

What is the Point of the Tripartite Psyche in Plato's *Republic*?

This paper moves from a specific debate in recent Platonic scholarship to more fundamental questions about the place of the theory of the tripartite psyche in the argument of Plato's *Republic*.

Much recent scholarship has centred on the question how, exactly, we should understand the internal workings of the tripartite psyche. Specifically, what cognitive functions are allocated to the two lower parts and is the ideal assumed that of reason's 'control' over the other parts or that of reason's 'persuasion' of them? (See e.g. Hendricks 2004, Stalley 2007, Moss 2008; for earlier stages of this debate, see Gill 1996: 245-60, 2006: 307-13.) However, further reflection on the evidence for this question suggests that the answer is, quite simply, indeterminate. Both in Book 4 and Books 8-9, Plato's Socrates uses language which is compatible with either interpretation. This suggests, in turn, that the focus of this argument is not directed at defining a specific psychological pattern and norm in the way assumed by this kind of scholarship. More broadly, it suggests that we are wrong to look in the *Republic* for a – free-standing, fully worked out – theory of human psychology, just as (by the same token) we are wrong to look there for an analogously free-standing, fully elaborated political theory.

In some ways, this conclusion is unsurprising. On any plausible reading of the *Republic* as a whole, some claims are central to the argument of the dialogue, others are secondary, or, indeed, not fully explored. In this case, the core claim would seem to be that reason should rule (in psyche and polis), and that justice consists in a (psychic or political) structure where this takes place. The question what this rule consists in, whether control or persuasion, and what this implies about the functions of the two lower parts, is not explicitly addressed, and seems not to be resolved even by implication. The focus of the argument moves on, in Books 5-7, to the epistemological and ontological implications of the idea of justice as reason's rule. But it does so without clarifying decisively whether this rule consists in control or persuasion, either at the psychological or the political level. Comments are made both in Books 5-7 and in Books 8-9 that might imply either picture.

The paper closes by reflecting on the problem of trying to extract from the *Republic* determinate and independent doctrines about 'psychology' or 'politics', when the relevant evidence forms part of an unfolding argument which does not seem to be designed to provide those kind of doctrines.

Reading

C. Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy: The Self in Dialogue* (Oxford, 1996)

C. Gill, *The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought* (Oxford, 2006)

H. Lorenz, 'Desire and Reason in Plato's *Republic*', *OSAP* 27 (2004), 83-116.

R. Stalley, 'Persuasion and the Tripartite Soul in Plato's *Republic*', *OSAP* 32 (2007), 63-89.

J. Moss, 'Appearances and Calculations, Plato's Division of the Soul', *OSAP* 34 (2008), 35-68.

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