
Reason and Emotion in Classical Philosophy

Greek philosophers often saw in Euripides's portrait of Medea the central problem of humankind's moral existence. Medea was betrayed by her husband Jason and, in anger, sought revenge by killing her children. Her children's nurse observes: "Your mother moves her heart, moves her anger [*cholon*] . . . she will soon kindle the cloud of lamentation with greater emotion [*thumōi*]."¹ The chorus comments: "Excessive loves [*erōtes*] deliver neither good reputation nor virtue to men [*andrasin*]" (line 629). Having resolved to kill her children, Medea says, "I know what sort of evils I will endure, but emotion [*thumos*] is stronger than my resolve [*bouleumata*]" (line 1079).

For Greek philosophers, Medea represented the essence of moral catastrophe—behavior driven by emotion, anger, and love resulting

1. Euripides, *Medea*, lines 98–108. This and the next two quotations from *Medea* are my translations, rendered very literally to highlight the role of emotion. For the full play in translation with enumeration of lines, see Euripides, *Women on the Edge: Four Plays*, ed. and trans. Ruby Blondell, et al., *The New Classical Canon* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 147–215. The Greek text can be found in Euripides, *Euripides*, vol. 1: *Cyclops, Alceste, Medea*, ed. and trans. David Kovacs, *Loeb Classical Library 12* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

in death and destruction precisely because emotion overrules the governance of reason. The ethical ideal of classical philosophy was thus one in which reason governs our life, liberating us from the rule of emotion.

Plato

Analysis of the Soul

I begin with Plato because of his incalculable influence on the Christian tradition and because moral psychology before Plato is, by comparison, notably underdeveloped.

As is well known, Plato thought of the human soul as possessing or comprising three functions: reason (*logos* or *logismos* or *to logistikon*), desire or appetite (*epithumia* or *to epithumetikon*), and spirit or emotion (*thumos* or *to thumoeidēs*).² Plato illustrated these functions and their relations with his image of the soul as a chariot, with two horses and a driver.³ Reason is the driver, who has to contend with an unruly horse, desire. Reason's natural function is to govern the soul but its task becomes difficult when desire intrudes. The second horse is emotion; its moral status is ambivalent, for it can be as much an obstacle to reason as is desire but can also help reason govern and control desire. Emotion should stand with reason and against desire by filling us with a sense of repugnance whenever we are overcome by desire.⁴ Elsewhere, Plato described the soul as a composite being,

2. See Plato, *Republic*, 434e–441c, in John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 1066–73, for the basic exposition from the middle dialogues. The Greek text can be found in Plato, *Republic*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy, Loeb Classical Library 237 and 276 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

3. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 253c–254e, in Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works*, 531–32 (hereafter PCW). For the Greek text, see *Plato*, vol. 1: *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler, Loeb Classical Library 36, reprint ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

4. *Republic*, 440 (PCW, 1071–72).

with a human element (reason), a lion-like element (emotion), and a beast with many heads, some wild and some tame (the various desires).⁵ The point of these metaphors is that emotion and desire have no share in rationality, thus setting up the possibility of conflict if reason should fail to govern.

Reason, Emotion, and Desire at War

Reason, emotion, and desire exist in a hierarchy of value: *logos* is the best part of us and *epithumia* is the worst part,⁶ even though it is the biggest (*pleistos*) part of the soul.⁷ *Thumos*, as usual, is sandwiched between *logos* and *epithumia* in the scale of value. Plato emphatically denied that it is a sort of desire,⁸ but it likewise differs from reason.⁹ As Plato explained in the *Timaeus*, the sons of the demiurge placed the immortal soul in a mortal body and thus joined it with another form (*eidos*) of soul, the mortal form. This union invested the soul with passions (*pathemata*) such as pleasure (*hēdonē*), pain (*lupē*), fear (*phobos*), emotion (*thumos*) and love (*erōs*).¹⁰ Because these passions threatened to defile the divine and immortal part of the now composite soul, the sons of the demiurge located emotion and desire away from reason, in the chest and stomach.¹¹ Sadly, their location in the lower regions has not prevented their dominating reason.

