

[*Republic: Selected Papers from the IX Symposium Platonicum*, Academica Verlag, 2012, 188-93; penultimate draft]

“Reason,” Hume writes, “is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (*Treatise*, 2.3.3.4). Confined to means-ends deliberation, reason is, on Hume’s telling, motivationally inert. Hume’s position belies an obvious fact—sometimes our recognition of moral facts leads us directly to act. This raises a puzzle about moral motivation. Phenomena such as *akrasia* reveal that it is possible for us to recognize that we ought to do something, yet to fail to act accordingly. How, then, does moral knowledge turn into moral motivation?

According to many scholars,<sup>1</sup> Plato has a potent solution to this Humean gap between knowledge and motivation. Though Plato initially defines reason in terms of its calculative ability, in *Republic* IX, he assigns it a desiderative aspect as well: reason is distinguished by its desire for wisdom. Thus, Platonic, as opposed to Humean, reason is a faculty of desire, as well as of deliberation. Significantly, Plato characterizes reason’s attraction to the forms as erotic:

....by nature the real lover of learning struggles toward what is, and does not remain with any of the many subjects of belief, but he goes forth, neither lessening nor losing his erotic desire until he grasps what each thing itself is by nature with that part of his soul which is fitted to grasp such an object because it is akin to it, and approaching what really is and having intercourse with it, and begetting understanding and truth, he knows, truly lives, is nourished and—at that point, but not before—is relieved of the pains of childbirth.... (490a-b)

This portrayal of the philosopher as erotically inclined towards the forms recurs throughout the *Republic*. To cite a few examples, at 485a-b, Plato states that philosophers *erōsin* whatever reveals to them that which is; at 499b-c, he claims that no city will become perfect unless its rulers are inspired with *erōs* for philosophy; at 501d, he calls philosophers *erastai* of truth; and at 611e, he writes of the soul’s longing for intercourse with the forms.

Plato’s use of erotic imagery to characterize reason’s desire for the forms is apt. *Erōs* is the desire for beauty, and the forms constitute a harmonious and hence beautiful set of objects. Perhaps, then, the connexion of moral knowledge to moral motivation is not opaque; it is easy to question why one should be attracted to the good, but less clear how one could fail to be attracted to beauty. Furthermore, erotic desire is intimately tied to action. As Glaucon observes at 458d, erotic necessity is sharper and more persuasive than geometric necessity. In treating the philosopher’s attraction to the forms as erotic, perhaps Plato is attempting to close the motivational gap, to explain why knowledge of the moral forms is connected to attraction to them.

But Plato’s characterization of reason’s attraction to the forms as erotic also leaves us with a worry. Plato’s treatment of *erōs* in the *Republic* is harsh: he lists *erōs* as a paradigmatic appetitive desire (436a-b, 439d), and in Book IX, he contrasts erotic and tyrannical desires with kingly desires, as being farthest from reason, law and order (587a-b). While Plato wishes to align the philosopher’s love of the forms with kingly desires, as I shall argue, tyrannical and philosophic *erōs* in fact possess striking commonalities.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in

<sup>1</sup> Notably J. Cooper, “Plato’s Theory of Human Motivation”, in J. Cooper, *Reason and Emotion*, Princeton, 1999, 138-49; T. Irwin, *Plato’s Moral Theory*, Oxford, 1991; and C. Kahn, “Plato’s Theory of Desire”, *The Review of Metaphysics* 41.1, 1987, 77-103.

<sup>2</sup> L. Rossetti has raised the following question for my interpretation: to what degree are the parallels between philosophic and tyrannical *erōs* intentional? Though it is difficult to ascertain Plato’s intentions, I believe that he deliberately presents philosophical *erōs* as an overwhelming desire: this

treating the philosopher's desire for the forms as erotic, Plato introduces significant tensions into his moral psychology. In particular, he raises the possibility of what we might call a tyranny of reason, of an overly ascetic psychic constitution in which reason rules solely to maximize contemplation.<sup>3</sup>

