

# Companions to ancient thought 2

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# *Psychology*

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# 3

## Plato's theory of mind

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### I The *psuchē* and its functions

At the risk of pedantry, it had better be pointed out at once that the subject under discussion in this chapter will not be Plato's theory of *mind*, but of the thing designated by the Greek word which we translate as 'mind': the word *psuchē* (pl. *psuchai*), from which 'psychology' and its cognates are derived.<sup>1</sup> This branch of Plato's thought has much to teach us about the formation of our own conceptual landscape. For it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that Plato *invented* the idea of 'mind' with which modern European languages operate, and that it is his writings which have made this idea available to the Western philosophical tradition. It is Plato, more than any other thinker, who is responsible for the pervasive intellectualism of that tradition – for the entrenched tendency to posit 'mind' (or in certain contexts, 'soul') as a substantial component of our nature, and to revere this as our most precious possession. (A relative devaluation of the opposed term, 'body', follows automatically from this move.)

Plato's invention was inspired by the life and teaching of Socrates – that shameless amateur who wrote nothing, but whom Plato recreated as a principal character in his dialogues. A central theoretical achievement of Socrates seems to have been the appropriation of the word *psuchē* for a new and original purpose. According to the Oxford editor of Plato, John Burnet (who based his assertion on 'what [he believed] to be a complete enumeration of all instances of [that word] in the extant Athenian literature of the fifth century'),<sup>2</sup> there is hardly an instance of it right down to the close of the century in any other sense than its two traditional ones – these being (i) 'courage', 'high spirit', and (ii) the 'breath of life', i.e. the principle which makes the difference between a living body and a dead one. This latter

<sup>1</sup> I must also mention that my discussion will concentrate mainly on the dialogues of Plato's middle period – the ones most widely read by students.

<sup>2</sup> See Burnet [123], section x.

principle bore little resemblance to what we call 'mind', since it was not thought of as the seat of consciousness, will or feeling; it was merely a sort of shadow or phantom of the dead person, which could appear to the living in their dreams.

Socrates, evidently, had something else in view when he reproached the citizens of Athens with preferring material gain to the improvement of their *psuchai* (*Apology* (*Apol.*) 29e1–2, 30b2), and when he spoke of the *psuchē* as a component of the human being distinct from the body but susceptible, as the body is, to its own characteristic types of harm and benefit (*Crito* 47e). In utterances such as these he was giving expression to the thought that *the body is not the real person* and that true self-interest requires us to aim not at physical gratification as such, but at the well-being of that non-physical part with which our identity is most closely bound up. This thought emerges also in the statement that 'it is not *living*, but *living well*, that we should treat as supremely important' (*Crito* 48b). Plato repeatedly emphasises the revolutionary nature of such a doctrine from the point of view of the ambitious and competitive culture to which Socrates addressed it: in the *Gorgias*, for instance (481c), he makes the cynical 'realist' Callicles protest that if Socrates is serious in arguing for the unconditional priority of spiritual claims over worldly ones, it will follow that life as we know it is topsy-turvy and that people are systematically doing the opposite of what they ought. In other words, Plato represents the Socratic injunction to 'take care of one's soul' as a thorough-going inversion of contemporary moral standards – a 'transvaluation of values'.

It may appear problematic to help ourselves to the term 'spiritual' before we have arrived at any positive account of what *psuchē* in the new, Socratic, sense was supposed to be. In fact, however, the most convenient way to gain insight into the *nature* of 'soul' or 'mind' in the writings of Plato is by considering the *activity* he attributes to it, and the *pattern of conduct* which he takes as his criterion of loyalty to the Socratic ideal (that is, of whether any given person really is devoted to the care of his or her 'soul'). These two lines of enquiry are very closely linked, since the ideal human life as Plato conceives of it is, precisely, a life in which the immaterial essence of human beings is able to express itself to the full and to satisfy its natural impulses; virtuous conduct, then, will be a sign that the *psuchē* is in a healthy condition and is engaged in unimpeded activity.

Many people today presumably bring to their reading of Plato a conception of 'mind' informed by debates within analytical philosophy. For such readers, perhaps the most striking feature of Plato's doctrine will be his portrayal of *psuchē* as primarily an organ of desire or striving, and only secondarily (and consequentially) as the seat of our reasoning powers or of

our moral conscience. It is the effort to fulfil its various natural desires which constitutes the proper work of the *psuchē*, and which for that very reason constitutes human life – since the work of the *psuchē* is, in a word, to live (*Republic* 1. (*Rep.*) 353d9).<sup>3</sup>

The most general characterisation of the objects of desire of the *psuchē* would be in terms of the familiar 'trinity of values' recognised by idealist philosophy – the good, the true and the beautiful. Thus (i) Plato makes Socrates say that every *psuchē* pursues the good, or in other words that an intelligent being aims in all its actions at the realisation of some state of affairs which it believes to be desirable (*Rep.* vi.505d11; cf. *Meno* 78ab, *Gorgias* (*Gorg.*) 468ab. In the *Meno* and *Gorgias*, which are earlier, the 'good' in question is relative to the agent, but by the time he wrote the *Republic* Plato had come to think of it as an absolute value). It does not follow, however, that there are no bad actions, for finite human beings are always to some extent ignorant about the real nature of the good (whether in the relative or the absolute sense), and the more ignorant we are, the less successful we shall be in our pursuit of it. (This is the basis of the famous 'Socratic paradox', according to which there is no such thing as voluntary wrong-doing: see *Protagoras* (*Prot.*) 357d, 358bc.) Plato, who has a very low opinion of the political culture of his age, holds that almost everyone is doomed to accept some spurious 'good' in place of the real thing, and so to forfeit the happiness towards which the *psuchē* naturally tends. Yet there is an underlying vein of optimism in this teaching, typical perhaps of all rationalist philosophies: conflict and enmity are not the deepest reality, since all intelligent life has a common goal – the enjoyment of the good – and therefore a common interest in learning what it is and how to reach it.

