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Author(s): Charles H. Kahn

Source: *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Sep., 1987), pp. 77-103

Published by: Philosophy Education Society Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20128559>

Accessed: 20-05-2019 12:36 UTC

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PLATO'S THEORY OF DESIRE

CHARLES H. KAHN

MY AIM HERE is to make sense of Plato's account of desire in the middle dialogues. To do that I need to unify or reconcile what are at first sight two quite different accounts: the doctrine of eros in the *Symposium* and the tripartite theory of motivation in the *Republic*.¹ It may be that the two theories are after all irreconcilable, that Plato simply changed his mind on the nature of human desire after writing the *Symposium* and before composing the *Republic*. But that conclusion can be justified only if attempts to reconcile the two theories end in failure. The attempt must be made first.

This is primarily a historical project, but one with some contemporary interest. Plato, in the *Republic*, is the first philosopher to formulate a full-scale theory of the psyche, and hence the first to articulate the concept of desire in a systematic way. Furthermore, his view of the subject is sufficiently remote from today's view to provoke some critical reflection on our own assumptions. On the other hand, Plato is perhaps the only major philosopher to anticipate some of the central discoveries of twentieth-century depth psychology, that is, of Freud and his school; I shall end with some comparisons between Plato and Freud. But it will be more instructive to begin by presenting Plato's view within the context of the contemporary theory of action.

I

It is commonly supposed, at least by philosophers, that to explain a voluntary or intentional action we must identify both a

¹ For present purposes I ignore whatever differences there may be between the psychology of the *Phaedrus* and that of the *Republic*, and I make no attempt to deal with the complications introduced in later works such as the *Philebus* and *Timaeus*. I briefly discuss the treatment of desire in earlier dialogues such as the *Gorgias* and *Lysis*.

desire and a belief on the part of the agent: the agent's desire for a certain goal and his belief that the action in question will lead to this goal. A belief alone, it is assumed, could not motivate the agent to act; there must be an appropriate desire in every case. This is the view that lies behind Hume's claim that reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions. And Hume was only echoing Hobbes, who said "the thoughts are to the desires as scouts and spies, to range abroad and find the way to the thing desired."²

I want to call attention to the fact that this notion of desire embodies a philosophical theory and is not simply a deliverance of common sense. The belief-desire theory of action has been criticized in some recent discussions, but it is still widely accepted. It is embedded, for example, in Donald Davidson's influential treatment of reasons for action: a reason is just a desire-belief pair.³ The theory in question is, in fact, very old. With one significant difference, it can be traced back to Aristotle. The difference is that, although Aristotle does give a two-factor explanation for action, he explicitly avoids the Humean assumption that motivation is fundamentally non-rational. As Aristotle puts it, "we desire something because it seems good to us, rather than it seeming good because we desire it. For the starting-point is rational thought (*noēsis*)" (*Metaphysics* A.7.1072a29). It is the reversal of this explanatory pattern by Hobbes that makes all the difference.⁴

For Aristotle then, despite his double-factor theory, reason is ultimately in charge of our actions; it remains the master and not the slave, even though it needs the cooperation of desire in initiating action. Reason can play this role because *boulēsis*, the dominant form of desire in human beings, is fully rational. Nevertheless, Aristotle's theory may rightly be regarded as the source of the traditional assumption that human action is to be explained by

² *Leviathan* 1.8. Compare the comments of John Cooper, "Plato's Theory of Human Motivation," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 1 (1984): 3-21.

³ See D. Davidson, "Actions, Reasons and Causes," in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, 1980), 3-19 (although Davidson speaks not of desires but more generally of "pro-attitudes"). For a challenge to the Humean view see T. Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford, 1970), 29-30.

⁴ *Leviathan* 1.6: "But whatsoever is the object of any mans Appetite or Desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth Good" (Hobbes's *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson [Penguin Books, 1968], 120).

reference to two distinct and contrasting factors: reason and desire, or, in a later terminology, reason and will.

It is essential to take note of the originality of Aristotle in this regard if we are to have an accurate view of Plato's quite different theory. It is hard to avoid imposing a double-factor theory upon Plato, because this view has become so familiar to us that it may seem to be the merest common sense. And there may be passages in the dialogues where Plato himself flirts with such a view.⁵ But his fullest and most mature psychological theory, in the *Republic*, is not a double-factor theory at all. In the *Republic* there is no concept of desire that can be *contrasted* with reason, and in this sense Plato simply does not have Aristotle's concept of desire. The fundamental difference between the two views can be illustrated at the level of terminology, where the historical connection between them is also particularly clear. Aristotle recognizes three species of desire: *boulēsis* (rational desire for the good—or for what is judged to be good), *thymos* (self-assertive feelings connected with anger and pride), and *epithymia* (appetite or desire for pleasure). The genus which embraces these three species is *orexis*, desire in general; and the corresponding psychic principle is *to orektikon* (the faculty of desire). Now the names alone make clear that two out of Aristotle's three species of desire are directly based upon the tripartition of the soul in the *Republic*. (See the diagram below.) But Plato has no comparable genus and no generic term. The term *orexis* (desire) never occurs in his writings; and that is no accident. Although Aristotle did not invent the word, he may have deliberately stretched its meaning to fit the needs of his theory.⁶ Plato, at least in the *Republic*, has no place for a generic concept of desire, as

⁵ I have in mind passages like *Gorgias* 468a–b, 509d–510a, and *Meno* 77b–78b, where Socrates claims that everyone desires what is good and hence implies that doing evil is to be explained by a mistake in cognition rather than volition. It has been pointed out to me (by Alexander Nehamas) that one might be tempted to construe the contrast between the charioteer and the two horses in the *Phaedrus* myth as a distinction between reason and desire; but I think that would be a misconstrual. The charioteer represents not reason alone but rational desire: he relies upon the horses for his locomotion but not for his motivation. His desire to behold the Forms is precisely the desire for knowledge and the good that (I will argue) is constitutive of reason in the *Republic*.

⁶ The only earlier use of *orexis* is in three fragments of Democritus (DK B.72, 219, 284), at least two of which appear genuine (no.s 219 and 284). Democritus seems to use *orexis* and *epithymia* interchangeably.

<u>Freud</u>	<u>Plato</u>	<u>Aristotle</u>
	(psyche)	(psyche)
		Reason Desire Sensation Nutrition
		(orexis)
1. ego	1. <i>logistikon</i> (rational)	1. <i>boulēsis</i>
2. ?	2. <i>thymoeides</i> ("spirited", anger)	2. <i>thymos</i>
3. id (libido)	3. <i>epithymia</i> ("appetite")	3. <i>epithymia</i>

opposed to some *other* psychic faculty. The tripartition of the *Republic* is not the division of a faculty of desire but a division of the psyche itself. From another point of view, Plato's tripartition of the soul can also be described as a partition of desire. But then reason appears not as some distinct principle but as *a particular form of desire*. When Aristotle divides desire into three parts, he distinguishes all three from reason, sense-perception, and the like. When Plato divides the psyche into three parts, he divides it without remainder.