In order to argue for this claim, I shall begin by contrasting two models of *erōs* which Plato develops in the *Republic*, then ask to which of these philosophic *erōs* conforms. These models are tyrannical *erōs* and the *orthos erōs* which a guardian feels for a beautiful boy. The connexion between tyranny and *erōs* is most fully developed in Book IX; Plato mentions *erōs* nine times in his preliminary characterization of the tyrannical soul (572b-576c). He writes that when clever tyrant-makers wish to make a tyrant of a youth, they implant *erōs* in his soul, to master his idle desires. These idle desires nurture *erōs*, until crazed, it kills off any opinions or desires which are useful and modest. *Erōs* rules the soul in a state of anarchy and lawlessness; the individual driven by its sting will pursue any means possible to satisfy his desire. What makes *erōs* tyrant within the soul? On the civic level, tyranny is characterized by two features: first, it is the rule of the few over the many, and second, the many are enslaved—the tyrant pursues his own interests at the expense of everyone else, and is even willing to murder those who oppose him. Similarly, what makes *erōs* tyrant in the soul is that in ruling, it aims solely at its own satisfaction, exterminating all contrary opinions and desires.

Plato's second model of *erōs* emerges in Book III of the *Republic*. Here, Plato distinguishes a form of *erōs*, *orthos erōs*, which is sufficiently neutered to present no risk to city or soul (402d-403c). It arises in a cultured man when he encounters a boy beautiful in mind and body. In the *kallipolis*, the law will prevent him from enjoying sex with his boy; while a man may *philein* his boy, touching him as if he were his son, their relations must never proceed further. The reason for this prohibition is that there is no pleasure which is greater, madder and sharper than sexual pleasure. Intense pleasure, in turn, is dangerous for two reasons. On the level of the city, it threatens to divert a man's attention towards a particular beloved and away from the collective good.<sup>4</sup> And on the level of the individual, it is linked to madness, immoderation and psychic imbalance. Why should it produce such results? Because it creates overwhelming appetitive desire, which threatens to upset the dominion of reason. In removing sexual pleasure from *orthos erōs*, Plato seeks to make it less potent, and hence less threatening to civic and psychic stability.

With these two models of *erōs* in place, let us return to Plato's proposal that reason's desire for wisdom is erotic. To which model of *erōs* does this conform, tyrannical or *orthos erōs*? Recall the distinguishing features of each. Tyrannical *erōs* has a tendency to dominate and compels the individual to pursue its satisfaction at the expense of other desires; *orthos erōs* lacks intense pleasure and, as a result, is not overwhelming. The first thing to note is that philosophic *erōs* is linked to pleasure: it not only offers the truest and purest, but

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characterization recurs in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*; and, as I shall argue, it follows from Plato's two-worlds view and is linked to his account of how philosophy supports virtue. It is this intensity which renders philosophical *erōs* similar to tyrannical *erōs*. However, I also believe that Plato would not wish to grant this resemblance; in this regard, I am drawing out difficulties for Plato's view, rather than revealing his authorial intentions.

<sup>3</sup> That both tyrant and philosopher are depicted as erotic has been frequently noted—see, e.g., T. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, Oxford, 1995, 302-3; Kahn, 1987, 98; A. Larivée, "Malaise dans la cité", in M. Dixsaut and A. Larivée (eds.), *Études sur la République de Platon*, vol. I, Paris, 2005, 169-97, at 193-4; P. Ludwig, "Eros in the Republic", in G. Ferrari (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, Cambridge, 2007, 202-31, at 203; S. Rosen, "The Role of Eros in Plato's Republic", *The Review of Metaphysics* 18.3, 1965, 452-75, at 460-1. However, in exploring the grounds for this parallel and arguing that it creates tensions for Plato's moral psychology I believe that I offer a new perspective on this issue.

<sup>4</sup> See Larivée, 2005, 175; Ludwig, 2007, 203-10.

also the greatest pleasure (583a, 587d-e).<sup>5</sup> This suggests that it is directly opposed to *orthos erōs*. Plato is, of course, concerned in Book IX to distinguish the pleasures of learning from those of the body: knowledge provides the soul with true filling, and its pleasures are pure. However, Plato's treatment of the desire for understanding as erotic creates complications, since it implies that philosophic pleasure possesses several of the features which he criticizes in impure pleasure. In Book VI, the philosopher is depicted as seeking relief from the pangs of intellectual childbirth (490b), suggesting that the associated pleasure is a relief from pain. And philosophic *erōs* is connected to insatiability—in Book V, the philosopher is said to be *aplēstos* for learning (475c), just as the *hoi polloi* in Book IX are maddened by their *aplēstia* (586b). Significantly, at 578a, Plato writes that the tyrannical soul is *aplēstos*. These features are not slips of the tongue on Plato's part, but result from his attempt to portray philosophic *erōs* as an overwhelming desire.

