

# The Translation of *Republic* 606A3–B5 and Plato’s Partite Psychology\*

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In this paper I discuss a line in Plato’s description of his ‘greatest accusation’ against imitative poetry: that it corrupts even ‘decent people’ (τοὺς ἐπικεῖς). Decent people are those who have largely true ethical beliefs and largely abide by them in their behaviour, but who also, because they have been ‘insufficiently educated in reason and habit’ (606A7–8), fall short of being truly virtuous, in two respects: they only have true ethical beliefs, not ethical knowledge, and at times they can only abide by their beliefs by restraining unruly passions. The line I am going to discuss, 606A3–B5, explains how imitative poetry strengthens these unruly passions until they can no longer be restrained.

This line is central to Plato’s account of how poetry corrupts its audience and is one of the *Republic*’s most complex and interesting applications of his partite psychology, but, unfortunately, it is also not an easy line to understand: it introduces, at least implicitly, a partite analysis of a reflexive attitude—a thought a person has about themselves—that is not only difficult in itself, but further obscured by an ambiguity in the relevant reflexive pronoun, ἑαυτῶ: either ‘itself’ or ‘himself’. This is a small word, but one on which the meaning of the sentence pivots, as does, consequently, our understanding of Plato’s accusation against imitative poetry.

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The majority of translations, including the most widely used, side with ‘itself’, and this choice is explicitly defended in the only substantial discussion of 606A3–B5’s translation.<sup>1</sup> I believe there are considerations that show decisively that this is the wrong choice. Some are basic considerations of consistency and sense, and others call for a more general discussion of Plato’s partite psychology: if we are to understand the kind of complex interaction between psychological subjects that we find in 606A3–B5, especially in the difficult cases of reflexive attitudes, we need to reflect carefully about how the parts of the soul are related to the whole person in Plato’s psychology.

## I

The text and my translation of 606A3–B8 is as follows, with some of its multiple psychological subjects highlighted:

- S<sub>1</sub> A non-rational part of the soul
- S<sub>2</sub> The rational part of the soul
- S<sub>3</sub> The whole person

- 606A3 Εἰ ἐνθυμοῖο ὅτι τὸ βία κατεχόμενον [S<sub>1</sub>] τότε ἐν ταῖς οἰκείαις  
συμφοραῖς καὶ πεπεινηκὸς τοῦ δακρῦσαι τε καὶ ἀποδύρασθαι  
A5 ἰκανῶς καὶ ἀποπλησθῆναι, φύσει ὃν τοιοῦτον οἶον τούτων ἐπι-  
θυμεῖν, τότε ἔστιν τοῦτο τὸ ὑπὸ τῶν ποιητῶν πιμπλάμενον  
καὶ χαῖρον· τὸ δὲ φύσει βέλτιστον ἡμῶν [S<sub>2</sub>], ἅτε οὐχ ἰκανῶς  
πεπαιδευμένον λόγῳ οὐδὲ ἔθει, ἀνίησιν τὴν φυλακὴν τοῦ  
B1 θρηνώδους τούτου [S<sub>1</sub>], ἅτε ἀλλότρια πάθη θεωροῦν καὶ ἑαυτῷ [S<sub>3</sub> or S<sub>2</sub>]  
οὐδὲν αἰσχρὸν ὃν εἰ ἄλλος ἀνὴρ ἀγαθὸς φάσκων εἶναι ἀκαί-  
ρως πενθεῖ, τοῦτον ἐπαινεῖν καὶ ἐλεεῖν, ἀλλ’ ἐκεῖνο κερδαίνειν  
ἡγείται [S<sub>3</sub>], τὴν ἡδονὴν, καὶ οὐκ ἂν δέξαιτο αὐτῆς στερηθῆναι  
B5 καταφρονήσας ὅλου τοῦ ποιήματος.

[You will understand why it is unreasonable] if you reflect that the part restrained by force [S<sub>1</sub>] in our own misfortune, and that hungered for the satisfaction of weeping and lamenting, because it desires these things by

<sup>1</sup> Mastrangelo and Harris, 1997

nature, is also the part that derives satisfaction and enjoyment from the poets. But the best part of our nature [S<sub>2</sub>], since it has not been sufficiently educated by either reason or habit, relaxes its guard over this sorrowful part [S<sub>1</sub>], since it is watching another's sufferings and <one thinks><sup>2</sup> it is no shame to oneself [S<sub>3</sub>] to approve of and pity another man who, while claiming to be good, grieves disproportionately, but rather one [S<sub>3</sub>] thinks that this is a gain—pleasure; and one would not choose to be deprived of this by despising the whole poem.

