

Harmony and Happiness in Plato's Ethics

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Modern moral philosophy tends to think of moral development in terms of learning to act ethically. Typically the “act” in question is considered morally appropriate if it is either in accordance with ethical rules and duties (as in deontological systems) or it results in the best consequences (as in utilitarian systems). Ancient moral philosophy, on the other hand, tends to think of moral development in quite different terms. The ancients talk less about acts than character traits. This would seem to place the ancients in the category of what is now called “virtue ethics.” But on closer examination they differ in important ways from contemporary virtue theorists. One aspect of ancient moral philosophy which distinguishes it from modern moral philosophy is its teleological structure. For the ancients, the process of moral development is aimed at achieving *eudaimonia*, or happiness¹. Happiness is the *telos* (the “end” or “goal”) of the moral life. Admittedly, this sounds odd to contemporary ears. When we hear “happiness”, we think of “a feeling of satisfaction”², but we must remember that the Greek concept of *eudaimonia* is “thinner” than our concept of happiness. As Julia Annas explains, happiness is only a formal concept and moral philosophy is the project of specifying the content of happiness.³ For example, the Skeptics argued that happiness consists in tranquility (*ataraxia*)

¹Following scholars like Annas and Irwin, I translate *eudaimonia* as “happiness” though I recognize that the more common translation “flourishing” (used by Nussbaum and others) has its virtues as well.

²See Nussbaum, Martha C. *The Fragility of Goodness*, 2nd Ed. (Cambridge University Press: 1986, rev. 2001), 15 n5.

³Annas, Julia. *The Morality of Happiness*. (Oxford University Press: 1993), 43-46.

and the Epicureans notoriously argued instead for pleasure. This paper will examine Plato's position in this debate. But it is important to note that the various positions taken in this debate about happiness are not metaphysically neutral. Perhaps the most significant distinctive of ancient ethics in general and Platonic ethics in particular is their emphasis on human nature and the psychology of moral development.⁴

Happiness

First it is important emphasize the point that, like (virtually) all ancient philosophers, Plato thought of ethics as the pursuit of happiness. Annas locates Plato "right in the mainstream of ancient ethical theory, for he clearly emerges as a eudaimonist, someone who holds that ethical questions are centered on the question of what happiness is and how best to achieve it."⁵ Annas bases her conclusion on several passages (see for example, *Gorgias* 472c, *Republic* 352d, *Philebus* 11d and 20b-23a and 60a-61a) but perhaps the most relevant passage is *Symposium* 204e-205a where Diotima teaches Socrates that "the desire for happiness" is "common to all human beings" and that only happiness (not merely the having of "good things") could be the ultimate aim of human pursuit (205a).⁶ A similar passage can be found in *Euthydemus* 278-282 where Socrates first explains that "there could hardly be a man who would not wish to do well" (278e) and later links doing well with being happy (280b). Citing these same passages, Terence Irwin concludes that behind Plato's ethical theory lies the eudaimonist assumption (commonly

⁴The Platonic emphasis on psychology and human nature was first pointed out to me in a lecture by David Glidden.

⁵Annas, Julia. *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*. (Cornell University Press: 1999), 37.

⁶Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Plato are from *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper. (Hackett: 1997).

held among ancient philosophers) that “whenever we are considering what to do or how to live, the right answer will tell us what we must do in order to be happy.”⁷

But while it is clear that Plato follows ancient tradition in assuming that ethics is about happiness, it is not at all obvious what Plato thinks happiness *is*. He seems to have at least three (apparently contradictory) ways of talking about the goal of moral development. At the risk of cuteness, we might refer to these three models of morality as (i) harmony, (ii) health, and (iii) holiness.⁸ Sometimes, as in the *Republic* (443d-e), Plato says virtue (read, *happiness*) is a kind of “harmony” among the parts of the soul. Then in other dialogues such as the *Crito* (47d-48a), Plato talks about morality as the “health” of the soul. And in a famous line of the *Theaetetus* “digression” passage (176b), Plato says⁹ the goal of morality is to imitate God -- what I am calling “holiness.” We will look at each of these themes individually and then see if they can be combined into a single coherent ethical theory.

Harmony

Perhaps the ethical model known most widely among modern readers of Plato is the harmony model. This is because the harmony model is advocated in the dialogue modern

⁷Irwin, Terence. *Plato's Ethics*. (Oxford University Press: 1995), 52.

⁸Growing up in the Southern Baptist church, twenty years of three-point sermons every Sunday addicted me to alliterative subheadings.

