

History of Philosophy

08 Plato's Ethics

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Abstract:

Dr. Arthur Holmes explores **Plato's tripartite theory of the soul**, identifying its three functional elements as **intellect, spirit, and appetite**. He explains that a **just individual** achieves internal harmony when **reason guides the spirited element** to discipline physical desires. This psychological balance is illustrated through the **myth of the charioteer**, where the mind must steer competing internal forces toward the **contemplation of the Good**. Holmes emphasizes that true virtue requires both **knowledge and a deep love for wisdom**, rather than a mere pursuit of fleeting pleasures. Ultimately, the text defines the **good life** as an ongoing **improvement of the soul** through the cultivation of habitual excellences.

Briefing Document:

Plato's Ethics and the Improvement of the Soul: A Comprehensive Synthesis

Executive Summary

The ethical framework of Plato, as analyzed in the provided text, centers on the "improvement of the soul"—a process of harmonizing the internal elements of human nature to achieve a state of justice. Plato identifies three primary functions or elements within the soul: the **Intellect** (rational), the **Spirited** (drive/initiative), and the **Appetitive** (desires).

The core of Platonic ethics is not merely the acquisition of factual knowledge, but the cultivation of **virtue (arité)** and the transition from self-interested desire (**eros**) to a contemplative love of the Good for its own sake (**philia**). Justice is defined as a state of "ordered unity" where reason, filled with wonder and wisdom, guides the spirited element to control the appetites. This internal harmony is the prerequisite for a just individual, mirroring the harmony required for a just city-state and a just cosmos. Ultimately, the good life is found in the imitation of the "form of the good,"

where pleasure is recognized not as the highest end, but as a secondary by-product of virtuous activity.

The Tripartite Soul: Elements and Functions

Plato describes the human soul not as a single unit, but as consisting of three distinct elements or levels of functioning. These elements are localized within the body and possess specific natural goals (*telos*).

1. The Intellect (Rational Element)

- **Location:** The head.
- **Function:** To provide guidance, direction, and rational oversight.
- **Distinctive Quality:** This is the level of the soul that distinguishes humans from other living things, such as animals.
- **Goal (*Telos*):** The achievement of **Wisdom**.

2. The Spirited Element (Conative Element)

- **Location:** The chest (where the heart beats with excitement and energy).
- **Function:** Described as "spunk," "initiative," or "drive." It provides the energy and "will" to act.
- **Distinctive Quality:** It is compared to a "spirited horse"—rearing to go and full of initiative.
- **Goal (*Telos*):** The achievement of **Courage**.

3. The Appetitive Element (Desires)

- **Location:** The stomach, bowels, and viscera (the "guts").
 - **Function:** To manage instinctual drives, wants, and physical appetites.
 - **Distinctive Quality:** Shared with animals; if left unregulated, it is driven by egoism and self-interest.
 - **Goal (*Telos*):** The achievement of **Temperance** or self-control.
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The Allegory of the Charioteer

To illustrate the struggle and progress of the soul, Plato utilizes the myth of the winged horses from the *Phaedrus*.

- **The Charioteer:** Represents the **Intellect**. Its role is to steer the team toward the "vision of the sun" (the form of the good).
- **The Unruly Horse:** Represents the **Appetitive** element, which is constantly pulling away toward its own immediate desires.
- **The Lead Horse:** Represents the **Spirited** element. It possesses the strength to control the unruly horse, but it must take its lead from the Charioteer.
- **The Outcome:** If the Charioteer successfully guides the spirited horse to control the appetitive one, the soul makes progress. If they fail ("flub"), the soul "crashes" and must begin the struggle again, potentially through successive incarnations.

Justice as Ordered Unity

Plato's ethics are deeply tied to the Greek concept of a harmoniously ordered universe. Justice is not merely an external action but an internal state of balance.

Domain Definition of Justice

Cosmos A harmoniously ordered and balanced universe (Cosmic Justice).

City-State A society that is harmoniously ordered and unified.

Individual A person whose three elements of the soul perform their respective functions correctly.

The Rule of Reason: For an individual to be just, the **Intellect** must rule. It provides the guidance that the **Spirited** element requires. Without rational direction, the boundless energy of the spirited element falls under the control of the **Appetitive** passions, leading to egoism and chaos.