The disagreement concerns the subject of the sentence from A7–B5, and in particular whether and/or where it changes. The *ἑαυτῷ* at B1 could be either neuter or masculine: either 'to itself' (S<sub>2</sub>) or 'to oneself/himself' (S<sub>3</sub>). As I do, a significant minority of translators take it to be masculine, which entails that the person as a whole is its masculine antecedent.<sup>3</sup> Thus, if it is masculine, *ἑαυτῷ* signals a shift from the sentence's opening neuter subject—*τὸ φύσει βέλτιστον ἡμῶν* (S<sub>2</sub>)—to the whole person (S<sub>3</sub>).<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the majority of translations assume that the subject is the rational part throughout the sentence.<sup>5</sup> Now, this is at least partly mistaken: *καταφρονήσας* ('despising') near the end of the sentence is masculine, so at some point the sentence must have shifted from the rational part to the whole person—the question is where rather than whether this change occurs.

2 I take this to be implicit; otherwise, Socrates *asserts* that it is no shame to pity inappropriate grieving, though he believes the opposite: *605E4–7*. Some translators tackle this by taking the second *ἄτε* to introduce a non-assertive context: e.g. Halliwell, 'on the grounds that', 1988; or Cornford, 'with the excuse that', 1941. That might be right, though it jars with the first *ἄτε*, which is assertive.

3 For example, Jowett–Campbell, 1894, 456; Cornford, 1941; and Halliwell, 1988. Adam comments, quoting Jowett–Campbell: "Plato passes from the rational part of soul to the man himself" J. and C. Hence *καταφρονήσας* below. The antithesis with *ἄλλος ἀνὴρ* makes the meaning clear', 1902.

4 That is, a shift of reference within the impersonal, accusative absolute construction introduced by *αἰσχροὺν ὄν*, preparing the reader for the masculine subject of *ἡγείται* and *δέξαιτο*.

5 For example, Shorey, 1978; Bloom, 1968; and Grube and Reeve, 1992. This continues in some of the most recent translations, such as Reeve, 2004, and Sachs, 2006.

This gives us the right question, but it does little to settle the disagreement. In a thorough discussion of this line, Mastrangelo and Harris agree that the subject changes, but deny that the change is anticipated by a masculine  $\acute{\epsilon}\alpha\nu\tau\tilde{\omega}$ .<sup>6</sup> They argue that the antecedent of  $\acute{\epsilon}\alpha\nu\tau\tilde{\omega}$  is simply the nearest and most explicit candidate, the neuter  $\tau\acute{o}$   $\beta\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\tau\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\nu$ , and that  $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\lambda\acute{\alpha}$  at B<sub>3</sub> introduces an independent clause in which the subject changes to the whole person.<sup>7</sup> With just the grammar of the sentence in view, it is fair to say that the burden of proof is on anyone who claims that the change is earlier and more abrupt. What I aim to do now is show that this burden of proof can be met comfortably: first, with an examination of the text (II) and, second, with reflections on Platonic psychology (III).

## II

If the rational part is the antecedent of  $\acute{\epsilon}\alpha\nu\tau\tilde{\omega}$ , then it is also the part with which we ‘pity’ ( $\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\epsilon\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$ ) another man. But consider the immediately subsequent line:

For few, I think, are among those who can reason to the conclusion that the pleasure we take from another’s suffering necessarily transfers to our own: for once *the pitying part* is nursed to strength in another’s suffering, it is not easy to restrain it in our own suffering. (606B<sub>5</sub>–8; my emphasis)

In this line we hear about a part that is both (a) ‘the pitying part’<sup>8</sup> and (b) the part that is normally restrained in our own suffering. Concern-

<sup>6</sup> Mastrangelo and Harris, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> They insert a high dot before the  $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\lambda\acute{\alpha}$  to reflect their view that it is an independent clause. Adapting from Shorey, they translate: ‘... relaxes its guard over the plaintive part [S<sub>1</sub>], inasmuch as this is contemplating the woes of others and it is no shame to it [S<sub>2</sub>] to praise and pity another who, claiming to be a good man, abandons himself to excess in his grief; but he thinks [S<sub>3</sub>] this vicarious pleasure is so much clear gain ...’

