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Question 3

In this paper, I will describe and analyze the argument advanced by Socrates and Glaucon in Book IV of *Republic*: that the soul contains three distinct entities accounting for different forms of motivation. I will begin by recounting their exchange before assessing its validity from a logical perspective. I will then examine some edge scenarios that I feel do not harmonize with Plato’s portrayal of the soul and see if these cases can be easily reconciled with an expanded definition. On nomenclature, I aim to use Plato when referring to the progenitor of *Republic*’s ideas, and Socrates when referring to the character in the dialogue.

**Part I: The Argument**

Socrates begins his inquest using his and Glaucon’s most recent conclusion. They have agreed that the perfectly just city is comprised of three distinct classes, each with a distinct purpose and motivation: moneymakers, auxiliaries, and guardians. Socrates argues that if a city possesses certain traits, its citizens must also possess those same traits on an individual level. Therefore, individuals must possess traits similar to the agents of the just city. If this is not the case, he says, then how could the citywide traits come about? Glaucon quickly assents to this point and the two advance their discussion with the understanding that there are three different motivations in an individual’s soul.

Socrates turns his focus to whether each of these motivations are administered by one unified soul, or instead by some number of unique entities. His approach is a tautological one; he aims to find competing motivations within an individual when faced with certain scenarios. This competition, he argues, must imply that there is more than one aspect of personality at work, since one faculty cannot manifest two contradictory interests. After a brief tangent to address possible objections, Socrates and Glaucon examine the feeling of thirst as an instance of an individual’s appetite. The thirsty individual wants only to drink and is compelled to act on that impulse. However, we can easily recount instances where we were thirsty, but did not immediately act to satisfy that need. This, Socrates, argues, is evidence of a second faculty affecting the soul, which arises from reason. Reason is notably able to supersede an individual’s appetite, as is shown by the ability to not drink even when thirsty.

The investigation then turns to the spirited element of the soul, and whether it is controlled by a faculty separate from appetite and reason. Glaucon initially posits the opposite, that spirit is similar in nature to appetite, and so is not its own faculty. Socrates responds by recounting the story of Leontius, who had an appetitive desire to look at a pile of corpses but prevented himself from doing so out of anger. We again are faced with a situation where an individual faces two competing motivations. But since anger is not a product of rational calculation, this competition provides evidence for a third faculty governing the soul’s spirit. Socrates further states that spirit provides support for reason, in the same manner that a city’s auxiliaries provide support for its guardians. Spirit remains distinct from reason, though, as shown by the case of small children, who can have spirit but do not yet possess the ability to reason. With this statement, Socrates has completed his attempted proof that the soul has three parts.

**Part II: Examination**

**2a: Criticism of Argument –** I am not convinced by the methodology used by Socrates to make this argument. He and Glaucon agree that finding a contradiction between an individual’s motivating interests imply that there is more than one faculty acting on their behalf. However, I feel that he does not sufficiently explore the possible contradictions that can occur, instead cherry-picking some clear-cut examples to support a preconceived notion that there must be three parts to the soul.

There are situations in which motivations compete that cannot be easily explained by the model put forth by Plato. While reading the passage, I found myself thinking about the idea of taste aversion. Taste aversion is an example of classical conditioning in which a human or animal avoids food or drink that they have subconsciously associated with sickness, such as nausea or vomiting (Nicholson). Taste aversion conditioning can even occur when the ingested substance has not directly contributed to any sickness. Someone who eats an apple hours before a stomach virus causes them to vomit will nevertheless avoid apples long after they have recovered.

I struggle to see how taste aversion fits neatly into Plato’s model of the soul. In the dialogue with Glaucon, Socrates himself places the desires for food and drink under the purview of the soul’s appetite. The appetite, according to Socrates, feels only desire, and only refrains from exercising these desires due to control from reason and spirit. But the subconscious nature of taste aversion suggests that the afflicted individual is relying on something other than reason for their avoidance of a food; in fact, it can be considered *irrational* to have an outsized reaction to a food after associating it with sickness.

