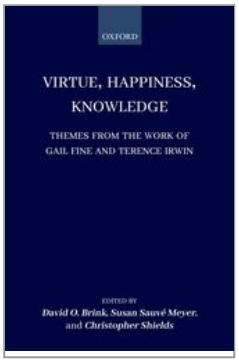

Virtue, Happiness, Knowledge: Themes from the Work of Gail Fine and Terence Irwin
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Self-Mastery and Self-Rule in Plato's Laws

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Abstract and Keywords

Plato's famous image of the divine puppets in Book 1 of the *Laws* illustrates the notion of self-mastery. The puppet achieves self-mastery when its golden cord (*logismos*) wins a struggle against the iron cords (pleasure, pain, fear, and desire). Self-mastery, so conceived, involves internal conflict. This raises a considerable puzzle, since the Athenian endorses a conception of virtue that involves harmony between rational and non-rational motivations, and he has criticized the conception of self-mastery praised by his interlocutors. Yet he presents the puppet image as an illumination of a conception of virtue on which he and his interlocutors are agreed.

Keywords: Plato, virtue, Laws, akrasia, self-control, temperance, courage

I begin with a text that occurs at a pivotal moment in book I of Plato's *Laws*.[1] The Athenian has just concluded his account of *paideia*, the process of training citizens to be good (644a7–8)—not good carpenters, or good sailors, or good businesspeople—but good *tout court* (643d6–644a5). He has in mind the perfect (*teleon*) citizen, 'who knows how to rule and be ruled with justice' (643e5–6). Turning now to the question of what such goodness consists in, he announces that he and his interlocutors have already agreed on a criterion of goodness:

> ATH
>
> Now, we previously agreed that those who are able to rule themselves (*archein hautōn*) are good, while those who are unable to do so are bad.
> CL

> Exactly.
> ATH
>
> Let us return to this phenomenon and clarify further what we take it to be. I hope you will allow me, if I can, to illustrate by means of an image.[2]
> (644b6–c2)

The image he offers is the famous comparison of human beings to divine puppets, pulled by various 'iron cords' (pleasure, pain, and their anticipations) and by the 'golden cord' of calculation or reasoning (*logismos*):

> Consider each of us, living beings that we are, to be a divine puppet—whether constituted as the gods' plaything, or for a serious purpose, we have no idea. What we do know is that these various experiences in us are like cords or strings that tug at us and oppose each other. They pull against each other towards opposing actions across the field where virtue is marked off from vice. Our account singles out one of these pulls (*helxeōn*) and says that each of us must **(p.98)** follow it and pull against (*anthelkein*) the other cords, never loosening our grip on it. This is the sacred and golden guidance (*agōgē*) of calculation, also called the city's common law.[3] The other pulls are hard as iron, but this one is soft because it is golden …. One must always pitch in with the noblest guidance, that of law, since calculation—although it is noble—is gentle rather than violent, so its guidance requires helpers if our golden element is to be victorious (*nika(i)*) over the others.
>
> (644d7–645b1)

He concludes that the point of this 'tale of virtue' is to clarify what is meant by the expressions 'self-mastery' (*to kreittō heautou*) and 'self-defeat' (*to hēttō heautou*):

> Here is how we may vindicate the tale of virtue (*muthos aretēs*) that likens us to puppets. It would become clear, in a way, what is meant by 'self-mastery' and 'self-defeat' (*to kreittō heautou kai hēttō einai*), as well as the manner in which a city and an individual ought to live.
>
> (645b1–4)

On the most natural reading of this stretch of text (644b6–645b4), the Athenian proposes to illuminate the goodness or virtue of the perfect citizen as follows:

> 1. Virtue is to be understood as self-rule (*archein heautou*) (previously agreed)
> 2. Self-rule is to be understood as self-mastery (*to kreittō heautou einai*) (unstated assumption)

3. Self-mastery is to be understood as the victory of our golden cord over our iron cords.

While I think that this is the correct way to read the Athenian’s remarks, it raises several puzzles for the reader of the dialogue.

