

## The Desires of Reason in Plato's *Republic*

In the *Republic*, as is well known, Plato's Socrates claims that the embodied human soul contains three distinct elements or parts, each of which has its own distinctive pleasures and desires and each of which is capable of ruling over the soul as a whole. In this paper, I examine the desires of *to logistikon*, the rational part or element of the soul. There is a puzzle about how best to understand these desires. In the *Republic*, *to logistikon* sometimes appears to be responsible for desires for the good, at least in the sense of what the agent believes to be best at the time. For example, it is depicted as capable of directly opposing the desires of spirit and appetite in those cases where the agent believes that it would be better, overall, to refrain from acting on such desires. However, in other passages in the *Republic* the rational part of the soul is represented as primarily responsible for a basic thirst for knowledge and understanding, for our non-derived desires to learn and discover the truth. As a result, it may appear as if the rational part of the soul in the *Republic* is uniquely and distinctively responsible *both* for our desires to do what we consider best overall at any given time *and* for our basic, non-derived desires to learn and discover the truth. But if this is right, it is difficult to see that Plato was entitled to treat reason as a single, unified source of motivation, as he appears determined to do. Perhaps out of concern to avoid saddling Plato with a division within reason, some recent interpreters have emphasized one of these kinds of desire at the expense of the other, or tried to reduce one kind of rational desire to the other. In this paper, I survey two such attempts: those of Terence Irwin (who overwhelmingly treats rational desires as desires for the good of the whole soul and each of its parts) and John Ferrari (who denies that reason in the *Republic* has any inherent attachment to the good, and seeks to reduce all rational desires to intellectual desires for knowledge and understanding). I argue that neither view is adequate as an interpretation of the *Republic*. I then offer an alternative account, on which Plato presents both the desire to do what one considers best and the desire to discover the truth as in some way basic to the rational part of the soul. I conclude that the view of Plato's Socrates in the *Republic*, so understood, need not imply a subdivision of the rational part or element of the soul.

Author:

Dr. Mark Johnstone  
Assistant Professor  
McMaster University (Ontario, Canada)

Mailing Address:

310A University Hall  
McMaster University  
1280 Main Street West  
Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4K1  
Canada

[mjohnst@mcmaster.ca](mailto:mjohnst@mcmaster.ca)