



Kinds of Unity of the Soul in Plato

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Abstract: In my study, I investigate aspects of Plato's analysis of the kinds of unity of the individual soul. The text to which I shall refer in my essay is Plato's Republic. Throughout Plato's Republic, the soul is represented as a composite entity. Since any soul is composed of different parts, namely the rational part, the spirited part and the appetitive part, the soul can have different developments. On the one hand, the parts of the soul are given; on the other hand, the development of the parts of the soul is not given but depends on education and on the influence exercised by society. Thus, the kinds of unity of the individual soul can be different from each other depending on the part of the soul which leads the whole soul. Only the unity produced by the rational part corresponds to a morally healthy condition of the soul, whereas the prevalence of the other parts brings about unhealthy conditions of the soul.

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Introduction:

In my essay, I analyse some aspects of Plato's inquiry into the unity of the individual soul. The text to which I shall refer for my analysis is Plato's Republic. Throughout Plato's Republic, the soul is represented as a composite entity: since the soul is composed of different parts, i.e., the rational, the spirited and the appetitive part, the soul can have different developments depending on the part of the soul which is most carefully cultivated by the individual and which takes the upper hand in the soul. The different developments of the individual are caused by the different forms of leadership present in the soul. The right kind of unity of the soul does not come about by itself: in order for the right kind of unity to be reached, engagement, effort, study, and self-examination are required. All other kinds of unity will bring about, to different degrees, negative results both

for the individual and for the society in which the individual lives.

The parts of the soul are given: the individual's soul is composed of these and not of other parts. This structure is not modifiable. The development which the parts of the soul experience, on the contrary, is not given, but depends on education and on the influence exercised by society. Hence, the kinds of unity in the individual soul can be different depending on the part that dominates within it. Correspondingly, since society is, in Plato's view, the result of the externalisation of the individual souls which are present in it, any society evolves depending on the tendencies of the individuals who compose the society itself. Only the unity produced by the rational part can lead the soul to a morally healthy condition, whereas the prevalence of the other parts of the soul brings about unhealthy conditions of the soul itself. The prevalence of the appetitive part can lead to

a destructive and self-destructive condition of the soul; correspondingly, this prevalence can bring about destructive tendencies in society. In books VIII and IX of the Republic, Plato analyses the progressive degeneration of the soul and of society.

Individuals are exposed entities: they are exposed to the danger of the loss of the correct kind of unity, they are exposed to the degeneration of the soul, and they are exposed to the intellectual decadence which is at the same time a moral decadence. Since the soul of the individual is an entity composed of different elements, and since these elements can be in a condition of mutual strife, individuals are naturally exposed to the danger of degeneration of the soul and of the disintegration of the unity of the soul. The way to the development of the rational part is long and difficult.

Plato considers at the same time two aspects of the soul: on the one hand, he analyses the

correct condition of the soul, which brings about the right kind of unity between the parts of the soul, on the other hand, Plato inquires into the not correct condition of the soul, which brings about the disintegration of the correct unity of the soul and which leads to the dominance of the other parts of the soul: these too are in a certain sense forms of unity of the soul since there is a dominant component of the soul also in these negative cases. These forms of unity are forms of negative unity: they can lead the soul exclusively to negative results .

Justice and injustice, health and unhealth, harmony and strife

The roots of the questions regarding the unity of the soul are exposed in Republic IV . Throughout his inquiry, Plato shows that the soul can have a unity produced by the rational part. It is nonetheless also possible that the soul precipitates in a condition of

civil war between its rational part and its appetitive part: the evolution of the soul is open; the composition of the soul is exposed to instability. Therefore, the unity of the soul is not immediately given: an appropriate education for the soul is needed. In order that the civil war in the soul can be avoided, the rational part ought to rule. In Republic IV, 441 Plato asserts :

‘Therefore, isn’t it appropriate for the rational part to rule, since it is really wise and exercises foresight on behalf of the whole soul, and for the spirited part to obey it and be its ally?

It certainly is.’

The rational part of the soul can lead the whole soul since only the rational part of the soul is wise. The leadership of the rational part corresponds, on closer inspection, to the only way in which a soul can be correctly led. All other forms of leadership are negative. As regards the other forms of leadership, Plato suggests that

the lack of leadership of the rational part will bring about a condition of degeneration of the soul. This degeneration is exposed by Plato in the books VIII and VIII of the Republic: the weakening of the rational part brings about a series of degenerations of the soul. Either the rational part leads, or there will be, as an unavoidable consequence, degeneration. Plato asserts in Republic IV, 442:

‘And we’ll call him wise because of that small part of himself that rules in him and makes those declarations and has within it the knowledge of what is advantageous for each part and for the whole soul, which is the community of all three parts.’