Plato seldom complained about *thumos*, but *epithumia* is another matter entirely. *Thumos* is like a lion, but *epithumia* is a multiheaded beast, some of whose heads are of wild (*agrioi*) animals.¹² That is why,

5. Ibid., 588c-d (PCW, 1196).

6. Ibid., 431a (PCW, 1062-63).

7. Ibid., 442a (PCW, 1073).

8. Ibid., 440e (PCW, 1072).

9. Ibid., 441a-b (PCW, 1072).

10. Plato, *Timaeus*, 69c-d (PCW, 1270-71). For the Greek text, see Plato, vol. 9: *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*, trans. R. G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library 234 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929).

11. Ibid., 69d-70b (PCW, 1271).

at the beginning of the *Republic*, Sophocles is reported being glad to be rid of sexual desire, described as a raging and wild (*agriōs*) despot.¹³ Plato reluctantly allowed that there are desires and pleasures that are simple and measured (*metriōs*), but noted that these are characteristic only of the few who are well born and educated.¹⁴ Desire requires training if it is to be measured.

The animalistic character of desire implies its unruliness. The pleasure associated with bodily desires puts us out of our minds (*ekphrona*),¹⁵ as desire constantly seeks to usurp its subordinate role and to become the soul's governing principle, precipitating civil war.¹⁶ The extreme example of this is the tyrannical character, in whom there is a principal love, surrounded by a host of desires or loves (*erōta*, from *erōs*),¹⁷ which wash away one's moderation (*sōphrosunē*) and drive one to madness (*mania*).¹⁸ Such a soul is a slave (*doulē*) because its best part, reason, is enslaved (*douleuein*) while the worst part, desire, plays the despot. The soul thus teems with slavery (*douleia*) and lack of freedom (*aneleutheria*).¹⁹ It languishes under the tyranny of desires, especially *erōs*. The tyrannical soul thus becomes an erotic (*erōtikos*) character—a soul taken over by this principal desire.²⁰ Being enslaved, the tyrannical soul is therefore least able to do what it truly wishes to do.²¹ It never tastes true freedom (*eleutheria*),²² but is instead in a lawless state that it mistakenly calls freedom.²³ Paradoxically, although *epithumia* is by nature the most

12. *Republic*, 588b–d (PCW, 1196).

13. *Ibid.*, 329c (PCW, 974).

14. *Ibid.*, 431c (PCW, 1063).

15. *Ibid.*, 402e (PCW, 1039).

16. *Ibid.*, 444a–b (PCW, 1075).

17. *Ibid.*, 572e–573a (PCW, 1181).

18. *Ibid.*, 573a–b; 578a (PCW, 1181; 1186).

19. *Ibid.*, 577d; 579d (PCW, 1185; 1187).

20. *Ibid.*, 573b–d (PCW, 1181–82).

21. *Ibid.*, 577e (PCW, 1185–86).

22. *Ibid.*, 576a (PCW, 1184).

greedy (*aplēstotatos*) element of the soul,²⁴ the soul in the grip of desire is never sated (*aplēstos*)²⁵ and attempts to satisfy desire produce, not the authentic and valid pleasures appropriate to these desires, but an alien (*allogria*) pleasure.²⁶

So, the soul's only hope is to cultivate reason and its capacity for governance. Plato went into considerable detail about the exalted status of reason. This was important to him because reason's natural function, to rule, is a consequence of its being the best part of us. As the metaphor of the soul as human, lion, and many-headed beast shows, reason is the distinctively human part of us. Desires are intrinsically and unredeemably animalistic; we share such desires with animals.²⁷ Reason alone is unique to humans. But it is more than merely human. It is that part of us that is divine²⁸ and the part by which we have kinship with what is immortal and eternal.²⁹ Reason is, therefore, the true human self; desire and emotion are (at least in some dialogues) accretions to the soul in its embodied condition.

The existential self, therefore, is suspended between time and eternity and between mortality and immortality. By virtue of reason, it is single and immortal and enjoys kinship with the divine and eternal; but it is also composite, beset by various passions, pleasures, and desires, all of which it shares with animals. The hierarchy of value (reason as the best part of us, desire as the worst part) means that there is an ideal relationship among the three functions; when the three operate appropriately, the soul attains an inner harmony, moderation (*sōphrosunē*). Without moderation, turmoil and chaos result.

