest desire? The supreme desire.

The supreme love. To which other loves contribute and to which they spring. What is the highest love? And that's a theme that's picked up by Christian writers.

Saint Augustine. Have any of you read his confessions? If you haven't, do. You know, when you finish the *Republic*, go and read the confessions.

And, you know, you could read it as a classic of the spiritual life. Actually, it's his philosophical as well as spiritual autobiography. But if there's one big impression that you get in reading Augustine's confessions, it's that he's torn between two loves.

He's torn between two loves. Very much reflecting the Platonic picture. But whichever love it is, in either case, it is the soul's love that moves the individual.

We're moved most by what we love. You'll see. So in order to understand Plato's picture of the soul and its pilgrimage, you have to see something of the relationship between knowledge and love.

I said guided by reason, but motivated by love. You get the two? You'll see. There are passages in Plato that have led some people to say that, according to Plato, if you know what you ought to do, you can do it.

Now, that's not true of Plato taken as a whole. It's not enough to know the good. You have trouble doing it unless you love the good.

You'll see. So the question that has to be raised when we get to talking of the improvement of the soul is, how do you get people to love the good? Not only know the good, but love the good. It's a crucial question.

And you can see that he's talking here about what we call values. Developing values. Transmitting values.

Value education. The word value can function as a noun. It's an ideal that we say we ought to pursue.

But the word value can also function as a verb. To value something. To love something.

To prize it. To want it. To desire it.

You'll see. And Plato was caught both. You have to know the good, but you have to love the good.

Both. Now, plainly, it's the charioteer that gives the guidance. But it's not the intellect as such that has the power to govern the wild desires.

Of that untamed horse. So that Plato's conception of the life of the soul is not one of purely objective or factual knowledge. It's not one of purely theoretical discussions.

There has to be more to it than that. What Plato talks about is a mind, an intellect that is filled with wonder. You'll see.

Filled with wonder. He talks not of knowing, but of contemplating. Contemplative thought is the highest kind of thought.

Now, that's not just being able to figure out the equations. Work the logical proofs. Tease all your friends with dialectics.

No, contemplation is not only identifying what is the good, but delighting in it. You'll see. Reflecting on it.

Pondering it. Looking at it. Absorbing it.

Wandering. Standing in wonder. You know, that's the sort of experience we get in the face of natural beauty.

Have I talked about this before? In the face of natural beauty? No. I remember an occasion in World War II. On the top deck of a troop ship somewhere off the coast of Iceland.

One November. To keep us out of mischief, they had us standing guard duty on the top deck. I've never figured out quite why what we were guarding against.

I think it was just to keep us out of mischief. But I remember being on guard duty there on the top deck of this troop ship. Converted Cunard liner.

In the middle of the night. A starless sky. The Arctic cold.

The superstructure of the ship swayed gently against the night sky. Not a light anywhere on the ship or anywhere. After all, you folks.

You know, and just standing there in sheer amazement at it. As far as the eye could reach. Stars, stars, stars.

Gently moving the superstructure of the ship. Well, that's when your mind is filled with wonder. Admiration.

The sense of awe. I won't say enjoyment. Because frankly, in the back of your consciousness, you wonder what's out there in the dark.

But wonder. Now, that's the sort of attitude which Plato is after. That the mind should have.

Concerning the good. You say, well it sounds like a religious kind of wonder. Yes.

And this is what Jewish and Christian and Muslim writers picked up on. You see, in the development of the mystical literature of the Middle Ages. They described the contemplative wonder of God in terms of Platonic contemplation.

Well, filled with wonder, with love for the good. You see, keep in mind that the virtue of the intellect is not just knowledge. In the sense of cumulative information or the like.

It's wisdom. The wisdom that results from not just acquiring knowledge, but from a contemplative delight in the good. So that it becomes part of your being to pursue the good.

Wisdom. Well... Wisdom becomes a kind of discernment. A practiced capacity for making sound judgments.

In particular cases. With moral or aesthetic conviction, as the case may be, moral or aesthetic. And a mind that's filled with that kind of wonder and wisdom naturally guides the spirited element and controls the appetites.