Only the rational part can know what is good for each part of the soul. Without specific knowledge, there is no reunion of the soul. The external behaviour is a consequence of the internal constitution of the soul. Either there is the correct kind of unity between the parts

of the soul, or there will be negative effects on the individual. The correct or incorrect composition of the soul is the decisive factor for the moral disposition of the individual. All actions derive from the correct or incorrect composition of the soul . Plato asserts in Republic IV, 443:

‘However, it isn’t concerned with someone’s doing his own externally, but with what is inside him, with what is truly himself and his own. One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other. He regulates well what is really his own and rules himself. He puts himself in order, is his own friend, and harmonizes the three parts of himself like three limiting notes in a musical scale—high, low, and middle.’

Justice regards the internal disposition of the individual: it regards the internal disposition of the individual. Just actions follow from the correct

disposition of the soul: the authentic foundation of justice is this soul disposition, and all other aspects derive from it . Justice does not consist in a series of actions. Justice is a disposition of the soul which precedes all actions: actions are the consequence of the correct disposition of the soul. The condition of justice in the soul is a condition in which every part of the soul does its work. The right kind of unity is not given: it needs to be achieved. It is not something which is reached once and for all.

The condition of justice in the soul is characterised by harmony between the three parts, whereas the condition of injustice is characterised by a condition of strife. In Republic IV, 444 Plato analyses the condition of injustice:

‘So be it. Now, I suppose we must look for injustice.

Clearly.

Surely, it must be a kind of civil war between the three parts, a meddling and doing of another’s work, a rebellion by

some part against the whole soul in order to rule it inappropriately. The rebellious part is by nature suited to be a slave, while the other part is not a slave but belongs to the ruling class. We'll say something like that, I suppose, and that the turmoil and straying of these parts are injustice, licentiousness, cowardice, ignorance, and, in a word, the whole of vice.

That's what they are.'

Injustice is described as a civil war. Justice and injustice are interpreted as corresponding to conditions of health and illness in the body. Injustice is described as a state of conflict between the three parts. We are confronted with a situation in which the three parts of the soul are not unified in harmony: the parts of the soul are not brought into the correct form of unity.

The presence of different elements in the soul is as such the foundation of the division of the soul: the unity between the parts of the soul is not immediately given. Unity is a

result to be reached, it is not an original disposition. Plato's description that the unity between parts of the soul can be reached only when there is justice between the parts of the soul gives a hint in order to understand the way in which the unity can be reached. The correct form of unity of the soul, in which the parts of the soul are unified in a harmonic entity, depends on the education of the rational part. Only when the rational part of the soul leads the whole soul, the soul is in a condition of justice; only when the rational part of the soul unifies the different parts of the soul with each other is the soul in the condition of unity.

The rational part of the soul needs to be appropriately developed in order that it can reach a disposition in which it successfully leads the whole soul. This development is to be reached through the programme of education exposed in books VI and VII of the Republic. The individual should be shifted from the dimension of

Becoming and brought towards the dimension of Being: the preparatory mathematical disciplines, first, and dialectic, then, should shift the individual from the dimension of Becoming to the dimension of Being. The education programme should lead the individual to the acquisition of a disposition of stability for his rational part and to the acquisition of the right perspective as regards the whole reality. Only after reaching the right perspective on the whole reality can the individual be able to give all components of reality the value which they deserve .

Education

The relevance of education to the dimension of Being and of ideas is expressed by Plato in the Republic too. Throughout the Republic, we can see that the absence of education increases the risk of degeneration of the soul and of society. Individuals are born in

a condition of absence of education, which corresponds to imprisonment in the cave: this corresponds to a condition of instability. The condition in which individuals usually live, described through the image of the cave, corresponds to a dimension in which there is no awareness of ideas and of the realm of Being: it is a condition of enslavement in the dimension of the sensible life and in the instability characterising the sensible life. If individuals have no awareness of the ideas and of a dimension which is beyond mere perception, they have no stable outlook on reality.

