

PRACTICAL REASONING, WEAKNESS, AND PLATO'S REPUBLIC

Glenn Lesses
Texas Christian University

In the *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and other early dialogues, Socrates denies that *akrasia* is possible. Roughly, his argument is as follows. Given that people always do, *ceteris paribus*, what they most desire, they perform acts that they believe are most good. This is so because they most desire what they believe is best. Hence for Socrates the ordinary explanation of weakness is incoherent because it entails that weak agents do what they believe is to be most good, believing it not to be most good. Especially crucial to this argument is the Socratic thesis about motivation: each desire is for what is believed to be good. Otherwise, agents would not always be motivated to pursue what they take to be most good and so weakness would be possible. In contrast with the early dialogues, Plato describes cases in the *Republic* in which agents perform acts contrary to what they take to be the best course open to them. As a result of such passages, commentators have argued that Plato rejects the Socratic analysis of *akrasia*. But at Republic 505d-e, we find what amounts to a Socratic statement about motivation: "This (i.e., the good) every soul pursues, and all its actions are done for its sake." This passage strongly suggests that Plato holds the Socratic thesis that each act, provided it is freely done, is motivated by what the agent believes to be good. But if we ascribe the Socratic thesis to Plato, how do we make sense of the instances of *akrasia* that Plato describes in the *Republic*? For given the Socratic thesis, we can reconstruct Socrates' argument against the occurrence of *akrasia*.

In this paper, I argue that Plato in the *Republic* tries to reconcile his acceptance of the possibility of weakness with the Socratic thesis about motivation. By virtue of his doctrine about the parts of the soul, Plato is able to distinguish practical judgments about what is good, all things considered, from more limited practical reasoning about what is good. These distinctions about reasons for acting permit him to admit the possibility of weak behavior. I try to show that even granting this picture of the *Republic*, Plato is guided by the fundamentally Socratic thesis implied by 505d-e.

In Book IV of the *Republic*, Plato's description of psychological conflict includes cases of weakness. Leonitus, for instance, strongly desires to look at the corpses of some people who were just executed, despite his recognition that this act is shameful and inappropriate (439e). His shameful desire is sufficiently strong to overcome his moral compunctions and leads him to do what he believes to be wrong (440a). Plato describes such cases in terms which suggest *akrasia*: "Besides, I said, we often see this else-

where, when his appetites are forcing a man to act contrary to reason, and he rails at himself with that within himself which is compelling him to do so (440a-b).” Other passages where Plato admits the possibility of weakness include his discussion of the virtues, where he clearly implies the possibility of acting contrary to reason. Injustice, he states, is what occurs when the worse element in the soul overcomes or rules the better part (431a, 444a-b, 444e). Since it is with the better part of the soul, namely, reason, that a person knows or believes what the best course of action is, when someone is acting unjustly it is possible that he or she acts contrary to what he or she believes to be best.

For us to understand cases of weakness, Plato says that we must see that there are several, relatively independent sources of motivation. Plato distinguishes three parts of the soul in Book IV: reason (*to logistikon*), spirit (*to thumoeides*), and appetite (*to epithumetikon*). Each part of the soul has a characteristic motivation. The rational part is something which loves wisdom and learning (581b7). Spirit loves victory and honor (581b1-2). The appetite desires money and profit (581a7). Each part then involves different sorts of desire: “As there are three parts, there are also, it seems to me, three kinds of pleasure, one peculiar to each part, and so with desires and kinds of rule (580d).” These different sources of motivation can come into conflict, a condition which Plato calls “civil war in the soul (*tes psuches stasis*, 440e5).” Each part, he says, has the tendency to be “meddlesome in the functioning of the other parts (443d3-6)”. If akratic behavior occurs, a person acts as a result of motivations the origin of which are the non-rational parts. This condition is necessary, but not sufficient for *akrasia*, since an agent must also act intentionally and recognize that some other action is better for weakness to result. Agents can, on Plato’s view, act contrary to reason, because of motivations leading them to do what reason thinks is less good. In a case where passion or emotion conflicts with judgments about what it is best to do, weakness can ensue.