Moderation is concord (*sumphonia*) or harmony (*harmonia*), and a

23. Ibid., 572e (PCW, 1181).

24. Ibid., 442a (PCW, 1073).

25. Ibid., 578a (PCW, 1186).

26. Ibid., 586e–587a (PCW, 1194–95).

27. Ibid., 441b (PCW, 1072).

28. Ibid., 590d (PCW, 1198).

29. Ibid., 611e (PCW, 1215).

kind of order (*kosmos*), which functions as a control (*enkrateia*) over various pleasures (*hēdonai*) and desires (*epithumiai*).³⁰ In the condition of temporal existence, the composite soul experiences a kind of civil war,³¹ with desire wishing to go its own way, heedless of reason's governance. Moderation is a state in which, reason having gained the mastery over desire, the soul experiences harmony.³²

Moderation thus requires self-mastery. Plato puzzled over the concept of self-mastery, implying that one is simultaneously master and slave.³³ However, the paradox is resolved once we acknowledge the composite nature of the existential soul. Because the composite soul comprises both reason and alien elements (desire and emotion), the possibility emerges of conflict and opposition. Harmony is attained by reason, aided by emotion, mastering desire.³⁴ However, mastery of desire does not mean extirpation; some desires are good while others are worthless (more on this shortly). We should honor the good desires while punishing (*kolazein*) and enslaving (*doulousthai*) the worthless desires.³⁵ Likewise, we should restrain the unnecessary—that is, good but excessive—desires and eliminate lawless (*paranomoi*) desires.³⁶ Having trimmed away worthless and excessive desires, we need only practice moderation—neither starving nor indulging the necessary desires.³⁷ In achieving mastery, reason must cultivate the help of emotion, its natural ally. It does so through a regimen of moral and physical training (*mousikē* and *gumnastikē*), which achieves the inner *sumphonia* that is moderation.³⁸ Although

30. Ibid., 430e (PCW, 1062).

31. Ibid., 444a-b (PCW, 1075).

32. Ibid., 442c-d (PCW, 1073-74).

33. Ibid., 430e-431a (PCW, 1062-63).

34. Ibid., 439c-d, 441e (PCW, 1071; 1073).

35. Ibid., 561b-c (PCW, 1172).

36. Ibid., 571b (PCW, 1180).

37. Ibid., 441e-442a (PCW, 1073).

38. Ibid., 441e (PCW, 1073).

thumos can be morally troublesome—as in the case of Medea—Plato regarded it as a necessary condition of moral virtue. Everyone, he wrote, ought to be a person of *thumos*; resistance against evil and wrongdoing requires well-born (*gennaios*) *thumos*.³⁹ That is why, in the metaphor of the chariot found in Phaedrus, *thumos* is said to be the good (*agathos*) horse, even if *epithumia* is said to be the bad (*kakia*) horse. *Thumos* is a lover of honor (*timēs erastēs*), accompanied by *sōphrosunē*.⁴⁰ Closer to Plato's interests in the Republic, *thumos*, when well trained, provides us with the sort of moral energy needed to resist the demands of *epithumia*. *Thumos* is, for Plato, naturally allied with (*summachos*) reason and uses its weapons on behalf of reason.⁴¹ That is why the would-be rulers of Plato's ideal republic required extensive physical training, whose purpose is to tame *thumos* by means of harmony and rhythmic motion.⁴²

Good Emotions

So far we have been exploring Plato's thoughts about passion and desire in their problematic sense. The textbook portrait of Plato exhibits him as a upholding a strict dualism between reason and the irrational parts of the soul. This portrait has a basis in Plato's dialogues, especially *Phaedo* and *Republic*, but it represents just one side of Plato's view. To arrive at the other side, it is helpful to have a closer look at pleasure and desire, since they are closely linked to each other and to humankind's central moral problem.

As noted previously, *thumos* has a positive function for Plato. But even *epithumia* does not bear a wholly negative sense in Plato's

39. Plato, *Laws*, 731b–c (PCW, 1413–14). For the Greek text, see Plato, *Laws*, 2 vols., trans. R. G.

Bury, Loeb Classical Library 187 and 192 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926).