This Platonic concept of reason as a form of desire is so unfamiliar to us that it may seem to be a kind of category mistake. Perhaps that is why even those commentators who have correctly noted that the tripartition of the *Republic* is a tripartition of desire⁷ have generally not drawn the necessary consequences for Plato's theory of rationality and for his conception of philosophy as a form of love. Aristotle remarks, in mapping his tripartition onto Plato's, that what he calls *boulēsis*, or the rational desire for what is good, will belong in Plato's *logistikon*, "in the rational, calculating part of the soul" (*De Anima* 3.9.432b5), but this is an understatement. For Plato the rational desire for what is good just *is* the rational part of the soul. Aristotle's rational principle of desire is, for Plato, reason itself.

I begin with a sketch of this extraordinary theory of reason in the *Republic*, in the context of the tripartite conception of the

⁷ Notably T. H. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 192 n. 20, p. 195. Compare Cooper, "*Plato's Theory of Motivation*," p. 5-6.

psyche. After a brief look at earlier dialogues on the subject of desire, I turn to the *Symposium*, where Plato gives a unified account of eros. And I end by considering the question how this unified theory of love can be made compatible with the tripartite psychology of the *Republic*.

II

To begin with the theory of the *Republic*: My description of reason there as a form of desire implies an interpretation that may be regarded as controversial and will require defense. For what Plato says at *Republic* 9.580d7 is that for the three parts of the soul there are three pleasures, "one proper to each part, and similarly there are three desires and three rules" (one proper to each part). It might seem more natural to construe the desire proper to reason not as reason itself, but as an attribute or property which reason *has*. I think, however, that any such distinction between reason and its desire cannot be a distinction between the thing and its property but only between two essential aspects of a *single* psychic principle. Plato regularly characterizes this principle on the one hand as the capacity to calculate and to think things through (*to logistikon*) and as "that by which we learn" (580d10), but also, on the other hand, as the *philomathes*, the part which *loves* to learn, and which is "always wholly directed to knowing the truth of how things stand," so that it is called "lover of learning (*philo-mathes*) and lover of wisdom (*philo-sophon*)" (581b9, in book 9). It was precisely by the notion of *to philomathes* (intellectual curiosity and love of learning) that Plato first introduced us to the rational principle in book 4 (435e7), where the mention of this love is immediately followed by a reference to the part "by which we learn" (436a9). Thus the two descriptions, "lover of learning" and "that by which we learn" (or "by which we calculate"), are used both in book 4 and in book 9 as alternative designations for the rational part.⁸ What Plato means, I think, is that nothing could cause us (or

⁸ In addition to the four passages cited see book 4.439d5 (*hōi logizetai*), 9.583a2 (*hōi manthanomen*) and 586e4 (*to philosophon*). "Lover of learning" (*philomathēs*) is of course a standard description of the philosophic temperament, both in the *Republic* (5.475c2, 6.485d3, 490a9, etc.) and in the *Phaedo* (67b4, 82c1, d9, etc.); in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates applies the term to

the soul) to learn if it did not make us *want* to learn. So although we may distinguish verbally and conceptually between the capacity to know and the desire to know, just as we may distinguish between the theoretical capacity to know the truth and the practical capacity to calculate and deliberate, these are not real distinctions for Plato. In each case—theory and practice, reason and desire—we are only distinguishing two aspects of what is, for Plato, a single principle. This unity of theory and practice is so fundamental in Plato's thought that he never makes Aristotle's distinction between *sophia*, the theoretical wisdom exercised in contemplation, and *phronēsis*, the practical wisdom exercised in action and deliberation. This unity of theory and practice has as a consequence or presupposition that the knowledge of truth must also be a knowledge of value, of what is worth pursuing, so that the desire to know the truth will ultimately be a desire to know *and to possess* the good. As Plato tells us in *Republic* 6, the good is "that which every soul pursues and for the sake of which it performs all its actions" (505d11). And since the Form of the Good is the source of all knowledge and all reality, *rational* desire for Plato must ultimately be a desire to know and obtain the good. So the rational part of the soul is (or essentially comprises) not only a desire for knowledge but also a desire for the good, like Aristotle's *boulēsis*. This will become clearer as we complete our sketch of the tripartition.

The three parts are introduced in book 4 by a distinction between: (1) the *philomathes*, the love of learning and the principle by

himself (230d3). As Richard Robinson has noted (*Phronesis* 16 [1971]: 46–47), Plato describes the parts of the soul both as instruments by which *we* do things and also as agents in their own right. However, the instrumental, or faculty, view of the parts must be seen as an expository device to introduce them at the level of the explanandum, since it is *our actions* that are to be explained. The agent-view of the parts ("lover of learning", "lover of honor," etc.), on the other hand, represents them as theoretical entities with explanatory power. Plato's explanation of human character and conduct is given exclusively in terms of the interaction of these parts. There is no room for a person or self over and above the three parts *on the level of the explanans*. References in book 9 to the person "handing over the throne of his soul" to one or another of the parts constitute a picturesque but eliminable feature of Plato's exposition, not to be taken literally as part of the explanatory model. It remains to be seen how far an anthropomorphic conception of the three parts is essential to the model. For an interesting discussion of anthropomorphism here, see Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's 'Republic'* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1981), 142–46.

which we learn, (2) the *thymoeides*, the principle “by which we get angry,” and (3) the money-loving principle (*to philokhrēmaton*) or the part “by which we desire the pleasures concerned with food and begetting and the like” (435e-436a). Thus the parts are distinguished from the beginning by reference to so many different types of drives, desires or impulse.⁹ The third or appetitive part (*to epithymētikon*) will be elaborately subdivided in books 8-9, first into biologically necessary and non-necessary desires, and then the non-necessary desires are further subdivided into lawful and criminal impulses. These criminal desires, which are latent in everyone, show themselves in dreams, as Plato describes in a famous anticipation of the Freudian Oedipal insight: “then, when the rational element sleeps, the wild and beastly part . . . [wakes] and is freed from all shame and reason. It does not hesitate to try to have intercourse with a mother in imagination, or with anyone else, man, god or beast; it is ready for any deed of murder, and will abstain from no kind of food” (9.571c-d transl. after Shorey). Plato’s picture of the *epithymētikon* thus corresponds rather nicely to Freud’s depiction of the id. Struck by this parallel and by the obvious possibility of correlating reason with the Freudian ego, some interpreters have tried to find the superego in Plato’s principle of anger (*to thymoeides*),¹⁰ which he describes as “always wholly impelled to domination, victory, and prestige, and hence called ‘ambitious’ (*philonikon*, literally, “loving victory,” “loving to win”) and *philotimon* ‘loving honor’ ” (9.581a-b). As these terms indicate, Plato’s principle is self-assertive and directed outwards to competition with others, not internalized and self-punishing like the superego.¹¹ It has closer affinities with the love of power and with the desire to be first. In view of this essentially social character, the *thymoeides* is

⁹ See 436b2: The question is whether it is with a different principle in each case “or with the whole soul that we engage in these activities, when we are impelled to do so (*hotan hormēsōmen*).”

