The Powers of Plato’s Tripartite Psychology

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1. Introduction

There is a mystery right at the heart of Plato’s famous doctrine of the three parts of the soul, as this doctrine is presented in the Republic, Phaedrus and Timaeus: just what is a soul ‘part’ (meros, eidos)? Republic IV tells us a way to distinguish soul parts, namely by the Principle of Opposites: since ‘the same thing will not do or undergo opposites in the same respect, in relation to the same thing, at the same time’ (436b8-9), whenever we find a thing that does or undergoes opposites in the same respect, in relation to the same thing, at the same time, we must partition it in such a way that each of the parts does or undergoes only one of the opposites in question. But this raises more questions than it answers: (1) are these parts themselves simple? (2) is the Principle of Opposites the only way to determine parts? (3) what is there to being a soul-part other than being distinguished by the Principle of Opposites— is it to desire and pursue one of the characteristic (idia) pleasures identified at Republic 580d-81c, namely, the pleasures of truth for the reasoning part of the soul, of honour and victory for the spirited part, and of food-sex-drink, and as a means to these, money, for the appetitive part?

I will not be able to offer a definition of a soul part in this paper, but I will argue for negative answers to questions (1), (2) and (3) above, and I will propose another way of thinking about soul parts, according to which a part is the bearer of a psychological power (dunamis), a power being a disposition to affect or be affected by a natural correlative object. This natural object determines the character of the power to which it is correlated, and that in turn determines the simplicity or complexity of the part that is the bearer of the power. On this basis I will argue that the characteristic pleasures of Republic 580d-81c are not the natural objects of soul parts—strictly, only powers have natural objects. However, Plato also calls the best condition of a soul part ‘natural’ (hence justice is the natural relation in the soul of reason ruling and the other parts being ruled [Republic 444d] and the spirited part is naturally reason’s ally [Republic 441a, cf. Timaeus 70a-b, Phaedrus 253d]). So it would not be unreasonable to say that, in an extended sense of ‘natural’, the natural object of the spirited part of the soul is the same as the natural correlative object of courage, the to-be-feared and not-to-be-feared.
The paper is organized as follows: section 2 gives my reasons for answering questions (1) to (3) above in the negative. Section 3 introduces the idea of a natural correlative object and explains its role in investigating psychological powers. Section 4 illustrates this with an example from Republic V and explains how psychological powers are related to objects other than their natural correlatives; finally, section 5 applies these results to the tripartite soul.

2. Parts

Famously, application of the Principle of Opposites to cases of psychic conflict leads Plato to distinguish a reasoning, spirited, and appetitive part of the soul. A thirsty man desires drink, but is sometimes held back from drinking because he has calculated that the drink is bad. By the Principle of Opposites, it cannot be the same thing that both impels him towards the drink and holds him back, so there must be two parts—one pushing forward and the other pulling back—in the soul of the thirsty man who does not drink. This case establishes the distinction between the reasoning and appetitive parts of the soul (439d). To distinguish the spirited from the appetitive part, Socrates tells the story of a man who, when he was passing by some corpses, both desired to see them and was repelled by the sight. The desire to see them prevailed, but as he looked, he rebuked his desire (or himself, or his eyes). Socrates identifies this rebuking part as the spirited part (439e-440e). Finally, to distinguish the spirited part from the reasoning part, Socrates adduces the case of Odysseus’ response to seeing his maidservants run off to Penelope’s suitors: Odysseus has an angry desire to kill them then and there, but, calculating that it is better to wait, he checks his anger (441b-c). Later, in Republic IX (580d-81c), Socrates attributes three characteristic (idia, 580d8) objects of pursuit to these three parts: to the reasoning part, truth; to the spirited part, honour; and to the appetitive part, food-drink-sex-etc., and money, which is a means to these.

But does the Republic IV argument isolate all the soul-parts there are to isolate? Republic IV itself suggests that Plato has reservations: defining justice in the soul, Socrates says the just person ‘harmonizes the three parts of himself like three limiting notes in a musical scale—high, low, and middle. He binds together those parts and any others there may be in between . . .’ (443d; my emphasis.) And in Republic X, after distinguishing the soul into two parts, a superior part which follows measurement and an
inferior part which follows appearance in opposition to it (602e-603b)\(^1\), Socrates refers to the inferior part periphrastically, as if he wishes to avoid the names given the lower parts earlier in the Republic (which he never uses once during the Republic X discussion.) For example, he talks about the lamenting thing (to \textit{thrênodon}, 606a8-b1), the pitying thing (to \textit{eleinon}, 606b7-8), the thing forcibly restrained in private misfortunes (to \textit{biai katechomenon tote en tais oikeiais sumphorais} 606a3), the thing that leads to recalling sufferings and lamenting and is insatiable (to \textit{de pros tas anamnêseis te tou pathous kai pros tous odurmous agon kai aplêstôs echon}, 604d8-9); often, he calls it just, ‘this sort’ (to\textit{iouton}). How do these parts relate to the three parts of Republic IV? Are they further parts to be added to be added to the three? Are they subdivisions within the three?

It is a standard scholarly assumption that Plato holds the reasoning, spirited, and appetitive parts of the soul to be themselves indivisible, because incapable of internal conflict. There is surprisingly little textual evidence to support this. Indeed, Socrates compares the appetitive part to a many-headed (polukephalos) beast (Republic 588c7-10), suggesting that it, at any rate, is divided. Presumably one can simultaneously have an appetite for food and a desire to sleep; and in this case, the result would seem to be conflicting attitudes towards either of the two, sleep, or food—one would be both drawn to and away from food. (It may be that Plato thinks that it is only a particular kind of conflict that licenses partitioning, for example, an opposition not only to the object pursued but also to the pursuit itself\(^2\)—although the Principle of Opposites does not express this—but even so, the prospects for avoiding further division are bleak.) Rather than textual grounds, it is a philosophical consideration that motivates the doctrine of non-divisible parts: if any of the parts can itself do or suffer opposites, the thought goes, then, insofar as psychic conflict is to be explained in terms of the contributions of two distinct parts, the need for explanation is reproduced at the level of the explanans. But Plato introduces psychic conflict into the argument not as a phenomenon requiring explanation so much as an uncontroversial ground for dividing the soul—because analysed in terms of the difficult-to-reject Principle of Opposites. Socrates does not say that there are no other grounds for dividing the soul. (Indeed, his first argument to distinguish the reasoning from the spirited part of the soul is that animals and young children cannot reason but can be angry [441a-b]). One might object that the Republic’s
soul-city analogy requires three parts of the soul as there are three classes in the city. However, it may be that the three classes in the city too may be further subdivided, e.g., the producing class by craft. What matters for the analogy is that there is enough unity to each of the soul-parts (and each of the social classes) for justice to be a kind of harmony among the three parts brought about by reason’s (and the philosophers’) rule.