One puzzle concerns the putative agreement about (1). The Athenian states that he and his interlocutors have previously (*palai*) agreed that ‘those who are able to rule themselves (*archein hautōn*) are good, while those who are unable to do so are bad’ (644b6–7). But where has this putative agreement taken place? At no point in the prior conversation have the Athenian and his interlocutors agreed to any claim using the expression ‘self-rule’ (*archein hautōn*).[4] Even if we take (2) to indicate that ‘self-rule’ (*archein heautou*) and ‘self-mastery’ (*to kreittō heautou*) may be used interchangeably, and we look for places in the prior conversation where the interlocutors have agreed that virtue is to be understood as self-mastery (*to kreittō heautou*), we will still come up short. While Clinias has emphatically endorsed such a conception of human excellence at 626e2–627a2, the Athenian has subjected it to devastating criticism (627c3–628e1).[5]

(p.99) A second, and related, puzzle is that self-mastery, as illustrated in the puppet image, involves internal conflict. It consists of reason’s victory in a struggle against the conflicting pulls of pleasure, pain, and their anticipations. Thus (1), (2), and (3) entail a conception of virtue that involves psychological conflict.[6] But the Athenian, in opposing Clinias’ contention that self-mastery is the highest achievement, has rejected the thesis that excellence consists in victory in battle. On the contrary, he maintains, peaceful relations among potentially conflicting elements are far better than victory over internal opposition (628c9–e1).

My project in this essay is to argue that these puzzles cannot be resolved in any satisfactory way. There is no interpretation of (1) and (3) on which (3) both is a plausible interpretation of the puppet passage and also clarifies a conception of goodness on which the Athenian and his interlocutors have previously agreed. I will argue that there are two competing models of virtue in books 1 and 2 of the *Laws*. One is what I will call the CONFLICT model, which is introduced by Clinias, criticized and rejected by the Athenian, and captured by the victory of the golden cord in the puppet image. The other is what I will call the HARMONY model. It receives its fullest articulation at the beginning of book 2 where the Athenian describes virtue as the ‘agreement’ (*sumphōnia*) between one’s reason and one’s pleasures and pains (653a5–c4), but has its seeds in the Athenian’s criticisms of the conflict model early in Book 1, and in the account of *paideia* that precedes the puppet passage (643b1–644b5). Readers of the dialogue thus must face the question of why the Athenian continues to appeal to the conflict model even though he does not endorse it and has discredited it. I will argue that he does so as part of a dialectical strategy that is defensible in the light of the

legislative project of the dialogue, even if it involves arguing from premises that the Athenian does not accept.

Victory, Conflict, and Self-Mastery

Self-mastery and self-defeat loom large in the discussion from very early in the *Laws*. Right after the Athenian and his two interlocutors have agreed to undertake their leisurely discussion of ‘constitutions and legislation’ (625a6) Clinias is asked to identify the goal of the institutions characteristic of cities on Crete. The latter’s response presents a very dark assessment of the human condition:

> [W]hat most people call peace exists only in name, while in fact every city is by nature always in an undeclared war against every other. If you look at it this way, you will discover, I submit, that it is with war in mind that the Cretan lawgiver established all the institutions that govern our public and private life.
>
> (626a2–7)

(p.100) When questioned by the Athenian on the scope of the war he has in mind, Clinias readily agrees that it is not just cities that are at war with each other, but also villages, households, and individual people (626c3–13). Indeed, he agrees, even within an individual person conflict is pervasive: ‘each person is pitted against himself’ (626d8–9). Victory in this latter conflict, he claims, is the greatest of all victories:

> CL: In the latter contest, Stranger, victory over oneself (*to nikan auton hauton*) is the highest and most excellent of all victories and being defeated by oneself (*to hēttasthai auton huph’ heautou*) is the most shameful and wretched of defeats. These ways of speaking indicate that each of us is engaged in an internal war against himself. (626e2–6)

This ‘internal war’ waged by each person ‘against himself’ is the struggle that will later be illuminated in the figure of the puppets. While Clinias does not here use the locution for self-mastery that we find in the puppet passage (*to kreittō heautou*)—speaking instead of ‘victory over oneself’—the Athenian immediately uses the language of self-mastery to restate Clinias’ thesis: ‘each of us as a single individual is either master of or defeated by himself’ (*ho men kreittōn hautou, ho de hēttōn*, 626e8–627a1). Clinias has put on the table the thesis that self-mastery is the ultimate human achievement.[7]