¹⁰ A. J. P. Kenny, “Mental Health in Plato’s *Republic*,” in *The Anatomy of the Soul* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 1-27.

¹¹ In the Leontius story the *thymoeides* does seem to act the part of the superego, in reproaching the eyes for their compulsion to gaze at the corpses (439e-440a). But self-reproach cannot be its essential function, since in the parallel example (at 441b) from *Odyssey* 20.17 it is Odysseus’ reason that upbraids his *thymoeides* (for urging punishment immediately, without regard to the larger plan of action).

perhaps more like Aggression than like any other Freudian concept. But we will focus here on the rational part.

Plato's picture of reason begins at the social level with the wisdom of the guardians in book 4: they represent in the state what reason represents in the psyche. Now the knowledge of the guardians will be essentially practical: their excellence will be *euboulia*, "good counsel" or "goodness in deliberation." They must deliberate on behalf of the whole city, and their wisdom will be good judgment concerning the welfare of the city as a whole. The corresponding virtue for the individual will be the excellence of the psychic part which naturally deserves to rule, the *logistikon* which "calculates (*analogisamenon*) concerning what is better or worse" (441c1); which "has a care for the whole soul" (441e5) and "deliberates on behalf of the whole soul and body" (442b6). Wisdom consists in this part's ruling the whole person and giving orders based on "the knowledge of what is advantageous (*to sympheron*) for each of the parts and for the whole which is common to all three" (442c5–8). But if the rational part, both in city and in individual, has as its specific function the practical knowledge of what is good and advantageous, it must by its very nature be able to know and pursue what is best. The part that "loves to learn" must also love to know and obtain what is (or what it takes to be) good. This is the second controversial thesis I shall defend here: that reason in the *Republic* is not only essentially desire but essentially desire for the good. At the level of the individual, reason aims at what is advantageous for each part of the soul and for the whole composed of all three; at the level of the city, wisdom aims at the welfare of the whole community. Hence the goal of rational desire, of reason as such, is neither the good of the individual alone (as it is sometimes said to be, on egoistic readings of Plato) nor the good of the community alone, but the good in every case, the good in general or the Good as such.

This identification, or at least this necessary convergence, of reason with desire for the good can be confirmed from the argument which Plato uses to establish the distinction between reason and appetite. Plato proposes as an example a thirsty man who prevents himself from drinking on the basis of a resistance that comes "from reasoning" (*ek logismou*): thirst pulls him on to drink, but this pull is "over-powered" (*kratein*) by a rational force dragging him back (439b3–d8). Plato has just emphasized that thirst

here must be construed simply as *desire for drink* and not as *desire for good drink* (437d–439a). This passage has sometimes been thought to imply that the appetite (*epithymia*) in question is a “blind craving,” with no cognitive grasp of its object;¹² but, of course, thirst must recognize its object as drinkable and *hence* as desirable. So a minimum of cognition is implied even for the most elemental appetite. A more complex form of cognition is required for other appetitive drives, such as the love of money or the pursuit of a sexual object. And quite definite judgments of a moral sort are characteristic of the intermediate part of the soul, the *thymoeides*, which gets angry when it thinks it (i.e., the person) has been wronged. So a cognitive element of some kind is an essential component in all three parts of the soul.¹³ The reason why Plato emphasizes that thirst as such is a desire for drink as such, and not a desire for hot drink or good drink, is not because he wants to deny a cognitive element to appetite but because he wants to insist upon the appetite’s *indifference* to all considerations other than getting what it wants. In order to establish the distinction between reason and appetite Plato must here define, for the first time, the notion of a desire that is essentially *independent* of any judgment concerning what is good, beneficial, or advantageous (taking these three terms as synonymous). In earlier dialogues, Plato had systematically construed desire as desire for something judged to be good or beneficial.¹⁴ Opinions will differ as to how far this “intellectualist” view of desire represents the position of the historical Socrates, the psychology of a younger, more naive Plato, or (as I believe) a deliberate simplification on Plato’s part, designed to make plausible the insights contained in the Socratic paradoxes. On any reading of this earlier view, Plato must decisively break with it in order to distinguish reason and appetite as separate and potentially conflicting factors in the soul. It is precisely as a desire for what is judged to be good and beneficial that reason is set apart from appetite and the *thymoeides*.¹⁵

¹² J. Annas, *Introduction to Plato’s ‘Republic’* 139.

¹³ This has been argued at length by Jon Moline, “Plato on the Complexity of the Psyche”, *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 60 (1978): 1–26.

¹⁴ *Gorgias* 468b–c, 499e; *Meno* 77c–78b. See Section III, below.

¹⁵ So, rightly, Irwin, *Plato’s Moral Theory*, 195: reason consists of “rational desires for the over-all good.” Similarly, Cooper, *Plato’s Theory*

We must bear in mind that all three parts of the soul are represented by Plato as at least minimally rational in the Humean sense. The two nonrational parts are not only capable of recognizing their objects; they must also make some use of means-end reasoning to attain their goal, at least in the intra-psychic competition with reason. The very possibility of spirit or appetite seizing control implies as much, since it obviously takes some form or analogue of intelligence for these parts to succeed in enslaving reason, to *use* reason for their own ends. (How this is to be understood will be seen below.) But if all three parts are represented as minimally intelligent, what is distinctive of reason are its twin goals: (a) the theoretical love of knowledge, and (b) the practical pursuit of what is good. And it is primarily the second, more practical concern that Plato must rely upon in the arguments to distinguish reason on the basis of psychic conflict. For it is not any theoretical conclusion about the nature of the beverage but only the practical decision that it would be harmful to drink which can explain why the thirsty man resists the impulse to quench his thirst.

In order to see the connection between this argument in book 4 and the fuller psychology of books 8–9 it will help to distinguish three levels at which we might understand Plato to be speaking of the rule of reason in the soul.

1. In the weakest notion of the rule of reason, rational deliberation has no role to play in fixing the ends to be pursued but only in guiding action and desire towards these ends. On this view, any desire will count as rational if it is lucidly pursued, when its consequences are judged advantageous “all things considered.” However, what *counts* as advantageous is independently specified, as in the hedonistic calculus of the *Protagoras*: reason controls only the means, not the ends. Now in fact while we may regard this as a rational life, this is not a case that Plato will describe as one in which reason “rules” (*archei*); though he may

of Motivation, 21 n. 18. But Cooper distinguishes “judgements about the good” from “desires for good that follow upon them,” thus introducing the Aristotelian bifurcation of rational judgement and rational desire. (On p. 6 he thus speaks of reason *having* desires.) I do not think this does justice to the radically different Platonic conception of reason as *constituted* by desire.

say that reason “prevails” (*kratei*) in any particular decision to act or refrain from acting.¹⁶

2. A stronger notion of the rule of reason requires that the ends of action (and not only the means) be rationally determined. For Plato, this means that if reason rules, the goal to be pursued will be defined by a specific conception of human welfare, the minimum version of which is given by the account of virtue in the Socratic dialogues and in the early books of the *Republic* (before the introduction of philosophy in book 5). The rule of reason aims at a good life, specified in terms of the harmonious development of bodily health and psychic excellence.
3. In the strongest notion, reason rules not only by fixing the ends to be pursued and guiding action towards these ends, but by *constituting* the goal of human life through its own philosophical activity. Whereas in (2) the function of reason is strictly practical, here it is both practical and theoretical: it is as knowledge of reality and the Forms (including the Form of the Good) that reason both specifies and provides the content of the good life.