The debate over whether or not there is a way to characterize the principle of opposites and each of the soul parts so that each part is itself indivisible seems to me a creature of modern scholarship and to be removed from what is surely of much more concern to Plato, namely how to correctly describe the elements in the soul so as to make sense of virtue as well as other psychic states. If the love-objects attributed to the three parts of the soul are objects the parts cannot but love and pursue, virtue might be no more than continence, with the three parts always pulling in different directions. That view, however, does not fit well with the Republic’s multi-book elaboration of an educational programme for the non-rational elements in the souls of the young so that when their reasoning parts mature their non-rational elements will already have been attuned to reason (401c-d).

3. Natural objects

In the course of arguing for tripartition of the soul in Republic IV, Socrates invokes a principle that I will dub the Principle of Relatives. Here is the text in which it appears (437d-38e [numbers inserted in bold correspond to the breakdown of the text that follows]):

[S.:] (1) . . . insofar as it [viz., thirst] is thirst, is it an appetite in the soul for more than that for which we say that it is the appetite? For example, is thirst thirst for hot drink or cold, or much drink or little, or in a word, for drink of a certain sort? Or isn’t it rather that, when heat is present as well as thirst, it causes the appetite to be for something cold as well, and where cold for something hot, and where there is much thirst because of the presence of muchness, it will cause the desire to be for much, and where little for little? But thirst itself will never be for anything other than what it is in its nature to be for, namely, drink itself, and hunger for food.
That’s the way it is, each appetite itself is only for its natural object (*hou pephuken*), while the appetite for something of a certain sort (*toiou*) depends on additions (*prosgignomena*).

Therefore, let no one catch us unprepared or disturb us by claiming that no one has an appetite for drink but rather good drink, nor food but good food, on the grounds that everyone after all has appetite for good things, so that if thirst is an appetite, it will be an appetite for good drink or whatever, and similarly with the others.

All the same, the person who says that has a point.

But it seems to me that, in the case of all things that are related to something, those that are of a particular sort are related to a particular sort of thing, while those that are merely themselves are related to a thing that is merely itself . . . the greater is such as to be greater than something, . . . [i.e.] than the less, . . . and the much greater than the much less, . . . and the once greater than the once less . . . and the going-to-be-greater than the going-to-be-less . . . And what about the various kinds of knowledge? Doesn’t the same apply?

Knowledge itself is knowledge of what can be learned itself (or whatever it is that knowledge is of), while a particular sort of knowledge is of a particular sort of thing. For example, when knowledge of building came to be, didn’t it differ from other kinds of knowledge and so was called knowledge of building? . . . And wasn’t it because it was of a particular sort of thing that it itself became a particular sort of knowledge? And isn’t this true of all crafts and kinds of knowledge . . . (437d-38d, tr. Grube-Reeve).

The passage can be divided into four parts:

(1) A particular claim about an appetite (437d): thirst is for drink, not cold drink or indeed drink of any particular sort; if it is to be for any of these, then there must be another factor present, e.g. heat, which causes the thirst to be for something cold as well as for drink.

(2) A generalization from (1): each appetite itself is only for the object it is for ‘by nature’, while the appetite for something of a certain sort depends on some additional factor. (437e)
An implication of the generalization in (2): just because everyone has an appetite for good things, it doesn’t follow that any appetite, e.g. thirst, by itself is qualified and restricted to good drink. 4 (438a)

In response to Glaucon’s protest against (3), a further generalization, to the Principle of Relatives (438a-b, 438d), explained and applied to knowledge and then appetite (438c-439a): for any relation \( r \), the object of that relation \( o \) is correctly specified when \( o \) (and \( o \) alone) is invariably the object of any instance of \( r \). 5

In this passage, Plato suggests that appetites like thirst be treated in the same way as relations like being-greater-than, going-to-be-greater-than, being-once-greater-than; he writes as if he expects his audience to find his treatment of the comparative relations familiar. 6 In each of these cases the second relatum—the less, the going-to-be-less, the once-less—is related to the first (the greater, the going-to-be-greater, the once-greater) by a relation that is invariably true and transparent. This is why the going-to-be-greater is related to the going-to-be-less rather than, for example, to the is-currently-less: ‘going-to-be-less’ alone is always a correct description of whatever it is that the going-to-be-greater is going to be greater than. By contrast, if A is going to be greater than B, it does not follow that A is not currently (or, for that matter, was not in the past) greater than B. In these examples, the invariable object is found out by treating the relation as logically transparent. On this basis, the invariably correct description for the object of thirst would have to be ‘that which can quench thirst’. Identifying that which can quench thirst with drink, and ruling out extinctions of thirst that don’t count as quenching (e.g. knocking unconscious), would involve further, not-purely-logical, inquiry. What things do and suffer can be described in many ways; the Principle of Relatives directs us to descriptions that are invariably correct. 7 But the way in which natural objects are specified (the knowable, for the knowledge relation; the lesser-than, for the greater-than relation) only names a property of things in the world rather than saying what these things are. We still need to know: which things are lesser-than? what is it that is knowable?

This approach to specifying natural objects is reminiscent of Socrates’ approach to causes in the Phaedo (96e-101d): having concluded that investigating causes through observation and experience leads the student of nature to posit contradictory causes, Socrates describes his preferred ‘safe’ method of stating causes by means of reason
alone:

... if there is anything beautiful besides the Beautiful itself, it is beautiful for no other reason than that it shares in that Beautiful, and ... so with everything ... and if someone tells me that a thing is beautiful because it has a bright color or shape or any such thing, I ignore these other reasons—for all these confuse me—but I simply, naively and perhaps foolishly cling to this, that nothing else makes it beautiful other than the presence of, or the sharing in, or however you may describe its relationship to that Beautiful we mentioned, for I will not insist on the precise nature of the relationship, but that all beautiful things are beautiful by the Beautiful. That, I think, is the safest answer I can give myself or anyone else.

(100c-d, tr. Grube)

What makes the Forms ‘safe’, i.e., invariably correct, causes is that, for any f needing explanation, the Form, f-ness, is a cause of f but never a cause of not-f; f-ness’s opposite is never a cause of f, and f-ness is never not-f itself; instead, because like causes like, f-ness is superlatively f itself. Thus, Socrates says, ‘the words of the statement, “Simmias is taller than Socrates” do not express the truth of the matter’ (102c). The reason that these words, although true, do not express the truth is that they do not identify the cause: it is not because the one is Simmias and the other Socrates that the one is taller than the other. (Evidence of this causal fact is that the statement ‘Simmias is taller than Socrates’ is not invariably true; for example, it was not true when Simmias was a young child and Socrates already a grown man.) Rather, Simmias is taller than Socrates because Simmias has tallness in him that overcomes the shortness that Socrates has in him.

