The Tripartite Soul as Metaphor*

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This paper deals with the role of metaphor in the Republic's presentation of the tripartite soul, and in particular with the ways in which that construct is deployed in Books VIII and IX. As is well known, Book IX ends with an image, an ‘eikôn of the psuchê in speech’ (IX, 588b10), which presents the psuchê as a triform creature—a human being, a lion, and a many-headed beast, with the outward appearance of a human being (588b10–e2). This image, which we shall treat in detail below, comes at the end of a lengthy discussion, in Books VIII and IX, which is similarly rich in imagery. That discussion thus culminates in an explicit statement of Plato’s sense of the importance of image-making: Plato chooses to use an eikôn to sum up the entire argument for the intrinsic benefits of justice which begins in Book II and reaches its conclusion in this passage; and that eikôn serves as a paradigm to emphasize the centrality of the main argument’s underpinnings in the psychology of tripartition. The eikôn, the image, of Book IX is clearly powerful in itself: its location and function in the argument make this apparent. But that image also underlines the importance (and thus the power) of imagery in the representation of the tripartite soul throughout the dialogue. The tripartite psuchê is just one of the contexts in which the Republic’s pervasive use of images manifests itself. But the centrality of image-making to that account and the centrality of that account to the dialogue’s ethical and political argument are such that an analysis of the status and function of the images of tripartition is an essential part of any exploration of the power of the Republic’s imagery. Accordingly, though I concentrate on the issue of what the use of imagery contributes to the presentation of the tripartite soul in the Republic (and especially in Books VIII and IX), I assume throughout

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1 See below (n. 3).
readers’ acceptance of the obvious truth that the tripartite soul plays a crucial role in the dialogue’s argumentation, and therefore advance the argument that a demonstration of the power of imagery in the presentation of the tripartite soul may serve as a contribution to the study of the power of imagery in the Republic and in Plato’s way of composing philosophical dialogues more generally.

The eikôn that concludes Book IX is, as noted, explicitly framed as providing an answer to the challenge first posed in Book II, concerning the intrinsic superiority of justice over injustice. It rehearses, in a nutshell, the representation of the deviant character types—especially that of the tyrant—that occupies Books VIII and IX. That account depends closely on the potential for conflict between the various forms of motivation which have their sources in the three elements of the psuchê. Plato thus acknowledges the power in the argument of the dialogue not only of this image of the tripartite psuchê, but also of the tripartite psuchê itself as an image. In the basic sense in which I want to use the term in this chapter, both these images involve metaphor, the figure of thought that consists in thinking about one domain in terms of another. At the risk of stating the obvious, what Plato explicitly identifies as an image (eikôn) involves precisely what we in English describe as imagery, and in particular that variety of imagery that we call metaphor. To think and talk about the psuchê as a composite creature consisting of a person, a lion, and a many-headed beast is to transfer to a target domain (that of the psuchê) features that belong to the source domains of human and animal agency (as well as features of other domains too, as we shall see). The construction of the eikôn of Book IX thus involves a mechanism of thought, metaphor, that has been operative in the discussion of the tripartite soul from the outset. We do not know for sure whether Plato would have regarded all the forms of metaphor deployed in that discussion as eikones, but whether he did or not, it remains true (a) that the image of the tripartite soul that he does explicitly label an eikôn is constructed using the mechanism of metaphor, (b) that the same mechanism is used repeatedly in the discussion of the tripartite soul wherever it occurs in the dialogue, and (c) that this mechanism is one that we typically classify in English as a species

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2 See Republic IX, 588b1–4:

‘Well then,’ I said, ‘since we have reached this point in the argument, let us return to what was said at the beginning, which was the reason for our coming this far. The assertion was, I think, that it was advantageous to act unjustly, if a person could be completely unjust while enjoying a reputation for justice. Wasn’t that what was said?’