What about the second feature of *orthos erōs*? *Orthos erōs* is stable and non-overwhelming; tyrannical *erōs*, by contrast, is characterized by its overriding power. That philosophic *erōs* is closer to tyrannical than to *orthos erōs* is suggested by parallels between the *Republic* and *Symposium*. In Book V, when Plato argues for an opposition between knowledge, belief and ignorance, he likens the philosopher's insatiability to that of the boy-lover (474c-475c). In contrasting spatiotemporal objects with forms, the example Plato focuses on is beauty. He goes on to distinguish the philosopher from the one who cannot be led from the many beauties to beauty itself (475e-476d). That Plato should focus on the form of beauty, and develop a parallel between philosopher and boy-lover, suggests that he is alluding to the ascent of the *Symposium*.<sup>6</sup> This suspicion is confirmed if we look more closely at the passage in Book VI, which I quoted earlier (490a-b). Here, Plato describes a specific sequence of epistemic events: the philosopher feels *erōs* for the forms; grasps them, *ephaptesthai*, with the part of his soul which is fitted to do so; has intercourse with them; and gives birth to truth and understanding. This sequence is mirrored in the culmination of the ascent of the *Symposium* (211e-212a).<sup>7</sup> Here, the lover feels *erōs* for the forms; grasps them, *ephaptesthai*, with the part of his soul which is fitted to do so; has intercourse with them; and gives birth to virtue.

What these parallels to the *Symposium* suggest is that philosophical, like sexual *erōs*, is one of the most intense desires one can experience. But this, in turn, suggests that philosophical *erōs* is far removed from the calm, orderly *philia* that is *orthos erōs*. If anything, its urgency mirrors the compulsive force of tyrannical *erōs*. Just as tyrannical *erōs* drives the individual to satisfy it with its stinging power, so philosophical *erōs* does not cease to sting until the philosopher grasps the forms (490b). As Larivée has noted, a key feature of tyrannical *erōs* is that it focuses the individual's desires: while the democratic soul has an array of desires, in the tyrannical soul, these become unified under *erōs*.<sup>8</sup> This narrowing of focus is replicated by philosophic *erōs*. In Book VII, Plato contrasts the *hoi polloi* with the philosophers, because they lack a single aim in life (519b-c); by contrast, philosophers are single-minded in their pursuit of knowledge. This is further developed in the hydraulic metaphor: since the philosopher's desires incline so strongly to learning, they are weakened for all else (485d-e). If tyrannical *erōs* is distinguished from *orthos erōs* by its unidirectional force, then it is to tyrannical *erōs* which philosophic *erōs* most closely conforms.

This result is odd, since Plato treats the tyrannical soul as the most vicious and the most distant from the philosophical soul. This suggests that Plato's proposal, that reason's

<sup>5</sup> Plato's position on intellectual pleasure shifts significantly by the *Philebus*, where he contrasts pure pleasures, which include the pleasure of learning, with impure pleasures; while the former are truest, they are not necessarily greatest (50e-53c, 63d-e).

<sup>6</sup> See Ludwig, 2007, 218-21.

<sup>7</sup> Irwin, 1991, 234-5, notes this parallel, as does A. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*, Oxford, 1989, 52.

<sup>8</sup> 2005, 181-2.

desire for the forms is erotic, may be problematic. Why, then, should Plato be attracted to it? First, it undergirds his account of how knowledge of the forms promotes virtue. In Book VI, Plato recognizes that he owes us an account of why philosophers are qualified to rule. His answer centers on how their love of the forms renders them virtuous (484b-487a). As Kahn has noted, the rechanneling of desire plays a central role in Plato's account.<sup>9</sup> It is because the philosopher loves the forms with such intensity that his desire for sensuous ends is diminished, and he achieves moderation. The second, related, reason why Plato portrays reason as having *erōs* for the forms is that this follows from his two-worlds view. In Book V, Plato explores the opposition between forms and particulars: while forms have full being, particulars roll around between being and non-being (476e-480a). For Plato, there is an ethical upshot to this: particulars, in contrast with forms, lack value. Thus, when the philosopher comes to know the forms, he undergoes a conversion; he recognizes that forms are the only things with true value, and that the particulars which merely imitate them are, in comparison, worthless. This conversion gives rise to love, to a desire to center his life around the best objects.<sup>10</sup>