⁹In this paper, I will frequently claim that Plato “says” something. This locution is not necessarily meant to attribute a positive commitment to Plato. Following a recent trend in Platonic scholarship, my phrase “Plato says...” could also mean that Plato is merely setting forth a position for the consideration of his readers without committing himself to it. What I find interesting (and will attempt to show in this paper) is that a unified ethical theory emerges from a close reading of the entire Platonic corpus. Perhaps the skeptical reading is right and Plato did not actually believe anything he wrote. In that case, substitute my term “Plato” with “the implied author of the Platonic dialogues” or even “the persona Plato adopted when discussing ethics” or some suitably skeptical term. For the sake of clarity and brevity, I will continue to use the simple (and perhaps simplistic) “Plato.”

scholars (though, interestingly, not ancient Platonists¹⁰) see as the most important source for Plato's ethics: the *Republic*. In Book IV of the *Republic* (specifically 442c-444a), after explaining his famous theory of the soul's tripartite structure, Plato identifies the goal of morality as the "inner harmony" between these three parts of the soul. The virtuous person is one who "puts himself in order, is his own friend, and 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, and from having been many things he becomes *entirely one, moderate and harmonious.*" (443d-e, my italics). Another passage similar to the harmony passage can be found starting at *Gorgias* 503d. Here Plato shows that a good soul is one that "gets to have a certain organization and order" (504b) -- i.e., one that is "disciplined" (505b). The *Republic's* use of unity, moderation, and harmony, is an obvious analog to the *Gorgias's* use of organization, order, and discipline. All six terms seem to be different expressions for the same harmonious state of the soul which Plato identifies with happiness.¹¹

Interestingly the *Gorgias* goes on to identify this "order" with self-control (506e-507a). The Greek word translated "self-control" here is *sophrosyne*. This is the same word translated "temperance" in *Charmides*. At the end of the dialogue Plato has Socrates say "I think that temperance is a great good, and if you truly have it, that you are blessed [or, *happy*]" (176a). According to Irwin's gloss on this passage, "temperance is not simply one among a number of recognized good qualities, it is supposed to determine whether we have or do not have a virtuous soul."¹² In other words, *sophrosyne* is a kind of "master virtue" which allows you to

¹⁰See Annas (1999). The book is almost entirely devoted to demonstrating the differences between modern and ancient ways of reading Plato.

¹¹Similarly, Plato links harmony and goodness in the *Timaeus*: "All that is good is beautiful, and what is beautiful is not ill-proportioned. Hence we must take it that if a living thing is to be in good condition, it will be well-proportioned" (87c).

¹²Irwin, 35.

make use of the other virtues and goods.¹³ But what is most significant for our purposes is Plato's identification of temperance with the "order" of *Gorgias*. If temperance brings happiness as *Charmides* suggests, and temperance is the same as the order advocated in *Gorgias* which in turn is the same as the harmony discussed in *Republic*, then it turns out that harmony really is supposed to be a model for happiness.

Health

But harmony is not the only model of moral well-being at play here. As David Glidden pointed out to me, the *Charmides* begins with an attempt to cure a headache which allows Plato to raise the issue of the relationship between physical health and moral health. On Irwin's reading of *Charmides* 156d-157c, "Socrates claims that the proper medicine to produce health in the soul is the sort of discourse that will produce temperance there; for temperance assumes the healthy condition of the whole soul, and health spreads from there to the whole body."¹⁴ Hence we get what I am calling Plato's health model of happiness. This model is found in the *Gorgias*, too. After the discussion of discipline we examined above, Plato goes on say that just as physical discipline results in a state of organization called "health" in the body, so we can call the organization of the soul a kind of health (504b-505b).

It is this nuance of psychic (perhaps even "spiritual") health that scholars are attempting to communicate when they translate *eudaimonia* as "flourishing" rather than as the more literal "happiness." Like the harmony theme, the health theme can be seen in many passages throughout Plato's writings. In fact, the psychic health theme might be the most pervasive model, mentioned in a wider variety of dialogues than any of Plato's three models. For example,

¹³The term "master virtue" was introduced to me by David Glidden.

¹⁴Irwin, 35.

the model is mentioned explicitly in *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Gorgias*, *Republic*, and *Timaeus*, and is implied in *Apology*, *Phaedo*, and other dialogues. Most interestingly, the health model can be seen in *Republic* Book IV immediately following the passage we examined above. At *Republic* 444c Plato claims that “just and unjust actions are no different for the soul than healthy and unhealthy things are for the body” and from this concludes that “virtue seems, then, to be a kind of health, fine condition, and well-being of the soul” (*Republic* 444e, cf. *Crito* 47d-48a).