In the Phaedo, Socrates’ safe but uninformative identification of causes enables the identification of ‘more sophisticated’ and informative causes: having hypothesized that the cause of the heat of this stone is Heat, one draws on the empirical observation that fire is that thing in nature that always brings heat, and never cold, along with it; that is, heat, the power to make things hot, belongs to the nature of fire. On this basis, one can conclude that fire causes stones to become hot. Similarly, snow can only make things cold because it is its nature to be cold. This enables one to build on the logical truth that heat drives out or is driven out by cold, and to say, more informatively, that fire drives out or is driven out by snow even though the latter two are not opposites (103c-105c).
The argument of Republic IV goes beyond stating the logical truths that thirst is for what quenches it and that the desire for something good conflicts with the desire for something that is not good. We learn the natural object of thirst is drink (even if no-one, no thirsty person or animal, can be shown willing to drink just any drink). We learn that two desires, for two different natural objects, can combine so that the resulting appetite is for something which is not the natural object of either appetite: if I am cold and thirsty, my desires for warmth and drink combine so that I desire, not just warmth and drink, but a warm drink. We also learn that the desire for good may be opposed to the desire for drink, even though neither the two desires nor their two objects are themselves opposites of each other (and even if the desire for drink is for drink as good). It is interesting that rather than appealing to the ready-to-hand examples of psychic conflict and the widely-held view that some of our desires are good-independent and so can come into conflict with our desire for the good (cf. Protagoras 352b-53a), the argument of Republic IV appeals to the Principle of Relatives. What is it about thirst and rational desire that allow them to do and suffer opposites? The answer lies in what the appetites are for ‘by nature’: thirst is for drink as such, but drink may be, in a particular situation, all-things-considered good or not, so thirst can assent to or be impelled towards drinking even as rational desire, which is for what’s all-things-considered good, dissents from, or is impelled away from, drinking.¹⁰

4. Knowledge and Opinion

So far, we have seen that Plato specifies natural objects for relations, instances of which include appetite and knowledge (I will have more to say about what kinds of relations these are in the following section). I now turn to Republic V’s discussion of knowledge and opinion, where Plato begins with the principle of relatives, according to which each cognitive power is ‘set over’ its correlative natural object, and then proceeds to build on the logical truth that knowledge is of the knowable and opinion of the opinable to make the substantive claim that knowledge is of what-is and opinion of what-is-and-is-not. This discussion should underscore that natural objects belong not to soul-parts but to their powers.

In context, the passage at Republic V.476e-80a is part of Socrates’ larger argument that philosophers are well-suited to rule; in this passage he attempts to
distinguish philosophers, true lovers of learning, from others who might be confused with them, whom he calls ‘sight-lovers’. The idea is that sight-lovers have at best the power of opinion, a power inferior to the power of knowledge (which successful philosophers have). To show this, Socrates argues that knowledge and opinion, being distinct powers, are ‘set over’ distinct objects.

The part of this argument relevant to our purposes is stated simply at 477b: opinion is a distinct power from knowledge, and so opinion is set over one thing and knowledge over another, ‘according to the power of each.’ Socrates proceeds to spell out this argument as follows (numbers inserted in bold correspond to the breakdown of the text that follows):

[S:] (1) Powers (*dunameis*) are a class of things that are that enable us—or anything else for that matter—to do whatever we are capable of doing. Sight, for example, and hearing are among the powers, if you understand the kind of thing I’m referring to. . .

Here’s what I think about them. A power has neither color nor shape nor any feature of the sort that many other things have and that I use to distinguish those things from one another. (2) In the case of a power, I use only what it is set over (*tetaktai epi*) and what it does (*apergazetai*), and by reference to these I call each the power it is. What is set over the same things and does the same I call the same power; what is set over something different and does something different I call a different one. . . Is knowledge a power . . .?

[G:] (3) It’s a power, the strongest of them all. . . (4) [and opinion] is a kind of power as well, for it is what enables us to opine.

[S:] A moment ago you agreed that knowledge and opinion aren’t the same.

[G:] How could a person with any understanding think that something (3) infallible (*anamartêton*) is the same as (4) something that is not infallible?11

[S:] (5) Then we agree that opinion is clearly different from knowledge . . . (6) hence each of them is by nature (*pephuken*) set over something different and does something different. . . (7) Knowledge is set over what is, to know it as it is. . . And opinion. . . Does it opine the very thing that knowledge knows, so that the
knowable (gnōston) and the opinable (doxaston) are the same, or is this impossible?

[G:] (8) It’s impossible, given what we agreed, for if a different power is set over something different, and opinion and knowledge are different powers, then the knowable and the opinable cannot be the same. (Republic 477c-78b)

As I understand this reasoning, it goes:

1. Powers are things that enable us to do whatever we can do. (477c)
2. Powers are individuated on the basis of their functions (what they do) and their objects (what they are ‘set over’). (477c-d)
3. Knowledge is an infallible power. (477d-e)
4. Opinion is a fallible power. (477d-e)
5. Therefore, knowledge and opinion are different powers (478a).
6. Therefore, knowledge and opinion have different objects and functions. (478a-b)
7. The object of knowledge is what is. (477b)
8. Therefore, the object of opinion is not what is [but rather, as further argument establishes, what is and is not]. (478b)

Any interpretation of this argument must face three difficulties. First, premise (2) gives two criteria for distinguishing powers: their functions and their objects. Can these not come apart? It seems possible for different things to be done to the same objects—Gail Fine gives the vivid example of animal husbandry and butchery, both of which are set over domestic animals—in which case we would seem to have multiple powers but only one object. Yet Socrates’ argument from (5) to (6) seems to infer ‘distinct powers, therefore, distinct objects.’ Second, if the objects of knowledge and opinion are distinct, then how can knowledge be an improvement on opinion? One would have thought that knowledge improves on opinion by grasping the very same object, only better. Third, Socrates himself seems to disregard the claim that knowledge is set over what is and opinion over what-is-and-is-not when he later speaks of philosopher-rulers knowing in what way just and fine things are good (506a, 520c), and says that he only has opinions about the Form of the Good (506b-e, 509c).
Gail Fine argues that this passage distinguishes knowledge and opinion not by their objects but by their contents, that is, by the propositions over which they range: knowledge is set over true propositions, and opinion over some true and some false propositions. Both, however, have the same objects. The inference from (5) to (6) then runs, ‘different powers, therefore different contents’, and this is because (3) says that knowledge entails truth, or ranges over only true propositions, and (4) that opinion does not entail truth—it ranges over both true and false propositions.\(^{14}\) This interpretation requires the ‘is’ in (7) to be read veridically, as ‘is true’ (if read existentially or predicatively, the argument distinguishes knowledge and opinion by their objects).\(^ {15}\) Since opinion and knowledge can after all have the same objects, our three difficulties are dissolved: different powers, including knowledge and opinion, can be exercised on the same objects; thus knowledge can be an improved grasp of the very objects about which we formerly had only opinions; finally, Socrates’ statements about knowing sensibles and having opinions about Forms pose no trouble; however, there is a special relationship between knowledge and Forms: knowledge of Forms is necessary for knowledge of other things.