The condition alternative to the cave is a condition of liberty, i.e., liberty from the exclusive influence of the senses. The way out of the cave corresponds to the way of liberation: the way to ideas and to the realm of being, exposed in Republic VI and VII, represents the way to freedom, i.e., to a condition of at least relative independence of

all limitations represented by the dimension of the senses.

The individual needs development of his rational part in order to arrive at the right composition of the soul. The knowledge which is searched for by Plato is a kind of knowledge which transforms the person. This kind of knowledge is not sectorial knowledge. It is a knowledge which profoundly changes the person: it forms his soul; it educates the rational part so that the rational part becomes able to lead the soul. The individual has in his rational soul the potentiality to be educated. Through education, the individual acquires contact with a dimension which is at least partially alternative to the average life dimension.

Plato is searching for a transformation of the individual: he is seeking a conversion, i.e., a complete change in the orientation of life. The specific disciplines are instruments to lead the individual to this conversion:

the contents of the specific disciplines are important, but they are not the whole question. Plato aims to arrive at a change of the initial dimension of the individual through these disciplines. The contents of the disciplines should produce a change of the individual. The internal disposition of the individual will change through these disciplines. In Republic VII, 518 we read:

‘But our present discussion, on the other hand, shows that the power to learn is present in everyone’s soul and that the instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body. This instrument cannot be turned around from that which is coming into being without turning the whole soul until it is able to study that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely, the one we call the good. Isn’t that right?

Yes.

Then education is the craft concerned with doing this very

thing, this turning around, and with how the soul can most easily and effectively be made to do it.’

A complete change of perspective is necessary in order that the individual can go out of his initial dimension. The individual needs to experience a change of life: the whole individual should go away from the dimension in which the individual is initially. The way of education is a way of abandoning the initial dimension in which a person is born. The thread of education is described as a way of liberation from one’s initial condition in Republic 518–519:

‘However, the virtue of reason seems to belong above all to something more divine, which never loses its power but is either useful and beneficial or useless and harmful, depending on the way it is turned. Or have you never noticed this about people who are said to be vicious but clever, how keen the vision of their little souls is and how sharply it distinguishes the

things it is turned towards? This shows that its sight isn’t inferior but rather is forced to serve evil ends, so that the sharper it sees, the more evil it accomplishes.

Absolutely.

However, if a nature of this sort had been hammered at from childhood and freed from the bonds of kinship with becoming, which have been fastened to it by feasting, greed, and other such pleasures and which, like leaden weights, pull its vision downwards—if, being rid of these, it turned to look at true things, then I say that the same soul of the same person would see these most sharply, just as it now does the things it is presently turned towards.’

Through this passage, it becomes clear that a part of the soul has been blocked in the dimension of becoming. The soul is born in a disadvantaged condition: it needs to go out of this condition. The initial condition of the soul is a condition of imprisonment. This implies that going out of this dimension is a sort of

liberation. The process of education is a process of liberation. Moreover, it implies that going out of this dimension requires a process of liberation. The whole condition of the soul needs to change: the change of the soul is the change of the whole condition of the soul; it is not simply the change of an aspect of the soul. The life of the soul needs to change. A passage from Republic VII, 521 confirms the extension of the change which the soul should experience:

‘Do you want us to consider now how such people will come to be in our city and how—just as some are said to have gone up from Hades to the gods—we’ll lead them up to the light?

Of course I do.

This isn’t, it seems, a matter of tossing a coin, but of turning a soul from a day that is a kind of night to the true day—the ascent to what is, which we say is true philosophy.

Indeed.

Then mustn’t we try to discover the subjects that have the power to bring this about?

Of course.

So what subject is it, Glaucon, that draws the soul from the realm of becoming to the realm of what is?’

The discipline draws away the soul from the dimension of becoming to the dimension of being. The individual learns the existence of another dimension. He is no more a prisoner of the dimension of becoming. A new dimension is opened for him. The contact with the new dimension is described as a turning from one dimension to another dimension. It is a kind of existential conversion from one dimension to another dimension. We are here not only confronted with the acquisition of knowledge but with a complete change of perspective on reality on the part of the individual who is making the experience of the acquisition of knowledge. Plato aims to shift the individual from one dimension to the other

dimension. The whole inquiry into education aims to bring about a shift of dimension. Only this shift of dimension can, among other things, lead the rational part to its development. In Republic VII, 522–523 Plato confirms his intent:

‘That this turns out to be one of the subjects we were looking for that naturally lead to understanding. But no one uses it correctly, namely, as something that is really fitted in every way to draw one towards being.’