I have suggested that there are two reasons why Plato treats reason's attraction to the forms as erotic: this undergirds his account of how philosophy promotes virtue, and it follows from his two-worlds view. However, it is the very views that motivate Plato to treat reason's attraction to the forms as erotic, that also create significant problems for his moral psychology. Consider, first, Plato's account of how philosophical *erōs* promotes virtue: the philosopher achieves moderation because the intensity of his attraction to the forms causes his appetitive desires to wither. This is in tension with Plato's proposal in Book IV that moderation is harmony of the soul; in the moderate soul, all of the parts agree to the rule of reason. In Book VI, inner peace is achieved, not because appetite recognizes that the rule of reason is in its interest, but because it is so weakened that it no longer has any motivational pull. This form of moderation bears closer resemblance to the quasi-moderation of the oligarch, who governs his appetites with force (554c-d), than to the inner concord of the moderate man.

Now consider our second claim, that Plato's proposal that reason feels *erōs* for the forms stems from his conviction that forms are the most perfect objects, while in comparison, particulars lack value. Some scholars have attempted to explain the connexion between philosophy and virtue by arguing that the philosopher's love of the forms generates a desire to propagate instances of them, by rendering himself and others virtuous.<sup>11</sup> There is one passage in the *Republic* which supports this reading: at 500c, Plato writes that one cannot spend time with the forms, admiring them, without imitating them. However, this is contradicted by the thrust of Plato's portrayal of the philosopher's *erōs* for the forms: what he finds loveable is their perfect, eternal, unchanging natures. But since particulars, be they bodies, cities or souls, are changeable and imperfect, they can only be secondarily lovable. Thus, while the philosopher's love of the forms gives rise to a yearning to contemplate them, it also reduces his interest in imitating them, through ordering city and soul. This is confirmed by Plato's critique of *mimēsis* in Book X, as well as by his emphasis on the regret which the philosopher feels upon being forced to return to the cave.

<sup>9</sup> "Plato on the Unity of the Virtues", in W. Werkmeister (ed.), *Facets of Plato's Philosophy*, Amsterdam, 1976, 21-39, at 32, 37; see also G. Ferrari, "The Three-Part Soul", in G. Ferrari (ed.) 2007, 165-201, at 192; G. Santas, *Plato and Freud*, Oxford, 1988, 77-8.

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion, see R. Kraut, "The defense of justice in Plato's *Republic*", in R. Kraut (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, Cambridge, 1999, 311-37, at 319-23.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Cooper, "The Psychology of Justice in Plato", in J. Cooper, 1999, 138-49, at 145-8; R. Demos, "A Fallacy in Plato's *Republic*?", *The Philosophical Review* 73.3, 1964, 395-8, at 397-8; Irwin, 1991, 239-42; Irwin, 1995, 301-16; R. Kraut, "Egoism, Love and Political Office", *The Philosophical Review* 82.3, 1973, 330-44, at 339-41.

We are left, then, with a concern that philosophic *erōs* may resemble tyrannical *erōs* in ways that are more than superficial. The tyrannical soul is bad because it aims at improper ends, satisfying unlawful appetites; and because it is imbalanced, pursuing the desires of the smallest part, at the expense of the rest (577d). The first of these features does not apply to the philosophical soul, since it aims at knowledge of the forms, which are the best objects. However, there is a risk that it may come to resemble the tyrannical soul in the second dimension, that its rational element may seek to satisfy its desire for contemplation, at the expense of the rest of the soul. Earlier, I noted that reason's aims are divided: its role is to deliberate concerning the good of the whole, but its passion is to contemplate. The difficulty is that these pull in opposed directions. Caring for the soul requires reason to study the lower parts and to harmonize their various aims; this involves engagement with this world. Reason's experience of the forms, however, has taught it to turn away from the things below. In proposing that reason's desire for the forms is erotic, Plato has thus created an inbuilt source of dissonance. Reason will feel passionately drawn to contemplation, but Plato never provides it with a direct attraction to ruling.<sup>12</sup> While he states at 441e and 442c that reason's role is to rule the soul, he never claims that it loves ruling. In fact, at 521b, Plato specifies that those who are not lovers, *erastai*, of ruling must rule the city, and in Book IX, he proposes contemplation, not ruling, as reason's proper pleasure.