(ii) The desire of the *psuchē* for truth or reality is less self-explanatory, but we can develop some sympathy for this aspect of Platonism by thinking about its origin in the mission of Socrates. One of the most striking features of Socrates' conversation, or 'dialectic', was its sheer intellectual destructiveness.<sup>4</sup> His policy, as Plato has him provocatively point out at his trial (*Apol.* 21a ff.), was to put to the test those who claimed to possess any kind of knowledge (specifically, the practitioners of the various crafts or *technai*) by cross-questioning them and drawing them into self-contradiction on their own subject-matter; his unvarying success in doing this proves, he says, not that he himself possesses any positive knowledge but that no one is (genuinely) wise except God. Nevertheless, a survey of Plato's early

<sup>3</sup> 'Again, what of living? Shall we not call that a function of the soul?' – 'Certainly' (*malista*, lit. 'most of all').

<sup>4</sup> 'Destructive' should not be taken to imply 'harmful', however: see *Meno* 84c8 and context.

dialogues – those in which the personality of Socrates, and his peculiar philosophical method, are most in evidence – shows that the overall project of Socratic discussion was highly purposive and that the questions it addressed were directly motivated by Socrates' interest in the well-being of *psuchal*, both his own and his friends'.

The standard Socratic question is about the essence of some moral quality or phenomenon. Socrates insists that before we can decide the truth of any proposition about courage, piety, friendship or personal merit in general, we need to be able to say *what each of these things is in itself* (see *Meno* 71b); and the expected reward for answering such questions correctly is that the answers will contribute to the formation of a body of moral theory, that is, a resource for dealing with the larger question of 'how to live' (see *Gorg.* 500c; *Rep.* 1.352d) as coherently and reliably as a *technikos* (expert) proceeds within his own field. Plato's early work introduces us, then, to the idea of a 'moral science' which would be built up out of the vague, one-sided insights embodied in ordinary moral consciousness by subjecting these to criticism and purging them of their inconsistencies – the goal of the exercise at any given stage being to win through, by a process of trial and error, to a relatively stable definition of the concept under consideration.

Now, one aspect of this quest for definitions which seems to have made a particularly strong appeal to Plato's imagination was the promise it held out of reducing something inherently *unstable* and *multiple* – in this case, the multiplicity of 'common-sense' or pre-reflective opinions about moral and political value – to the *unity* and *stability* of an abstract verbal formulation (e.g. 'Justice is . . .') which would, ideally, be immune to revision because all possible objections or counter-examples would have been disposed of in the process of formulating it. It was this prospect, according to Aristotle (*Metaphysics* (*Met.*) A.987a29ff.), which Plato brought into connection with a doctrine he had accepted in his youth from the Heraclitean philosopher Cratylus, namely that 'all sensible things are in a state of flux and there is no knowledge of them'. It followed from this doctrine that if human beings were able to attain to any knowledge at all, that knowledge must be of *non-sensible* objects; and the unitary essences which Socrates had been trying to articulate suggested themselves to Plato, in retrospect, as candidates for this role. He came to think of 'justice in itself', 'beauty in itself', etc. as constituents of a realm of objects which would indeed be knowable because they would be co-ordinated not with sense-perception but with (pure) intellect. (The spatial metaphor of an intelligible *realm* is Plato's own: see *Rep.* VI.509d2.)

In the great dialogues of Plato's middle period – the *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus* – we find the opposition between 'sensible' and

'intelligible' worlds elaborated into the theory of Forms or Ideas which is the centre-piece of his philosophy. This theory is far from being simply a means of moral edification. It is a direct descendant of the Pythagorean view that what is most real in things is their form or structure (and not, as the Ionian thinkers had assumed, the matter of which they are made); and as such, it aspires to the status of a universal mode of explanation on a par with the mechanistic mode which was its rival in the philosophy of science (see *Phaedo* 97b–102a). Still, one of the most important applications Plato finds for his theory is in setting before us the vision of a way of life that would *gratify intellectual desire*. Just as Socrates conspicuously refused to accept the counterfeit 'goods' of popular esteem in place of the true good, so he refused to accept the counterfeit 'realities' of popular opinion in place of something that, by successfully withstanding criticism, would prove itself worthy to be called a representation of reality. Plato argues in the *Republic* that the ultimate winner of this title will be a completely unified body of theory of the form exemplified by the piecemeal achievements of dialectic: that is, an explicit 'account' (*logos*) of the being, or essence, of every possible object of thought and of its relation to every other such object (*Rep.* VII.534b; 537bc). And he pictures the successful outcome of philosophical enquiry in terms of a *union* between the Forms and 'that part of the [enquirer's] *psuchē* which, being akin to such objects, is qualified to grasp them' (*Rep.* VI.490b). This 'union' would have as its issue intelligence (*nous*) and truth (*alētheia*), and it alone would summon our reasoning powers into full activity and make them 'really live and grow'.

(iii) The third characteristic tendency of the Platonic *psuchē* is towards the beautiful (*to kalon*, also conventionally translated as 'the noble' or 'the fine') – although from the point of view of individual existence, this tendency is the one which declares itself first and which renders the other two intelligible. Plato thinks that Beauty is unique among the Forms in being manifest in our senses (*Phaedrus* 250d): that whereas other intelligible objects such as Justice, Temperance, etc. can be brought to articulate consciousness only through the exercise of our (never fully adequate) reasoning powers, there are certain encounters between an individual *psuchē* and an object occurring in everyday experience which spontaneously reveal to that *psuchē* the existence of an ideal world beyond the world of sense. The class of objects which possess this power of revelation are those we credit with the property of 'beauty', i.e. – roughly – with being such as to provoke desire or promise happiness.<sup>5</sup>

For Plato, then, the aptitude of the *psuchē* to be drawn towards some

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Stendhal, *De l'amour* (1822), ch. 17: 'Beauty is only the promise of happiness.'



congenial object outside itself is the starting-point and necessary condition of what he calls 'philosophy'. Progress beyond the starting-point, however, calls for resolute non-acquiescence in the seeming impossibility, given the constraints of the human condition, of getting what we are really after in our capacity as desiring creatures. For the object of love or desire (*erōs*) in general, we are told in the *Symposium* (*Symp.*) (260a), is the *perpetual possession* of the good; and perpetual enjoyment of any of the good things of life is denied to us, not only by our own mortality, but more generally by the chronic instability and violence of the sensible world. Plato's vision in his middle-period dialogues is of a way of life which could secure for us, in spite of these hazards, a happiness that would be independent of all contingency. His proposal is that we learn, however slowly and arduously, to substitute for the natural objects of desire – physical pleasures and comforts, social recognition, even the companionship of loved persons – a different range of objects which can come to be of interest to us only on the basis of a higher culture (*paideia*); and the incentive he offers us for undertaking that culture is simply an assurance that these different objects, once attained, can never be taken away from us, since they are naturally indestructible and incapable of being competed for. The objects in question are, of course, the Platonic Forms. So, once again, it is only the philosopher – the person who practises 'care of the *psuchē*' in the Socratic sense – who can hope genuinely to satisfy the desire expressed in our common feeling for 'beauty'. Other people – those who settle for the unreliable gratifications of life in the body – thereby signify their acceptance of an inferior or counterfeit beauty, 'loaded with human flesh and colour and a mass of other mortal dross' (*Symp.* 211e).