The programme of studies draws the soul towards another dimension. It brings the soul towards another dimension. It is a programme of study based on the opposition between dimensions of reality. The programme of study is functional to transpose the individual to a dimension with which he did not have previously any contact. The individual meets a dimension of reality which he cannot know before studying the disciplines. The dimension of Being is

initially unknown to him. Finally, in Republic VII, 533 we can observe the role of dialectic as the discipline which liberates the individual from his initial condition:

‘Therefore, dialectic is the only inquiry that travels this road, doing away with hypotheses and proceeding to the first principle itself, so as to be secure. And when the eye of the soul is really buried in a sort of barbaric bog, dialectic gently pulls it out and leads it upwards, using the crafts we described to help it and cooperate with it in turning the soul around. From force of habit, we’ve often called these crafts sciences or kinds of knowledge, but they need another name, clearer than opinion, darker than knowledge. We called them thought somewhere before. But I presume that we won’t dispute about a name when we have so many more important matters to investigate.

Of course not.’

The eye needs to be liberated from a condition of

degradation. Dialectic liberates the individual from his initial condition. Knowledge is regarded as a liberation. The programme of study liberates the soul from the condition in which initially is. The soul needs to be liberated: the condition of being free from the bog is not given and is not present initially . A process of education is needed. In Plato's view, the soul is initially in a condition of strong disadvantage. The individual needs to change dimension: he cannot remain where he is if he wants to develop his rational part .

Disintegrations

The unity of the soul depends on the capacity of the rational part to unify the whole soul . The rational part needs due development. If the process of proper development is not fulfilled, the rational part will not be able to unify the soul. As a consequence, a series of disintegrations of the soul will

come about since the soul will not be able to control the other parts of the soul. Correspondingly, the other parts of the soul will take the upper hand.

The degenerations of the soul come about as degrees of progressive weakening of the rational part of the soul and of progressive increase of the strength of the other parts of the soul. To the weakening of the rational part of the soul corresponds the expansion of the other parts of the soul . In particular, the expansion of the appetitive part of the soul proves to be the most dangerous for the soul: the progressive expansion of this part of the soul brings the soul to a condition of increasing criminal attitudes .

In Republic VIII, 546–547, Plato identifies insufficient attention to education as the cause of the beginning of disintegration: this lack of attention to education will bring about an insufficient capacity for good government; education

is indispensable in order to avoid the decadence of government. Education is the condition for the growth of the rational soul; lack of education is the cause of the degeneration of the soul. Plato introduces the sequence of degeneration in the following way:

‘It is hard for a city composed in this way to change, but everything that comes into being must decay. Not even a constitution such as this will last forever. It, too, must face dissolution.’ (Republic VII, 546)

Plato introduces the decadence of the best city as a kind of unavoidable destiny. Nothing which belongs to the dimension of Becoming is immune to decadence. Since the best city too has come into being, the best city too will decay: coming to being is bound to deterioration. Nothing which comes to be can ever be free from decadence. As regards the destiny of the individual, the condemnation to the decadence of the city implies that the

individuals too of the city will deteriorate .

We can observe throughout the description of the progressive degeneration of the individual’s soul that there is a steady diminution of force of the rational part to the advantage of the other parts. This different composition of the soul brings about the disappearance of the correct unity of the soul. There is no longer a correct unity of the parts of the soul since only the rational part can bring to a correct unification the parts of the soul . Weakening of the rational part means the disappearance of unity – of the correct form of unity –. The fact that the other parts gain the upper hand as soon as the rational part weakens testifies to the importance of education: even a slight weakening of the rational part is sufficient for the other parts of the soul to take control.

In Republic 550 the spirited part of the soul takes the upper hand in the soul; the rational part is therewith relegated to a

secondary role within the soul. This is as such a condition of degeneration since the rational part must lead the whole soul in order that a good organisation of the soul is reached and then maintained . Plato asserts:

‘Because he isn’t a bad man by nature but keeps bad company, when he’s pulled in these two ways, he settles in the middle and surrenders the rule over himself to the middle part—the victory-loving and spirited part—and becomes a proud and honor-loving man.’

