

Phillip Shannon

Dr. Douglas Young

PHIL 301W

8 December 2010

Plato and the Principle of Opposition

In his *Republic*, after examining conflicts within individual souls, Plato concludes that there are necessarily three parts of the soul. These are the calculating rational element, the nonrational spirited element, and the nonrational appetitive element. He is able to divide the rational from the nonrational by using the intuitive principle of opposition. Essentially, this is the idea that nothing can have opposite properties at the same time. I believe that Plato errs in his use of this principle because it does not apply in any of his arguments regarding the tripartition of the soul. I will examine in detail Plato's argument for each division in the soul and then discuss why I believe his overall argument is unsound.

Plato believes that the division of the soul is most obvious in psychological conflicts within individual souls. To demonstrate this point, he considers the desire for drink. He states that "the soul of the thirsty person, insofar as it is simply thirsty, does not want anything else except to drink, and this is what it longs for and is impelled to do" (439a). According to Plato, anyone who is thirsty desires the drink itself. This means that he does not desire specific types of drinks, like healthy drinks or good drinks. However, sometimes a thirsty person refrains from drinking. An example of this would be someone who is close to dying from dehydration. If he is handed what he believes is a bottle of arsenic mixed with water, despite his thirst, he will not drink. Plato believes that opposed desires such as these are instances of the soul doing opposite things at the same time.

To conclude that there must be multiple parts of the soul, Plato depends on the principle of opposition. This is the idea that nothing can "at the same time, in the same respect, and in relation to the same thing—undergo, be, or do opposite things" (436e). Plato's argument in favor of this principle is that it intuitively seems unlikely that there could exist anything which is contrary to it. There is no formal argument in favor of it. While this may seem haphazard, it seems that Plato was correct in putting this

kind of faith into it. The basic idea behind the principle has been axiomatic in logic at least since Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, where he states that "It is impossible for the same thing at the same time to belong and not to belong to the same thing and in the same respect" (1005b18-21).

Using the principle of opposition and his example of thirst, Plato's argument is like this:

- I. Your soul is telling you to drink.
- II. Your soul is, at the same time, telling you not to drink.
- III. Nothing can at the same time, in the same respect, and in relation to the same thing—undergo, be or do opposite things.
- IV. Therefore, the part of your soul telling you not to drink must be different from the part of your soul telling you to drink.

Because the part of the soul that "masters" the urge to drink arises from "rational calculation," Plato believes that one part of the soul must be rational. The other, which "feels passion, hungers, thirsts and is stirred by other appetites," is nonrational (439d).

The next question Plato addresses is whether this nonrational part should be divided further. In the thirst example, it is shown that the nonrational part of the soul is different from the rational part by using appetitive desires. However, as Plato points out, we have other nonrational elements of our soul aside from appetites like thirst. The question raised is whether the "spirited element—the one with which we feel anger—[is] a third kind of thing, or is it the same in nature as [the rational calculating element or the appetitive element]" (439e).

To answer this question, Plato looks at an example in which a person is experiencing both the spirited and the appetitive desires of the soul. Leontius, "known for his love of boys as pale as corpses," was walking home when he passed a pile of pale dead corpses. His appetitive desire was to look at the pile. Leontius's reason, however, urged him not to look at such a disgusting sight. When his reason was overcome by his appetite, he became enraged and said to his eyes, "Look for yourselves, you evil wretches; take your fill of the beautiful sight" (439e-440a). Plato believes that this shows a divide in the nonrational part of the soul because "anger sometimes makes war against the appetites as one thing

against another” (440a).

This argument appears to be strictly one from analogy. Plato compares the relationship of anger and appetites to that between states at war. When our appetitive desires win over reason, we usually feel anger. Thus, spirit often becomes “the ally of reason” in a war against appetites (440b). He concludes that the spirited element of the soul, which includes anger, is different from the appetitive element. Perhaps there is an implied argument within what Plato is saying that makes a better case for the separation between the two. Using the example of Leontius:

- I. Your appetitive desire is to “conquer” reason and to look.
- II. Your reason tells you, at the same time, to “conquer” your appetitive desire and to abstain from looking.
- III. Your spirited desire is for reason to win.
- IV. Thus, your spirited desire is to “conquer” your appetitive desire and to abstain from looking.
- V. Nothing can at the same time, in the same respect, and in relation to the same thing—undergo, be or do opposite things.
- VI. Therefore, the spirited element must be different from the appetitive element.

This seems like a valid argument which Plato means but does not make unequivocally. He points out that, although reason and spirit often form an alliance, they cannot be the same thing. Plato considers the story of Odysseus returning home after his journey and having both the spirited desire of anger, which urges him to kill his slave girls, and the rational desire, which urges him not to kill them. In this case, spirit does not side with reason, thus showing that reason and spirit must be distinctive parts.

By first dividing the soul into the rational and nonrational parts using the principle of opposition, then further dividing the nonrational segment into two parts, Plato concludes that the soul has three parts. The rational segment is the calculating agent, which is responsible for reason. The nonrational part consists of the appetitive element, which is responsible for things like hunger and thirst, and the spirited element, which feels emotions like anger. Plato believes that this is where the divisions of the soul stop.