Of course, it is the Athenian’s questioning that has led Clinias to think about self-mastery. His immediate purpose in doing so, however, is not to illuminate the psychology of self-mastery; this he turns to only much later, when he introduces the figure of the puppets. His strategy at 626e–628d is to broaden the notion of self-mastery beyond its primary application—the case of an individual ‘pitted

against himself’—and extend it to cases where there is conflict within groups, specifically, cases where one faction within a city or a family fights for control against another. While the Athenian is prepared to concede that it may be odd to use the expressions ‘self-mastery’ and ‘self-defeat’ in the case of familial or political faction, his main point is not about linguistic usage (627d1–2), but the structure of the underlying phenomenon.

A crucial feature of this phenomenon, he and Clinias agree, is that the struggle is between a better party and a worse. Self-mastery is the victory of the better party, while self-defeat is the victory of the inferior party.

> ATH
>
> … I take you to be saying … the following. It sometimes happens that a large number of unjust citizens collectively undertake to force their will on the just minority and enslave them—even though all are members of the same tribe and born into the same city. When the **(p.101)** former prevail you say it is right to call the city ‘defeated by itself’ (*hēttōn hē polis hautēs*) and bad, and when they are defeated, ‘master of itself’ (*kreittōn*) and good.
> CL
>
> While this way of speaking is decidedly odd, Stranger, it is undeniable that these things do happen.
> ATH
>
> Now, let’s stay with that point. Presumably there could be many brothers born to a single man and wife and it would not be unheard of if the majority of them turned out to be unjust and the minority just?
> CL
>
> Not at all.
> ATH
>
> We are not seeking to mandate that the household or tribe as a whole be called ‘defeated by itself’ (*hēttōn hautēs*) when the wicked parties win, and that it be called ‘master of itself’ (*kreittōn*) when the latter are defeated (*hēttōmenōn*). That wouldn’t be fitting, since our concern is not with the felicity of this popular expression, but with what is correct and mistaken in the nature of laws.
> (627b2–d4)

The Athenian’s concluding sentence reminds his interlocutors that their investigation of self-mastery is part of a broader inquiry into laws, with the background assumption that a law code is correct if it aims at the right objectives. In response to Clinias’ opening proposal that victory in war against other cities is the goal of Cretan legislation (626b5–c2), the Athenian is now embarked upon an extended argument whose conclusion will be that a good legislator must aim at cultivating internal peace and good relations within the city. As the first step in this argument, he invokes the case of faction within a

family and asks Clinias which is the best outcome for an adjudicator to aim at (627e–628a):

> • The good brothers defeat and kill the bad brothers.
> • The good brothers win, and the bad brothers are made to submit to their rule.
> • The brothers are reconciled with each other in peace and friendship.

While the precise nature of the difference between the second and third options is disputed, it is undeniable that the Athenian takes the third to be better than either the first or the second.[8] The best outcome for the family is not to have the conflict decided in favour of the better party (a scenario that would count as 'self-mastery' in the extended sense), but to avoid the conflict by cultivating peace and goodwill among the different parties.

The Athenian immediately applies this result to the case of a faction-ridden city and asks whether it would be better for the city to face its external enemies with 'one side destroyed and the other victorious, or with friendship and peace achieved through **(p.102)** reconciliation' (628b6–c1). The latter is clearly preferable, Clinias agrees (c2–3). On this basis, the Athenian draw the crucial conclusion:

> The best is neither war nor faction (one should pray to be spared the necessity of either) but rather peace and mutual good will. Victory of a city over itself, it would seem, is not an excellent but a necessary achievement. To think otherwise is like supposing that a disease-ridden body is performing at its best after being flushed out by a purgative—with no thought to the case of a body that needs no such treatment. For the same reason, no proper statesman will assess the *happiness of either a city or an individual* solely and primarily with a view to war against external enemies, and no lawgiver is any good unless he regulates military matters for the sake of peace, rather than regulating peacetime for the sake of war.
>
> (628c9–e1)

He drives home his point by comparing the strife-ridden city to a disease-ridden body, and the city where one faction is victorious over the others to the sick body that has been 'flushed out by a purgative'. Far better than the latter is a body that has no need of the purgative, and the same goes for a city. Thus, a proper legislator will aim to cultivate peace and mutual goodwill in the city.