## 2 Recollection

How did Plato think contact with the Forms was to be achieved? Before tackling this question directly, it may be helpful to look more closely at his 'intelligible realm', and at the theoretical role he envisaged for the objects belonging to it. Broadly speaking, the role of the Forms in Platonism is to shed light on certain problematic intellectual capacities of human beings. There is, first, the capacity to attach linguistic signs not just to particular objects presented in sense-experience ('Socrates', 'Plato') but also to concepts ('red', 'truthful', 'animal'), which can be instantiated by indefinitely many particulars but are never presented to us all at once, as particulars are. In this connection the theory of Forms is an attempt to explain, as regards sentences like 'Xanthippe is a woman', what it is that the expression 'a woman' stands for: in present-day terms, it is something like a theory of meaning for predicate-expressions. But, secondly, there is the

capacity of thought to reach beyond experience in a more radical sense – that is, to draw comparisons between something encountered in experience, and on the other hand something which is not so encountered but which we somehow represent to ourselves. Plato asks himself: how is it possible for us to entertain propositions such as 'The perfectly just society has never yet been realised'? How can we think or talk about this thing, the perfectly just society, when by our own admission no one has ever had any experience of it? This seems to go against the intuition, still defended by modern philosophers of language, that you are not in a position to make a judgement (i.e. to have a thought) about something unless you have some knowledge that enables you to identify it – to single it out from everything else.<sup>6</sup>

Plato's famous doctrine of 'recollection' serves to explain how the human mind can gain access to the intelligible (or ideal) world, and consequently how ideal objects can come to figure in our judgements. It is a doctrine which draws inspiration from the religious belief, shared in Plato's time by groups as dissimilar as the Pythagorean philosophers and the adherents of popular mystical cults, that *psuchē* is immortal and that it is reincarnated in a succession of different bodies. This belief seems to have worked more powerfully on Plato himself than on the historical Socrates, for in the early *Apology* (40c) Socrates is made to say that death is *either* a state of nothingness *or* a migration of the soul to another world; whereas in the mature dialogues this agnostic note is dropped and we find him speaking quite casually, yet with perfect conviction, about the next life.<sup>7</sup>

The recollection doctrine as we first encounter it in the *Meno* is not explicitly presented as an adjunct to the theory of Forms, for that is still in embryo. At this stage, Plato's aim is a relatively modest one: he is concerned to explain the phenomenon of non-empirical learning or discovery, and by rendering this phenomenon intelligible, to confute sceptical doubts about the possibility of the Socratic enquiry into essences. (The doubts in question are those captured by the so-called 'paradox of enquiry': how, asks Meno (80d), can you set about looking for \* an object that is unknown to you? After all, if you really don't know it, what do you suppose you are going to look for? And how will you recognise it when you find it?)

Plato chooses as an illustration of such discovery the introduction of one of Meno's slave-boys to a geometrical theorem by a process of goal-oriented question and answer – a process which, we are pointedly told, is not one of

<sup>6</sup> See Evans [623], 89ff.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. *Rep.* 498d: we must press on with our argument even in the face of apparent deadlock, since the reincarnated soul of Thrasymachus may be more receptive to arguments it has heard before.

\* *Zētein*, here used quasi-metaphorically of an intellectual search.

teaching but of *recovery of knowledge by the boy from within himself* (85d); that is, of *remembering* something which he once knew but has forgotten. This is Plato's way of representing the fact that what the boy learns is derived not from an 'external' source in sense-perception – it is not by looking at a diagram, however closely, that you grasp the ratio of the hypotenuse of an isosceles triangle to the other two sides – but from the perception of logical relationships between propositions. Anyone who speaks Greek (82b4), and so possesses the necessary vocabulary to enter into a discussion with Socrates about squares, triangles, etc., is already equipped with a stock of knowledge which – limited as it may appear – is in principle capable of being extended *without* limit by reflection on the meanings of the terms it comprises. Or rather, it is capable of being extended to the ideal limit represented by the complete *a priori* science that Plato envisages in *Republic* VII. A promise that this goal is not unattainable is contained in the picturesque statement at *Meno* 81d that 'all nature [or reality, *physis*] being akin, and the *psuchē* having learned everything, there is no reason why a person who has remembered (or, as they say, "learned") one single thing should not find out all the rest for himself'.

Why does Plato think that, in order to demonstrate the possibility of a universal science of conceptual connections, he has to persuade us that the *psuchē* really *never lacks* the knowledge that will be placed at its disposal by the dialectical process? From one point of view, this can be seen simply as a consequence of the Platonic axiom that 'nothing imperfect is the measure of anything' (*Rep.* VI.504c). Plato's use of the term 'recollection' (*anamnēsis*) to characterise the process of *a priori* discovery, and so to dispel the 'paradox of enquiry', really displays his sympathy with the unspoken presupposition of the paradox, which is that knowledge must be *complete* knowledge if it is to be genuinely worthy of the name. To the question: 'How can one search for an unknown (intelligible) object?', Plato's reply is that in a sense the objects of philosophical enquiry are already as familiar to us as any of the other constituents of our world: that is to say, they are objects which have at some time been *present* to the *psuchē*, and which the *psuchē* will therefore recognise if they are ever presented to it again. What makes the search necessary in the first place is that this knowledge is not operative, but latent or dormant,<sup>9</sup> and so needs to be reactivated before we can claim to be in practical possession of it; but what is latent in the *psuchē* is nothing less than a memory of *seeing* the intelligible objects – of having them paraded before the mind's eye, as in the subsequent *Phaedrus* myth.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This distinction was to become still more prominent in the moral psychology of Aristotle (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.3).