The diminution of the rational part can be seen in Republic 553: the appetitive part of the soul takes the upper hand within the soul; the whole condition of the soul is worsening. The whole soul is exposed to the desires of the appetitive part: the assumption is that there are desires of the appetitive part which go out of control if the rational part does not control them.

‘He makes the rational and spirited parts sit on the ground beneath appetite, one on either

side, reducing them to slaves. He won’t allow the first to reason about or examine anything except how a little money can be made into great wealth. And he won’t allow the second to value or admire anything but wealth and wealthy people or to have any ambition other than the acquisition of wealth or whatever might contribute to getting it.’

Both the rational part and the spirited part are relegated to a secondary position. These parts of the soul are reduced to slaves of the appetitive part. The other parts of the soul must be servants of the appetitive part: they cannot do anything else than what the appetitive part requires. The leading part of the soul is now the appetitive part. The programme of action of both the rational part and of the spirited part is dictated by the appetitive part.

In Republic 560–561 we can then observe an authentic assault of the desires of the appetitive part to the rational

part. The soul does not have at its disposal true doctrines: thus the soul cannot resist the force of the appetitive part. If there is a void of education, there is degeneration. Correspondingly, false beliefs occupy the soul. If a person is not endowed with fine studies and true arguments, this person is exposed to bad desires and therewith to the risk of moral degeneration. Fine studies and true arguments are the best instruments to counteract bad desires. They are not here, though, since the process of the correct education has not taken place:

‘These desires draw him back into the same bad company and in secret intercourse breed a multitude of others.

Certainly.

And, seeing the citadel of the young man’s soul empty of knowledge, fine ways of living, and words of truth (which are the best watchmen and guardians of the thoughts of those men whom the gods love), they finally occupy that citadel themselves.

They certainly do.

And in the absence of these guardians, false and boastful words and beliefs rush up and occupy this part of him.

Indeed, they do.’

Plato uses images taken from the fight. The citadel, which in this context represents the rational part, is empty of knowledge: this means that the rational part has no instruments in order to oppose the force of the desires of the appetitive part. The rational part needs knowledge in order to resist these desires; if the rational part has not acquired the due instrument of knowledge through an appropriate process of education, the rational part will be nothing. Truth too is absent in the rational part: this means that the rational part cannot assign the right values to the different elements of reality. The rational part is not able to evaluate the desires of the appetitive part. The citadel – the rational part of the soul – is occupied since there is no knowledge: this means that the

rational part is condemned to be occupied if it does not have knowledge at its disposal. Either there is knowledge, or there is an occupation of negative desires.

The degeneration continues: in Republic VIII, 565 we can see the transformation of a political leader into a kind of wolf. Due to the degeneration of the political environment and of the individuals, the political leader is brought to commit murder, therewith degenerating further and further. He thus becomes a kind of wolf. The new figure of the tyrant comes about step after step.

‘What is the beginning of the transformation from leader of the people to tyrant? Isn’t it clear that it happens when the leader begins to behave like the man in the story told about the temple of the Lycean Zeus in Arcadia?

What story is that?

That anyone who tastes the one piece of human innards that’s chopped up with those of other sacrificial victims must

inevitably become a wolf. Haven’t you heard that story? I have.’

The soul becomes prey to desires. Desires take the upper hand and a particularly negative form of desire emerges. In Republic IX, 572 a new kind of desires is introduced by Plato: this kind of desires expresses the potential criminality of the individual. We can see this description of the new species of desires:

‘Our dreams make it clear that there is a dangerous, wild, and lawless form of desire in everyone, even in those of us who seem to be entirely moderate or measured. See whether you think I’m talking sense and whether or not you agree with me.

I do agree.’

The desires push then the individual up to madness. Republic IX, 573 describes the personality of the tyrant as characterised by madness. The madness comes about due to the dominance of passions:

‘Then a man becomes tyrannical in the precise sense of the term when either his nature or his way of life or both of them together make him drunk, filled with erotic desire, and mad.’

The lack of force of the rational part leads to the explosion of madness.

Conclusions

Since the soul is composed of different parts, the soul is divided. The correct unity between the parts needs to be reached: it is not immediately present. The correct unity between the parts presupposes the development of the rational part. This development can be reached only through education. Education is achieved through a long process. The lack of education brings about the disappearance of the correct kind of unity between the parts of the soul and the emergence of increasing levels of degeneration of the soul.

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