Adopting Plato's style of finding inner psychological conflicts and using them to demonstrate divisions in the soul, I think that Plato could have kept going. Consider conflicts within the spirited element. A graduating senior at Lycoming College cries with sadness as he walks through the gate at the end of the quad, saying goodbye to his life as a college student. But he also feels an opposite emotion: happiness. Certainly, this is an instance of two opposite things happening at the same time (the moment of passing through the gate) and in relation to the same thing (graduation):

- I. Your spirit is happy about graduating.
- II. Your spirit is, at the same time, sad about graduating.
- III. Nothing can at the same time, in the same respect, and in relation to the same thing—undergo, be or do opposite things.
- IV. Therefore, the part of your spirit which is happy must be different from the part of your spirit which is sad.

There are two possible conclusions that could be made from this argument. Either this argument is sound, and the soul can be divided into at least four total parts, or this argument is not sound, calling the conclusion into question. Because I believe that most people, including myself, would be wary of this conclusion, I think that there may be something wrong with this argument. If this argument is flawed, then we may find the same error in some of Plato's logic as well, because it seems to be parallel with his argument about opposing desires.

If the breakdown happens anywhere, I believe it is in the conclusion not following from the premises. The first and second premises are both true and valid statements. To deny (III) would be to deny an axiom of modern logic, one that Aristotle believed was "the most certain of all principles" (1005b23). While the conclusion may appear to follow from the premises, I think that this is where the argument does not work logically. Arguing in the same manner as Plato, I would say that if one thing, and only one thing, is doing opposite things, then we can claim that the following is an inconsistent triad:

- I. The opposite things are happening at the same time.
- II. The opposite things are happening in the same respect.

III. The opposite things are happening in relation to the same thing.

This is essentially the principle of opposition restated. In Plato's arguments, (I) is assumed to be true. He also assumes that (III) is true. For example, in the thirst example, a thirsty man is at the same time desiring drink and not desiring drink. They are both in relation to the drink. Therefore, the only thing that can account for the opposite things occurring is (II). Because you are both desiring a drink and not desiring a drink, and because (II) is the only thing that is not a fact, then it follows that (II) is necessarily false. Plato's example of things that move in different respects is of "a person who is standing still but moving his hands and head" (436c). This is how Plato concluded that the rational part of the soul is different from the nonrational. When things are not "in the same respect," they are different parts, like the moving hands and head of a person who is standing still.

The mistake in this argument is assuming both (I) and (III) to be true. I think that the argument in which I concluded that the spirited element of the soul should be divided is best shown to be false by this wrongful assumption. I will concede that (I) is true. The happiness and its opposite, sadness, are happening at the same time. But (III) seems unlikely. The feeling of happiness is happening because the student is starting a new and exciting part of his life. The sadness is happening because the student is leaving behind a lot of his friends. Thus, I believe that this shows that the happiness and sadness are not occurring in relation to the same thing. This means that at least (III) does not apply, making the principle of opposition not applicable.

Applying this to Plato's argument about thirst is more difficult. The man who has the desire to drink and not drink seems to have desires in relation to the same thing: the drink. However, just as the happiness and sadness appeared to be in relation to the same thing (graduation), I believe that the "drinks" referred to here are different. The man's desire not to drink is in relation to a specific drink: a bad drink. His desire to drink is in relation to "the drink itself," with no discrimination for good or bad. Are "the drink itself" and "bad drink" the same thing? It seems to me that they are not, and so the desires are not in relation to the same thing.

Someone could object, saying that this distinction is merely a technicality which has no real effect

on the validity of the conclusion. My response would be that it does appear this way, but in reality, this small technicality makes Plato's entire argument for the tripartite soul unsound. The desire for drink and the desire to not drink a bad drink are not opposites because they are not in relation to the same thing, so the principle of opposition cannot apply. For Plato's argument to work, I believe that he would have to show an instance of reason having a desire against the drink itself, meaning any drink without discrimination. Reason is not acting contrary to appetite by refusing a bad drink. Consider this example: Your mother likes to go out to eat on Friday nights. On Friday morning, she sees a news report about how dirty Denny's is and says, "Let's go somewhere that's not Denny's." Her fondness of eating at restaurants is like the appetite for any drink. The desire to not go to Denny's is like reason refusing a bad drink. She is not acting contrary to her desire to go out to eat by refusing to go to Denny's. The desire to go out to eat and the desire to not go to Denny's are two different things which are hardly opposites.

Thus, I have shown the flaw in Plato's argument for the tripartite soul. Using the principle of opposition, Plato divided the soul into rational and nonrational parts, and then further divided the nonrational segment into the spirited and appetitive elements. Because the desires of the soul were not in relation to the same thing, I believe that the principle of opposition was not applicable. Consequently, it would appear that Plato's argument for the tripartition of the soul is unsound.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Trans. Richard Hope. 1960. New York: The University of Michigan Press, 1966.

Print.

Plato. *Republic*. Trans. C.D.C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004. Print.