

How and why does Plato divide the soul into parts? Does his division make sense?

Leonardo Franchi, Department of Philosophy

PHIL2005W - Greek Philosophy from Plato to Aristotle

One of Plato's recurring and overriding goals is to discover what it means to be virtuous and just. He is concerned with philosophy as a tool to help him and others live as just and virtuous a life as possible. It is of no surprise then that much of his writing deals with this topic, and that discussions of what it is to be just and virtuous deal with the internal reality of human beings. In order to talk about how one should live he begins by talking about how our soul is constituted and what sort of relation the just man stands with in regards to his soul. He divides the soul into three distinct parts—the appetitive, the spirited, and the rational. Each has its role to play, each pursues its own goal. In order for a man to be just, he claims, each part of the soul must not escape its bound but rather fulfill its respective task and nothing else. However, this is not the only way to characterize the internal workings of the human animal, and in order to evaluate them more effectively we will investigate the theories of Hans Jonas, who developed a radically different conception of the organism. He takes a biological approach to the problem, developing a framework which holds what Plato names the appetitive as the foundation of all life, eliminating the role of the spirited and rational. His theory, evolving from the most fundamentally simple organism up to the human being, rather than Plato's top down approach, provides a more compelling view of the driving nature of our existence.

The just and virtuous life that Plato seeks he finds, unsurprisingly, in the life of the philosopher. Only the philosopher, he holds, is able to understand the nature of reality and live life as it should properly be led. But in order to show what justice is and how to achieve it at a personal level he must first explain the workings of the soul and how it can be just itself. The *Republic* provides the clearest and most cogent argument for the division and justice of the soul, and it begins by discussing the perfect city. Approaching things obliquely, Socrates' discussion of the just city leads him to the claim that the just city is one in which there are three classes of people, the guardians, soldiers, and the craftsmen, and each of them must fulfill its own task. The guardians are the ones who rule, but they are also the philosophers, and their knowledge is what gives the city good judgment and wisdom. The craftsmen are the vast majority of the city's inhabitants, and they simply want to gain as much money, food, or erotic pleasure as they can. The soldiers are the ones who give the city its courage and strength, and can side with the guardians to enforce their leadership (*Republic* 430a-b).

Next, Plato must show that the soul has parts and is not just one homogeneous entity. He starts by stating the claim that the same object cannot undergo or contain opposites at the same point in time and space. That is, a homogeneous object cannot contain opposite features. The example he uses serves well to illustrate his point—if my head is still while my body is moving, we do not say that my body is unmoving and moving, but rather we say that the part of my body which is the head is still, and the part which is my arm is not. In a similar vein, Plato claims that it is not at all uncommon for us to, for example, be thirsty but at the same time not want to drink (*Republic* 439b). There may be something holding us back from actually satisfying our thirst, but nevertheless our thirst is there and demanding drink. As a result of this he shows how there must be at least two different parts of the soul: the appetitive part, that which seeks drink with no regard for anything else, and the rational part, that which in this case is holding back the person from drinking immediately. Furthermore, he argues, there is a spirited or emotional part to contend with. This is certainly not part of the appetitive, because it is often at odds with it—we are often angry against our basic instincts. However, it is also not a part of the rational, as even young children are full of emotion and spirit, and they have not learned to be rational yet. So, like this, Plato sets out his tripartite definition of the soul.

This division itself is not without some controversy, however. It is clear that this whole architecture depends on his statement that one entity cannot consist of opposite features, but as A. W. Price points out, there is nothing inherently wrong with contrary desires. Contrary desires are very common in everyday life, and we cannot imagine ourselves to not have them. For example, I often have a desire to avoid work in order to idle the time away, but I also have a directly opposing desire to see my task before me completed. This is itself is nothing particularly new or damaging to my unity of soul (Price, *Mental Conflict*). It does not bode well for Plato's division if we can so easily strike doubt into the foundations of his reasoning.

The final step which he makes is the linking of the parts of the city with the parts of the soul. He states that as there the same number of parts, and each part is of the same kind, so then "a man is just in the same way as a city." (*Republic* 441d) So justice in men, like in the city, is when each part does its own job and refrains from overriding the duties assigned to the other parts.

The question at this point is what the role of the parts of the soul is, and how they are to be ordered in order for the philosopher to live a just life. It is clear that for Plato the rational part is the part that rules, for only it has wisdom. Like the guardians in the city who are philosophers, the rational part can take into account the rational desires of each part and evaluate which is best for the overall soul, regardless of particular wants or desires of a smaller section of the whole (Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory*).

A very illustrative discussion occurs between Plato and Kallikles in the *Gorgias*, where Kallikles tries to convince Plato that the best way to live life is to try to maximize the appetitive and sate it as much as possible. Kallikles makes two main claims, the rejection of which illuminates Plato's vision of the rational philosopher. First, he believes that solely based on the fact that we are beings with needs, it is a good thing to satisfy those needs. Secondly, it is a good thing to merely have these appetitive needs in the first place. Plato's response consists of a pair of examples, the latter of which is so strongly abhorrent to Kallikles that he is forced to abandon his argument. Using the instance of a catamite, a passive homosexual, much maligned in Greek society, Plato shows how both the need itself and the gratification of the need is not something to which we should ascribe value (*Gorgias* 495). It is important to look at the content of specific desires and needs, as well as the needs themselves, in order to live a just life—and it is exactly this which the rational part of the soul provides (Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*). Furthermore, with the rational part lording over the appetitive and emotional ones, Plato paints a picture of the philosopher as an ascetic. As the rational part is in charge, it knows that more time for philosophy and appreciation of Knowledge is better than less, and that too much satisfaction of the appetites leads to muddy thoughts. The outline, then is clear. The rational part, focused solely on the needs and desires over the whole and never the part, controlling the whole soul absolutely, leaves no room for the blindly striving appetitive to take for itself what it constantly reaches unless otherwise approved. The spirited and emotional part, the seat of courage, often works in tandem with the rational but is still ultimately subordinate to it.