These three levels of the rule of reason are distinguished by progressively richer accounts of reason, corresponding to progressively stronger characterizations of the good as the goal of rational action. The distinction between (2) and (3) coincides with the difference between Plato's account of pre-philosophic virtue in *Republic* 4 and the account of philosophic virtue in books 5–6. (But the stronger view is not an innovation here: both Diotima's speech and the doctrine of the *Phaedo* anticipate these later books of the *Republic* by identifying the best human life with the life of philosophy, including access to the Forms.) Since the *Republic* is explicitly composed as a defense of justice and only secondarily as a defense of philosophy, Plato does not emphasize the distinction between (2) and (3): it is almost without our noticing it that the just man of book 4 is replaced by the philosopher in books 8–9. Hence many of Plato's references to “the rule of reason” seem ambiguous as between (2) and (3). But the contrast between the purely instrumen-

¹⁶ At 439c7 it is essential that it be reason that prevails (*kratein*), though, as we shall see, Plato hints at a more than instrumental role for reason here. In the case of the repression of spendthrift desires in the oligarchic soul, he speaks not of reason prevailing but of some appetites dominating others (*epithymias epithymiōn kratousas*, [554d10]).

tal role of reason in (1) and its teleological role in (2) and (3) is sharply marked: this is the difference between reason as slave and as master of the passions. Thus the *Phaedo* deprecates the slavish conception of virtue based upon a balancing of pleasures and pains, in contrast to the life of genuine virtue determined by wisdom (68d–69c). The *Gorgias* had argued earlier that no version of (1) can be fully coherent unless it coincides with (2), and hence that the only rational life is one that accepts the Socratic notion of the good.¹⁷ A similar argument is implicit in the account of the deviant lives of *Republic* 8–9, where the rule of reason is identified with the life of the just man (here equated with the philosopher). If reason is able to rule in the soul, it will specify the life of virtue (the life of philosophy) as the good to be aimed at. If it does not succeed in doing so, that is because it has been so “overpowered” by spirit or appetite that it mis-identifies the good. Since it is *only* the rational part that can form any conception of the good, even an erroneous conception, the domination of the other parts has the consequence of *causing reason to make a mistake* in its recognition of the ends to be pursued. That is what it means for reason to be enslaved.¹⁸ Reason can rule only if it is enlightened in regard its object, that is to say only in a virtuous soul. And its rule can be fully realized—as in (3)—only if it is fully enlightened, that is, only in the life of philosophy.

Plato could not present his full-strength conception of the rule of reason in book 4, before the appearance of philosophy. But he does not need even the weaker view for his initial argument in support of the tripartite psychology. After all, the tripartite model is designed to apply to human beings generally, not only to virtuous men, much less only to philosophers. Hence Plato’s example is skillfully under-described, so as not to presuppose the notion of reason ruling in the soul that will be specified in the following definition of the virtues.¹⁹ All he requires is a single instance in

¹⁷ See my “Drama and Dialectic in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 1, ed. Julia Annas, (1983), 113–18.

¹⁸ Here I am agreeing with Cooper (*Plato’s Theory of Motivation*, p. 19 n. 9 and p. 20 n. 18), against Irwin, who speaks of the deviant lives as following a “rational plan,” being “controlled by (the) rational part,” or resulting from “a rational choice, made by the rational part” (*Plato’s Moral Theory*, 227–34). I see no textual support for this interpretation.

¹⁹ The application of Plato’s argument seems quite general, since the example is not explicitly limited to the case where reason sets the ends of

which someone refrains from drinking as a consequence of *some* calculation of long-term advantage. But even the weakest conception of reason established by such an argument must explain how it is capable of this result. How can a faculty of cognition and judgment prevail over intense thirst?

Plato's answer here, I submit, is that reason just is, or essentially contains, a primitive desire for the good, an irreducible, non-derivative urge to pursue what it takes to be good and advantageous. That is what it means to claim that the good is "what every soul pursues and for the sake of which it always acts": the good is what we all want *in so far as we are rational*. Whenever our conduct is under rational control, we can say either that it is a *judgment* concerning what is advantageous that determines our action or that we are led by a rational *desire* for what is good. On Plato's view there is no gap between knowing the good and wanting the good. (Even Aristotle's statement that we desire something *because* it seems good to us might have been rejected by Plato as misleading, since it suggests that the judgment and the desire are distinct episodes or events.) Now in terms of the psychology of book 4, wanting the good just means wanting each part of the soul to perform its function in a harmonious way. In the anthropomorphic language with which Plato describes the interaction of these parts, reason's desire concerning the other parts of the soul will be expressed as commands to them to perform in harmony with one another and with its own judgment. So reason's desire to rule in the soul is not some third thing, over and above its judgment and desire for what is beneficial: its desire to rule is just the expression or the spelling-out of its desire for what is beneficial.²⁰

Whether reason succeeds in ruling, that is, whether the other

action but might include the instrumental use of reason in what Plato calls "slavish virtue" (as in the hedonic calculus). However, Plato cunningly insinuates the virtuous *rule of reason* (which is gradually described in the following pages, 440a-441e) by suggesting that the desire to drink in his example is due to excessive "affect (*pathēmata*) or disease" (439d2), thus implying that the rational calculation is aimed at health and welfare. If the role of reason were thought of here as merely instrumental, we would in fact not get the division of psychic parts that Plato wants to establish (for reasons developed by Cooper, *Plato's Theory of Motivation* 7-8 n. 9).

²⁰ Here there seems to be a disagreement with Cooper (p. 6) who ascribes to reason "an innate taste for ruling." In the end, however, Cooper too derives this from the more fundamental desire for good (p. 8).

parts will be persuaded to obey (*peithesthai*) reason's judgment is another matter. In order for appetite and anger to listen to reason, they must be properly trained; hence the need for the scheme of pre-philosophical education in books 2-3. Reason too must be properly trained in order to give the right commands; hence the need for philosophy, and for the theory of knowledge and higher education in books 5-7.²¹ By the end of book 6 we know that the learning part of the soul will not be adequately prepared to rule until it reaches the highest form of learning (*to megiston mathēma*), the only knowledge that can satisfy its desire, namely cognition of the Good itself, "which every soul pursues in all its actions." The principle which we find in earlier dialogues such as the *Gorgias* and the *Meno*, and which was cited in book 4, that "everyone desires good things" (438a3), thus reappears in book 6 in a double form: as the universal desire of all human beings and as the essential desire of reason. Once we realize that for Plato all knowledge culminates in knowledge of the Good, since it is the Good that makes all things knowable as well as making them real and true (6.508e-509b), we see that the love of learning that characterizes the rational part of the soul is ultimately identical with the love of the good that is shared by all mankind, but which, according to Plato, can be fully realized only by lovers of that Form which is truly the Good.