Self-disciplined thoughts. You see. Well, the other thing I suppose that you might ask about the Thedrus is... What's that lengthy, tedious final section about rhetoric? All sorts of functions of rhetoric.

You know, for a while I say to myself, no, let's not have them bother with that final section. Then I decided that having to work through it would be not only a good exercise in self-discipline for the soul. It might be a means of enforcing or reinforcing the realization.

That there's a difference between rhetoric and dialectic. You see. Rhetoric without dialectic is a tool of the appetites.

Manipulative. A way of getting what you want. Six easy lessons about how to win an argument and win friends and influence people.

No, if rhetoric is to be saved from that, it must be by virtue of the operation of dialectic. The cultivation of wisdom. And so we come full circle in our thinking about Plato back to where he began with the psionists.

His epistemology. We need knowledge of ideals by means of dialectic. It's in the light of this sort of consideration that the Pythagoreans, it was.

The Pythagoreans, perhaps Pythagoras himself, coined the term philosophy. Literally, what is philosophy? It's the love of wisdom. You see.

Now, one note there. Just now, I said that love for Plato is eros, desire. Ah, but here's another term.

Not eros, but phileo, philea, the noun. And phileo is a sort of friendship love. Where you love something for its own sake.

Not out of wanting it. For you. But for its own sake, you love it.

That's what friendship's about. And philosophy is the love of wisdom for wisdom's sake. Or if you like, for the good's sake.

Rather than as a matter of appetite. Self-interest. The love of wisdom.

Okay, any comments thus far? Yeah, Ruth. My understanding is that Plato's soul was allotted to different classes. When you're talking about perceiving the good and

loving the wonder, would you then say that it's sort of a matter of faith, depending on which soul has entered our existence? No, don't say which soul has entered your existence.

You are a soul that has a body, not a body that gets some alien soul. No, what you are, what you were. Yeah, well, this is the way in which the recycling of souls.

It's an odd word, isn't it? Recycling of souls. The way in which it works, you see, it's a matter of reward and punishment. So that if you're a good gal in this life, you might make it as a philosopher in the next one.

Yeah, and there's no sense in which we all start at the same point. In the pilgrimage. Because if on a scale of one to ten, you see, in a previous existence, you made it from three up to four.

Okay, you are likely to get a much better start in the next life than if you started at five and sank down to four. Just because you both ended up at four doesn't necessarily mean that you start at par next time. But is there a concept of fate? No, I wouldn't call it fate.

Fate implies something blind. Remember back when we were talking about the Greek poets, Greek plays, and so forth. There was a concept of fate as something blind.

But it gradually gave place to a concept of cosmic justice. And this, in Plato, is the concept of justice at work, not blind fate. I guess it wasn't clear to me when he was talking about the souls and which god they associated with when they were in the heavenly existence.

The notion of the soul falling in Plato could have two different senses. It could mean your moral decline. Or it could mean simply the fact of being embodied.

And losing the freedoms that that brings. But no, this is part of the picture of cosmic justice. Let's see, Ryan.

I was trying to reconcile the two different uses of how he intermixes philosopher and this eros for truth. They seem somewhat contradictory, but both seem to be true positives in his philosophy. Well, if on the scale you're down here and have an eros for truth, it may seem to be a self-interested one.

By the time you get up here, it should be less self-interested and more the failure type. It's not that eros as such is bad. But rather than with the development of virtue, you delight in the good for its own sake.

Get the difference between, and this is an Aristotelian distinction, between what is intrinsically good and what is instrumentally good. The intrinsic good is something that is desired for its own sake. The instrumental good is for the sake of something else.

The notion of eros can be simply treating everything as instrumental. It can be. It isn't necessarily, but it can be.

Whereas philia is not treating things as instrumental. Friendship treats one as a value for itself. He has a dialogue with the way the lysis, which is specifically about friendship.

And you might want to read it to get a contrast to the symposium. In the symposium, you get the two loves in contrast. In the early speeches, it's all eros of the lower sort.

And then when Socrates makes his final speech, it's love of beauty itself, wisdom, and so forth. But in the lysis, he talks about what friendship is. What is friendship? And love in that sense.

