

# The "tripartite" soul and its virtues

## discussed by Proclus

Although Plato considered the soul (the real self of each one of us) as an essentially indivisible unity, he also puts forward a conception of it as embracing a multiplicity of modes of action. A most important exploration of the nature of the human self is to be found in his *Republic* in which an examination of consequences to the soul of living justly and unjustly is unfolded. At the beginning of the second book of the *Republic* Socrates suggests that, since the soul is too small and too close for us to look at easily, he and his fellow thinkers should explore the workings of a republic because, he claims, it is an analogue of the soul and its multiple "parts" or modes. He divides the wholeness of a city into three classes – the governors, the auxiliaries and the general population who are the mercantile producers (hereafter referred to as "mercenaries") of material goods: these, Socrates says, are the parallels to three distinct aspects of the soul: the reasoning part, the *thumos* (or ordering or spirited part) and the desiring or appetitive part. Proclus, in his *Commentary on the Republic* (407 onwards) explores these aspects of the soul in some detail and is particularly concerned with how each part has its own excellence or virtue (in Greek *arete*):

"I here consider virtue not ambiguously, and in the same manner as when we ascribe virtues to things inanimate, but that which is properly so called. This therefore we say is vital, is the perfection of life, and is the cause of well-being, and not of being to those by whom it is possessed. But since life is twofold, one kind being gnostic, and the other orectic,<sup>1</sup> or appetitive, virtue will be a certain perfection both of the orectic and of the gnostic form of life. . . . Hence Socrates in his *Republic* makes a distribution into three genera, *viz.* into guardians, auxiliaries, and mercenaries, before he indicates what the different kinds of virtue are in the best polity; and before he distributes the virtues analogously in one soul, he shows that there are three parts of the soul essentially different, *viz.* reason, anger, and desire, [each with their own perfection attained through the cultivation of *arete* or virtue]."

Social class	Soul faculty	Greek term	Relation
Governors	Reason	Logos	governs
Auxiliaries	Anger or "spirited part"	Thumos	Governs and governed
Mercenaries	Desire or appetite	Epithumia	governed

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<sup>1</sup> This is an important element of Platonic psychology: the division of powers and activities directed either to knowledge or to the fulfilment of a range of desires – the *gnostic* and the *orectic*. Although this distinction is made, the two aspects are not considered to be entirely separate and ultimately they are drawn together in the ideal life.

"We can add that there is one perfection and energy of a thing considered by itself, and another according to its habitude [i.e. its active relationship] to something else; . . . For there is not the same perfection of man, and of a man who is a ruler, as neither is a man the same with a ruler; nor is the same thing to behold the soul simply, and the soul as governing the body. Hence it is not the same thing to consider the essential and the relational perfection of a thing. Neither, therefore, must we consider the activity of a thing essentially originating from itself, and solely directed to itself in the same manner as the activity of that which governs or is governed; for government, and the being governed, are certain relationships. Nothing indeed hinders but that the same thing may perform a certain action, not as governing or as governed, but as possessing a certain essence by itself, and an activity which it is allotted consequent to its essence. Thus for instance, the rational power in us when it lives cathartically,<sup>2</sup> performs its proper work theoretically, being naturally adapted thus to live according to its essence; but in this case it does not perform the office of a governor, as the irrational parts contribute nothing to that energy which is directed to itself. Rightly, therefore, does Socrates show that every governing art imparts good to the governed; so that when the rational part extends good to itself alone, purifying and investigating itself, it does not then possess the life of a governor."

"Since however all the parts are conjoined with each other, and give completion to one life, it is necessary to consider them according to their relative energy, and thus to perceive the virtue and the vice of each. Hence we must define *political*<sup>3</sup> virtue to be a habit perfective of the relative life of the parts of the soul; and its contrary, political vice, to be a habit corruptive of the vital habitude of the parts to each other."

"These things being determined, let us now consider how we shall introduce all the four virtues; and let us endeavour to make it apparent to the learner that they are four. Since, therefore, there are three equal parts of the soul (for from hence we must begin); but these have not an equal order, one being allied to intellect, another being naturally adapted to body, and another being arranged in the middle of both; hence, that alone governs which is naturally allied to intellect, *viz.* reason, and, which itself spontaneously knows, intellect; and that is alone governed, which, according to its proper order, is allied to body. This is the desirative part of the soul, which aspires after corporeal possessions, just as reason desires intellectual

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<sup>2</sup> That is to say, when the soul acts as itself alone, detached from material considerations belonging to the body.