40. *Phaedrus*, 253d (PCW, 530–31).

41. *Republic*, 440a–e (PCW, 1071–72).

42. *Ibid.*, 441e–442a (PCW, 1073).

dialogues; after all, in the *Phaedrus*, the soul possesses *epithumia* even in its disembodied state.⁴³ Admittedly, even in that state it seems a bit unruly, but the metaphor of the chariot seems to require us to think of the soul in its pure, disembodied state as somehow still possessing *epithumia* as well as *thumos*. To see how *epithumia* can enjoy a positive meaning we must attend to the distinction between necessary and unnecessary desires. Necessary desires are those that are unavoidable, whose satisfaction benefits us in some way, and for the satisfaction of which we have a natural tendency.⁴⁴ Unnecessary desires are those that do us either harm or at least no good and which can be eliminated with effort. Plato illustrated his point with food: desire for food to sustain bodily health is a necessary desire; desire for luxurious food or an unduly varied diet is an unnecessary desire.⁴⁵ The same analysis, he asserted, would hold good for other desires.⁴⁶ Although necessary desires are obviously a function of our bodily existence and thus would not pertain to the soul in its pure, disembodied form, nothing suggests that for Plato necessary desires are evil. On the contrary, anticipating Aristotle's idea of the mean, Plato held that we should neither starve nor indulge the necessary desires.⁴⁷ They may be inconvenient, but they are not evil as long as the satisfaction of such desire is moderated.

Plato, however, went beyond the grudging acknowledgment that the organic needs of the body are not evil. He argued additionally that each element of the composite soul—*logos*, *thumos*, and *epithumia*—has its own pleasures and desires. There are thus pleasures associated with good and noble desires besides the pleasures of

43. See *Phaedrus*, 246a (PCW, 524), where all souls, even those of the gods, are composite, and 249a, which describes the celestial journey of the disembodied soul, a journey that is affected by desire, the unruly horse (PCW, 526-27).

44. *Republic*, 558a (PCW, 1169).

45. *Ibid.*, 559a-b (PCW, 1169-70).

46. *Ibid.*, 559c (PCW, 1170).

47. *Ibid.*, 571d-572b (PCW, 1180-81).

worthless (*ponērōn*) desires.⁴⁸ Reason's desires are satisfied by wisdom, which, Plato argued, is a truer mode of filling (*plērōsis*) than are food and drink precisely because wisdom partakes of pure being (*kathara ousia*).⁴⁹ Wisdom also yields a truer sort of pleasure (*alēthēs hēdonē*), because with wisdom the soul is filled with real things (*ta ontā*).⁵⁰ Philosophical pleasures are consequently the best, since they relate to the mind's pursuit of knowledge and not to physical desires.⁵¹ So, just as there is an ontological hierarchy within the composite soul, there is a hierarchy of value among pleasures; pleasures of the body are inherently inferior to those of the mind. Nonetheless, even *thumos* and *epithumia* receive the pleasures appropriate to them when reason governs the soul.⁵²

Reason and *Erōs*

The connection between reason and desire is deeper than the observation, in the *Republic*, that reason has its own pleasures. There is in fact a deep connection between reason and *erōs*. Affirming such a connection seems paradoxical, given Plato's relentless critique of *erōs* in the *Republic*, especially (as indicated above) in the section describing the tyrannical character,⁵³ but the connection is emphatic in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.

A turning point in the dialogues occurs in the *Phaedrus*. At first, Socrates, in his customary quest for definition, notes that everyone considers *erōs* to be a kind of desire (*tis epithumia*)⁵⁴ and then goes

48. Ibid., 561b–c (PCW, 1172).

49. Ibid., 585b–c (PCW, 1193).

50. Ibid., 585d–e (PCW, 1193–94).

51. Ibid., 583a, 485d (PCW, 1190; 1109).

52. Ibid., 586e (PCW, 1194).

53. Drew A. Hyland, noting the varying depictions of *erōs* in the dialogues, observes that "Each dialogue, it is thus indicated to us, must be qualified by the other; neither is the whole story, much less the 'Platonic view' of eros" (Hyland, *Plato and the Question of Beauty*, Studies in Continental Thought [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008], 28).