<sup>10</sup> *Phaedrus* 247c ff. It is open to question how far Plato's overall contribution to epistemology is influenced by this flight of fancy. M. F. Burnyeat, for example, has

A passage from the *Phaedo* account of recollection displays clearly the influence of this idea on Plato's reasoning. Here the immediate aim is to prove that the soul exists before its incarnation in the body, and the key consideration will be our ability to compare items encountered in experience with a non-empirical paradigm – as when we say that no two physical objects, considered in terms of length, weight, volume, etc., ever perfectly exemplify the mathematical concept of equality. (Plato treats this ability as powerful if not decisive evidence for pre-existence, since in his view the latter offers the only satisfactory explanation of it.) It is first agreed (73c1–2) that in order to remember something, one must have known it before. Then Socrates asks (73c6 ff.): 'If, on seeing, hearing, or otherwise perceiving something, one not only apprehends that thing but comes to think of something else – something which is the object not of the same knowledge but of another – isn't it correct to say that one has remembered the thing of which one has acquired the thought?' The essence of this suggestion, which is explained in the next few pages of the *Phaedo* first with reference to a material 'something else' (a person) and then with reference to an intelligible one ('the equal itself' or absolute equality, 74c4–5), is that 'if *A* makes you think of *B*, then *B* must be someone, or something, you have already met. The possibility that you might *advance* from *A* to *B* by a non-arbitrary process of projection or extrapolation (rather than *returning* to *B* as to the scene of a past experience) is simply ignored.

But perhaps this nostalgia for a putative perfect knowledge is motivated, in turn, by the quasi-spatial conception of an intelligible 'realm' (*noētos topos*) which we noticed earlier. For it is only if we imagine the totality of possible applications of a concept laid out in space, and hence as surveyable at a single moment (if only the viewer could get into the right position), that we shall think of concepts or 'ideas' as the sort of thing that could be grasped by a *disembodied* mind. If, by contrast, we picture the meaning of an expression as making itself known to us not through some favourable configuration of objects but through the unfolding of events over time, it becomes possible to give a different account of the phenomenon that interests Plato – that is, of our ability to advance from a more superficial to a

condemned the view that 'something analogous to perceptual acquaintance is for Plato . . . a requirement of knowledge quite generally', or that he '[confuses] propositional knowledge with something called "knowledge by acquaintance"' ([182]), 183; the allusion is to Bertrand Russell's terminology in *The Problems of Philosophy* [657], ch. 5, 'Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description'. Interestingly, though, the general claim has suggested itself to at least one commentator independently of Russell's categories: 'For [Plato] truly (as he supposed the highest sort of knowledge must of necessity be) all knowledge was like knowing a *person*', enthuses Walter Pater ([644], 116).

deeper understanding of the concepts we use. This different account would insist that our embodied condition is not one of exile from a truth located elsewhere, but rather a horizon which encloses any possible progression from (relative) ignorance to (relative) knowledge. It would maintain, with Plato,<sup>11</sup> that the starting-point for theory (i.e. for making the meanings of our terms fully explicit) is the rudimentary understanding of abstractions such as 'knowledge', 'beauty', 'justice', etc. which we possess from the moment these words first find a place in our idiolect; but it would represent theoretical activity in general not as a retrieval of something already (innately) present in the mind, but as an exploration of the possibilities opened up by a common language.

The remainder of the *Phaedo* aims to show that *psuchē* not only pre-exists our physical birth, but also survives our physical death, and indeed is immortal. (Appropriately, the dramatic setting of this dialogue is the prison cell in which Socrates is about to submit to the death penalty.) Two passages are particularly significant for our purposes: first, a critique of the materialist view that *psuchē* is a 'harmony' or attunement of bodily elements ('hot and cold, dry and wet, and so on': 86b8), and must therefore cease to exist as soon as the body ceases to live; and secondly, an attempted proof of the positive thesis that it is impossible in principle for the *psuchē* to die, since 'life' belongs to it as an essential characteristic, just as heat belongs to fire or oddness to the number three (102b ff.).

These arguments are meant to provide a rational foundation for Plato's ruling moral idea – the idea of a 'philosophical' way of life devoted to the care of our true (immaterial) selves. Both, however, are flawed. The first rests on an objection to the 'harmony' theory which is nowhere near as decisive as Plato seems to have believed. According to this objection, the theory contradicts itself on the question of whether or not one *psuchē* can be more 'attuned' – i.e. can be more or less of a harmony – than another. From one point of view we are forced to conclude that it cannot (since *being a psuchē* is not a matter of degree); from another, on the contrary, that it can (since the theory also represents personal virtue in terms of 'attunement' – 93c – and individuals obviously differ in this respect). But it is far from clear why the materialist could not dispose of this objection by distinguishing two senses of 'attunement', one of which would admit of degree and one not. This would be no more than a development of the musical metaphor from which the theory was launched: for example, every lyre (once fitted with strings) will make some sort of noise, and is thus 'attuned' in one way or another, but it is

<sup>11</sup> Plato's Socrates relies on his interlocutors, however naive or confused, to *tell him what they think*. From what other source could the dialectical method derive materials on which to work?

only when a lyre is ready to be played that it can be said to be 'attuned' in the normative sense, i.e. to be *in tune*. Granted this distinction, we could surely characterise not only the soul's virtue, but 'soul' itself, as an 'attunement' (i.e. as a configuration or structural property) of matter rather than, as Plato would have it, a substance with properties of its own.

Again, the *Phaedo*'s final argument for immortality suffers fatally from the assumption that among a thing's essential properties may be that of existence itself. Plato believes that some things *necessarily exist*, namely those things which possess essentially the property of being alive: in addition to the *psuchē*, these include (i) God and (ii) the Form of life, 106d5–6. The notion of a necessarily existent being was to have an enduring influence, reappearing in the rational theology of the Middle Ages in the guise of an 'ontological argument' for the existence of God; whatever its merit in that connection,<sup>12</sup> its inadequacy to the task of proving personal immortality emerges as soon as we recall that essential properties were introduced as those which a thing cannot cease to have *without ceasing to exist* (cf. 103c5). The information that one's *psuchē* is 'essentially alive' in this sense does little towards robbing bodily death of its sting.