However, aside from failing to draw the all-important object-content distinction, Plato’s text is incompatible with Fine’s requirement that the items over which opinion is set, considered severally, be parceled out between knowledge (set over what is [true]) and ignorance (set over what is not [true]). On Fine’s view, any individual proposition belongs, if true, to knowledge, and if false, to ignorance. But at 478d-e, Socrates introduces ‘intermediate’ things which are and not, for opinion and neither knowledge nor ignorance to be set over.\(^ {16}\) The text seems to rule out knowledge and opinion being set over the same objects.\(^ {17}\) Further, at 478b, Socrates says that ignorance is set over nothing, for ‘nothing’—and not ‘that which is not true’—best describes ‘that which is not’ (478b).

It is not only in the Republic that Plato assigns different objects to different cognitive powers. The Timaeus also distinguishes between knowledge and opinion by their objects: discourse about anything sensible (aisthêton) is carried throughout the soul by the circle of the Different and results in opinion; discourse about the intelligible
(logistikon) is carried by the circle of the Same and results in understanding and knowledge (37b-c).\(^{18}\)

At Republic 478a, Socrates and Glaucon agree that it is ‘impossible’ for the same thing to be the object of knowledge (gnôston) and belief (doxaston), adding twice that knowledge and opinion are each set over something different ‘by nature’ (pephuken, 478a4, a13). I take this to mean not that the gnôston is not a possible object of opinion and that the doxaston is not a possible object of knowledge, but rather that the gnôston is not the natural object of opinion and that the doxaston is not the natural object of knowledge. What it is for a power to be ‘set over’ an object is for that object to be the object of that power ‘by nature’, and, I suggest, this means that the power is by itself capable of grasping\(^{19}\) the object. Being set over an object \(y\) is a special property of a power \(x\) such that if power \(x\) is set over natural object \(y\), then \(x\) is by itself sufficient for grasping \(y\); this means that \(x\) has no need of another power of the soul in order to grasp \(y\).\(^{20}\) For example, we can say that sight is set over the visible, or that the visible is the natural object of sight, because seeing a visible object requires no other power of the soul than sight. The qualification ‘of the soul’ is necessary, as the example shows: seeing also requires the sun’s illumination and the visible object’s visibility; similarly, understanding requires the Good’s power of making intelligible and the intelligible object’s intelligibility (Republic 507d-509b). However, these other powers are not powers of the soul. Further, psychic power \(x\)’s being set over natural object \(y\) does not rule out its grasping some other object \(z\), although it does require that if \(x\) grasps \(z\), it will do so by means of its set-over grasp of \(y\) and with the help of another power of the soul. (Conversely, natural object \(y\) may be grasped by some other combination of powers \(a\) and \(b\).)\(^{21}\)

When Socrates says that knowledge is by nature set over what is, he is saying that one who possesses knowledge can grasp what is without the help of any other power of the soul. A philosopher can think about the Forms at any time, without using any other power than her knowledge. The power of knowledge can also be exercised on the good, fine and just things the philosophers are said to ‘know’ (520c, 506a)—it is through their knowledge of the Forms of the Good, Fine and Just that they know how these things are good, fine, and just—but this knowledge also requires the use of another power: at
the very least, perception that such-and-such thing is a law or institution or person. Similarly, while the latent knowledge of Forms we possess can be exercised in the use of language (Phaedrus 249b-c), and in our judgments about deficiencies in sensibles (Phaedo 74d-e), these acts also require sense-perception. But philosophical thought which makes the Forms the direct objects of thought requires the mediation of no other power. Conversely, opinion, although a weaker power than knowledge, may still grasp what is as a result of experiencing conflicting sensory experiences (as in the summoners’ argument, Republic 523a-24e), or perhaps as a result of Socratic questioning. The opinion by which Socrates grasps the Form of the Good (506b-e) enough to give an image of it as the Sun may involve the power of thought (dianoia). Opinion’s grasp of what is will always be deficient, however: for example by being partial, or by changing whereas what is does not change.

When we turn our attention away from the differences between knowledge and opinion to focus on the characterization of opinion by itself, the ‘one power, one natural object’ model suggests that opinion cannot be a single power after all. First, Plato sometimes says that the objects of (some?) opinions are the objects of perception: so Timaeus 37b-c calls the object of opinion perceptible (aisthêton)—even though Timaeus 77b-c clearly distinguishes the two powers, allowing perception but denying opinion to the appetitive part of the soul. The objects of cognition on the Divided Line (Republic 509d-511e) divide into the visible and the intelligible, with belief (pistis) corresponding to visible things aside from images and reflections; the only mention of opinion in this passage comes in naming and ranking the cognitive condition of geometers—Socrates calls this cognitive condition thought and places it between opinion (doxa) and understanding (511d). Republic 533e-34a includes in opinion (doxa) both imagination (eikasia) and belief (pistis). These passages suggest that Plato subdivides opinion into finer-grained powers—so perhaps the overlap between opinion’s and the other powers’ natural objects is due to the other powers being sub-powers of opinion (so that opinion is an umbrella term), or perhaps powers like perception and imagination are related to opinion as its sources or instruments. This may be why, in Republic X, Socrates moves quickly from saying that a thing may appear (phainetai, 602e5) to us contrary to how reasoning tells us it must be (e.g. reasoning tells us that the stick in the water is straight,
but it still appears to us to be bent) to saying that there must be a part of us that believes
(doxazon, 603a1, cf. 602e8) that it is as it appears (i.e. there must be a part of us that
believes the stick is bent.)

How well does the proposal that the set-over relationship is a ‘grasp by itself’
relation between a power and its natural object fare with the difficulties initially raised for
the Republic V passage? The third difficulty, of squaring the claim that knowledge and
opinion are set over distinct objects with Socrates’ talk of knowing sensibles and opining
about Forms, is removed if knowledge and opinion can, in conjunction with other
powers, be exercised on objects other than their natural objects. The second difficulty,
about how knowledge can be an improvement on true opinion, is allayed by the fact that
knowledge of F corresponds to what is F in every way, whereas opinion cannot, because
the opinable is subject to change, perspectival variation, etc. As to the first difficulty,
that in many cases different powers can be exercised over the same object, the proposal
allows this, claiming only that the special set-over relation is exclusive between a power
and one natural object.

Commentators on the Republic V passage have observed that it enables Plato to
explain that knowledge is stable and opinion is unstable because the unqualified being-F
of knowables causes the stability of knowledge, and the qualified being-F of opinables
(i.e. their being F and not-F in different respects or at different times or appearing F and
not-F from different perspectives) causes the instability of opinion. I suspect that rather
than holding only that the instability of opinables causes opinion to be unstable and the
stability of knowables causes knowledge to be stable, Plato holds more generally that the
objects of psychological powers affect the psychological powers that grasp them, giving
them the character that they have. And in the case of perception, the experience of
seeing-red is easily explained by the redness of the object seen; the experience of feeling-
hot is explained by the heat of the object touched, and so on.

