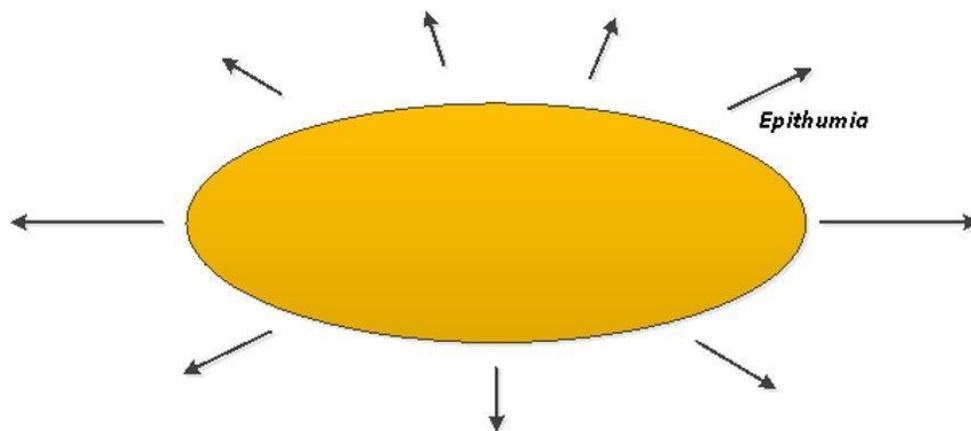


Harmonia in Platonism

Summary: In the *Republic* and in *Pheadrus*, Plato characterises the human soul, which he thought to be made up of three parts: a part energised by reason, a part energised by raw desire, and a “spirited” part energised by wholesome pride or “anger.” These energies can be modelled more generally as *epithumia*, the movement of expansion, *thumos*, the movement of constraint, and *logos*, the movement governing the other two based on some interpretation of reality. Modelled in this way, the internal dynamics of the psyche and of culture at large are brought to light in ways that highlight the challenges we face as a society today. In particular, Plato’s characterisation of the soul points obliquely to the harmony or balance that is always challenged by the tension that exists between the outward expansion of *epithumia*, our constant need to explore, to experience and to know, and the need to hold some degree of order in the psyche, some centre to the chaos of our experience. This notion of *harmonia*, latent in traditional interpretations of Platonism, opens up a way of approaching Platonism that is perhaps more accessible to our modern materialistic sensibilities and easier to apply to the pressing problems of our day, such as climate change, hyper-individualism, and populism.

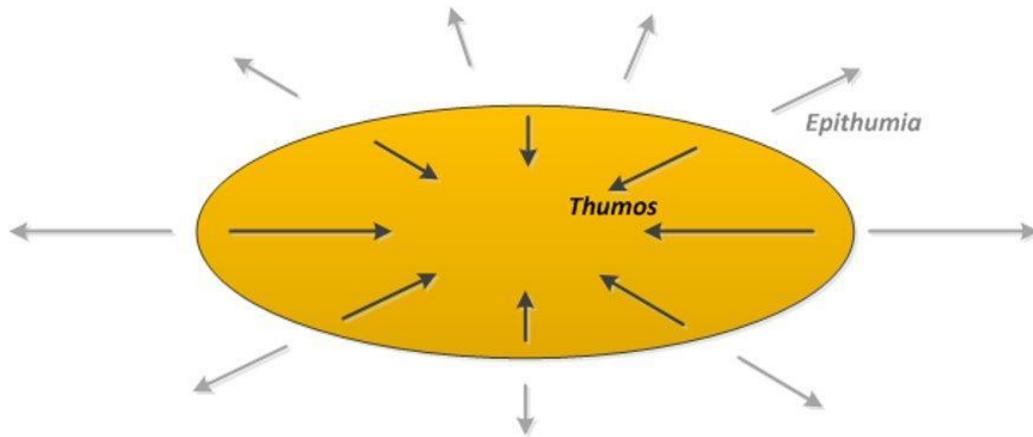
The Soul, Plato says, is composed of three fundamental forces held dynamically in a structure¹ we call the self.

- **Epithumia** is the movement of expansion. It’s our irrational fears and desires, but it’s also our desire to experience more of the world, the need to know, curiosity, interest. Plato calls it the dark horse. The many headed beast.