Does his picture of the soul as a whole make sense, and is it reasonable? I think that he is working on shaky ground, and is inscribing a complicated model onto what may be a much simpler, or at least more basic, phenomenon. The philosopher Hans Jonas approaches a similar problem, albeit with vastly different vocabulary, starting from the biological nature of life as compared to the material non-life.

Jonas begins by separating out the simple life form of an organism from material reality of the not-life. The important part of life, that all organisms from the simplest to the most complex share, is *metabolism*, and it is this metabolism that serves as the foundation of the division between life and non-life. In fact it is so central to his concept of an organism that he states "Organism appears as a function of metabolism, not metabolism as a function of organism." (Jonas, *The Phenomenon of*

Life) But what is the value of metabolism that makes it so central to Jonas' theory and related to Plato? Metabolism is what separates the organism from its environment by what Jonas calls *needful freedom*. This is the fact that an organism essentially and fundamentally needs the material world, for its metabolism is constantly manipulating and excreting, engulfing and processing the raw materials around it, but at the same time the organism is not equal to the material that composes it. A snapshot in time of the physical composition of an animal, including all the physics to describe the motion of every particle involved, does not capture the life of the organism itself. So needful freedom is what creates a level of separation between the organism and its environment, and "the organic form stands in a dialectic relation of *needful freedom* to matter." (p. 80)

The basic structure of metabolism—needful freedom—provides for understanding of the development of cognitive achievement. As an organism becomes more complex, the separation from the environment created by metabolism grows greater—motility provides the organism with physical distance from objects, language provides psychological distance from the world. The evolution of the organism can be explained, says Jonas, by the growing complexity of physiological structures that provide for more separation between the organism and the world.

The relevance to Plato is clear once we discuss the metabolic needful freedom of Jonas with Plato's appetitive part of the soul. Both are blind striving forces that seek something from their environments. Both are central to the development of the human being. But each lead in completely different directions for each of these two philosophers. Unlike Plato, there are no parts of the soul for Jonas. There is no careful delicate balance that the rational must keep oiled and functional. The whole idea of a clean division, inscribed upon the soul by internal reflection, is thrown out for the brute self-creating force that is metabolism. The striving of the metabolism is not something to be controlled and modulated, as Plato would claim, but rather is itself the force which drives life and evolution forward.

What is interesting to note is that both Plato and Jonas want to ground ethics on their respective ontological systems. Plato's conclusions of how to live a just life are firmly rooted in the division of the soul and role of the rational in controlling the appetitive. There is the choice of the real reality of the Forms and true knowledge, or there is the choice of the false reality, damaged copies of the perfect being that the Forms have. An ethical choice is one that chooses the path of the Forms, and only the rational part of the soul is able to make that choice. Likewise for Jonas different ontological categories ground ethical choices. However, in this case the separate ontological categories are simply life and non-life. An ethical choice is choosing life over non-life, choosing actions that further life where at all possible. Once again from a similar premise and similar goal we end up with vastly different valuations of ethical decisions. Now, instead of valuating the ascetic life of a philosopher that is so dear to Plato, Jonas simply instructs us to value life wherever possible, and make choices that will further life over non-life whenever the choices come to pass. This seems to me to be a refreshingly simple, and workable, guiding light for us to follow.

Jonas approaches the issue from an organic biological point of view, starting from the simplest life/non-life division and working his way up to the workings of a human being. Plato starts from the other end, describing the end result, the perfect tripartite form of the soul, and then explains how various simpler permutations can exist in animals without intelligence. While both have merits, I think that Jonas' approach is more plausible and gives a stronger foundation for our conception of self. Plato, in creating a more complex and elaborate theory, is compelled by Occam's Razor to show its necessity. As we have already seen, there are already doubts about his move to divide the soul, and he otherwise does not provide a convincing argument for the creation of this elaborate framework. The opposite can be said of the biophilosophical development that Jonas explores, as it requires little more

than a few assumptions rooted in basic scientific knowledge. There are undoubtedly alternative ways to trace the development of mind and organisms separate from either Plato or Jonas. In fact, the ethics that Jonas develops by basing his philosophy on the distinction between life and non-life can certainly be questioned. However, by investigating the alternative narrative that Jonas provides we have been able to more clearly see some of the basic problems with Plato's division of the soul and how else we could go about discussing the same issues.

Works Cited

Price, A. W. *Mental Conflict*. Routledge, 1995.

Irwin, Terence. *Plato's Moral Theory*. Clarendon Press, 1977.

Nussbaum, Martha C. *The Fragility of Goodness*. Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Jonas, Hans. *The Phenomenon of Life*. Harper and Row, 1966.