At this point, readers of the *Republic* might expect the Athenian to make the analogous point about victory over oneself in the personal case. In the *Republic*, justice is presented as a condition of harmony between the various elements in the soul, analogous both to a faction-free city (441e–444b) and to health in the

body (444c–445b). That is, we might expect the Athenian to say to Clinias something like, 'A person who has defeated a rebellion by the inferior elements within him is as depleted as a sick body flushed out by a purgative, or a city that has just emerged from a civil war. Far better is the person who experiences no internal insurrection in the first place'. The Athenian, however, fails to draw such an inference, at least not explicitly. He does indicate that his conclusion applies to an individual as well as a city (*kai pros poleōs …ē kai idiōtou* 628d4–5), but he fails to state explicitly that this means the individual must have internally harmonious relations. Instead, Plato keeps the conversation focused on the case of the city, by having Clinias respond with the observation that his city and Sparta do seem to be organized with a view to war against external enemies (628e2–5). The Athenian will answer this concern with a discussion of the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus and a lengthy disquisition on the virtues that citizens must have in order for the city to avoid faction (629a1–630d1). While none of the interlocutors denies that virtue requires internal harmony, they do veer away from the subject. Although the Athenian has the opportunity here at 628e1 to affirm the HARMONY model for virtue, he conspicuously fails to avail himself of the opportunity.

The Athenian's failure here to draw any conclusions about psychological self-mastery is in keeping with his apparent lack of interest in the phenomenon so far in the dialogue. Immediately after he draws Clinias' attention to the phenomenon of an individual at war with himself, the Athenian immediately turns to apply the notion 'back to the previous cases' (626e7), that is, to the familial and political versions of self-mastery. One might suspect that he has led Clinias to the topic of personal self-mastery simply **(p.103)** as a device to introduce the topic of political strife. The latter topic is important for the Athenian's political argument, since his major contention at this stage in the discussion is that the legislator's priority must be to avoid political faction.

Having devoted no consideration to the sort of internal complexity involved in cases where an individual person is pitted against himself, one might suppose that the interlocutors are not in a position, at 628e1, to articulate the conception of internal psychological harmony that is analogous to the peaceful relations in the faction-free city described in 628c9–e1. Indeed, it is only much later, in the puppet passage (644d7–645b1), that the Athenian considers the internal complexity involved in cases of individual self-mastery and self-defeat. The iron cords of pleasure, pain, and their anticipations and the golden cord of *logismos* are the parties to the conflict in the person previously described as 'pitted against himself' (626d8), and self-mastery is analysed as the victory of the golden over the iron cords. With this understanding in hand of the internal complexity involved in psychological self-mastery, the Athenian is in a position to make the point he failed to make at 628e, that a condition even better than self-mastery is agreement between the golden and iron cords. But the Athenian makes no such claim about the puppets. As I previously argued, the most

straightforward reading of the puppet passage is that the Athenian is construing virtue as self-mastery (the victory of the golden cord over the iron cords), with no mention that a better condition would involve agreement between these psychological forces. Has he forgotten his prior remarks that victory over dissenting opponents is a poor second (a necessity rather than an excellence, as he put it at 628d1), while the best condition will involve peaceful internal relations? In what follows, I will refer to these alternative models of excellence as the CONFLICT model and the HARMONY model.

Does Virtue Allow for Conflict?

Might we avoid these difficulties by supposing that in the earlier passage, where the Athenian rejects the political version of the CONFLICT model (628c9–e1), his failure to draw the analogous conclusion about an individual person indicates that he does not accept the conclusion in the individual case? Perhaps he agrees with Clinias that victory over oneself (in the psychological sense) really is what goodness (human excellence) consists in. In that case, virtue as the Athenian conceives it does allow for internal conflict. If this were his position, then it would *not* be misleading for him to claim at 644b6–7 that the figure of the puppets illuminates a conception of goodness to which he and his interlocutors have already agreed. While he didn’t explicitly endorse the CONFLICT model for personal virtue at 628e, he left it unchallenged.