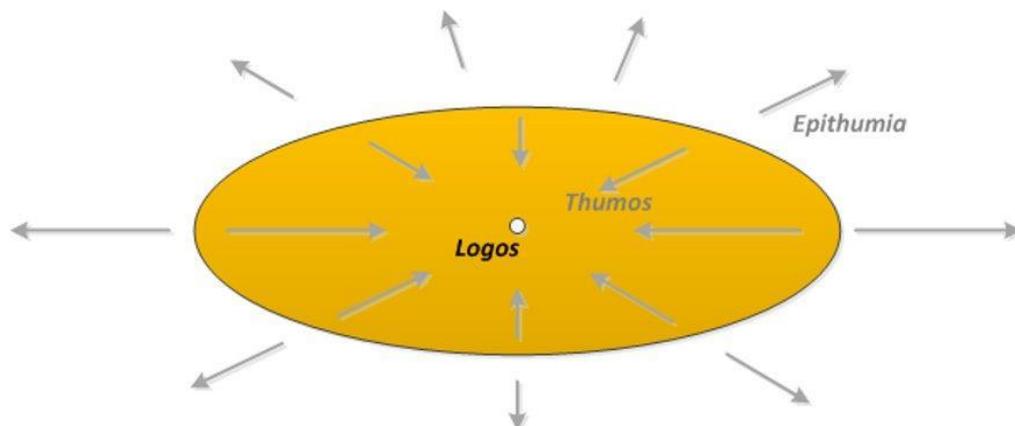


- **Thumos** is the movement to constrain this expansion, to control it, to hold a center of some kind. Plato calls it spirited pride or “anger”. The white horse.

¹ This way of diagramming these internal movements in the soul is based on the work of contemporary integral philosopher (and Platonist), Steve McIntosh (see *Integral Consciousness and the Future of Evolution*, p296-9).



- **Logos** is the relatively stable interpretation of the world around which this dynamic tension between *epithumia* and *thumos* plays itself out. It's a movement of sorts in the sense that it is actively governing the dynamic between the other two. Logos is the 'I' we point to when we refer to ourselves. Plato calls it the charioteer.



This way of modeling the tripartite soul emphasises the constant dynamic that exists between these internal movements within us. *Epithumia* necessarily expands one's experience around some interpretation of the world. *Thumos* imposes some kind of restraint on this expansion by holding the center, keeping *epithumia* in line. These two exist in a kind of dynamic tension. The more active the expansive force, the more engaged is the constraining force. The stronger the constraining force, the more freely we are able to explore our experience without losing our centre. The center itself, *Logos*, around which this dynamic plays out, is the reflective, rational position governing the movements of *thumos* and *epithumia*. (It's also the unquestioned assumptions implicit in our interpretation of reality, those things we take for granted as natural, normal, and obvious.)

In his description of the *arete* in the *Republic*, Plato points us to an additional influence on this dynamic.

"One who is just...puts himself in order, is his own friend, and harmonises the three parts of himself [*logos, thumos, epithumia*] like three limiting notes in a musical scale—high,

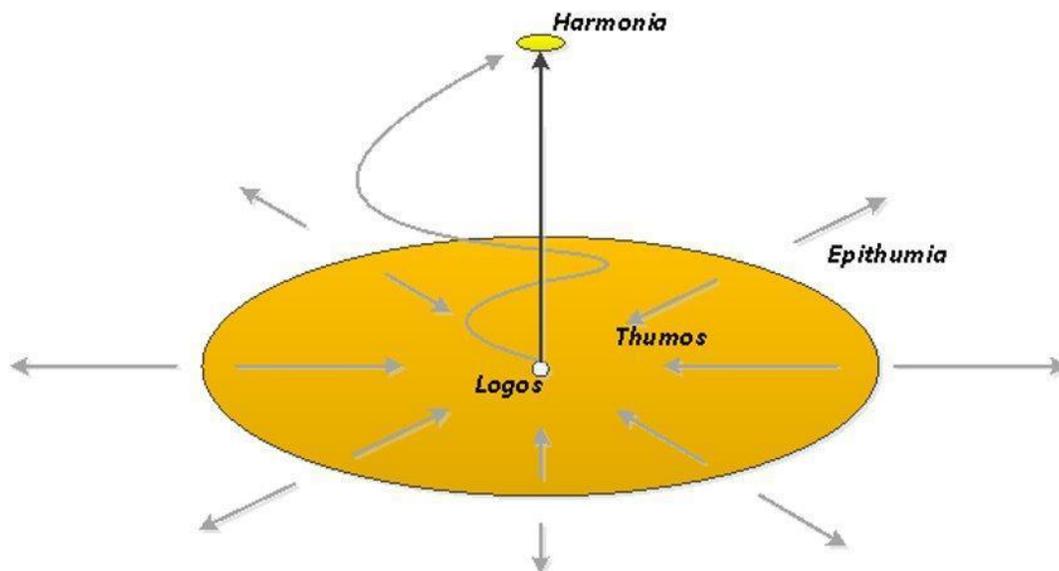
low, and middle. He binds together those parts, and any others there may be in between, and from having been many things he becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious." *Republic IV 443e*

In his account of creation in the *Timaeus* he points to it as well.