This doctrine is easy to state but extremely hard to understand because we do not clearly see how the Good can be an object for *knowledge*, and still less do we see why or how the Good makes other things real and knowable. I have no solution to propose here to these difficult problems.²² But even without an explication of the

²¹ The theory of the virtues in book 4 is not self-contained, as we can see if we ask what activity of reason constitutes wisdom according to book 4. If reason rules, it aims at the welfare of each part and of the whole as well. But what is the welfare of the rational part? And what is it for reason to do "its own proper work"? Except for an occasional mention of knowledge (428b6ff., 428c11-d8, 442c6), there is no hint of an adequate answer until we reach books 5-7. We can give no non-circular account of what Plato means by the rule of reason until we can give some content to the autonomous (non-instrumental) activity of reason, conceived as love of knowledge and pursuit of the good. And here the notion of what is good must be specified by more than civic concord and psychic harmony, since these both presuppose the notion of the rule of reason.

²² For discussion see G. Santas, "The Form of the Good in Plato's *Republic*", in *Essays in Greek Philosophy*, vol. 2, ed. J. P. Anton and A. Preus (Albany: SUNY, 1983), 232-63. Compare Nicholas P. White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 100-03.

supreme principle of the Good, we can see how the psychic factor defined by the love of knowledge and truth can coincide with the rational desire for the good—for welfare or happiness—which is common to all human beings. For these are just the theoretical and the practical sides of our essential rationality.

As has been seen, all three parts of the soul have a cognitive aspect and all three are also forms of desire. But only at the level of reason do the cognitive and desiderative elements fully coincide, so that their highest fulfillment must be achieved together. Although Plato always avoids mechanical repetition and one-to-one correlation, the erotic ascent to the Form of Beauty in the *Symposium* is essentially equivalent to the dialectical ascent to the vision of the Good in *Republic* 6–7. Without begging the question whether the Form of Beautiful is to be taken as strictly identical for Plato with the Form of Good, we can recognize that the two Forms play precisely the same role in each dialogue, as terminus for the scheme of philosophical enlightenment.

In the *Symposium* this whole scheme is structured by the notion of eros presented as a universal desire for the good. A cursory glance at the earlier dialogues in which this theme is developed will help us appreciate the rather different ways in which this desire is articulated in the *Symposium* and *Republic*.

III

The *Gorgias* is, I believe, the earliest dialogue with any systematic discussion of desire. And it is the *only* dialogue before the *Phaedo* and *Republic* to recognize a contrast between rational desire aiming at the good (expressed by the verb *boulesthai*) and sensuous desires aimed at pleasure (expressed by the term *epithymia*).²³ The desires for pleasure, praised by Callicles as constituting the life-

²³ Aristotle's terminological distinction between *boulēsis* (rational desire) and *epithymia* (appetite) is inherited from the *Gorgias*, probably by way of semi-technical usage in the Academy. The *Charmides* also mentions, in passing, a terminological distinction between *epithymia* aiming at pleasure and *boulēsis* aiming at some good (167e, where *erōs* is said to be directed towards something *kalon*). The author of the *Gorgias* and *Charmides* was obviously not suffering from any "Socratic" illusion that all desire is desire for the good. (And compare the description of erotic emotion at *Charmides* 155d.)

goal of a naturally superior man, correspond roughly to the “appetitive” part of the *Republic*, though they probably would include the anger or “spirited” drives as well.²⁴

One passage even speaks prophetically of “the part of the soul where appetites are found” (493a-b1). But there is no corresponding attempt to define a rational part of the soul. The psychological theory of the *Gorgias* is at best incipient. The possibility of a conflict between desires is not envisaged, although we do hear of a rational choice between the satisfaction of good and bad desires (500a; cf. 491d11, 505a-b, 507e2). In addition, a famous argument of the *Gorgias* implies that what a person *really* wants is not always what he *thinks* he wants: we may be mistaken as to the true object of our own desire.²⁵ A closely related paradox is argued for in the *Meno*: all men desire good things; no one wants what is bad (*Meno* 77c1, 78b4).

The *Meno* supports this paradox with the claim that “no one wants to be unhappy” (78a4-5).²⁶ Similarly in the *Euthydemus*, one of Socrates’ protreptic arguments takes as its premiss: “We all want to be happy” (282a2). As we shall see in a moment, this premiss also serves as the starting point for the Platonic theory of love in the *Symposium*. We come even closer to the doctrine of the *Symposium* in what the *Lysis* has to say about something that is “dear (*philon*) for its own sake.” In a famous passage which constructs and then breaks the regress, “X is dear for the sake of Y, Y is dear for the sake of Z, etc.,” Socrates suddenly introduces the notion of the primary or truly dear thing “for the sake of which all other things are dear” (219c-220b). This alone is truly called dear; other things are dear only for the sake of this primary object, of which

²⁴ There is no trace of the *thymoeides* in the *Gorgias*. Presumably Plato had not yet thought of it as a distinct type of desire; but in any case there would have been no reason to introduce it in the *Gorgias*. A third class of impulses would have spoiled the neat dualism by which Calliclean appetites are opposed to Socratic *boulesthai*.

²⁵ *Gorgias* 468b-c. Here again we have a paradox that Plato echoes in the *Republic*: the tyrannically ruled soul will by no means *do what it wants* (*ha an boulēthēi*) *Rep.* 9.577e1-2; cf. *Gorgias* 468e5 and d5-7.

²⁶ The logic of these arguments is of course questionable. For an attempt to defend them which in my view makes them too tame, see G. Santas, *Socrates* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1979), 187-89. I think these arguments must be understood as protreptic rather than deductive.

they are as it were the deceitful "images" (*eidōla*, 219d3). The identity of this mysterious "original" is left open in the *Lysis*, though an interpretation in terms of the good is hinted at (222c4, d5; cf. 221e3-4). For a fuller account of what Plato regards as truly and primarily dear we turn now to the *Symposium*.

IV

The great speech which Socrates attributes to the priestess Diotima falls into two parts. The first and longer section presents the preliminary or lesser mysteries of love based upon the universal desire for happiness. The concluding portion of Diotima's speech, designed for full initiates, describes the philosophic ascent to the Beautiful itself outside of time and place. It will be necessary to get clear on the relation between the exoteric and esoteric doctrines before we attempt to reconcile this theory with the tripartite account of desire in the *Republic*.