Some interpreters have indeed proposed that, for the Athenian, a virtuous person may still experience psychological conflict. For example, Elizabeth Belfiore has proposed that, in contrast to the *Republic*, the virtue of temperance (*sōphrosunē*) in the *Laws* involves a balance of opposing powers, in which there is a ‘constantly renewed **(p.104)** combat against the anti-rational’ (Belfiore 1986: 428–33, 429). Christopher Bobonich finds that, on the Athenian’s view, ‘a courageous person may not be entirely free of misdirected fears and desires … but is able to resist them’ (Bobonich 2002: 289; cf. 350, 546n122). However, it is implausible to suppose that this is the Athenian’s view *tout court*, since at the beginning of book II (653a–c) he outlines in great detail a conception of virtue on which there is agreement (*sumphōnia*) between reason on the one hand and one’s pleasures and pains, loves, and hates, etc., on the other hand. This is exactly the model of individual virtue (the HARMONY model) that we would expect him to endorse, given that he has criticized the CONFLICT model and endorsed the HARMONY model in the political case—criticisms that he articulates *before* the puppet passage. Moreover, the account of *paideia* at 643b–644b, which immediately precedes the puppet passage, speaks of shaping the ‘pleasures and desires’ of citizens (643c7–8; cf. 643e5), so it too fits the HARMONY model rather than the CONFLICT model.

To be sure, the Athenian can grant, in cases of conflict between the ‘golden’ and ‘iron’ elements in a person’s psyche, that it is *better* for the rational element to win the struggle than to be defeated. Along these lines one might argue that

even if the best psychic condition is one of harmony, victory of the sort modelled in the puppet passage will still be good and admirable.[9] Since the prior agreement that the Athenian proposes to elucidate in terms of the puppet image does not explicitly invoke virtue (*aretē*), but instead makes claims about what a good person must be able to do (644b6–7), one might propose to resolve the puzzle by taking the self-mastery illuminated by the puppet passage to model a condition that is good, even if it is not virtue.

However, this is not a plausible solution to our interpretive puzzle. First of all, the Athenian describes the puppet image as a 'tale of virtue' (*muthos aretēs*, 645b2)—so we are entitled to construe it as proposing a conception of excellence, not a lesser degree of goodness. Second, the criticisms that the Athenian has explicitly levelled against the CONFLICT model and in favour of the HARMONY model in the political case do not treat victory over internal opposition as something good and desirable, even if second best. Rather, he concludes that victory in such cases is 'a necessity' (628d1), that is, a drastic measure called for in a dire situation. Victory in such situations is choice worthy only in the way a purgative is. If we take our cue from the Athenian's assessment of political self-mastery, then we should see the person who is victorious over conflicting internal impulses as debilitated and weakened—hardly in a position to perform well in the challenges he faces. This is a much less positive assessment of the CONFLICT model than we find in the puppet passage. So, we cannot dissolve our puzzle along these lines.

(p.105) Does Reason's 'Victory' Eliminate Internal Conflict?

An alternative strategy for dissolving the puzzle is to deny that the victory of the golden over the iron strings in the puppet is an instance of the CONFLICT model. On this reading, we should accept that the Athenian and his interlocutors agree that the superiority of the HARMONY model to the CONFLICT model applies both to the political and the personal case, even though they do not explicitly draw the latter conclusion at 628c9–e1. We may accordingly suppose that this tacit endorsement is the 'previous agreement' about goodness referred to at 644b6–7. With these presuppositions, we should expect that the puppet image expresses (or is at least consistent with) the HARMONY model.