Knowledge, Love, and Contemplation

A central theme in Plato's ethics is the relationship between knowing the good and doing the good. The text emphasizes that intellectual knowledge alone is insufficient for the improvement of the soul.

The Two Loves (*Eros* and *Philia*)

Plato distinguishes between two types of love or desire:

1. **Eros:** A desire or "wanting" love. While it can be directed toward lower appetites, it can also be directed toward "things above" (ideal forms).
2. **Philia:** A friendship-type love where something is loved for its own sake rather than as a means to an end. **Philosophy** is defined as the "love of wisdom" (*philia* of *sophia*) for wisdom's sake.

From Information to Wonder

The virtue of the intellect is not "cumulative information," but **Wisdom**. Wisdom results from a "contemplative delight" in the good.

- **Contemplation:** This is the highest form of thought. It involves standing in "wonder," "awe," and "admiration" of the Good, similar to the experience of viewing a star-filled sky.
- **The Role of Dialectic:** While **Rhetoric** can be a tool of the appetites (manipulative), **Dialectic** is the pursuit of wisdom. True friendship is described as a "joint pursuit of wisdom" through dialectic.

The Good Life and the Critique of Hedonism

Plato's ethics focuses on "being the right kind of person" rather than simply "making the right decisions."

Virtue as Excellence (*Arité*)

Virtue is defined as a "quality" or "excellence" of the soul. It is a habitual disposition achieved when the elements of the soul perform their natural functions. Justice is the "ordered unity" of these virtues (Wisdom, Courage, and Temperance).

The Place of Pleasure

Plato explicitly rejects **Hedonism** (the belief that pleasure is the highest good) for several reasons:

- **Human Nature:** Humans are more than just appetitive beings; therefore, satisfying appetites cannot be the highest good.
- **Moral Judgment:** We make moral judgments about "good" and "bad" pleasures. This implies there is a standard of "Good" higher than pleasure itself by which pleasure is judged.
- **The "By-product" Theory:** Pleasure is not the goal of the good life, but a "by-product" of higher activities. It is described as the "icing on the cake" rather than the cake itself.

The Imitation of the Good

The ultimate aim for the soul is to become "like the good." In Plato's later writings, the "Form of the Good" is identified with God, making the ethical goal the "imitation of God." This involves the cultivation of virtues that liberate the soul and allow it to reflect the eternal nature of the Good.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Plato's Ethics and the Tripartite Soul

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of Plato's ethical framework as presented in the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes. It explores the nature of the human soul, the pursuit of virtue, and the philosophical distinction between different forms of love and knowledge.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. **How does Plato describe the "tripartite" nature of the soul?**
2. **Where are the three elements of the soul located within the human body according to Plato's primitive psychology?**
3. **What are the specific virtues (goals) associated with each of the three elements of the soul?**
4. **How does Plato define a "just person" in the context of the soul's elements?**
5. **In the "myth of the winged horses" from the *Phaedrus*, what do the charioteer and the two horses represent?**
6. **What is the difference between *Eros* and *Philia* in Plato's philosophy?**
7. **According to the text, why is knowing the "good" insufficient for actually doing the "good"?**
8. **How does Plato characterize the "contemplative thought" that leads to wisdom?**
9. **What is the primary difference between rhetoric and dialectic concerning the soul?**
10. **Why does Plato reject hedonism as the highest good for human beings?**

Part II: Quiz Answer Key

1. **How does Plato describe the "tripartite" nature of the soul?** Plato describes the soul not as having three literal parts, but as possessing three elements or levels of functioning. These levels consist of the intellect (rational), the spirited (initiative and drive), and the appetitive (desires and instincts).
2. **Where are the three elements of the soul located within the human body according to Plato's primitive psychology?** The intellect is located in the head, while the spirited element resides in the chest, where the heart beats

with excitement. The appetitive element is situated in the stomach and viscera, as these areas are most affected by emotions and physical desires.