<sup>3</sup> The translator, Thomas Taylor, is using the word *political* in its widest sense – Proclus here is talking about the parts of the soul as analogous to the parts of a *polis* or community. We have already seen, as an example, that the reason can act by itself without reference to the community of powers which are active in the whole organism, but the *political* virtue of reason is the excellence of reason as it performs its proper role in the whole – that is to say, as the governor or director of the other powers. Since the other powers, in this context, are acting in the material world, the political virtues are associated with the outer life; other levels of virtue, says the tradition, are activated when the soul turns inward and upward towards the eternal realm.

good. But the spirit part is that which both governs and is governed. This part, because it is irrational, is present also with irrational animals, like the desirative part, is destitute of knowledge, and naturally requires to be governed by that which is allied to intellect; but, because it is always present with, when desire opposes reason, it is more allied to the rational part than desire, which is more remote from reason, and remarkably sympathizes with the body. For this always adheres to the body, and never abandons its life; but the spirited part often despises the body and a life in conjunction with it, aspiring after another object of desire, which does not pertain to the body.<sup>4</sup> These then, being three, one of which, reason, ought to govern only, but another, as body, to be governed only, and another to govern, and at the same time to be governed, according to an order in the middle of the extremes, - hence, the governors are two, the one primary, and the other secondary, and the things governed according to the same reasoning are also two."

"It is requisite, therefore, that the part which alone and primarily governs should possess one virtue perfective of governing relationship; but that the part which governs secondarily, and is governed primarily, should possess twofold virtues perfective of two relationships. . . . But it is necessary that the part which is alone governed should possess one perfective virtue. Reason, therefore, which, as we have shown, ought only to govern, has for its ruling virtue prudence, according to which it bounds both for itself and others the measures of actions. Desire, which ought only to be governed, has for its virtue temperance, according to which it measures its appetites, converting itself to reason, from which it receives a rational impulse, through custom and training. But the spirited part, which naturally governs and is governed, possesses, so far as it governs, fortitude, through which it overrides the desirative part, and preserves itself invulnerable from its attacks; but, so far as it is governed, it possesses temperance, through which it also desires to be disciplined by the measures of reason."

"But if prudence is alone the virtue of the governor, but temperance is the virtue of the governed, and both temperance and fortitude form the virtue of that which governs and is at the same time governed, it is evident that the remaining virtue, justice, must belong to all parts, to one as governing, to another as that which is governed, and to another as that which both governs and is governed; so that through this each part energizes according to its proper order, the one as governing, the other as governed, and a third as both."

"Socrates, therefore, having established these three genera, in order to give completion to the city, indicates whence we may call the city wise, whence brave, temperate, and just. And the guardian genus, indeed, on account of its being most

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<sup>4</sup> Traditionally the spirited part was said to aspire after honour (and, of course, to avoid shame); along with honour we might also say that it is attracted to the power and the exercise of power. Power and honour are not of themselves directly attached to body, unlike the pleasures which are the objects of desire and appetite.

musical, possesses the science of good and ill; for, as we before observed, it has learnt from the discipline of music in what manner it is requisite to be wise respecting superior natures, and respecting human felicity. Hence, he says, poets also are to be compelled to compose such verses as have a tendency to these types. And if it also learns the mathematical disciplines and dialectic, it will be in a still greater degree wise and scientific. The auxiliary genus, on account of its living in arms, and in the exercise and study of warlike affairs, especially possesses fortitude. And the mercenary genus requires temperance; for an affluence of things necessary is especially in want of this virtue, since an abundance of these leads to an intemperate life. These three genera therefore mutually according with each other, and preserving their own energy with respect to governing and being governed, justice is the result of such a subsistence."

Class in city	Part of soul	Activity	Virtue	Co-ordinated whole
Governors	Reason	Governing	Prudence or wisdom	Justice
Auxiliaries	Spirited part	Governs and governed	Temperance when governed, fortitude when governing	
Mercenary	Desire	Governed	Temperance	