5. Back to the tripartite soul

Let us take stock. Section 3 above investigated the notion of a natural object and
its role in arriving at psychological explanations, and section 4 characterized the non-
exclusive but privileged relationship between a power and its natural object, and
suggested a way in which a power could be related to objects other than its natural object. We now return to the tripartite soul to apply the lessons of these discussions.

Strikingly, the Republic does not use the word ‘power’ (dunamis) for either the soul-parts or in general for capacities that may be developed in one way or another. In the Republic, apart from knowledge, opinion and ignorance, which we have already considered, powers of the soul\(^25\) include justice and injustice (351e, 358b, 367a, 443b, 588b), civic courage (429b-30b), branches of study including dialectic (521d, 532c, 533a), crafts (346a-b), and sight, a perceptual power which needs no development (508a-509b) and which serves as a model for intelligence (518c-e) and dialectic (532a).\(^26\)

Unlike powers, soul-parts seem to be capacities for opposites, in the sense that they can develop to have or participate in states of either virtue or vice, states that would have opposed natural objects. Plato seems to think that a virtue, at any rate, cannot be a capacity for opposites. He raises this point twice in Republic I: first, he worries that justice seems to be a craft of stealing because the person who has the power to guard also has the power to steal (333e-34b);\(^27\) second, he worries that justice is the knowledge, or the power in the soul, or both, which enables the doing of both fine and shameful things (375d-76b). His account of justice in the Republic answers these worries: the just person will not steal, because of his justice, i.e., because his soul is in the condition of reason ruling his appetites and spirit (442e-43b), and because his desires flow towards learning (485d-e). So the power of virtue, at least, is a power to do certain sorts of things and not their opposites. (Indeed, Plato may think that the virtues are not capacities for opposites even in the sense that their existence is consistent with both their exercise and their non-exercise, on the grounds that they will always be exercised in the right circumstances.)

Plato’s use of the notion of a power of the soul can be clarified using some Aristotelian terminology. Aristotle distinguishes lexically between capacities and developed dispositions, using ‘dunamis’ for the former and ‘hexis’ for the latter (e.g. Nicomachean Ethics II.5, 1105b20-28)—although he sometimes also uses ‘dunamis’ for the genus that includes capacities and dispositions. Plato, although he does not distinguish capacities and states lexically, shows a preference for applying the term ‘dunamis’ to what Aristotle calls a ‘hexis’ (disposition). Thus a Platonic dunamis is either a developed disposition of some capacity or else a disposition that required no
development. Examples of the latter include sight, and modeled on sight, the virtue of reasoning (*phronesis*), which, Socrates says, involves no development but can be turned either towards the right objects so as to benefit or towards the wrong objects so as to harm (518c-e).

Now I want to propose that it is not parts, but rather powers, to which natural objects belong, and that *Republic* 580d-81c’s characteristic pleasures of the reasoning, spirited and appetitive parts of the soul—the pleasures of, respectively, truth; honour and victory; and food, drink, sex etc. as well as money—are only characteristic because most visible. Each of these pleasures is what the soul pursues *when it is ruled by one of the parts*: when the reasoning part rules, the soul pursues truth; when the spirited part rules, the soul pursues honour and victory; and when the appetitive part rules, the soul pursues either wealth (in the oligarch), all pleasures equally (in the democrat), or the fulfillment of unnecessary and lawless desires (in the tyrant). But each of these conditions of rule is a power of the soul, specifically, a virtue or vice. And it’s because (for example) honour is the timocratic power’s natural object that it is the spirited part’s characteristic object, for the spirited part is most visible when it rules the whole soul and makes the whole soul pursue honour. This could explain why the appetitive part’s characteristic object is specified disjunctively: there are three distinct natural objects of the three different powers of the soul (oligarchy, democracy, tyranny) that can be described as the rule of the appetitive part.

Socrates describes the tripartite soul as possessing what powers it does in virtue of the cognitive conditions of the parts and the relations between the parts. On the one hand, among the powers that are virtues are wisdom (knowledge of the good) and courage (preservation of reason’s judgments about what is to be feared); these are, respectively, the virtue of the reasoning part of the soul and the virtue of the spirited part of the soul (441c-d, 442b-c). On the other hand, the virtues of moderation and justice are not the virtues of any particular part, consisting instead in relations of psychic specialization and psychic agreement (442c-d, cf. 441d-e, and the parallel case of the city’s moderation and justice, 431e-32a). However, like wisdom and courage, moderation is characterized as a cognitive state: all the parts share the same opinion (*homodoxousin*) about which parts should rule and be ruled in the soul (442c). Thus
moderation’s natural object would be reason’s rule. Even granting the spirited and appetitive parts’ restriction to opinion, and consequent ceiling on stability, the parts’ agreement that reason should rule is the basis for saying truly that the three soul-parts, qua joint bearers of moderation, are (together) unconflicted, and in that sense, simple.

Consider now a vice: according to Republic VIII’s account of the oligarchic character, the oligarch’s appetitive part rules and presses his reasoning and spirited parts into service so that the one calculates how to make profits and the other is ambitious for wealth (553c-d). Socrates describes the oligarch as conflicted (544d). But how should we understand his conflict? Socrates does not say that the conflict is between the reasoning part’s desire to pursue the truth and the appetitive part’s desire that the reasoning part calculate profits, or between the spirited part’s desire to pursue honour and the appetitive part’s desire that spirit admire wealth—as one might have expected if the love-objects of 580d-81c were fixed in nature for the parts. Rather, Socrates says that the conflict originates in the oligarch’s evil appetites not having been tamed by reason and persuaded that it’s better not to act on them; this requires them to be kept in check by compulsion and fear (554c-d). This implies, of course, that they could have been tamed by reason, where being tamed by reason involves something other than being motivated by the fear of sanctions, since that is the oligarch’s current condition. Socrates says the oligarch ‘won’t allow the . . . [reasoning part] to examine anything except how a little money can be made into great wealth. And he won’t allow the . . . [spirited part] to admire anything but wealth. . .’. Here, I take him to be describing the direction in which the oligarch’s reasoning and spirited parts develop, rather than an ongoing struggle over the objects desired by the higher parts versus the objects imposed by the appetitive part on them. On my view, the natural object of the oligarchic soul—of all its parts—is wealth, and that while this unites the soul-parts in some ways, it divides them in other, greater, ways, inasmuch as a lover of wealth will want wealth by any means, and even if he debars himself from some of these means, he will not cease to want the wealth that can be gotten by those means, and so he will be divided against himself.

Continuing to want things (e.g. the possessions of widows and orphans) that he does not allow himself to go after, for fear of being caught out, is one of the intuitively unhappy consequences of the oligarch’s viciousness. But unless we distinguish
characteristic and natural objects as I have proposed, and allow that a soul-part can pursue objects other than its characteristic one, we will have to attribute to the virtuous person too continuing desires for things he does not allow himself to go after.