"But the motions which are allied to the divine part of our nature are the dianoëtic energies and circulations of the universe. These, therefore, each of us ought to pursue; restoring in such a manner those revolutions in our head (which have been corrupted by our wanderings about generation), through diligently considering the harmonies and circulations of the universe, that the intellectual power may become assimilated to the object of intelligence, according to its ancient nature. For, when thus assimilated, we shall obtain the end of the best life proposed by the Gods to men, both at present and in all the future circulations of time." - *Timaeus 90d*

From these descriptions we discern the presence of a fourth influence acting on the internal dynamics of the soul. This is not a movement coming from within the individual soul, but rather one that exerts its influence from outside the tripartite dynamic by calling *logos* to some degree of **balance or harmony**. Based on Plato's descriptions in the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*, we might call this movement in the soul "*harmonia*" and characterise it in this way:

- **Harmonia** is the connection or "sympathy" *logos* has tacitly and intuitively with the whole through its current natural and intellectual sensitivities.

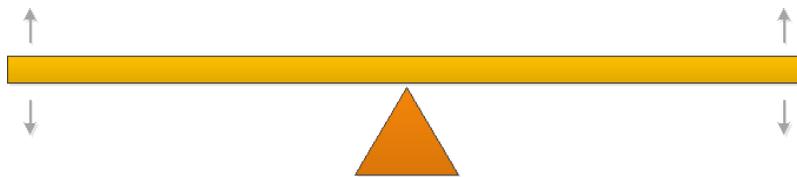


We connect with *harmonia* through our tacit connection with the cosmos and our intuitive connection with intellectual form. We have a natural "sympathy" (Olympiodorus - *in Alc.* 5.3-12) with the whole. When the dynamic of the soul is distorted and out of balance it is our sense of

justice, beauty, and goodness, that calls us back to *harmonia*. Realising *harmonia* allows *logos* to navigate through its physical, cultural, and ethical environment in a more balanced way. When this happens, the tensions between *epithumia* and *thumos* are transcended. They don't go away, but they become creative and constructive.

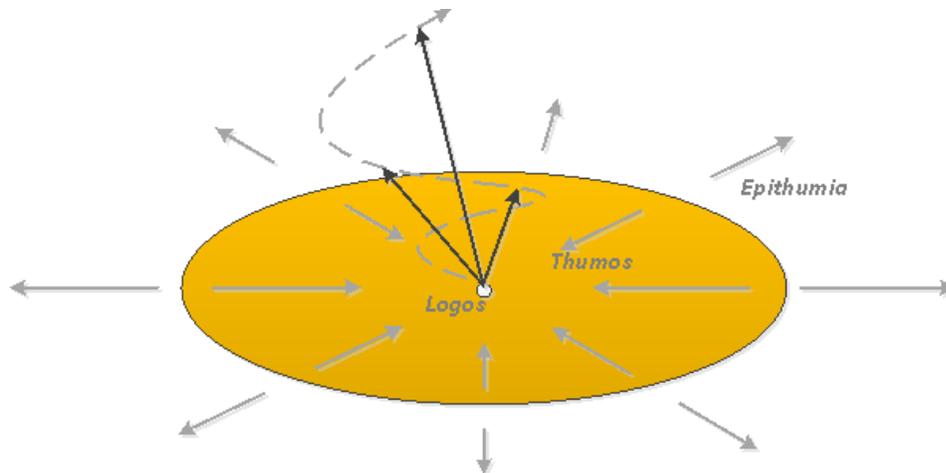
This way of modeling the tripartite soul helps us understand how Plato's intellectual forms, Truth, Beauty, Justice, Goodness, all point us to *harmonia* in some way. Our interpretation of these forms have changed as our *logos* has changed throughout the ages, and yet the forms themselves continue to point us to the same thing. The call of Truth, Beauty, Justice and Goodness comes from within us, not from the world as such. Our sense of what's true, beautiful, just, or good in any given moment comes from the innate connection we have with the cosmos and the role we play as a developing *logos* embedded in that larger whole. That sense might be interpreted through the lens of the times, but *harmonia* itself transcends and includes any specific dynamic of the soul playing itself out between us and our culture, between us and nature, between us and reality.

The Balance Point



Notice that a balance point is a delicate singularity. It is not an entity in itself but it makes it possible for an entity to exist by balancing the tension between forces that comprise that entity. A physical structure exists because a balance or harmony has been achieved in the tension between physical forces (strong force, weak force, electrodynamic, and gravity). The soul in Plato's model can be seen in a similar way. It is not physical; it is an internal structure in consciousness, but it is a structure nonetheless. One could argue that the soul exists, in so far as it maintains some degree of balance between the internal movements of *epithumia*, *thumos*, *logos*, and *harmonia* with the cosmos.