This leaves reason with only one clear motive for ruling: if it tends to appetite, it will be able to contemplate some of the time, but if appetite rules, it will be forced to devote all its attention to procuring pleasures of the flesh. We see this purely instrumental motivation reflected in the nocturnal preparations of the moderate man: he rouses the rational part of himself, feasting it on arguments, and offers the other parts a moderate amount of satisfaction, to ensure that they do not distract reason from contemplating (571d-572b). Reason does not tend to the lower parts out of a sense of obligation, or in order to render the soul virtuous, but because this secures it maximal satisfaction. Its motivation bears a strong resemblance to that of the tyrant: the tyrant, too, relieves debt, not out of a sense of justice, but to ensure that his power is maintained (566e).

If reason's prime motivation for ruling is to maximize the satisfaction of its contemplative desires, then we have reason to worry that this will give rise to a tyranny of reason, to an overly ascetic psychic constitution, in which the rational part satisfies the desires of the lower elements only to the degree necessary to ensure that they do not interfere with its intellectual aims. This concern is heightened, when we consider certain elements in Plato's characterization of the philosophic soul. While much of the *Republic* emphasizes reason's role in caring for the lower parts, there are also passages which suggest a more oppressive role.<sup>13</sup> In the pleasures argument, Plato writes that reason will look down on the pleasures of the other parts, and would have no need for them were they not necessary for life (581e). In distinguishing necessary from non-necessary desires, Plato proposes that we should get rid of all unnecessary desires (559a-c). This extermination of appetite recurs in Book X, when Plato writes that appetitive and spirited desires ought to wither, not flourish (606d). It reaches its apogee in Book IX, when Plato compares the soul to a three-part beast; while reason tames some of appetite's heads, it kills others (589b). This inner violence calls to mind tyrannical *erōs*, which exterminates all contrary opinions and desires (573b), and it suggests that reason's *erōs* for the forms supports the suppression, rather than the harmonization, of appetite.

In this paper, I have examined Plato's proposal that reason feels *erōs* for the forms. Far from bridging the gap between moral knowledge and motivation, it introduces significant difficulties into Plato's moral psychology. In particular, since reason's *erōs* is all-consuming,

<sup>12</sup> Pace Cooper, "Plato's Theory of Human Motivation", 191-4; see Ferrari, 2007, 196-8.

<sup>13</sup> Parry alludes to this oppressive aspect of reason, though the bulk of his interpretation maintains that the rule of reason promotes the satisfaction of the lower parts of the soul ("The Unhappy Tyrant", in Ferrari, 2007, 386-414, at 411-13).

it creates a risk that, far from slave to the passions, reason will be tyrant. We thus see two strands in the *Republic*: an optimistic emphasis on reason's role in harmonizing the parts of the soul, but also a more pessimistic portrayal of reason as suppressing the sub-rational elements.<sup>14</sup> Why does Plato find himself in this predicament? Because he wants reason to do too much work, to be both fair ruler of the soul and lover of forms. Perhaps he would have done better to treat reason as a faculty of deliberation, but not of desire, so that he would not be confronted with the risk that it might pursue its own desires at the expense of psychic harmony. However, there is another way of looking at this tension. While Plato's proposal that reason feels *erōs* for the forms may fail to explain how philosophical understanding promotes psychic harmonization, it does shed light on the inner turmoil which results from the opposition in reason's aims. Perhaps Plato's great accomplishment in the *Republic* is to give a psychologically astute portrayal of the tensions which characterize human existence, insofar as we are mortal beings striving to achieve a more-than-mortal state of philosophical understanding and psychic unification.

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<sup>14</sup> One might object to my characterization of the ascetic soul as pessimistic along two lines. First, J. Szaif has proposed to me that, if contemplation is the best activity, then an ascetic psychic arrangement needn't be viewed as a pessimistic outcome, if it maximizes contemplation. In response, I would emphasize that even if the ascetic soul maximizes intellectual activity, insofar as it involves the suppression of the lower parts of the soul, and thereby fails to satisfy Plato's characterization of virtue as harmony, it is a sub-optimal psychic arrangement—one we are driven to because we are saddled with non-rational psychic elements. Second, M. Schofield has pointed out to me that the hydraulic metaphor specifies that the appetites are weakened, but not that they are suppressed (a similar argument is pursued by Irwin, 1991, 339–40, n. 64). However, in the *Republic*, Plato does not simply suggest that as reason grows stronger, appetite is naturally weakened; he also depicts the philosopher as purposefully denying appetite satisfaction in order to reduce its power (442a-b)—this implies that appetite is forcefully dealt with, and that the resulting psychic arrangement is oppressive, rather than harmonious.