3. **What are the specific virtues (goals) associated with each of the three elements of the soul?** The goal or *telos* of the intellect is to achieve wisdom. The spirited element aims for courage, and the appetitive element finds its proper functioning in temperance or self-control.
4. **How does Plato define a "just person" in the context of the soul's elements?** A just person is an individual whose soul is harmoniously ordered and balanced. This occurs when the intellect rules the soul, providing rational guidance to the spirited element, which in turn brings its energy to bear in controlling the appetites.
5. **In the "myth of the winged horses" from the *Phaedrus*, what do the charioteer and the two horses represent?** The charioteer represents the intellect or reason, while the two horses represent the spirited and appetitive elements. The spirited horse provides the strength and initiative to help the charioteer control the unruly appetitive horse so the soul can progress toward the "form of the good."
6. **What is the difference between *Eros* and *Philia* in Plato's philosophy?** *Eros* is a form of love characterized by desire or wanting, which can be directed toward either base appetites or higher beauty. *Philia* is a friendship love where something is loved for its own sake, forming the basis of "philosophy" as the love of wisdom.
7. **According to the text, why is knowing the "good" insufficient for actually doing the "good"?** Knowledge alone is not enough to govern the soul's wilder desires or "untamed horses." One must not only know the good through the intellect but also love the good to be motivated to act upon it.
8. **How does Plato characterize the "contemplative thought" that leads to wisdom?** Contemplation is described as the highest kind of thought, involving a mind filled with wonder, admiration, and awe. It is not merely identifying the good through logic, but delighting in, reflecting on, and absorbing the good until it becomes part of one's being.

9. **What is the primary difference between rhetoric and dialectic concerning the soul?** Rhetoric without dialectic is a manipulative tool of the appetites used to get what one wants. Dialectic, however, is the pursuit of wisdom and the cultivation of ideals that saves rhetoric from becoming merely a means of self-interest.
10. **Why does Plato reject hedonism as the highest good for human beings?** Plato argues that because humans are more than just appetitive beings, satisfying the appetites through pleasure cannot be the highest good. He maintains that there are good and bad pleasures, meaning there must be a "good" higher than pleasure by which pleasures themselves are judged.

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the themes discussed in the source context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Hierarchy of the Soul:** Explain how the relationship between the intellect, the spirited element, and the appetites creates a "just" individual. Contrast this internal harmony with the "egoism" Plato identifies as a major problem in political thought.
2. **The Role of Wonder in Education:** Discuss Dr. Holmes' description of contemplation and "wonder." How does this aesthetic and moral conviction differ from purely factual or cumulative information, and why is it essential for the development of wisdom?
3. **Teleology and the Soul:** Analyze the idea that the soul is an "active thing seeking its aim." How does the concept of *telos* apply to the three elements of the soul and the ultimate goal of becoming "like the good"?
4. **The Interplay of Knowledge and Love:** Compare the functions of the "charioteer" (intellect) and the "two loves" (*Eros* and *Philia*). How do these forces work together to facilitate the soul's pilgrimage toward the "form of the good"?

5. **Virtue as Excellence:** Plato defines virtue (*arité*) as an "excellence of the soul" and a "habitual disposition." Explore how this "ethic of virtue" differs from an ethic focused purely on making right decisions or specific actions.

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Arité	Translated as virtue; refers to a quality or "excellence" of the soul and its natural functions.
Appetitive	The level of the soul associated with physical desires, wants, and instinctual drives; located in the stomach/viscera.
Contemplation	The highest form of thought; a state of delighting in and pondering the "good" with a sense of wonder and awe.
Dialectic	The philosophical method used to gain knowledge of ideals and wisdom; the "proper activity of lovers" of the good.
Eros	A type of love defined by desire or "wanting"; it can be directed toward lower appetites or higher forms of beauty.
Hedonism	The mistaken belief that pleasure (<i>hedon-e</i>) is the highest good for human beings.
Intellect	The rational element of the soul responsible for guidance, wisdom, and the vision of the forms; located in the head.
Justice	An ordered unity and harmony where the elements of the soul (or city-state) perform their respective functions correctly.
Philia	A friendship-based love where something (such as wisdom) is loved for its own sake rather than for instrumental use.
Rhetoric	The art of persuasion; if not guided by dialectic, it becomes a tool of the appetites for manipulation.

Spirited	The element of the soul representing drive, initiative, "spunk," and energy; located in the chest.
Telos	The natural purpose, goal, or "end" toward which a function or element of the soul aims.
Tripartite	Refers to the three elements or levels of functioning within the soul: the intellect, the spirited, and the appetitive.