Given this analysis, Plato could supply a plausible explanation of weakness in terms of non-rational motivations that we have independent of any desire for what we believe to be good. But such an explanation would put into focus the problem of ascribing the Socratic thesis to Plato. How can Plato accept the thesis that every desire is for what is believed to be good? It seems to me that Plato does not explain *akrasia* in exactly these terms. Such an explanation of weakness attributes assumptions to Plato that he does not actually accept. It is assumed that only motivations associated with the rational part involve beliefs and that only reason has the capacity to form beliefs about what is good. But if we do not ascribe these assumptions to Plato, we can construct a different view of weakness with which the Socratic thesis is compatible.

Why should we think that parts of the soul other than reason also have the capacity to form opinions and beliefs? First of all, Plato does not restrict the motivations of the non-rational parts to brute biological cravings. His examples involve desires that are more complex than this. Leonitus’ desire to see the corpses, for instance, is not a simple physiological urge even though its origin is the appetitive part.² Secondly, Plato describes the spirited and appetitive parts in ways suggesting that they are capable of making certain practical judgments when they initiate an agent’s actions. The appetite is the part that is money-loving because the satisfaction of its desires is often assisted by money (580e-581e). This description apparently entails that the appetitive part can engage in some hypothetical reasoning. For example, if I wish to satisfy my desire to have some wine, I might recognize that I need to obtain sufficient money to purchase the wine. The appetitive part performs these sorts of calculations. The appetite’s awareness of its ends and how to obtain them is presumably shared as well by the spirit’s practical judgments about how to obtain honor.

There is also additional evidence that the non-rational parts can be the source of belief. Plato describes appetite and spirit as having beliefs (*doxazein*) which can conflict with those of reason (602e-603a). And Plato says that the appetitive part can, in principle, hold the same opinion (*homodoxosi*) as reason that the latter should rule (442d2). Plato does at one point call the non-rational parts of the soul “irrational (*alogiston*, 439d, 604d),” but as we shall see shortly it is not because spirit or appetite is incapable of forming beliefs or of making any practical judgments. In any case, on the basis of such textual evidence, it is likely that Plato endorses the view that appetite and spirit are capable of making judgments about how to achieve certain ends and, more generally, of having beliefs.³ Taking Plato’s contention at 505d-e literally entails that the desires of *to epithumetikon* and *to thumoeides* as well as those of *to logistikon* are associated with beliefs about what is good.⁴ If we suppose that this thesis is legitimately imputed to Plato, then thirsts, for instance, have something believed to be good as their objects. Since we tend to think of such desires as simple cravings, this analysis of desire sounds odd to us. Of course, Socrates found it unproblematic that all desires were for the good. It seems to me that we can sketch reasons why Plato would agree with him. First of all, since Plato holds that spirit and appetite have sufficient cognitive capacity to form beliefs about what they desire, we already know that the motivations initiated in these parts of the soul go beyond cravings. Part of the Socratic assumption is that what an agent wants in the sense of having some motivation is not completely independent of what the agent wants in the sense of ranking or evaluating highly the object of desire.⁵ On Socrates’ view, the judgments as to the worth or value of what is desired become identified with being motivated to pursue that object. The interpretation of Plato’s *Republic* to which

I am objecting at least implicitly holds that Plato distinguishes between the motivations that an agent has and a agent's evaluations of what he or she desires. Hence, spirit and appetite become sources of desire which do not depend on an agent's beliefs about what is good. According to this view, the rational part of the soul is the source of an agent's judgments about what is good. But Plato's language suggests a different view. He says that the appetite *loves* money and the spirit *loves* victory. The talk of love in this passage (580d-581a) is consistent with the suggestion that motivations are based on judgments of worth or value. These parts of the soul want money or victory because of what they hold in the highest esteem. To simplify, we could say that appetite wishes to obtain bodily gratifications and spirit aims at achieving honor. In other words, the picture that we get from Plato's descriptions is that each part is the source of the motivations that it is, precisely because it holds beliefs about what is the highest good. Appetite believes money to be a means of achieving what it prefers most. The same presumably can be said of spirit. Far from objecting to the Socratic view that all desires are for the good, Plato seems to be committed to the same identification of wanting in the evaluational sense with wanting in the motivational sense. Plato does point out that each part has fundamentally different views about what is best and that following the preferences of the non-rational parts often leads to error about what really is good. For instance, Plato says that sometimes sensual pleasures are believed to be good when in fact they turn out to be bad (505c). In general, it can be argued that spirit and appetite are liable to make such mistakes because they are unable to calculate and measure the way the rational part can (602d-603a). The non-rational parts of the soul are *alogiston* then at least to that extent.