The initial account of love is prefaced by a general definition of desire (*epithymia*) as wanting (*boulesthai*) to get what one lacks or keep what one has (200b-e). Although bodily appetites other than sex are not mentioned, the analysis is broad enough to apply to them as well; it is explicitly extended to love of children, sports, money, fame, and learning, in addition to erotic desires proper (205d, 208c ff.). Eros is first specified as desire for what is beautiful, which includes or is identical to what is good (201c; cf. 204e1, 206a1). But the possession of good things is happiness, and all men desire happiness; this desire neither needs nor admits of any further explanation (205a). Diotima then reinterprets the universal desire for happiness as eros, that is, as the desire to possess good things forever and hence as the pursuit of immortality *by procreation in beauty*, beauty either of body or of soul (206b7). At first sight this definition picks out the erotic as a special case of the general pursuit of happiness. But since Diotima goes on to claim that *all* human beings become pregnant and have a natural desire to procreate, and that at the biological level this can be seen as a pursuit of immortality shared even by the animals, it turns out that specifically sexual activity connected with begetting counts less as a species than as a *sample* of eros conceived as the pursuit of what is lastingly good. The structure revealed in the case of biological

procreation will be found in every type of eros. Heroes, poets and artists, lawgivers and ordinary parents live different kinds of erotic lives because they identify in different ways what the *Lysis* calls "that which is truly and primarily dear," that for the sake of which all other things are valued.

Thus the more popular theory surveys different forms of love, characterized by different choices of the ultimate erotic object. But the *Lysis* had pointed to a single *prōton philon*. The notion of a unique object for the erotic enterprise makes its appearance only in the last section, where Diotima announces the final mysteries of love, "for the sake of which these other mysteries exist" (210a1). The universal desire for lasting possession of what is good, by procreation in beauty, can be fully satisfied only if one is rightly led in erotic matters, correctly informed concerning the nature and possession of the beautiful. One must pass from the love of one beautiful body to the love of all beautiful bodies, then upwards to the love of souls, of moral excellence, of knowledge, and finally to the true knowledge of true beauty, the Beautiful itself. Only the philosopher in contact with the Form can achieve what every human being wants, immortality in possession of the good, since only the Form is itself wholly good and lasting, imperishable (211a–b) and divine (211e3). Diotima's ladder of love is not only the true way to philosophic knowledge; it is also the true path to human happiness. That is, I suggest, why Plato has arranged to have Socrates present this doctrine not in intimate conversation with philosophical associates (as in the *Phaedo*) but at a prominent social occasion before a group of leading figures in Athenian life and culture. The philosopher's victory over the poets in the contest for the crown of wisdom is not the achievement of some narrow specialist but a public claim to be the teacher of what all men want to know. If Plato chose this occasion to reveal his mature doctrine of Forms (as I believe, for the first time) and in connection with the Form of Beauty alone, it was to make clear that the reality of Forms was the highest object not only of knowledge but also of desire, and hence of momentous concern to all men and not only to philosophers.

Diotima's account of the lover's ascent clearly implies that it is a single desire that begins by taking beautiful bodies as its object and ends with the beatific vision of the Form, just as in the *Republic* it is a single cognitive faculty that must be literally converted, turned around, from the shadows on the cave wall to the vision of

objects in the sunlight. The characterization of eros as the desire for procreation in beauty serves precisely to link the carnal lover to the metaphysical lover as participants in the pursuit of a common goal, which only the metaphysical lover, the Platonic philosopher, can fully attain. But that presents us with the problem of Plato's consistency on the subject of desire.

V

The theoretical unification of desire in the *Symposium* is made possible only by ignoring the bifurcation of desire between reason and sensual appetite, which was documented in the *Gorgias*, and which reappears in the *Phaedo* before being replaced by the trifurcation of the *Republic*. In following the *Meno* and *Euthydemus* in construing the universal desire for happiness as a rational desire for what is good, the doctrine of Diotima in effect considers only the kind of desire which the *Gorgias* calls *boulesthai*, and ignores altogether the broader spectrum of Calliclean "appetites." As a consequence it also ignores the phenomena of psychic conflict which loom so large in the *Republic*. Once we take account of the richer psychology of the *Republic*, how are we to reconcile the conception there of three or more independent sources of desire with Diotima's doctrine of eros, which begins with sexuality and the drive to reproduction but ends with the contemplation of incorporeal Beauty? How is the sexual drive rooted in the *epithymētikon* to be "transformed" into a rational passion for the truth, that is, for the Forms? Or must we admit that the theory of eros in the *Symposium* is simply incompatible with the psychology of the *Republic*?

Now the tripartite psychology of the *Republic* is certainly an innovation, a new model designed to do justice to the diversity of human motivation and the facts of conflict. Although there is a hint of tripartition in the *Phaedo*, there is as far as I can see no clear trace of it in the *Symposium* or in any earlier dialogue.²⁷ The

²⁷ We have a foretaste of tripartition at *Phaedo* 68c1-3, where the rational love of wisdom and learning (*philosophos* here, *philomathēs* elsewhere, e.g., 67b4) is contrasted with the non-rational "love of the body" which is characterized as "love of money and honor, either one or both." Tripartition emerges as soon as Plato splits these two "corporeal" loves apart, as he does in fact at *Phaedo* 82c5-8. Some scholars have found the

question then is not whether the *Symposium* anticipates the *Republic* theory of desire but whether it is incompatible with this theory, as at first sight it might seem to be.

There are, however, several considerations against the assumption that the two dialogues are flatly incompatible on the subject of desire. The first consideration is the doctrine of Forms, which is substantially identical in the *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*. It would be strange (though of course not impossible) that Plato should have presented his mature metaphysical theory in three dialogues, one of which contains a psychological doctrine incompatible with that of the other two. (I indicate below how the psychology of the *Phaedo*, though less fully articulated than that of the *Republic*, is entirely consistent with it.) Even more striking is the fact that Plato in the other two dialogues has certainly not *abandoned* the theory of the *Symposium*. The account of philosophical love in the last part of Diotima's speech is not only not contradicted but actually taken for granted by Plato in his presentation of philosophy as a form of eros in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*.²⁸ On this score it is not only the metaphysics but also the psychology of the three dialogues that forms a unified whole. None of this proves that Diotima's theory is compatible with tripartition; but it does at least justify an attempt to reconcile the two.

I suggest two different ways in which we might try to combine the theories of the *Symposium* and *Republic*. My first proposal will be to take eros not as restricted to rational desire nor as the desire of any single part, but as an undifferentiated source of psychic energy or motivation for all three parts, on the model of the Freudian id or libido as a pool of instinctual energy. On my second proposal eros will be identified with rational desire alone, but in a complex relationship with the other two parts of the soul.

The first, or quasi-Freudian, view of eros is suggested by an

doctrine of the "three types of life" in the much vaguer reference at *Symposium* 205d to "those who turn to eros in money-making or love of sports (*philogymnastia*) or love of wisdom (*philosophia*)". So Cornford, "The Doctrine of Eros in Plato's *Symposium*", in G. Vlastos, ed., *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays* 2 (Anchor Books, 1971), 123. Cornford also connects the pursuit of fame (*philotimia*) at *Symp.* 208c3 with "the spirited part of the soul" (*ibid.*, 125). But in the *Symposium* we have only the raw material for tripartition; in the *Phaedo* it is on its way to being organized in triads.