It has become popular in recent years to interpret the puppet image along these lines (even if not explicitly for these reasons). For example, Emmanuelle Jouët-Pastré construes the self-mastery recommended by the Athenian as a 'harmonization' of the puppet's movements.[10] Dorothea Frede proposes that only the iron strings pull against each other, while reasoning exerts its control over them by giving them their content and direction (Frede 2010: 217–20). Julia Annas proposes that the golden string does not oppose the iron strings with brute force, but rather manipulates them, shaping them and giving them direction (Annas 1999: 142–4).[11] Joshua Wilburn has denied that *logismos* pulls the agent towards specific actions (Wilburn 2012: 32–3). Most recently, Malcolm

Schofield has proposed, against my own construal of the golden cord as pulling against the iron strings (Meyer 2015: 181–2), that the moral of the puppet passage is that *logismos* is 'not a force pulling at us like pleasure and pain'; victory over oneself is a matter of a person 'translat[ing] into action the deliberations he has himself engaged in' (Schofield 2016: 146, 148).[12]

However, these interpretations are hardly the most straightforward reading of our passage, which refers to all of pleasure, pain, anticipations, and *logismos* as 'pulls' (*helxeōn*, e5). It says they 'draw against each other (*anthelkousin*) towards opposing actions' (644e3; the verb is repeated at 644e6). While reason's pull is also labelled 'guidance' (*agogē*) at 645a1, 7, which might suggest it is something other than a pull,[13] Plato elsewhere uses *agogē* to refer to the non-rational pull of appetites and emotions.[14] Granted, he does here characterize reason's pull as different from that of the iron strings. It is 'gentle' rather than 'violent', and consequently needs 'helpers' if it is to be **(p.106)** 'victorious' over the others (645a6–b1). But in identifying victory as the objective he is invoking the CONFLICT model. Indeed, the very necessity of 'helpers' underscores the fact that *logismos* is the weaker party in a struggle.

I think that the 'harmonizing' interpretations of the puppet image that I have just mentioned are most plausible as proposals about what the Athenian really thinks about virtue, the latter being the HARMONY model that he articulates explicitly at 653a–c. I am also prepared to concede that the further comments the Athenian offers in elucidation of the morals to be drawn from the puppet passage are compatible with the HARMONY model. Here is the fuller statement of those lessons (including the opening lines, 645b1–2, previously quoted):

> Here is how we may vindicate the tale of virtue (*muthos aretēs*) that likens us to puppets. It would become clear, in a way, what is meant by 'self-mastery' and 'self-defeat' (*to kreittō heautou kai hēttō einai*), as well as the manner in which a city and an individual ought to live. A person must grasp within himself the true account concerning these pulls and live in accordance with it, while a city, having received this account from a god or from the person who understands these matters, must establish it as law and conduct its internal and external affairs accordingly. In addition, the tale gives us a more lucid articulation of virtue and vice, and greater clarity here will perhaps shed light on education and various other practices, particularly the drinking party.
>
> (645b1–c4)

The 'true account concerning these pulls' (b4–5) seems to capture the description of *logismos* as something that evaluates the iron strings (644d1–2). The life in 'accordance with' such an account invoked in the present passage need not be a life in which the golden cord wins a struggle against the iron

cords. It could equally characterize a life in which there is no struggle between the cords, or even one in which (on the interpretations of Frede and Annas) the golden cord informs and gives content to the iron cords. As such, it would be consistent with the HARMONY model of virtue that the Athenian will articulate explicitly at the beginning of book II (653a–c), and for which he has prepared the theoretical grounding by rejecting the CONFLICT model advocated by Clinias earlier in book I. However, I still deny that the HARMONY model captures or is consistent with the image of the puppets (644d7–645b1),[15] for the Athenian portrays the puppets as subject to internal conflict and advocates victory as the solution to that conflict.

One might object that interpretive charity requires us to seek an interpretation of the puppet image that accords with the HARMONY model, since the Athenian has already laid the groundwork for that model and will soon explicitly affirm it. However, even if we interpret the puppet image as illustrating HARMONY rather than CONFLICT, we will still be left with the first of the two puzzles identified at the beginning of this essay. That puzzle concerns the Athenian’s assertion that he and his interlocutors have **(p.107)** previously agreed that a good person is able to ‘rule himself’ (644b6–7). This criterion of goodness is what the puppets image is supposed to clarify (644b9–c2), and if we are to interpret that image as illuminating the HARMONY model for virtue, then the Athenian must mean at 644b6–7 that he and his interlocutors have previously endorsed the HARMONY model. If the implication is correct, then Clinias, who has grudgingly[16] conceded that the HARMONY model is superior to the CONFLICT model in the political case, has tacitly accepted the same point about the individual case. But once again, we must ask where this tacit agreement has taken place. Presumably it would have occurred by 628e5, which marks the end of the critique of the CONFLICT model. There is, however, ample textual evidence that well beyond this point in the conversation, Clinias and Megillus continue to endorse the CONFLICT model for persons, and the Athenian continues to offer it for their approval.