### 3 Division and harmony

We must take care to distinguish the main 'harmony' doctrine criticised in the *Phaedo*, which seeks to reduce *psuchē* to a physiological structure, from the different idea that the *psuchē* in individual persons may be in a condition of harmony or disharmony and that this condition determines its moral quality. (The latter is the idea which appears in a subordinate role in the *Phaedo* discussion.) Plato was not, it seems, the first to speak of the mind in musical terms,<sup>13</sup> but the metaphor of 'psychic harmony' is one of the most influential with him, recurring in ethical contexts throughout his career. No doubt it gained in suggestiveness from the semantic range of the Greek word *mousikē*, which was much wider than that of our 'music', denoting as it did the whole of the literary and artistic side of life. At all events, this metaphor suggested to Plato an increasingly complex and articulate conception of the ideal to be pursued both in conduct and – still more important – in regard to one's mental state.

On the inward side, 'psychic harmony' refers in the first instance to a requirement of the Socratic method – the avoidance of contradiction in one's judgements. So, for example, if Callicles in the *Gorgias* fails to explore the logical consequences of his immoralist views (which Socrates believes to

<sup>12</sup> For a sympathetic reconstruction of the argument in secular terms, see Collingwood [615], 124ff.

<sup>13</sup> See Dodds [117], 260.

be incoherent), he is doomed to remain in a condition of internal 'discord': 'Callicles will not agree with you, O Callicles, but will be at variance with you (*diaphōnēsei*) all your life' (482b5–6). But intellectual and moral goals are never sharply differentiated in Plato, and from the outset the metaphor of 'harmony' invokes the further, more overtly edifying, idea of a proper ordering of parts within the *psuchē*. This spiritual order or structure, in Plato's view, reflects (for better or worse, depending on political conditions) the order prevailing in the society to which one belongs; and ideally, it reflects also the grand, unchanging order of the universe as a whole, though this correspondence is distorted in most people by the union of soul with body (see *Timaeus* (*Tim.*) 44ab).<sup>14</sup>

Now it is only when perfect order is realised in an individual *psuchē* that the person concerned can be said to qualify, by Platonic standards, as a truly human being – a legitimate example of *human nature*. Plato's psychology shares in the idealism of his conception of truth and reality in general, according to which it is only a *perfect x* which can be described (strictly speaking, or without qualification) as a *real x* at all; imperfect specimens are regarded as partially successful *copies* or adumbrations of the real thing. We must therefore bear in mind that the state of 'psychic harmony' – although it is, precisely, a perfect state, not within the reach of mediocre people but only of rare heroic figures such as Socrates – nevertheless functions in Platonism as a fixed point by reference to which we can find out what a human being *really is*; and so, what we ourselves really are, behind the misleading façade of our *apparent* nature. It follows that the pursuit of psychic harmony is not a 'mere' moral ideal, such as Anglo-Saxon philosophy is apt to contrast unfavourably with more modest (and hence more practicable) rules of life. On the contrary, it is an attempt to *realise ourselves*, or to become (in actuality) what we already (potentially) are;<sup>15</sup> and this is something which it could not fail to be in our interest to do, since actualising our potential means coming to be as fully alive as is possible for the kind of creatures we are, and our own (active) life is something of which we can never have too much.

<sup>14</sup> Plato is thus the originator of the idea of 'man as microcosm', i.e. of the individual human mind as a complete world in miniature, reproducing the structural features of a wider world beyond; the actual words 'microcosm' and 'macrocosm' were not, however, coined by him but by his commentators in the Christian era.

<sup>15</sup> This idea, which takes on an architectonic significance in Aristotle, remains irresistible even to Nietzsche: see *The Gay Science*, section 270: 'What does thy conscience say? "Thou shalt become the one thou art."' (Notice, however, that Nietzsche is thinking of one's individual nature, not one's nature as a member of the species.)

What then are the constituents of the Platonic *psuchē* – the terms which may or may not be so related as to confer internal 'harmony' on the whole?

At first Plato did not even think of the mind as composite. In fact, its non-composite nature is cited in the *Phaedo* (78b ff.) as a reason for believing it to be indestructible, though the case for regarding it as non-composite rests on considerations which could scarcely have carried much weight outside the Socratic circle (the *psuchē* is 'more similar' in character to the invisible world of Ideas than to the visible world of bodies, and as such is 'likely' to be among the things which have no parts: 78c7, 79b4). But he had strong motives for amending this view in the slightly later *Republic*, where the *psuchē* is said to contain three distinct elements: reason (*to logistikon*, literally 'the rational'), 'spirit' or 'passion' (*to thūmoeides*), and appetite (*to epithumētikon*).

Foremost among these was the motive generated by the political argument of the *Republic*. According to this argument, a political society is in essence a single, intelligent (and hence purposive) being, but a being whose intelligence is not equally distributed among the individual persons who make it up. Plato wishes to represent the *polis* as endowed with thought (unlike the purely biological communities of ants, bees, etc.), but at the same time his contempt for the democratic form of government leads him to treat (independent) thinking as a specialised function and to assign it to a specific social class, membership of which is to be open only to an intellectual elite (the 'natural leaders': see *Rep.* 474c1–3). In this way he arrives at the idea of a *rational organism* – a thinking subject composed of parts whose relation to the whole would be the same as that of individual organs to the body. The relationship Plato has in mind is that of *contributing to the well-being of the whole in whatever way one's natural gifts allow*, and in the political sphere he distinguishes not more than three such ways:<sup>16</sup> these correspond respectively to the functions of philosopher-guardians, military guardians, and the 'third class', which includes all manual labourers and traders.

Now the chief aim of the *Republic* is to determine the nature of justice, which is, of course, an intelligible Form or Idea; and when we speak of 'Form', Plato reminds us (*Rep.* 435a5–7), we are speaking of something that is one and the same wherever it appears, so that any two particulars which instantiate a given form will be in that respect identical (as, for example, in the case of two triangles which have all the same mathematical properties). This methodological principle implies that if there is more than one context in which (as we would put it) a particular concept is used, then any proposed philosophical account of that concept will have to be tested for correctness

<sup>16</sup> I mean, no more than three at the level of abstraction relevant to political theory: there are, of course, indefinitely many specialised functions within the third class.



and completeness in all these contexts successively; or, better, any account developed in one context will have to be corrected by means of insights drawn from another. Here only two contexts – city and soul – are involved, and Plato envisages an indefinite series of transitions from one to the other, with the true *logos* finally appearing as a flash of illumination like a spark from two sticks rubbed together (434d–435a). (This illustrates one aspect of the meaning of 'dialectic': truth emerges from the exchange *between* two parties in a conversation, *dialogos*.)