<sup>8</sup> Alternatively,  $\tau\acute{o}$   $\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\epsilon\iota\nu\acute{o}\nu$  might be translated simply ‘the pity’, though the result is the same: if ‘the pity’ is restrained, so is the part that pities.

ing (a), this pity is clearly the same as the pity at B<sub>3</sub> of the previous line—the argument depends on this. Concerning (b), the part that is ‘not easy to restrain in our own suffering’ is undoubtedly the same as ‘the part restrained by force in our own misfortune’ in the previous line. Together, (a) and (b) entail that the part that feels pity at B<sub>3</sub> is the *non-rational* part with which the line opens, (S<sub>1</sub>). (And it seems entirely fitting that the emotion of pity arises from the part that ‘hungers for the satisfaction of weeping and lamenting.’) Consequently, the subject to which it is no shame to pity cannot be (S<sub>2</sub>), the rational part that restrains the pity; but it can be (S<sub>3</sub>), the whole person to whom the pitying part belongs.

Consider next the function of the second ἄτε (since) clause: our rational part ‘relaxes its guard over the sorrowful part *since* ...’, introducing an explanation. If there is no shift to the whole person, then the explanation the ‘since’ introduces is that it is not shameful for the rational part to pity another’s grief (the thought being that one is not guilty of another person’s crimes). But a moments reflection makes it clear that this is a *non sequitur*. There is no discernible connection between the rational part’s reason for allowing *itself* to pity and the fact that it ‘relaxes its guard over the sorrowful part’.

The clause makes perfect sense, however, if it is the whole person for whom it is thought not to be shameful, since the person’s shameful behaviour can now be understood to be motivated by the emotions of their ‘sorrowful part’. The best part of our nature relaxes its guard over our sorrowful part, allowing this non-rational part to freely pity the grieving character—as it is wont to do when unguarded—since: we think (i.e. our rational part thinks) it is not shameful for us to pity (i.e. for our sorrowful part to pity) another’s suffering.

It is true that this introduces an abrupt shift from the rational part to the whole person, but in comparison this is a minor difficulty, and it is not as abrupt as it appears. As Adam points out, the change is signalled by ‘another man’ (ἄλλος ἀνήρ; B<sub>2</sub>), which introduces a contrast with an

implicit first *man*. That is, it is natural to take the thought to be that it is no shame for one man to pity another man—not that it is no shame for ‘the best part of our nature’ to pity another man, as if it were itself a man. We might also think that the sentence’s opening subject—‘the best part of *our* nature’—prepares us for the shift by reminding us that the rational part it is speaking of is just a part of a person. This is an unusual psychological subject: in a way both us (its thoughts are our thoughts) and a part of us. In the rest of this paper, I examine the connection between the sentence’s surprising psychological subject and its surprising shift from a part to the whole of this subject.

### III

For Plato, many of the psychological states that we attribute to a person are, strictly speaking, psychological states of a part of this person. To say that a person has an appetite for food is, on analysis, to say that this person’s appetitive part has an appetite for food: a person has an appetite for food by virtue of having an appetitive part that exercises its capacity to form such appetites. Consequently, for many psychological states there are two permitted descriptions, a description that takes the person as the subject—a ‘person-description’—and a more psychologically exact description that takes a part of this person as the subject—a ‘part-description’. Both descriptions are correct, but only a part-description can tell us the particular way in which a person is the subject of psychological states, especially complex ones. For example, part-descriptions are necessary to explain cases of psychological conflict, as we saw in book 4.

A part-description always has a corresponding person-description that describes the same psychological state of affairs. It cannot both be true, for example, that the appetitive part of a person’s soul has an appetite and be false that the person has this appetite. Just as my hand cannot move unless I move, a part of me cannot have a psychological

attitude unless I have this attitude.<sup>9</sup> To assume otherwise would be to think of a person as a fourth part alongside the other three parts, rather than ‘the whole, which is the community of all three parts’ (442C7–8).

From these reflections, we can see how natural it is to move between part-descriptions and person-descriptions. We might think that this is especially true when moving between a person and their rational part, since this is usually thought to be the part of the soul with which we identify most closely.<sup>10</sup> However, the main point I wish to make concerns how this partite psychology applies to the kind of reflexive attitudes we find in 606A3–B5.