To understand Plato's account of the origin of weakness of will, we must understand the special nature of *to logistikon*. I have argued that for Plato the source of weakness cannot simply be the result of non-rational motivations leading an agent to act in a way contrary to reason's desire for what is good. The other parts of the soul also have beliefs, even if limited ones, about what is good.

Plato says that reason loves "wisdom and learning (581b)". If agents were to lead rational lives by organizing their lives around the goods which are especially valued by *to logistikon*, they would pursue wisdom and be devoted to learning. Perhaps even more importantly, the rational part's function includes ruling the soul (441e). For reason can "exercise foresight on behalf of the whole soul (441e)". *To logistikon* "possesses the knowledge of what is beneficial to each part, and of what is to the common advantage of all three (parts) (442c)". These passages suggest that reason has a capacity for a special kind of practical judgment which the other parts lack. The rational part can assess which actions contribute to the gratification of the desires of the other parts as well as to its own. The appetite and the

spirit can determine only how to satisfy desires caused by what they each take to be good. Plato thinks that it is possible for reason to coordinate the motivations deriving from each part of the soul so that when reason dominates in this way the agent achieves a state of psychological harmony (443d).

We shall ignore particular features of Plato's moral philosophy in order to concentrate on the theory of practical reason and action embedded in his ethical views. What is the nature of the practical judgments made by *to logistikon* that enable an agent to attain effectively his or her overall ends? The special capacity of the rational part is its ability to formulate judgments about the good of the entire soul. A plausible way to understand this capacity is that the rational part can take into account all relevant beliefs available to the agent as reasons for acting. While the non-rational parts can only take as reasons for acting beliefs about how to satisfy their own particular ends, reason can make all-things-considered judgments about how to act. Some examples follow. Does an action actually frustrate achieving the ultimate ends of appetite even though it gratifies an immediate appetitive desire? How will satisfying the desires of one part coordinate with obtaining those of another? The answers to these and other similar questions are appropriately addressed by *to logistikon* because of the kind of practical judgments it can make. Furthermore, it is important to see that the desire of reason to pursue knowledge and truth means that this part is likely to maximize the information an agent has and the set of reasons from which an agent can act. On Plato's view, a person whose reason is functioning properly will take into account many more relevant considerations about how to act to obtain his or her ends. This capacity to take into account the totality of relevant evidence and so to formulate all-things-considered judgments is open only to reason.

But now we can appreciate why Plato accepts the possibility of *akrasia*. A person can act contrary to what reason believes to be good, all things considered, and still do what is thought to be good. If we distinguish between the special sort of practical judgments formulated by the rational part and the evaluations made by the other parts of the soul about what is good, we see that conflict is possible. All-things-considered judgments about what is good are different, in principle, from beliefs that some action contributes to what is held to be good by appetite or spirit. So there is no inconsistency in saying that an agent acts contrary to what reason judges to be good, all things considered, and still acts from some belief about the good that spirit or appetite has.⁶ Rational people, Plato holds, do not act contrary to what they believe to be best because of their judgments about what is best for them to do involve the totality of relevant information. Weak behavior for Plato is irrational precisely because the agent fails to do what he or she thinks is best, all things considered, so persons who are dominated by spirit