The doctrine of the tripartite soul is so important, not only within Platonism but for the whole subsequent European tradition of moral and psychological theory, that we had better take time to inspect its foundations. Obviously, begins Socrates (435e), the properties we attribute to whole communities must also be present in their individual members. (How could Thrace be spirited, Athens intellectual, Egypt commercial, etc., if not because that is how the inhabitants of those places tend to be?) The question is whether the entire soul is operative in each of these sorts of activity, or whether 'we learn with one part, feel indignation with another, and desire food, procreation, and so on with a third' (436a9–b1: notice that Plato never contemplates *more* than three distinct psychic tendencies). Socrates now introduces a theoretical principle which should be helpful: nothing can act or be acted upon in opposite ways at the same time, unless we make some qualification, e.g. by distinguishing parts of the thing, or different respects or relations in which the action or passion might occur (436b8–9). For instance, we might be tempted to say that a person or a spinning top was both moving and resting at the same time – but the conflict disappears if we specify what part of the person we mean in each case (e.g. standing on one spot but moving the hands), or in what respect there is movement or rest (e.g. the top is stationary in respect of its axis, revolving in respect of its outer edge, 436de). Let us call this the 'principle of opposition'.

Now, desire and aversion are opposed states of mind which we sometimes experience simultaneously in relation to the same object: for instance, you may feel thirsty but resist the temptation to drink for reasons of health (439c). Socrates takes care to explain that we must not interpret his favourite doctrine that *everyone desires the good* to mean that there is no such phenomenon in our mental life as an attraction towards objects which are in fact bad. That doctrine refers to what we might call *fully human* desire, following the image of reason as the human element in the soul (588d), or in other words to desire informed by the activity of the *logistikon* (the sort that Aristotle will later call *boulēsis* or 'rational wish'). What we need to remember for present purposes, however, is that there are some motives (for instance thirst) which do not *represent* to themselves in any particular way

the satisfaction at which they aim, but are just animal drives (see 439b 4–5):<sup>17</sup> and that in a language-using creature, these drives co-exist with motives of a different kind which go hand in hand with the power of *representing* or *describing* possible courses of action in terms of some positive or negative value-concept ('it would be an honourable thing to do', 'it would be harmful to my health'). The acquisition of language, and thereby of a range of socially informed (or 'rational') desires, does not actually abolish physical desire: instead it *subjects* the body (more or less effectively in any individual case) to the command of a central government, leaving the individual potentially responsive to both representational and non-representational motives (for instance, the *thought that* I had better not drink may co-exist with the *desire* to do so, though in a well-regulated mind the former will prevail).

But now, recalling our 'principle of opposition', we can see that for Plato it will not do simply to attribute these conflicting impulses to 'the person' (viewed as a unit). For in his terms, to say of a single agent that he or she is disposed both to drink and to refrain from drinking (or more generally, both to pursue and to avoid a given object; cf. Catullus' *odi et amo*) is to formulate an intellectual *puzzle* which demands to be resolved by a redescription of the case. Such phenomena (Plato thinks) illustrate the general principle that particular objects and actions, as they strike us now this way and now that, prompt us to apply to them first one predicate and then another directly opposed to it (see *Rep.* 476a, 523c ff.). The resulting instability in our representation of reality is a legitimate ground for mental discomfort: it needs to be eliminated by specifying *in what respect*, or *in relation to what*, each of the opposed predicates applies to the object. In the psychological case, the specification is carried out by postulating as many 'springs of action' in the *psuchē* as there are types of impulse which can enter into mutual conflict. We can then restore stability to our account of the conflict-ridden *psuchē* by saying that it desires to drink in respect of one of these springs of action, but desires to refrain from drinking in respect of another: according to Plato's construction, the former desire originates in an irrational, appetitive part ('the friend of certain satisfactions and pleasures', 439d8), the latter from a reasoning element.

The question next arises (439e) whether *thumos* ('spirit') should be regarded as a third, distinct, part of the soul or whether it should be identified with one of the other two. The immediate inclination of Glaucon,

<sup>17</sup> 'So if ever anything draws [the soul of a thirsty person] in a contrary direction [sc., away from drinking], this will be something in the soul other than that which thirsts and which draws him like a wild animal towards drinking?'



Socrates' interlocutor, perhaps deferring to that usage of *thumos* in which it corresponds to the English word 'passion',<sup>18</sup> is to equate this part with appetite (e5). But this is discredited by the phenomenon of passionate self-reproach or self-disgust, prompted by shameful impulses. In fact, *thumos* in general seems to be more closely associated with reason than with appetite, since this kind of indignation against oneself typically occurs when one is conscious of having acted contrary to one's own understanding of moral requirements; or again when one believes oneself to have been wronged by another person (440bd). Plato, then, thinks of *thumos* as the representative of impersonal moral consciousness within the soul at the level of 'right opinion' (as distinct from full knowledge): it is the kind of moral motivation established in us by early training (hence before the advent of reason in our lives), but calculated to make us receptive to the voice of reason when the time comes (cf. 402a). Its non-identity with our reasoning faculty is shown simply by the fact that animals and children, as well as many adults, have the one (*thumos*) without the other (441ab).

With this last step the structural correspondence between city and soul is fully developed (c4–7), the 'spirited part' having been duly portrayed as a psychic standing army – an intermediary between the 'better' and 'worse' elements, but always (in principle) in the service of the 'better'. The ideal psychic condition, which Socrates will shortly (443d) proceed to characterise in terms of the 'harmony' metaphor, is that reason – the smallest, but worthiest part – should rule in the soul with 'spirit' as its ally; and that both of these, united by physical and cultural education, should wield power over the psychic proletariat – the desiring element, which is 'the largest and . . . most insatiable part of each individual soul' (442a6–7).