Since we are capable of having attitudes towards ourselves, we can expect some of our psychological parts to be capable of having attitudes towards us. For example, since it is the spirited part ‘with which we get angry’ (439E3–4), the person-description ‘he is angry with himself’ will be analysed as the part-description ‘his spirited part is angry with him’. But while this part-description is strictly speaking correct, it is very misleading. It gives the impression that his spirited part is angry with *another* person—or worse, that it is a little person inside of him whom he has angered. The problem is that we expect (in Greek as in English) the objects of reflexive attitudes like self-anger to be reflexive pronouns, but ‘his spirited part is angry with himself’ is ungrammatical. Since ‘... angry with him’ is misleading and ‘... angry with himself’ is ungrammatical, we are left with no satisfactory part-description. This isn’t an error in Plato’s theory: a person analysed as multiple subjects is not something anticipated by normal language use, so inevitably some

9 Also like my hand and me, the entailment does not go both ways. Something can be true of a person without also being true of any of their parts: that a person is, say, just, akratic, or happy does not entail that any part of their soul is just, akratic, or happy. Though it might not worry every interpreter, it is worth noticing that if it is the rational part to which it is shameful in 606A3–B5, this suggests that something can be shameful not only for a person, but also for their parts. That is, it suggests that Plato offers a partite analysis not only of the subject of psychological states but also of the object of moral evaluations.

10 As Plato recognises. See especially 588B–589E.

linguistic anomalies will arise.<sup>11</sup> What it shows is that when describing reflexive attitudes, part-descriptions need to be avoided in favour of the corresponding person-descriptions. Hence the change in 606A3–B8: Plato wishes to describe a thought that our rational part has about us, so as a matter of stylistic necessity he describes this using the relevant person-description—a thought that we have about ourselves.<sup>12</sup>

Let's turn now to the competing translation, according to which the rational part thinks about *itself*, not about the person as a whole, so that both the subject and object of the reflexive attitude is a part of the soul. I have emphasised that the aim of Plato's psychology is to explain our everyday psychology: it offers unfamiliar explanations for familiar psychological states. Part-descriptions are never introduced for their own sake; each must have a sensible person-description to which it corresponds—otherwise it explains nothing, and is psychologically incoherent to boot. This being so, we can already conclude that the parts of our soul rarely have attitudes about themselves simply by noticing that *we* rarely have attitudes about the parts of our soul. If you have never thought to yourself that something is shameful for your rational part, then *ipso facto* neither has your rational part.<sup>13</sup>

With this in mind, consider the proposed translation 'it [sc. the rational part] thinks it is no shame to *it* to praise and pity ...' What is the corresponding person-description? The direct correspondent is 'he thinks it is no shame to his rational part', but a decent man hardly watches a play thinking about the moral standing of his Platonic parts. In theory, a viable alternative would be a person-description that refers

11 Compare Plato's discussion of the absurdity of the phrase κρείττω αὐτοῦ: 430E11–431B2.

12 Compare the change of subject at 440A8–B7, from person-description to part-description, when Plato is describing someone 'reproaching himself' (λοιδοροῦντά ... αὐτόν).

13 At least explicitly and *de dicto*. There will be occasions when not only the subject, but also the object of our psychological states could be given a part-description: e.g. if you believe you are clever, your rational part could be described as having, unbeknownst to it (or you), a belief about its own state.

indirectly to the rational part, so that the person is not thinking of it explicitly. But what could this be? While such a description is possible in principle, in this specific case there is no reasonable candidate. In short: there appears to be no human thought that corresponds to ‘it thinks it is no shame to it to praise and pity’, which is another way of saying that it appears to be psychologically incoherent.

The mistranslation of 606A3–B5 illustrates how easy it is to fail to appreciate that Plato divides the soul into parts only to better explain the whole. In particular, it is easy to fall into the error of treating the parts of the soul like little people, homunculi, with their own thoughts and concerns, a tendency that is not helped by Plato’s frequent (though purely literary) personification of the parts. But it is also an error easily avoided if we keep a constant eye on how we are going to move from part- to person-description. Simply appreciating that the rational part’s thoughts *just are* the decent person’s thoughts is almost enough to recognise that 606A3–B5 makes psychological sense only if *ἐαυτῶ* is masculine. This is not to say that the move from part- to person-description is always straightforward. As we saw, partite analyses even of something as common as reflexive attitudes are both difficult to interpret and difficult for Plato to express. But tricky as they can be, it pays to work on the assumption that Plato’s psychological analyses will ultimately make good psychological sense.

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