or appetite and who act akratically are foolish and irrational (604d). Because of this analysis of weakness, Plato denies that if an agent believes some course of action is best he or she will necessarily perform that action. Since it is possible to have reasons to act which do not cause someone to act, it is inadequate on Plato's view to get agents to act morally by mere intellectual training about what is right.⁷ It is arguably part of the point of detailing the educational process in the Republic to describe affective training that Socrates did not recognize as necessary.⁸ To finish up, I want to discuss the Cave analogy because it raises a significant issue for Plato. Persons who have successfully completed the journey out of the Cave—namely, philosophers—ultimately return and forsake a purely contemplative life in order to govern (519-521). Despite their wish not to rule, the philosophers will not refuse since they regard it as a matter of justice. Plato says that it is impossible (*adunaton*) for them to become involved in the practical affairs of ruling and also that they recognize returning as something necessary for them to do (*hos ep' anagkaion*, 520d). The relevant feature of the philosophers' return for us is that they have an aversion to what they in fact must do. A philosopher's motivation to contemplate the Forms obviously has its source in the rational part. Instead of acting to satisfy this rational desire, a philosopher does what is best, all things considered. To do otherwise would be to act contrary to what the philosopher judges to be best. So Plato implicitly recognizes that an agent might act because of a desire of to logistikon and still behave akratically. In other words, even on Plato's view, we do not need to restrict weakness of will to those cases in which an agent acts from passion of emotion.⁹ Persons, e.g., sometimes act from a sense of duty or principle—both presumably sources of rational motivation—although judging that trying to obtain some pleasure perhaps is actually better, all things considered.

While Plato tacitly accepts that such cases of weakness can occur, his analysis of *akrasia* cannot accommodate them. Weak behavior on his view is the result of a conflict between motivations deriving from the rational part and those deriving from the other non-rational parts of the soul. In particular, Plato holds that a person can act contrary to what is thought to be best, all things considered, because of desires stemming from the ends that the spirit or appetite have. What possible reasons can Plato give us for denying that agents sometimes also act weakly because of rational desires that they have? A person can judge that it is better, all things considered, to act contrary to what reason desires on occasion. The difficulty for Plato is that he fails to recognize that his analysis of weakness of will is ultimately independent of the parts-of-the-soul doctrine.

NOTES

1. Jon Moline, "Plato on the Complexity of the Psyche," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 60 (1978), pp. 7-11, discusses some of this evidence in more detail.

2. Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 129, mentions that Leontius' desire is possibly derived from a sexual desire.

3. My ascription of beliefs to the non-rational parts of the soul is not a radical thesis. See Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, pp. 129-130, Moline, "Plato on the Complexity of the Psyche," pp. 7-11, Terry Penner, "Thought and Desire in Plato," in G. Vlastos, ed., *Plato II* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 100-103. Penner holds that each desire has some minimal cognitive content as constituent of it. Moline argues for an agency theory in the sense that each part of the soul has some of the powers that an agent has including the ability to form beliefs. My own view, while inclined to be somewhat closer to Moline's, is that the text underdetermines any definitive choice between these alternatives.

4. Discussions of Plato's account of weakness of will often ignore 505d-e. Terence Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 224, 336, recognizes the importance of this passage. He argues that the passage should not be read to imply the Socratic thesis, since the good is said to be everyone's goal but it is not the case that "everyone will pursue it in all his actions (p. 224)." But the text does say that all the soul's actions (*panta prattai*, 505e) are done for the sake of the good.

5. See Gerasimos Santas, "Plato's *Protagoras* and Explanations of Weakness," in G. Vlastos, ed., *The Philosophy of Socrates* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 270-284, for discussion of these Socratic assumptions.

6. In some respects, the analysis of weakness I've ascribed to Plato resembles Donald Davidson's account in "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?," in J. Feinberg, ed., *Moral Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 93-113.

7. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory*, especially pp. 234-240.

8. A serious objection to my interpretation has been raised by Penner, "Thought and Desire in Plato," pp. 106-108. He points out that 437d-439b can be read so as to be an argument against the Socratic position. Considerations of space prohibit discussing this objection. Suffice it to say that the passage can support a different interpretation which does not conflict with the ascription of the Socratic thesis about motivation to the *Republic*.

9. Davidson, "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?," pp. 101-102, gives examples in which an agent acts weakly but because of some rational motivation.