²⁸ *Phaedo* 65c9, 66b7, 66e2-3, 67b9, 68a2-7, *Rep.* 6.485b-d, 490b2-7.

important passage on the rechannelling of desire in *Republic* 6. "When a person's desires incline strongly in one direction, we know that they will be weaker in other directions, like a stream of water directed off into one channel. So when someone's desires have set to flow towards learning and the like, they will be concerned with the pleasures of the soul itself by itself and will abandon the pleasures of the body, if he is truly a lover of wisdom (*philo-sophos*)" *Republic*, (6.485d). Taken literally, the notion of some desires *leaving* the channel of bodily pleasure to direct themselves towards learning would contradict the standard theory of the *Republic* according to which each part of the soul has its own distinctive desires, since learning and bodily pleasure belong to different parts. But if we here introduce a generalized notion of eros as the common source for the desires of each part, we see how the strengthening of desires in one direction will result in weakening desires for other objects. The very same hydraulic model is used by Freud in explaining his concept of sublimation. Libidinal impulses, says Freud, "are related to one another like a network of communicating canals filled with fluid"; these impulses show a great "capacity for displacement," that is, for abandoning their original sexual aim and redirecting the same impulse towards an aim that is more accessible or acceptable. This is the process of rechannelling which Freud calls "sublimation," on the grounds that society will recognize the surrogate aim as "higher."²⁹ The parallel suggests a view of eros as a common pool of motivational energy to be distributed between the three psychic parts in such a way that more for one means less for another.

Plato's reference to rechannelling is not a random image without doctrinal force. The view expressed is of central importance for his theory of the virtues and their unity in wisdom. Both here in the *Republic* and also in the *Phaedo* (see 69a–b) this view helps to make psychologically plausible Plato's claim that the philosopher's love for wisdom and truth will guarantee his possession of the other virtues: other pursuits will seem petty and other pleasures less desirable to one who is gratified by intercourse with the being and perfection of the Forms. In comparison with such an object nei-

²⁹ S. Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* trans. Joan Riviere, (Garden City, N.Y., 1943), 302.

ther profit nor power nor luxury and sensual indulgence will hold any serious temptations, so that the virtues of honesty and temperance will be trivial consequences of this redirection of desire into philosophical eros. The image of rechannelling permits us to see how the pursuit of wisdom so understood might be *causally* responsible for moral virtue.

The conception of eros as a pool of libidinal energy is attractive for many reasons, in view of the fascinating parallel with Freudian insights at other points of Plato's psychology (the tripartition itself, and the recognition of Oedipal dreams already noticed). It would also help to explain one of the more puzzling points in the psychology of the *Republic*, namely that the dominant passion in the tyrant's soul, which is essentially criminal and destructive and represents the extreme opposite of philosophical eros, is nevertheless called by the very same name: *erōs* or lust (9.572e5, 573b7, d4). This identical nomenclature for the two polar extremes would then point to eros as the underlying unity of psychic energy that finds expression in the desires of each part.³⁰

Attractive as it may be, I very much doubt whether this view of eros can be attributed to Plato. It would do nothing to account for the radical divergence of the three parts as independent sources of motivation, and consequently nothing to account for the facts of psychic conflict that are the center of attention in books 4, 8 and 9. Nor does it shed any clear light on the dynamics by which reason can control the other two psychic parts. Above all, this view is strictly incompatible with the presentation of eros in the *Symposium* in terms of the universal *boulēsis* for good things on the part of everyone (205a). For this is just that rational desire for the good we find in the *Gorgias*, *Meno*, and *Euthydemus* as prefiguring both Aristotle's *boulēsis* and Plato's conception of the *logistikon* in the *Republic*. What these parallels with Aristotle and with other works of Plato strongly suggest is that eros in the *Symposium*

³⁰ This Freudian interpretation of Platonic eros in terms of libido was accepted by Freud himself. See his "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego," in the *Standard Edition* of Freud's work, vol. 18, p. 91, where he cites studies by Nachmansohn and Pfister that treat Plato as a precursor of psychoanalysis. There is a similar comment in the preface to the 4th edition of "Three Essays on Sexuality", *Standard Edition* 7, p. 134. I am indebted here to some unpublished work by G. Santas.

should be seen not as undifferentiated psychic energy but as desire directed by a rational concern for what is good. And it is only this more rational conception of eros that can do justice to the close parallel, verging upon coincidence, between the erotic ascent of the *Symposium* and the cognitive progress of the Cave and the Sun. The question then becomes: how can the interpretation of eros in terms of *rational* desire explain the broad scope of eros in the *Symposium* and the rechannelling of desire in the *Republic*?

I want to suggest a solution that emphasizes the degree to which the cognitive and desiderative components go hand in hand at every level, so that the rechannelling of desire and the rule of reason over the other parts of the soul can be understood as alternative descriptions of the same phenomenon. As we have seen, it is by perverting our judgment of what is good and desirable that the lower parts succeed in using reason for their own ends in the deviant lives of *Republic* 8–9: that is what lies behind the metaphors of “enslaving” reason. And it is not by force but by persuasion, by gaining acceptance for its own judgment of what is beneficial, that reason can rule over the other principles and thus can harmonize and integrate the psyche by its “care for the entire soul,” by its “knowledge of what is advantageous for each one and for the whole which is common to all three” (441e5, 442c6). What lies behind the metaphors of psychic harmony and the rule of reason is the complete absence of emotional interference with, or resistance to, the rational appraisal of what is in our best interest.

We have in the *Phaedo* a vivid description of what it means for reason to be enslaved by the lower parts of the soul, which in this dialogue are presented as the desires (*epithymiai*) connected with the body. The philosopher, who is here designated as the *philomathēs*, the lover of learning, will recognize that his soul is fettered and fastened to the body in a cunning prison constructed of desire, from which he must release it by gentle admonition and persuasion (82e–83a). The philosopher will abstain as far as possible from bodily pleasures, pains, and desires because he sees that to undergo these experiences is to suffer cognitive harm: “when one feels intense pleasure or pain concerning a given object, one is forced to regard this thing as clearly real and true, although it is not. . . . Each pleasure and pain is like a nail which clasps and rivets the soul to the body and makes it corporeal, so that it takes for real what-

ever the body declares to be so" (83c-d).³¹ Unless it is enlightened by philosophy, reason is obliged to live in the darkness of the cognitive cave constructed by the sensual appetites or by *thymos*, by ambition and competition for honor: one's ontology is affected by one's favorite pursuits. Conversely, as reason is progressively enlightened (and assuming that good moral training is also available), the cognitive aspect of the lower parts will accept the guidance of reason concerning what is to their own advantage and will moderate their own claims according to the judgment of reason. This is one half of the phenomenon described as the rechannelling of desire. (The other half is the progressive reinforcement of reason's own preoccupation with knowledge and the Good.) It is not that sensual appetite or political ambition is transformed into the love of wisdom; by definition, these desires remain attached to their own proper objects. But they now operate within the limits assigned by reason. As a result of this subordination, the desires of reason directed to its own proper object will be predominant in the over-all economy of the psyche.