This discussion on taste aversion can likely be extended to all our subconscious behaviors that result from evolutionary tendencies. This is further evidenced by the famous tendency of loss aversion, that humans are more likely to avoid losses than pursue gains. Evolutionary psychologists have theorized that this tendency relates to the lives of early humans, where taking unnecessary risks could mean starving to death and being removed from the gene pool. That this behavior is irrational and automatic suggests that it cannot be drawn from pure reason. While it is unfortunate that Ancient Greece did not prioritize research into evolutionary biology, possibly due to its deeply entrenched theistic views, the behaviors that we inherit from evolution do not fit into one of the categories of Plato’s model of the soul.

**2b: Plato’s response –** It is interesting to consider how Plato’s reasoning would change if he did possess our current knowledge of evolutionary biology (I do not claim to be well-versed enough in Plato to steadfastly argue on his behalf, so my thoughts on this reasoning should be taken more as loose suggestions than actual conjectures). He could possibly call on his theory of knowledge to defend his organization of the soul. We know from the slave boy interaction in *Meno* that Plato is a proponent of the theory of recollection; that learning is merely the process of recollecting knowledge possessed by one’s immortal soul. As such, Plato could argue that we recollect our evolutionary biases in the same manner, only we do not do so consciously. The process of developing a taste aversion, even when a food has not caused us to become ill, could be a flawed recollection from one’s soul that implicitly occurs when we feel sick. Therefore, reason is still used to control appetite when encountering such evolutionary biases, which is consistent with Plato’s model.

Even so, in *Meno* 86d, Socrates specifically states that one must be asked questions to recall knowledge possessed by their soul, which does not happen in these cases of evolutionary psychology. This statement, that evolutionary biases come from a flawed soul, could even undermine Plato’s general theory of knowledge, as it is difficult to reconcile how one would recollect knowledge from a soul that is not always correct. To maintain his theory of learning as it relates to the soul, I believe Plato would not be able to categorize evolutionary psychology as a product of reason.

I see two possible responses from Plato that could explain our evolutionary biases without the use of the soul’s reason. First, Plato could argue that this knowledge acquired through evolution belongs to the body, rather than the soul. I do not know how this exactly fits into Plato’s overall theory of knowledge, but it could explain how we can learn without the process of recollection. That animals also experience these evolutionary biases could provide evidence for the knowledge not belonging to the soul, instead being a series of responses to one’s immediate environment. Second, evolutionary biases could affect the soul’s appetite instead of reason. This would not involve learning; rather, the use of conditioning could be interpreted as reinforcing certain desires over others, creating familiar pathways that act as a default for our future actions. This could be a challenge to argue, as Plato seems to emphasize in *Republic* that the appetite’s desires are unconditional.

**Part III: Conclusion**

Overall, Plato’s model of the soul is an interesting argument about a very ethereal subject. I think he is correct in his general assessment of our personalities, that we have varying motivations which can affect our behavior based on how we bias our thinking towards each of them. I also believe in his overall assessment of the soul, that it is at its most stable when the different parts are organized in a harmonious manner. However, I do not think this argument is fleshed out enough to stand in the face of a rigorous challenge to its validity. As shown with the example of evolutionary psychology, the notion of motivation, as we understand it now, is much more nuanced than during Plato’s time.

I do think Plato’s argument could hold water if it was less rigid in its claims. We see a similar assessment of motivation in Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, with the id, ego, and superego being analogous to appetite, spirit, and reason, respectively (Cohen). This theory, while also not widely accepted in modern times, is not as strict in its goals and can therefore be more ambiguous in its claims. I suppose that it is the nature of philosophical problems to be strict, but it seems as if Plato is placing unnecessary constraints onto his organization of the soul. It is also possible that Plato should not be trying to answer the question of motivation in the first place, as he is delving more into psychology than objective philosophy. As such, I believe that Plato’s theory of the soul presented in *Republic* is a good starting point for thinking about human motivation but does not hold up when subjected to modern standards.

Works Cited

Cohen, Elliot D. “Did Plato Lay the Groundwork for Freud’s Psychoanalysis?” *Psychology Today*, 12 Dec. 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-would-aristotle-do/201912/did-plato-lay-the-groundwork-freud-s-psychoanalysis>.

Nicholson, Nigel. “How Hardwired Is Human Behavior?” *Harvard Business Review*, 1 Aug. 2014, <https://www.hbr.org/1998/07/how-hardwired-is-human-behavior>.