My account of natural objects of powers and characteristic objects of parts can also explain the basis on which Socrates calls certain conditions of soul-parts ‘natural’. So, for example, Socrates says that the spirited part is ‘by nature’ the helper of the reasoning part (441a). This does not mean that the spirited part is necessarily, or even always, the helper of the reasoning part—and it should not mean that, given that Socrates immediately concedes that the spirited part may ally with the appetitive part if corrupted. Rather, it means that the spirited part as such should have as its object (of pursuit) that same object which is the unique object invariably grasped by the spirited part of the soul when it is in its best condition—i.e. when the soul possesses the virtue of courage—namely, reason’s pronouncement about what is to be feared and what is not to be feared.

6. Conclusion

Early in Plato’s Phaedrus, Phaedrus asks Socrates whether he believes a certain myth, and Socrates puts him off, pleading that his continuing lack of self-knowledge leaves him no time for physicizing interpretations of myths. What he urgently needs to know is whether he is ‘a beast more complicated (poluplokôteron) and savage than Typhon, or . . . a tamer, simpler (haplousteron) animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature’ (230a).30 Socrates’ words leave it unclear exactly what he seeks to learn: is it whether he is in harmony with or divided against himself (a question about his moral condition), or whether the human soul is simple or divided (a question about human psychology)?

Later in the Phaedrus (270c-d), Socrates describes and then applies to the soul a method for coming to know the nature of a thing (dianoeisthai peri hotououn phuseôs). The method prescribes that one inquire whether the thing under investigation is simple (haploun) or complex (polueides), and then, of each simple, what natural power it has for acting, and on what, or what power it has for being acted upon, and by what (tên dunamin autou, tina pros ti pephuken eis to dran echon e tina eis to pathein hupo tou). Applied to the soul, Socrates remarks, this method has the consequence that knowing the soul requires knowing the nature of the whole (tou holou). In this paper, I have asked
Phaedrus 270c-d’s methodologically prescribed questions of Plato’s own tripartite psychology as this is presented in the Republic to try to determine what the simples in the soul are, and I have argued that rather than the reasoning, spirited and appetitive parts isolated in Republic IV, the simples in the soul are the virtues. Thus the two interpretations of Socrates’ question in the Phaedrus, ‘does the human soul have parts or is it simple?’, and, ‘am I virtuous or vicious?’ are interestingly related. This is why Socrates can pursue the question of whether he is multiform or simple both by examining his opinions for consistency (Alcibiades I, 128e, 130c, 133b-c; Laches 187e-88a) and by delineating the motivations in the human soul and inquiring into the natural objects of their powers.

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1 In the Grube-Reeve translation, Socrates says, ‘when this part has measured and has indicated that some things are larger or smaller or the same size as others, the opposite appears to it at the same time.’ (Toutôi de pollakis metrêsanti kai sémainonti meizó atta eînai è elattô hetera heterôn è isa tanantia phainetai hama peri tauta. (602e4-6). It is not clear that application of the Principle of Opposites to this case warrants a division within the reasoning part, since what appear to ‘this part’ are a belief in accordance with measurement and an appearance contrary to measurement; perhaps the soul-partitioning opposition is between the (reasoning part’s) belief in accordance with measurement and a further belief formed (by another part) on the basis of the appearance contrary to measurement.

2 See, for example, T. Irwin, Plato’s Ethics (pp. 218 &ff). I worry that Irwin’s account of the kind of conflict that warrants soul division requires attributing self-conceptions to the parts, because this goes quite far beyond the text. My earlier paper, ‘Imperfect Virtue’ (Ancient Philosophy 18, 315-39), which offers an alternative account of division-warranting conflict, in terms of types of evaluative judgment now seems to me to raise the same worry.

3 J. Moline takes the parts to be fixedly, obsessively dedicated to these love-objects and argues that if the parts desire anything other than their love-objects it must be as means to the love-objects. (Plato’s Theory of the Understanding, University of Wisconsin Press
Moline argues that harmony in the soul is the result of the reasoning part persuading the lower parts, for example by myths about post-mortem rewards and punishments (of food, sex and drink accompanied by high reputation?). I find the idea of virtue and harmony based on internal deception implausible.  

I do not here take up the scholarly and philosophical controversy about whether or not this passage, or further passages in the argument, are meant to show that contrary to Socrates, there are good-independent desires. For the former, majority view, see: T. Irwin, who says that the Principle of Relatives allows Plato to introduce the idea of a good-independent desire, e.g., ‘thirst qua thirst’ which has as its natural object drink, and that Plato goes on to argue that such appetites exist (against a Socratic view that all desires are for good things), with the case of thirsty man who does not drink, 439b. See Plato’s Ethics (Oxford, 1995) 205-211, esp. 207. Cf. N. White, A Companion to Plato’s Republic (Hackett, 1979), pp. 124-25; T. Penner, ‘Plato and Davidson’, esp. p. 52; C. Kahn, ‘Plato’s Theory of Desire,’ p. 85. Against this, G. R. Carone maintains that this passage does not acknowledge the existence of good-independent desires, but rather introduces the idea of describing desires in terms of their natural objects alone, even though these desires are still for the good in the sense that their natural objects appear good to them. The reason to identify desires by their natural objects is that conflict between e.g. thirst and hunger is not to be explained by their going after their respective objects qua good, but qua drink and food. See ‘Akrasia in the Republic: Does Plato Change His Mind?’, Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy vol. 20, pp. 107-148, at pp. 117-19. I consider this issue, of the good-(in)dependence of some desires, to be concerned with the conclusions Plato draws from the use of the Principle of Relatives, and hence to be downstream from my present purpose, which is to understand the relevance of the Principle of Relatives to psychological attitudes in the first place. I do take up the downstream issue about desire and the good in my paper, ‘Plato on the Attribution of Conative Attitudes’ Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie 2006, pp. 127-62.
Similarly: the lover of food loves all food, and the lover of learning loves all learning (Republic 475b-c); love is of beauty as a parent is a parent of an offspring, and is necessarily [my emphasis] of something not possessed (Symposium 199c-201a).