I think this model of the soul tells us a lot about what we're struggling with as a society right now. Clearly the *logos* of our times is out of alignment with reality. We can disagree about how exactly we are out of alignment, but few would argue these days that we're moving toward more harmony and balance. Some would say we have given ourselves over to *epithumia*. We are infatuated with a grossly distorted idea of individuality. We indulge our individual freedoms at the expense of each other, all sentient beings, and the planet. It's so extreme at this point that natural systems are pushing back.

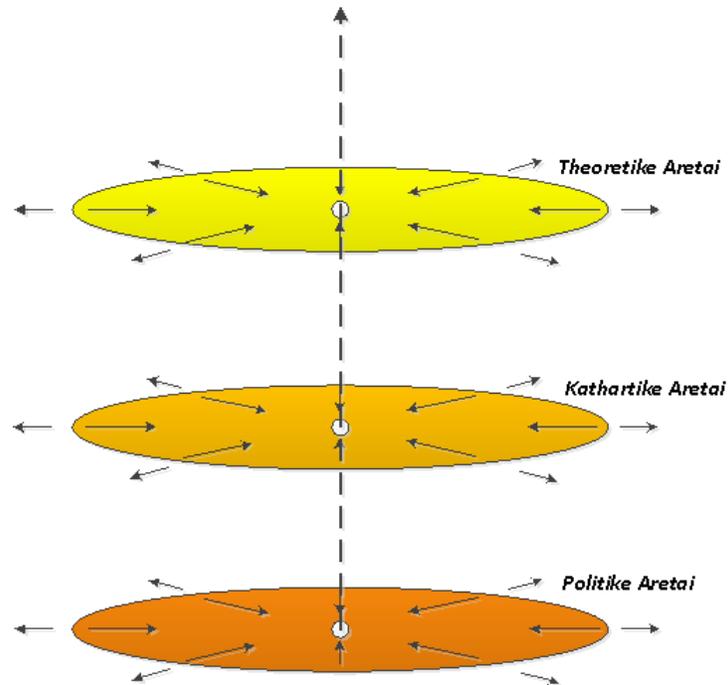


Ultimately it will be our sense of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness that will rectify this distortion calling us back to balance with the cosmos, calling us to *harmonia*. The concepts we have of truth, beauty, and goodness are not working for us right now. If we manage to change the cultural logos, as we must do in order to survive, we will have modified these concepts in a way that works more effectively such that they start to call us back to some degree of balance with the real.

What would this balance look like? At the civic level, the level of our interactions with each other and the world, it looks like the *politike aretai* or “excellences.” These are the civic virtues mapped out in detail by the neoplatonists.

- **Temperance** is when *epithumia* is exploring the world respectful of the *logos* that is supporting it.
- **Courage** is when *thumos* is staying true to that *logos* in spite of what the world is presenting to challenge it
- **Prudence** is when *logos* is doing the right thing given everything it knows about self, world, and other.
- **Justice** is when the three forces of the soul, *epithumia*, *thumos*, and *logos* are operating as one unit, when each is doing its job well in harmony with the other two.

These *politicke aretai* or civic virtues are just the first level of the multi-tiered path mapped out by the neoplatonists. They pointed to a same tension between expanding and constraining forces taking place at each level. Achieving some degree of *harmonia* at one level prepares us to develop at the next level, the next “octave” of contemplation. The higher we ascend (or the deeper we go) the more we rely on the foundations we establish at these initial levels of development.



Finally, this way of modeling the tripartite soul and the *aretai* helps to illuminate the difference between what we call “moral” and “spiritual” development. Because our physical, cultural and ethical environments are always changing, *logos* itself needs to change in order to adapt. But there appear to be fundamentally different ways that it can do so.

“Moral” development is when *logos* changes in response to the input it receives from the world. The new *logos* is learned from the world.

“Spiritual” development is when *logos* changes in response to the input it receives from its intimations of *harmonia*. The new *logos* is realised from within.

In its focus on purification, contemplation, and noetic union, the neoplatonist path of soul development is clearly a spiritual one. Our modern *logos*, to the extent that it is interested in development at all, is more interested in moral development. Our modern definition of truth is one that is “out there.” Our notion of justice is searching for practical ways of organising society. Our idea of beauty is interested in the object at hand rather than the eye of the beholder.

According to Plato, Truth, Beauty, Justice, and Goodness, are not found in the world of the senses. They are found *within* us. His philosophy, by our definition above, is therefore a spiritual path. Eternal form may certainly be evidenced in the material world, but ultimately we don’t look to material stuff to discover what Plato was talking about. We look to our innate connection with the cosmos and our intuitive connection with intellectual form. When we start to receive intimations of these forms from a deeper part of ourselves, we find the closer we approach them, the more they demand of us, and the more our *logos* must change.