Plato's Separation of Reason from Desire

RICHARD ROBINSON

Plato's separation of reason from desire, in *Republic* 435-9, is made in ten propositions.

Plato gives a name to none of these propositions. (Names for propositions, such as 'positivism' or 'Fermat's theorem', had not been invented in his day.) But we may find it convenient to name some of them. Some interpreters have found it convenient to name his first proposition 'The Law of Contradiction'. Others have rejected this name as involving a false description of the proposition laid down in 436 b-437 a. I shall call it here 'The Principle of Opposites'.

(1) The Principle of Opposites, 436 b-437 a. This is stated first in 436 b, where I translate: 'It is clear that the same will not do or suffer opposites, at least with regard to the same and towards the same, at the same time.'

This differs greatly from our Law of Contradiction in not being explicitly and specifically about propositions. Our Law of Contradiction is a statement about propositions and propositions only. But Plato's Principle of Opposites gives no explicit account whatever of what it is about or what it applies to. Its subject is indicated merely by the phrase 'the same', and therefore appears to be any nameable subject whatever. The only word that could be added to this phrase 'the same', without narrowing the reference, is the word 'entity', since this is the word for referring to any nameable subject whatever, without limitation to any class or category. We might roughly write 'the same thing' in the same sense, because 'thing' is often used in the same all-embracing and colourless reference as 'entity'; but we should be liable to be misunderstood, because 'thing' is often used in another sense, to mean substances as opposed to nonsubstantial entities such as qualities and relations.

But does the context indicate that Plato really meant to say something about a narrower class than the class of all entities? Perhaps the verb of his Principle implicitly limits and classifies its subject. This verb is: 'do or suffer.' The subject must therefore be something that logically can do or suffer. Whether that is something less than all entities is hard to say. It certainly does not confine the scope of
this Principle to substances; for relations may suffer change, and
tones of voice may do something to you. On the other hand, pro-
positions do not appear to do or suffer anything; and it does seem
probable that Plato never envisaged propositions as falling within
the scope of this Principle; and this does make the Principle very
unlike our Law of Contradiction. What the words 'do or suffer' most
often suggest to us is of course agents, whether moral agents like men
or merely natural agents like moving tops. In thinking of his Principle
Plato does often appear to have agents in mind as falling under its
subject. On the other hand, he never explicitly confines it to agents, or
to anything at all.

Plato's Principle of Opposites also differs greatly from our Law
of Contradiction in not being about contradiction but about opposition.
Contradiction belongs to propositions, and is precise. Opposition
belongs to a great many sorts of thing, and is vague.

Plato's Principle of Opposites is a conjunctive and not a disjunctive
proposition. It amounts to a conjunction of 'The same will not do
opposites' with 'The same will not suffer opposites'. Whereas 'p or q'
is a disjunction, 'not p or q' is a conjunction; or at least it is equivalent
to the conjunction 'not p and not q'.

In the second statement of the Principle, at 436 e 9 f., a third
alternative is added to doing and suffering, 'So no statement such as
these will disturb us, or persuade us a whit the more that what is
the same would ever at the same time with regard to the same and
towards the same suffer opposites or even be or even do them.' Being
opposites is added to suffering opposites and doing them.

The addition of being opposites lessens the impression that Plato
is talking specifically about agents. It also introduces an apparent
contradiction with another part of the Republic. According to Republic
479 b 9, 'each of the many', whatever they are, has the remarkable
characteristic that 'it no more is than isn't what anyone says it is'.
That is probably consistent with the Principle that nothing will do
or suffer opposites; but it seems inconsistent with the Principle that
nothing will be opposites.

It seems that Plato would have done better not to insert 'or even
be' in this second statement of his Principle. For, while this addition
pretty certainly conflicts with a passage in the next book, it is un-
necessary to his argument in this book. The coming separation of
reason from desire relies only on the doctrine that the same will not
do opposites, and makes no use of the doctrine that the same will