6 In Categories chapter 7, Aristotle says that things are said to be relative (pros tì) insofar as they are what they are in relation to other things (6a36-37, cf. 8a31-32, Topics VI. 142a28-30, 146b2-4, Metaphysics V. 1021a26-b3). His opening examples of relatives are ‘larger’ and ‘double’, and he classifies as relatives state (hexis), condition (diathesis), perception (aisthēsis), and knowledge (epistêmê) (6a37-b3). He argues that when relatives are specified correctly, it is apparent that the relata are correlatives: for example, knowledge is of the knowable; a rudder is of a rudderless thing (rather than of a boat, since not all boats have rudders); wings are of winged things (rather than of birds, since other things than birds—bats?—also have wings) (6b28-7b14). David Sedley (‘Aristotelian Relativities’ in Le style de la pensée: recueil de textes en hommage à Jacques Brunschwig, Belles lettres 2002, pp. 324-52) argues that Aristotle’s definition of relatives as those things ‘for which being is the same as being somehow related to something’ (Cat. 8a31) narrows the scope of true relatives to things which are said to be what they are on the basis of no intrinsic property but only relatively—e.g. the double, the larger than—by contrast with things that are said to be what they are on the basis of some intrinsic property—e.g. perception. Aristotle gives as the mark of narrower relatives ‘cognitive symmetry’: one cannot possess definite knowledge of the double without knowing the half. By contrast, Sedley says, one can know definitely what perception is, say by stating its function, without knowing the perceptible. (*is S. right?) According to Sedley, the motivation for Aristotle’s narrowing definition is to show that secondary substances, not being narrow relatives, can be known definitely without knowledge of their correlatives. It is not only Aristotle who refines Plato’s treatment of relatives; as Sedley points out, Simplicius’ commentaries on Aristotle’s Categories and Physics show that the problem of distinguishing among kinds of relatives occupied both Plato’s immediate successors in the Academy and the Stoics. *Cf. K. Gaiser, Plato’s Unwritten Doctrines, texts of Hermodorus on Xenocrates, Sextus on relatives.
Invariably correct’ is not the only way of picking out natural objects, but I believe that it is Plato’s way in the Republic; Aristotle’s Topics suggests a couple of others: for example, he says that a term that can be used in a number of relations should be defined by its primary relation, e.g., prudence should be defined as the virtue of the reasoning faculty rather than the virtue of man or his soul, because it is in virtue of being the virtue of the reasoning faculty that prudence is the virtue of man or his soul (VI.6, 145a27-32); again, Aristotle says that a relative term should be defined in relation to its end, i.e., to whatever is best, so that, e.g., desire should be defined as for pleasure, and not just for the pleasant (VI.8, 146b9-13).


Not every advance to more sophisticated causes requires empirical investigation, e.g., that 3 ‘brings the odd with it’ and ‘does not admit of the even’.

In her comments on this paper, M. Nussbaum perceptively identifies this as the source of the difficulty in seeing just how the parts are genuinely opposed in the Republic IV argument. After all, what is the contradiction between desiring drink qua drink and rejecting it qua bad? I think the answer has to be that Plato conceives of the opposition extensionally. Yes, the two parts are conceiving of their objects of desire and aversion differently, but this results in opposite movements towards the same extensional object (which may well be why Plato introduces into his characterization of the psychological attitudes of assent and dissent, wanting and rejecting, the notion of ‘taking something and pushing it away,’ [437b], cf. his description of aversion as a case ‘in which the soul pushes and drives things away’ [437c]). Cf. De re contradiction.*

I have slightly emended the Grube-Reeve translation here at 477e6-7 to reflect order of the Greek more exactly.

For an overview of the problems raised by this argument, see J. Anna, An Introduction to Plato’s Republic (Oxford, 1981), 193-211.

Gail Fine, ‘Knowledge and belief in Republic V’ ['Republic V'], pp. 66-84 in her Plato on Knowledge and Forms (Oxford 2003), at p. 73.


The same point is made in detail by Francisco Gonzalez (‘Propositions or Objects? A Critique of Gail Fine on Knowledge and Belief in Republic V, Phronesis vol. 41, 1996, pp. 245-75), at pp. 265-69. Fine can reply that this just amounts to the claim that what opinion is set over is indeterminate until the instances are considered, at which point each opinion turns out to be set over either what-is-true or what-is-not-true. But nothing in the text indicates that Plato is distinguishing the contents of opinion in general from the contents of opinions considered individually.

I agree with Fine that Plato cannot hold that the objects of knowledge are exclusively Forms and that the objects of opinion are exclusively sensibles. However, her case in favour of the veridical reading of ‘is’ over the predicative and existential readings leans too heavily on the supposition that Socrates must argue from premises acceptable to the sightlovers, who would not agree that the objects of opinion exist and do not exist or are and are not F but could easily agree that some of the contents of opinion are true and others false. (‘Republic V’, pp. 70, also 78-79.) But Socrates argues from the premise that each of the many beautiful things will also appear ugly, and each of the many just things will also appear unjust (478e-79b) to the conclusion that opinion is set over what is and is not (479c-e). If that conclusion were just the claim that the contents of opinion may be true or false, why would he need the premise? According to Fine, 479c-e draws a further conclusion than this, which is that the sight-lovers’ nomima (479d4), by which Fine understands the sight-lovers’ accounts of beauty or justice, and not just their beliefs, include or entail true and false propositions (pp. 82-83). But at 479c, Socrates states his conclusion about the intermediacy of the objects of opinion without any mention of the subset of them that are nomima. Finally, since the ‘is’ in this stretch of the argument must be read predicatively, a preferable reading would be one in which the ‘is’ could be read as consistently predicative.

G. Reydam-Schils argues that although the objects of opinion are sensibles, the World-Soul has opinions about them without sense-perception. See her ‘Plato’s World Soul: Grasping Sensibles Without Sense-Perception’ pp. 261-66 in T. Calvo and L. Brisson (eds.) Interpreting the Timaeus-Critias: Proceedings of the IV Symposium Platonicum (Academia-Verlag, 1997). Unlike human opinion, which involves distortion in the circle
of the Different (43b-d), perhaps when it is false, the opinions of the World-Soul are not said to involve any distortion. A welcome implication of the possibility of opinion about sensibles without sense-perception is that humans can have opinions about sensibles without occurrent sense-perceptions, or on the basis of testimony.

19 I use the term ‘grasp’ as a shorthand for powers’ acting on or being acted on by their natural objects; since what I am saying is meant to apply to both active and passive powers of the soul, I do not intend my use of this shorthand to imply the view that e.g. knowledge is active rather than passive with respect to its objects.

20 The political division of labour that’s supposed to be analogous to the psychic division of labour in the tripartite soul assigns to each class a job that’s ‘its own’ according to the principle that one’s own work is the work one is best suited to do. It is unclear whether by this Plato means the work that one is better-able to do than are others, or whether he means the work that is the best work, given one’s own abilities, that one can do.

21 At Charmides 167d-e Socrates refers to an apparently familiar matching of powers with objects: wishing (boulêsis) is for the good and appetite (epithumia) for the pleasant; fear is of the frightful and knowledge of learning, just as vision is of colour and hearing of sound. The two perceptual cases illuminate Plato’s model: colour is not the only object grasped by vision; however, whenever we see e.g. shape and size, we see them through colour—and, the Theaetetus suggests, by the power of reason (185a-c). Similarly, sound is not the only thing grasped by hearing; for example, we can use it to tell distance and direction, but we tell these things through sound, by way of features of the sound we hear. We may want to say that in such cases we are inferring distance and direction, or shape and size, from the sound or colour we perceive, rather than hearing or seeing them, but the advantage of allowing that we do hear or see them while denying that these are what hearing or vision is set over or that these are the natural objects of hearing or vision, is that attributing the grasp of distance and/or direction to another faculty like reason makes it mysterious how non-rational animals are able to tell distance and direction (presumably this is why Aristotle attributes to common sense some of the powers the Theaetetus passage attributes to reason.).
22 So I agree with Fine both that knowledge is not restricted to Forms and that it has a special relationship to Forms (this last is why I disagree with Annas’ view that ‘what is’ includes particulars that are not F and not-F at the same time, e.g., Socrates’ being a man [Introduction, pp. 210-11]).