And he speaks of the proper art of lovers, the proper activity of lovers, as dialectic. Dialectic, yeah. Because friendship, as he conceives it, is a joint pursuit of wisdom.

Of the good. For its own sake. That's what friendship is.

Not desiring each other. Though that may be there. But the thing that makes it distinctly friendship, in his sense, is that you join together in the pursuit of wisdom.

In the pursuit of the good. Sometimes we ought to do a seminar on friendship. Aristotle has a wealth of material on friendship.

It's a notion that these days we have, I think, trivialised. And as a result, we've missed an awful lot. Alright, let's come to the last of these themes.

The good life, where I'm including more of ethics. Certainly, his political thought. More about aesthetics.

In fact, everything that contributes to what is his overarching concern, namely, the improvement of the soul. And the soul is valued, is the focus, because it's eternal, the way the body isn't. It's imprisoned, it needs vast improvements, it needs liberating.

The ideal for the soul, in its pursuit of love for the good, is to be like the good. To be like the good is to be like the form of the good. And because in some of his later

writings he identifies the form of the good with God, to be like the good is to be like God.

And there's one place in which he talks of the imitation of God. Which is another phrase that's been caught up in the language of Christian spirituality. Thomas Akempis, medieval, wrote what's become a classic on the imitation of Christ.

You see, the imitation of God is Plato's theme. Now, how can this be? Well, obviously, the cultivation of the virtues. Virtues such as wisdom, courage, temperance, justice, and all the others.

And you remember that list of Platonic dialogues, lots of other virtues. What is a virtue? The term he uses is *aristé*, which means simply a quality, an excellence. Quality, an excellence.

In other words, to have virtue is to be good. Plato's philosophy is not primarily an ethic of making the right decisions. But of being the right kind of person.

It's an ethic of virtue, rather than an ethic of actions, in its primary focus. Virtue is an excellence of the soul. The soul has virtue when, in its elements, those elements of the soul achieve their proper, natural function.

You see. And that function becomes a habitual disposition of the soul. Temperance.

Courage. Wisdom. Or, if you're talking of other virtues, respect for others.

So forth. And in some of his dialogues, he explores the question of what the relationship is between different virtues. Is this just a potpourri, like a bag of marbles? Or is there some sort of ordered unity among the virtues? You see.

His response in the Republic is, yes, that justice is the ordered unity of the virtues. And justice is achieved when the soul is ruled by reason, and so on and so forth. What about the role of pleasure, the place of pleasure, then, in the good life? And Plato deals with this in two of his dialogues, the Gorgias and the Philebus, at least those two.

Gorgias and the Philebus. And while he rejects the notion that pleasure is the highest good, he still sees pleasure as good. A good.

But not the highest good. It's the appetitive, self-interested creature, always trying to gratify its own desires, that makes pleasure the highest good. That's what becomes known as hedonism.

The highest end is hedon-e, pleasure. And Plato criticizes hedonism as a mistaken view of what is the good for humans. Humans are more than simply appetitive beings.

And as a result, pleasure is not the highest good. The appetites are not the highest part of the human soul. So satisfying the appetites is not the highest good.

Hedonism is a mistake. And he points out that pleasures are, not all of them, in any case, good. There are good pleasures, there are bad pleasures.

And inasmuch as we make moral judgments about different kinds of pleasures, it cannot be that pleasure itself is the good. There must be some good by which pleasure is judged. Now, in moral psychology, the fact is that there are some higher, more enriching pleasures.

The pleasures of contemplation. The pleasures of the life of the mind. The fact is that pleasure is a by-product of higher activities.

A by-product of activity that caps off, that crowns the good life. It's sort of the icing on the cake, rather than the cake. It's a by-product, rather than the end in itself.

So Plato has essentially the same view of the place of pleasure as you get, for instance, in the book of Ecclesiastes. Where the wise man comments that whatever my heart desired, I kept back from it. It was all vanity, a vexation of spirit.

There was no profit under the sun, you see. And yet, on the other hand, there's nothing better than to enjoy the good things as gifts of God in wisdom, recognizing what their enjoyment can be in terms of love of the good.