The Persistence of the CONFLICT Model

When Megillus is asked to enumerate the institutions that train Spartan citizens in courage, he invokes ‘a large set of activities that involve endurance,’ including ‘boxing matches and the raids that regularly involve a severe beating, … going barefoot and sleeping without bedding in the winter’ and competing in the ‘naked games’ that take place ‘in the worst heat of summer’ (633b5–c7). The Athenian responds by making explicit Megillus’ assumption that courage involves struggle, and asks him whether the struggle is only against pains, but also against pleasures:

ATH

> … Let's consider what we take courage to be. Does it amount quite simply to a battle against fears and pains alone? Or does it also oppose yearning and pleasures …?
> MEG
>
> That's what I think. It opposes all these things.
> ATH
>
> Now, if I recall our previous discussion correctly, our friend here spoke of a city being 'defeated by itself' and likewise a man. Isn't that so, Stranger from Knossos?
> CL
>
> Quite true.
> ATH
>
> So now, is it the person defeated by pains whom we call bad, or also the one defeated by pleasures?
> CL
>
> Even more so, I think, in the case of pleasures ….
> (633c8–e3)

The Athenian is clearly invoking a CONFLICT model for virtue. The 'previous discussion' to which he refers, in which Clinias 'spoke of a city being "defeated by itself" and likewise a man' must be 626d–e, where Clinias first invokes self-mastery. Most interesting for our present purposes, the Athenian indicates here that he and his interlocutors agree with Clinias' proposal. (Note the first-person plural: 'the person whom **(p.108)** *we call* bad'—633e1.) The present passage, then, must underwrite the Athenian's later claim, at 644b6–7, that he and his interlocutors have already agreed that 'those who are able to rule themselves are good, while those who are unable to do so are bad.'[17] But in that case, the prior agreement was to the CONFLICT model. Since the puppet image is offered to elucidate the phenomena invoked in that prior agreement, we should expect the image to model an individual person's victory over himself (self-mastery in the personal sense). And this, I have argued, is the most natural way to read the image.

Conclusion

I conclude that there is no satisfactory resolution of the interpretive puzzles with which we began. There is no interpretation of the puppet passage on which it both captures the HARMONY model advocated by the Athenian and illuminates a conception of virtue that both the Athenian and his interlocutors endorse. Rather, we have seen that the Athenian persistently encourages his interlocutors to think of virtue in terms of the CONFLICT model long after he has established the HARMONY model's superiority.[18]

Why does Plato have the Athenian proceed in this puzzling manner? No doubt the CONFLICT model for virtue is attractive to Clinias and Megillus, since it resonates with their militaristic ethos, and it is hard to deny that the Athenian finds that model deeply misguided. Nonetheless, the difference between the CONFLICT model and the HARMONY model turns out to be unimportant for the purposes of establishing the main results of the legislative inquiry in book I. We may summarize those results as follows. A legislator must aim not simply at making a city victorious in war against its enemies, for which it must cultivate courage in its citizens. His more important aim is to keep the city free from faction. To that end, the city must cultivate the virtues of justice and temperance in its citizens, not just courage. To cultivate this broader palette of virtues, a society must have a system of education that addresses people’s pleasures and desires, not just their pains and fears. Whether one conceives of the virtues to be cultivated by such an education in terms of the CONFLICT model or in terms of the HARMONY model, one has reason to endorse a system of education that pays attention to all the iron strings, not just to pain and its anticipation.

Indeed, one can make the case that the self-mastery captured by the CONFLICT model is a developmental stage on the way to the full virtue captured by the HARMONY model—that repeated success at resisting the pull of opposing desires and fears will result in retraining those desires and fears so that they agree with rather than oppose the golden cord.[19] If this is the case, then one can justify, to proponents of the CONFLICT model, educational institutions required by the HARMONY model. **(p.109)** This, I propose, is what the Athenian is doing in book I of the *Laws* when he appeals to normative beliefs that are deeply held by his interlocutors but that he himself does not accept.