23 A worry: the Phaedo case is a case not exactly of exercising the developed disposition of knowledge, but rather of triggering recollection, a process which begins the development of the disposition of knowledge; is the Phaedus case well-described as the exercise of knowledge? Both cases seem different from the case of a philosopher contemplating the Forms not just in the involvement of some other faculty, but in the nature of the disposition(s) named ‘knowledge’. Conversely, perhaps Plato would want to say of the summoners’ argument that the power that grasps what is is nascent knowledge, rather than opinion.

24 In ‘Doxa and Dunamis in Plato’s Republic’ (Phronesis 1968, pp. 119-30), J. B. Gosling understands what a power is ‘set over’ (epi) and what it does as so closely related that the two criteria for distinguishing powers never come apart. So for example, heat is the power of melting butter; what heat does is to melt butter and what it is epi (Gosling’s gloss is ‘is appointed to’ or ‘is drawn up against’) is the melting of butter. So, according to Gosling, knowledge and opinion are two capacities of the same faculty. J. Hintikka (‘Knowledge and its Objects in Plato’ pp. 1-30 in J. Moravcsik (ed.) Patterns in Plato’s Thought (Dordrecht: D. Reidel 1973) also effectively combines the two criteria in the relation of having as an aim or end, on the grounds that Plato like his predecessors and contemporaries confounds process and product (both possible senses of ‘ergon’). In reply, G. Santas argues that the thrice-repeated distinction between what a power does (apergazetai) and what it is set over (epi) is a clear distinction between process and product; according to Santas, the two functions of knowledge and belief in the argument are cognizing infallibly and cognizing fallibly, which difference is explained by their stable or unstable objects. (‘Hintikka on Knowledge and its Objects in Plato’ (ibid. pp. 31-51).

25 These are both active and passive and sometimes Socrates indicates the power of the correlative object, for instance, corresponding to the power to see is the power of visible
things to be seen and corresponding to the power to know is the power of intelligible things to be known (508a-509b); similarly, imitations (602c) have the power to affect the part of the soul that is susceptible to them. There are also powers of the city (351b, 433b-d); the power of things like Gyges’ ring, money and political power (360a, 359b, 366c, 466c, 473d, 494c, 591a).

26 In the Sophist, the Visitor says, ‘Whatsoever has some power (dunamis), either by nature (pephukos) to affect (poiein) anything else or to be affected (pathein) even in the smallest degree by even the most trifling thing, even just once, I say this really is. I propose this as a definition of what is (ta onta) that it is nothing other than a power (dunamis).’* (Sophist 247d8-e4) Thanks to J. Cleary for referring me to this passage.

27 This worry recalls the equally troubling arguments in the Hippias Minor that the power to tell the truth is the power to lie since the most successful at deception will know the truth from which he needs to depart (365d-69b). Republic III retains the idea that the ability to tell successful verbal lies depends on knowledge of the truth--because knowledge of the truth enables the liar to depart from the truth successfully--without conceding that the knower is as disposed to lie as to tell the truth (382a-e).

28 My view requires that the appetites (epithumiai) of the Principle of Relatives passage discussed in section 3 be powers and not just sub-parts of the appetitive part (to epithumétikon).

29 Footnote to Lorenz on “what psychic rule comes to.”*

30 Tr. Nehamas and Woodruff.

31 The reference of ‘the whole’ in this passage is the subject of some scholarly disagreement. For the view that it is the whole soul, see e.g. R. Hackforth, Plato’s Phaedrus (Cambridge, 1952), p. 150 and C. J. Rowe, Plato: Phaedrus (Aris & Phillips 1986), p. 205. One consideration that might seem to favour this interpretation is that the ensuing discussion, starting at 270c, says nothing about studying the universe, plenty about studying the soul. But of course that is just where the method recommends beginning, with enumerating the simples in the soul. Further, in the context, there is no question that knowing the nature of the soul requires knowing the nature of the whole soul, or that knowing an individual soul requires knowing soul in general. An interesting
alternative to ‘the whole cosmos’ is proposed by M. L. Gill (2004) in ‘Plato’s Phaedrus and the Method of Hippocrates’ (Modern Schoolman 80, pp. 295-314). Gill argues that ‘the whole’ is ‘the whole environment’, so that one comes to know a soul’s powers and dispositions by observing its behaviour in its environmental context, where the boundaries of the context are determined teleologically. She also finds parallels for the ‘whole environment’ approach in two Hippocratic treatises and suggests that the Phaedrus shows Socrates getting to know Phaedrus by observing his behaviour in his environment. (pp. 301-5) But the reference to Anaxagoras at 270a suggests that the whole cosmos is what is intended; a noteworthy parallel is Cratylus 400b, where the soul’s name (ψυχή) is said to derive from its power to support and sustain the whole of nature (πνεῦμα ὀχεί καὶ εχεί, phusechê). (This parallel is not conclusive; the claim might be that each body has a soul to support and sustain its nature: phusin pantos tou sômatos at a5 might be read ‘the nature of every body’ and tôn allôn hapantôn phusin at a8 ‘the nature of all other things’.) Another relevant consideration even if ‘the whole’ in this passage refers to ‘the whole environment’, the in-principle environment of a human soul extends to the cosmos because it is capable of thinking about the whole cosmos. But as I’ll suggest below, an investigation of the whole cosmos as acting upon the soul would be a highly structured investigation.

Although my argument differs from hers, I believe it nevertheless supports the conclusion of J. Whiting’s (forthcoming) ‘Psychic contingency in Plato’, which argues that some embodied human souls (e.g. the Republic’s oligarchic or tyrannical souls) have distinct agent-like parts while in other souls (e.g. the just person’s soul) the so-called parts are simply the different motivations of a unitary subject. On the other hand, I do not agree with C. Korsgaard’s (1999) ‘Self-constitution in the ethics of Plato and Kant’ (Journal of Ethics 3, pp. 1-29) according to which justice, understood as the constitutional rule of reason, is not only a necessary condition for the unity of the agent, but also (following from its necessity for unity) of the agent’s authorship of his or her actions. Korsgaard’s focus on what it takes for some happening to count as an action (according to her, Plato says that for a happening to count an action, it must be in accordance with the agent’s constitution, and a constitution counts as the agent’s own when reason rules)
seems to me entirely foreign to Plato, as does her argument that when one chooses what to be, i.e. what constitution to have, one cannot but choose to be reason-ruled, and this is what makes the reason-ruled constitution the agent’s ‘own constitution’.

33 I am grateful to David Ebrey, Stephen Menn, Martha Nussbaum, Rachel Singpurwalla and philosophy audiences at Brown University, UC Davis and Arizona State University for comments on earlier versions of this paper.