As we read this text we are witnessing the *début* of a world-historic idea: that of the *centred*, or *integrated*, *subject*. This is the idea that every constituent of our subjectivity should be supervised and, as far as possible, controlled (though Plato is aware of the intractable nature of dreams: see *Rep.* 571c ff.) by a central agency which is representative of the self as a whole – like the philosopher-guardians *vis-à-vis* the city. The suggestive power of this image has persisted into modern times. Freudian psychoanalysis, for example, has operated under the sign of a highly Platonic conception of sanity in so far as it has aimed at the 'replacement of id by ego' – i.e. at helping people escape from a condition in which their behaviour is dominated by impulses that are *unconscious*, and as such not controllable by that part of the mind which responds to external reality. To make this comparison is not to belittle Freud's invention, though it is true that

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Heraclitus, fr. 85 Diels, 'It is hard to fight against one's *thūmos*: it will pay with its life for what it desires.'

nowadays, in the climate created by the revisionary psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, the notion of a 'split' or 'decentred' (and therefore essentially unstable) subject is mounting a serious challenge to the authority of the Platonist ideal.<sup>19</sup>

As we have just seen, a *psychē* conforming to that ideal will be distinguished by a certain kind of internal constitution – literally an 'aristocracy' in miniature, a régime under which the 'better' elements rule the 'worse'. We have progressed, then, from the bare assumption that justice is a *Form* – an assumption dictated by the Socratic method – to a detailed account of *what Form* (or structure) an individual *psychē* must exhibit if it is to be credited with this fundamental virtue. But in fact Plato never ceases to draw inspiration from the more abstract, or primitive, idea of an opposition between *form* and *formlessness* in general, and of the *psychē* as a field upon which these rival principles fight it out.<sup>20</sup> Already in the *Gorgias* (504ab) we find him comparing the *psychē* with other objects whose merit lies in the 'order and proportion' imparted to them by a purposive intelligence (houses, ships, etc.); and in the *Republic* he develops this into a picture of the philosopher-ruler as a 'psychic artist' – one whose dedication to the intelligible Forms will prompt him not only to imitate these in his own life, but also to reproduce them in the lives of other people 'both privately and publicly' (500d5), taking as his raw material politically formless humanity.

The consequences of this picture in relation to more familiar forms of 'art' are notorious. *Republic* x examines the activities we are accustomed to think of as 'imitating reality' (drama, poetry, painting, etc.) and argues that they do not deserve to be recognised as anything more than imitators of appearance. As such, they pose a threat to psychic order, for they are allies of an 'inferior' part of the mind (603b1, 605b1) – of something in us which positively relishes the violent and contradictory qualities of human emotion, or the variety of aspects of a visible object, or the element of play or tinkering with expressive materials which is common to all the arts. For Plato, the presentation of a thought-content in a pleasurable form is always dangerous, since it threatens to distract us from the real question, which is the *truth-value* of the content (just as we can be led astray in our search for true beauty in human beings by the facile charms of youth and health: 601b6–7; cf. 402–3). At this high point in the development of his psychology, the 'enemy within' is represented above all by a hankering after

<sup>19</sup> For the comparison with Freud, see Kenny [167], section III.

<sup>20</sup> The Pythagorean 'Table of Opposites' cited by Aristotle (*Met.* A.5: 986a22 ff.) has 'limit' and 'unlimited' (*peras* and *apeiron*) as the first of its ten pairs of opposed terms; so this feature of Plato's philosophy again lends support to Aristotle's description of him as 'in most respects a follower of the Pythagoreans' (*Met.* A.6: 987a30).

spectacle, diversity or unstructured plenitude; and his fierce resistance to temptation from that quarter leaves its mark both on the epistemology and on the moral theory of the *Republic*. Epistemically, the goal proposed there is to exchange the multiplicity of appearances, or 'seeming' – of the quasi-cognitive states that crowd in upon us unbidden, as things strike us in this way or that – for the unity of 'being' as registered in an achieved, and stable, structure of belief; morally, it is to exchange the multiplicity of transient emotion (*pathos*) for the unity of an achieved, and stable, soul-structure.

The slightly later *Phaedrus*,<sup>21</sup> whose joint themes are love and rhetoric, is our source for another celebrated statement of the tripartition doctrine. Here Plato likens the *psuchē* to a chariot drawn by a pair of winged horses (246a); the latter, which are of unequal character, correspond respectively to 'spirit' and appetite, and the driver to the faculty of reason which directs both. This dialogue inherits from the *Republic* a vision of the defeat of unruly desire by the 'better', truth-seeking, self; and a conception of philosophy as the authentic *psuchagōgia*, or 'mind-guidance' (261a8), of which rhetoric (in the popular sense of the word) is a mere travesty. So, once again, the scene is set for a battle between true and false culture for the possession of individual souls – between the vulgar cult of plausibility and the critical study of our own system of meanings (265e).

Yet the *Phaedrus* changes the balance of emphasis within Plato's psychological theory: over against the somewhat austere ideal of psychic integration, it boldly affirms the role of *unreason* in our life, and even claims that 'our greatest gifts are the fruit of madness, provided the madness be god-given' (244a6–8). Retrieving from the *Symposium* his doctrine of the education of desire, Plato now acknowledges sexual love, along with poetic and prophetic enthusiasm, as a species of divine *mania* – in other words, as a non-rational mode of access to 'what is higher'.<sup>22</sup> For he tells us that in the grip of erotic *mania*, certain privileged souls – those with an aptitude for recollection of the world of Forms which we inhabited before birth (250e–251a) – regain the 'wings' which will lift them, through speculation, from the material to the ideal. This dialogue, then, brings into prominence a theme which was relatively understated in the *Republic*: that of the grounding of our discursive powers in a non-discursive source of energy, namely the compulsion to make contact with (or to reappropriate) alienated constituents of our own being. In the attempt to characterise this compul-

<sup>21</sup> This is the consensual view which has emerged from scholarly debate about the date of the dialogue. For a review of the arguments (and further references), see Hackforth [156], Introduction; Nussbaum [32], 470, n. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Wittgenstein [671], 6.432.

sion, Plato takes as his paradigm our experience of the sexual wish to appropriate an object perceived simultaneously as 'other' and as 'non-other'.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4 An ambiguous humanity