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Notes:

([1]) It gives me great pleasure to dedicate this essay to my teachers Gail Fine and Terry Irwin, in thanks for their generous support and guidance over many years and in appreciation of the fine example they have set in their own work, both as teachers and as scholars. I would also like to thank David Brink for his careful written comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

([2]) Translations of the *Laws* are from Meyer 2015, with occasional modifications. The text translated is that of des Places (1951).

([3]) According to the alternative translation defended by Schofield 2016: 140–1, by Schofield and Griffith 2016: 59-60, and by Nightingale 1999: 104n12, *logismos* ‘calls in aid the law common to the city’.

([4]) At 627e1 the Athenian uses the expression ‘rule themselves’ (*archein autous hautōn*), but in that context, it means political self-determination, not a psychological condition that the puppet image can illuminate. I discuss the psychological use of the expression (which we find at *Meno* 86d6 and *Gorgias* 491d4–8) in Meyer 2015: 169–72.

([5]) 626e–627a is generally taken to be the locus of the prior agreement, although Schofield and Griffin 2016: 58 and Schöpsdau 1994: 228 rightly mention 633d–e as well, a passage that I will discuss.

([6]) I use the label ‘psychological’ for convenience, as a general characterization of the pleasures, pains, anticipations, and calculations (644c4–d3) that are modelled by the puppet’s iron and gold strings. It is, however, worth noting that neither the term ‘*psuchē*’ nor its cognates is used in the puppet passage, or in the other passages where self-mastery is invoked.

([7]) One might object that Clinias’ precise claim is only about the greatest victory, leaving open that other achievements may be greater. But the reference back to this passage at 633d5–e2 indicates that the Athenian interprets it as a general criterion of goodness and badness and at his paraphrase of Clinias’ remarks at 627b7–8 glosses ‘master of itself’ as ‘good’.

([8]) Against Leo Strauss’ contention that the third option is ranked the worst by the Athenian (Strauss 1975: 5), see Meyer 2015: 91.

([9]) David Riesbeck has argued (in private correspondence elaborating upon his remarks in Riesbeck 2016) that even if virtue is a condition of HARMONY, it must be cultivated in a process whose earlier stages will involve battling against conflicting inclinations. So even if the Athenian does not take self-mastery to be virtue, he still takes it to be an important achievement.

([10]) ‘L’homme doit donc sans cesse essayer de devenir maître de lui-même en harmonisant les mouvements de la marionnette qu’il est. La victoire sur soi est l’établissement d’une harmonie et d’un accord entre ses affects et le *logismos*. (Jouët-Pastré 2006: 42).

([11]) Terence Irwin’s description of the golden cord as ‘controlling [a person’s] feelings of pleasure and pain’ (Irwin 1995: 351) also seems to adopt this line of interpretation.

([12]) Still, Schofield appears to allow that this involves resisting the pull of pleasures and pains, and hence does not after all do away with the conflict model (Schofield 2016: 148). His main contention, in any case, is that the puppet passage invites the careful reader to identify the verdict of *logismos* as the activity of the self.

([13]) Indeed, England 1921: 256 construes it as education, invoking 659d2 and 819a5; against this see Meyer 2015: 181, and on the iron strings more generally see Meyer 2012.

([14]) *Republic* 604b1; *Phaedrus* 238c3.

([15]) It is important to distinguish between the image itself (644d7–645b1, quoted in full at the opening of my essay) from the psychological preamble (644c3–d6) and from the subsequent commentary that draws morals from the image (645b1–c6).

([16]) ‘While (*men*) your argument appears sound in a way (*pōs*), Stranger …’ (628e2–3).

([17]) Schofield also notes this connection (Schofield and Griffith 2016: 58n13).

([18]) Indeed, he continues to invoke the struggle against pleasure, pains, desires, and fears in book I even after the puppet passage. See, for example, 647a4–6, 647c7–d8, 648c8–e5.

([19]) Aristotle’s thesis that virtue of character is formed by habituation would be an instance of such a view (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2.1–4).