THE POWERS OF
PLATO’S TRIPARTITE PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT
The widely-held view that the three parts of the soul have—no matter what the condition of the soul as a whole—fixed objects of desire, namely truth for the reasoning part, honor for the spirited part, and the pleasures of nutrition and reproduction for the appetitive part, is difficult to reconcile with the Republic’s program for the education of the non-rational parts of the soul, and with its insistence that the virtuous person’s soul is harmonious. Distinguishing between the characteristic object of a part and the natural object of a power, the paper explores the related ideas of a natural object and the power that is set over it, concluding that the natural object determines the character of the power to which it is correlated, and that in turn determines the character of the part(s) bearing the power. Depending on their power, the parts of the soul can have different objects of desire.

I. Introduction

How should we study the soul? In Plato’s Phaedrus, Socrates describes and then applies to the soul the method by which one should investigate the nature of a thing (ὁδὲ δὲὶ διανοεῖσθαι περὶ ὧτουοῦ ὕσεως). The method prescribes that one inquire whether the thing under investigation is simple or multiform (ἁπλοῦν ἢ πολυειδές), and then, of each simple, what power it has, by nature, for acting, and on what, or for being acted upon, and by what (τὴν δύναμιν ἢ πρὸς τί πέφυκεν εἰς τὸ δρᾶν ἢ τίνα εἰς τὸ παθεῖν ὑπὸ τοῦ). Applied to the soul, Socrates remarks enigmatically, this method has the consequence that knowing the soul requires knowing the nature of the whole (τοῦ ὅλου) (Phdr. 270c-d).

1 Is the reference of ‘the whole’ to the whole soul or the whole cosmos, and if the whole soul, then does that mean the whole soul of an individual or the world-soul? For the view that it is the whole soul, see, e.g., Hackforth 1952, 150 and Rowe 1986, 205. One consideration favoring this interpretation is that the ensuing discussion, starting at 270c, says nothing about studying the universe, and plenty about studying the soul. But of course that is just where the method recommends beginning. In favor of the world-soul is the reference to Anaxagoras at 270a; a noteworthy parallel is Cratylus 400b, where the soul’s name (ψυχὴν) is said to derive from its power to support and sustain the whole of nature (φῶς ἐν ὑπὸ τοῦ).
In this paper, I ask *Phaedrus* 270c-d’s methodologically prescribed questions of Plato’s own tripartite psychology as this is presented in the *Republic*: what are its simples and what powers do these have, to act on what, and to be acted on by what? In section II, assuming as is widely assumed that the simples in the soul are the reasoning, spirited and appetitive parts, I propose that the objects that they naturally act on and are affected by are not restricted to the characteristic (ἰδία, 580d8) desires and pleasures Socrates attributes to these parts at *Republic* 580d-81c, viz., those of truth to the reasoning part; those of honor to the spirited part; and those of food-drink-sex etc., and money, which is a means to these, to the appetitive part. This passage has led interpreters to adopt a view of tripartite psychology that is very difficult to reconcile both with the *Republic*’s program for the education of the non-rational parts of the soul, and with its insistence that the virtuous person’s soul is in a condition of harmony. I draw a distinction between the characteristic object of a part and the natural object of a power. In sections III and IV, I provide textual grounds for, and philosophical elaboration of, the related ideas of a natural object and the power that is set over it. The basic idea is that a power is a disposition to affect or be affected by a natural correlative object. The natural correlative object determines the character of the power to which it is correlated, and that in turn determines the character of the part(s) that bear the power. With all this in place, in section V, I apply the lessons of our new-found precision about powers and parts to the moral psychology of the *Republic*. I argue that depending on their power, or the power in which they participate, the parts of the soul can have very different objects of desire and pursuit. My account of Plato’s tripartite psychology vindicates his faith in the ideal city’s educational programme and in the prospect of a harmonious condition of virtue.2

2 Although my argument differs from hers, I believe it nevertheless supports the conclusion of Whiting 2009 (forthcoming), which argues that some embodied human souls (e.g., the Rep.’s oligarchic or tyrannical souls) have distinct agent-like parts while in other souls (e.g.,