We interpreted the idea of the tripartite *psuchē* in the first instance as a correction to Plato's earlier dualist account of the mind–body relation. The suggestion was that he withdrew in the *Republic* the cruder theory of the *Phaedo*, which attributed appetite exclusively to the body and represented the life of reason, by contrast, as an ascetic 'rehearsal for death' (66b ff.; 67e5). Now, there is a rough and ready truth in this. Plato never reverts to the view that physical sensations belong to the body *rather than* to the mind: the *Theaetetus* (184d) assigns to a unitary *psuchē* the task of synthesising information received through the various senses, while the *Philebus*, one of his last works, argues that thirst and the like belong not to the body but to the *psuchē*, in virtue of the latter's memory of past gratification (35cd). Plato seems, too, to have felt retrospectively a falsity of emphasis in the *Phaedo*'s portrayal of bodily existence *per se* as an obstacle to wisdom and virtue: the *Republic* swings so far the other way as to present its ethical programme as positively one of hedonism, albeit in a strictly ideal sense (586de: under the rule of reason each part of the soul will enjoy 'the truest pleasures of which it is capable').

It would be wrong, however, to give the impression that Plato ever simply abandons dualism in favour of the more naturalistic view that the life of the mind necessarily comprises bodily as well as non-bodily elements. On the contrary, he remains strongly committed to the view that the rational element in us is the real self, and that it is this real self which survives our physical death. In fact, it is difficult to give a categorical answer to the question of Plato's final position on the anatomy of the soul, except to say that it is a position within which his 'worldly' psychology pulls in one direction, while his religious and transcendental concerns pull in another.

The *Republic* shows clear signs of internal tension on this score. For its final book introduces new grounds for the belief that the soul is indestructible, and consequently that it must after all be non-composite. Nothing can be destroyed, argues Socrates, except by its own 'native evil' or disease (609a), yet the 'psychic disease' of injustice identified in book iv has no

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the description of recollection as a 'recovery of knowledge which is our own (*oikeian*)', *Phaedo* 75e (with Burnet's note). Nussbaum ([32], ch. 7) argues that the *Phaedrus* represents, not just a change of emphasis, but an actual change of doctrine as compared with the *Republic* – a revaluation of 'the risky and the mutable' inspired by Plato's personal experience.

tendency to bring about the dissolution of the composite human creature – a vicious soul is, if anything, restless and hyperactive rather than the reverse. And in fact it would be against reason for the soul to be able to die of its vices, because this would enable vicious people to put themselves out of their misery by sheer perseverance.<sup>24</sup> On a deeper view, then, we find that the 'lower' parts of the soul do not after all belong to it *essentially*, but are like the underwater accretions of the sea-god Glaucus – mere trappings of the true soul, the *logistikon*, which cling to it in its present earthly state (611d).

What looks at first glance like an outright self-contradiction (the soul both is, and is not, composed of parts) can be mitigated – though not resolved – by setting it against the appropriate idealist background. The 'parts' in question, we must remember, are not fellow-citizens in a psychic democracy: they stand in an immutable order of rank, and it is the *best* element in us – the best expression of our nature – which provides the key to our identity, just as it is a *perfect* circle which tells us what we need to know in order to define circularity. Plato's conception of humanity as an amalgam of what is *truly* human with other, extraneous factors is captured in all its incoherence by his comparison of the *psuchē* to one of those fantastic beasts of mythology (*Rep.* 588b ff.) – in this case, a combination of *man*, lion and 'many-headed monster' (representing, of course, our old friends reason, spirit and appetite). This image is bound to prompt the question: how could it be a mark of human nature to be less than fully human, and so to be less than itself?

A legitimate, if enigmatic, answer to this question would be that human nature according to Plato is inevitably 'less than itself' just because it is also *more* than itself. Not content to have described an ideal political system in which mind (or theory) would take precedence over matter (or physical labour) and issue commands to it as master to slave,<sup>25</sup> he goes on to extrapolate these values into an all-embracing doctrine of cosmic order, setting up *psuchē* as a metaphysical principle in authority over *sōma* or 'body'. For *psuchē* (he argues in the *Phaedrus*, 245c ff.; and at greater length in *Laws* x, 891e ff.) is the only sort of entity which can initiate movement – in contrast to matter, which moves only when motion is imparted to it by some external agency; it is therefore *prior* to matter in the sense that, given a perfectly static universe, spontaneous motion would necessarily precede the

<sup>24</sup> Glaucon's words at 610d hint at an interesting supplement to the *Phaedo* arguments for immortality. An after-life is necessary, Plato now suggests, in order that the wicked may suffer for their sins: therefore it exists, assuming the universe to be rational. This seems to prefigure the Kantian doctrine of immortality as a postulate of pure practical reason. See Adam [161], vol. II *ad loc.*

<sup>25</sup> For an illuminating study of the organising role within Platonism of this 'master-slave' motif, see Vlastos [179].

mechanically transmitted variety if things were to get moving at all. As such, *psuchē* is the 'natural master', while matter is the 'natural subject' (*Laws* 896c2–3).

The foregoing bit of reasoning not unnaturally determines Plato's conception of that most 'masterful' of all beings – the deity, or living presence which ensures the orderly movement of the universe in its totality. It is only fitting that the Platonic God should consist of 'a soul or souls' (899b5), and should be said to have created the immortal component of the human *psuchē* in its own likeness (*Tim.* 41c). But this of course implies that the process by which human beings 'become what they are' is at the same time a process of coming to resemble God – the being on whom the best element of human nature is modelled. And so it implies that to become truly human is to come to exemplify a nature which is more than human, namely that of unadulterated mind, or in other words of God. (Hence Plato can tell us at *Rep.* 501b that the 'likeness of true manhood' produced by the political artistry of the guardians will be derived from their understanding of the 'godlike' quality named by Homer: he senses in this poetic term a naive anticipation of the philosophical truth that humanity, by virtue of its faculty of reason, is a creature 'not of earth but of heaven', *Tim.* 90a.) If the essence of the human being is to transcend itself in the direction of the divine, then from another point of view it will belong just as much to our essence to be forever only *en route* to our humanity, not yet to have achieved it; and so to have to reach an accommodation, during our earthly existence, with components of our own mentality which are incidental (and inferior) to our presumed 'true selves'.