How this change takes place is explained in the ladder of love in the *Symposium*. The prison-house of carnal desire is represented by the first stage, in which the initiate is enamoured of a single beautiful body (210a). But a skillful erotic guide will use the initial triggering effect of sexual attraction (like the triggering effect of sense-perception in the *Phaedo's* account of Recollection) in order to get the lover to see his desired object *as beautiful*, and hence as an exemplar of a desirable principle that is to be found elsewhere as well. This is the first step in the cognitive liberation of the rational principle that will permit it to turn its attention towards its proper object. What is affected by this first step is not the sensual desire as such (which belongs essentially to the *epithymētikon*) but the cognitive component *to the extent that it represents the rational principle* temporally trapped in the attachment to a lovely body, as something judged to be good and real and hence as an object of misplaced *rational* desire. What happens in the course of erotic

³¹ In this connection Shorey appropriately cites William James (who appeals in turn to Locke and Berkeley): "Among all sensations, the *most* belief-compelling are those productive of pleasure or of pain." W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 (Dover, 1950), 306, cited by Shorey in "Plato's Ethics," in G. Vlastos, ed., *Plato* 2, p. 28 n. 129.

initiation is that this rational element is directed “upwards,” first to the recognition of beauty as “one and the same” in all bodies: when the lover has reached this stage “he will relax this intense passion for a single body, despising it and thinking it a small matter” (210b5–6). Thus the cognitive shift to a higher form of beauty will result in the devaluation, and hence weakening, of sensual desire. The process continues then in a recognition of “beauty in soul as more precious than that in body” (210b6–7): again it is the cognitive reevaluation that is the key to the upward movement. In the *Symposium*, the rechannelling of desire from physical lust to metaphysical passion takes place by an essentially epistemic process of altering the description under which the object is initially desired, and thus converting the lover’s attention from a view of the world as consisting of individual bodies to a vision of the incorporeal principles from which this phenomenal world derives whatever beauty and rational structure it possesses. This cognitive redirection requires just the sort of dialectical exercise that is described in *Republic* 6–7, so that the initiate may come to see the beautiful images precisely as *images* of a higher Beauty. Like the conversion of the “eye of the soul” in the *Republic*, the education of eros in the *Symposium* is essentially a cognitive enterprise, the liberation of *rational* desire from attachment to an inadequate object and its redirection to its proper goal, “the true knowledge which is knowledge of Beauty itself” (211c7). What the *Symposium* makes clear is what is only partially indicated by the description of rechannelling in the *Republic*: that the process of enlightenment for reason is at the same time a process of reeducation for the desires.³²

VI

In conclusion, I want to suggest that Plato’s theory of desire has certain definite advantages both over the Humean-Davidsonian view of reason and desire and also over the Freudian conception of ego and id. The advantage in both cases is that for Plato reason as a faculty of cognition and judgment is at the same time equipped

³² Irwin, *Plato’s Moral Theory*, 167–71, gives a partially analogous account of the ascent.

with, if not simply identical to, its own autonomous source of motivation. Hence the recognition of an action as good or beneficial—as a component of or contribution to one's welfare—is *ipso facto* a reason, and in favorable circumstances a sufficient motivation, for performing the act. Admitting this practical power in reason itself relieves us of the artificial necessity of inventing a pre-existent desire whenever a rational decision issues in action.³³

The advantage over Freud's view seems to me even more significant. For Freud, "the ego is after all only a part of the id, a part purposively modified by its proximity to the dangers of reality. From a dynamic point of view it is weak; it borrows its energy from the id."³⁴ Freud has such a limited conception of the ego, as the principle of rational knowledge, because of his genetic approach: he begins with babies, who have a very weak sense of "reality." But a theory which derives the faculty of rational cognition from an infantile pleasure-principle is poorly equipped to understand rational decision-making and wholly unable to account for the development of theoretical science and mathematics. By deriving the motivation for rational knowledge and action from basic, irreducible desires to know the truth and obtain what is good, and on the other hand by deriving the content and structure of reason from the nature of things as structured by objective principles of intelligibility, Plato can do more than account for the existence of science and philosophy. He can also explain why, for some people, for example, for a devoted scientist, knowledge is the most important thing in the world, and why, for all of us, it is such a frustrating experience when we somehow cannot bring ourselves to do something that we know very well is the best thing for us to do. The frustration involved in an experience of *akrasia* is best understood as the frustration of a rational desire for what is seen to be good.³⁵

³³ For a sensitive discussion of the issues involved in conceiving reason as a source of motivation see C. M. Korsgaard, "Scepticism about Practical Reason," *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986): 5–25.

³⁴ Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, trans. W. J. H. Sprott (New York: Norton, 1933), 107.

³⁵ If one appeals here to a standing desire for welfare or *eudaimonia* to explain the efficacy of deliberation, we have in effect Aristotle's notion of *boulēsis* or rational desire, which gets focussed on a particular action by a judgment issuing in a *choice* or decision to act (*prohairesis*), the fusion of reason and desire (*NE* 6. 2, 1139b4–5). Plato, recognizing the fusion, saw no advantage in splitting the two apart. On the question of whether his position is defensible, see Section VII.

VII

Postscript. It might be suggested, by a partisan of the two-factor view, that Plato's conception of reason as a form of desire is simply incoherent. What happens to the element of judgement or belief that is fundamental in any analysis of rational thought? Although a belief and a desire may have the same propositional content, surely they represent very different propositional *attitudes*; and the contrast between them can be vividly characterized as a difference of "fit": "We require our beliefs to fit the world, but we require the world to fit our desires."³⁶ If the desire for good is construed as an effort to change the world, it is hard to see how it could be identified with the urge to know the truth, which manifests itself in a judgement as to what is in fact the case. So even if we grant Plato that reason and the desire for knowledge might be thought of as a single psychic principle, it does not seem coherent to identify this principle with desire for the good.

Plato might well respond by suggesting that desire for good is to be construed not as an effort to change reality but to conform *ourselves* to an objective pattern: to "imitate the divine" by setting our own soul in order, and this will include setting our cognitive capacity and our judgements in conformity with the nature of things. Coming to know the world as it is would be part of what it means for us to imitate the divine. But for Plato knowing the world as it is will include knowing what is good. At the limit, knowing the good and loving it will be only notionally not psychologically distinct.

Much more would have to be said to defend such a view. But something of this sort is surely implied by Plato, unless we are prepared to interpret his elaborate parallel between the ladder of love and the climb out of the cave as a mere coincidence.³⁷

The University of Pennsylvania

³⁶ Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 53.

³⁷ An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the University of Helsinki in March 1983 and before various audiences since then, including a lecture at the Catholic University of America in October 1983. I am indebted to my auditors for many valuable comments, and am particularly grateful to Myles Burnyeat and Alexander Nehamas for their detailed criticism.