It might be tempting to read the harmony and health models as two different specifications of happiness from different stages of Plato’s development. But we can’t read Plato as merely changing the metaphor from dialogue to dialogue since, as we saw in the *Gorgias* and *Republic* passages mentioned above, Plato sometimes uses both models together in the same argument. Plato, then, must not see any inconsistency between the two models. Indeed, it turns out that for Plato there is a quite intimate connection between harmony and health. The *Republic* passage continues by saying that this psychic health is in fact the establishing of “the parts of the soul in a natural relation of control, one by another.” This “natural relation” that constitutes health is clearly another version of the harmony and organization described in the earlier passages. Thus, not only does Plato connect health and harmony, he goes further: whenever he explains what he means by “health,” it turns out that that health *just is* a state of harmony between the parts of something (either body or soul).¹⁵ Hence we can conclude that for Plato harmony and health are not two different aims of morality; they are merely two different ways of talking about the same aim. Health and harmony can be seen working together most clearly in *Timaeus* 86b-92c. Plato introduces this section of Timaeus’s speech as a discussion of the “diseases of the soul” (86b). As far as physical health goes, Plato

says we ought to imitate “the structure of the universe” in order to keep our bodies “in a state of natural equilibrium” (88d). Likewise, psychic health is thought of in terms of harmony with the universe. “The thoughts and revolutions of the universe” have an “affinity” to our rational soul (“the divine part within us”) and engaging in philosophy allows us to bring the “revolutions in our heads” into conformity with the “the harmonies and revolutions of the universe” (90d).

Interestingly, Plato was not the only ancient philosopher to think of ethics as a form of psychic health and to think of philosophy as a means to attain that health. Martha Nussbaum has shown that many ancients saw philosophical arguments as “medical” or “therapeutic” tools.¹⁶ But despite Plato’s interest in health, the Platonic impulse of what Nussbaum calls “medical moral philosophy” denies “that the norm of health itself derives in any way from the condition or the wishes of the patient. It is ‘out there’ to be discovered and then applied to their case.”¹⁷ Thus Nussbaum reads Plato as setting himself against the Aristotelian and Stoic insistence that ethics should be specific to humans -- i.e., that it should “correspond” to empirically discoverable human nature.¹⁸ In other words, Plato believes there is such a thing as the “form” of Health (with a capital “H”) that is more fundamental than specifically human health.¹⁹ And if Health is a form, then specifically human health is an imitation of real Health which applies universally to all things.²⁰

¹⁵For more on the Platonic identification of health and harmony, see Julius Moravcsik, “Health, Healing, and Plato’s Ethics” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 34: 7-26 (2000), especially pages 16-19.

¹⁶Nussbaum, Martha C. *The Therapy of Desire*. (Princeton University Press: 1994), 13-15.

¹⁷Nussbaum, 19.

¹⁸Nussbaum, 24.

¹⁹ For an explicit claim that health is a form, see *Phaedo* 65d.

Holiness

Hence from the tension between the Platonic impulse toward divinity and the Aristotelian impulse toward humanism we get Raphael's famous Renaissance painting "School of Athens." Raphael portrays Plato and Aristotle in heated debate: Plato emphasizes transcendence (as indicated by his gesture toward heaven) and Aristotle emphasizes immanence (gesturing toward earth). Thus we see that the Aristotelian goal of the ethical life is to fulfill human nature while the Platonic way is to transcend human nature.²¹ Plato's emphasis on transcendence comes out most clearly in those passages where he says morality is becoming "like God," the most famous of which is found in the so-called "digression" of the *Theaetetus* (171d-177c). At 176b-c, Plato says "one should try to escape from wickedness and pursue virtue" which is explained when he says: "escape means becoming as like God as possible; and a man becomes like God when he becomes just and pure, with understanding." Likewise in *Republic* 613a Plato claims that "the gods never neglect anyone who eagerly wishes to become just and who makes himself as much like a god as a human can by adopting a virtuous way of life." In these passages, Plato clearly identifies virtue with god-likeness and hence the aim of morality with the third model of happiness -- what I am calling holiness. While not widely discussed among modern Platonic scholars, the holiness model was perhaps the most influential reading of Plato's ethics in the ancient world, especially among the Neo-Platonists and the early Christians.²²

²⁰ Or, since health consists in the harmonious relationship between parts, perhaps health can only apply to *lcomplex* things.

²¹ This debate can be seen continuing today between contemporary ethicists. For a defense of the anti-Platonic position, see Nussbaum's "Transcending Humanity", Chapter 15 of *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford University Press: 1990), and for a critique of Nussbaum's essay from a self-described Platonist, see Robert M. Adams's "The Transcendence of the Good", Chapter 2 of *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford University Press: 1999).

²² See Burnyeat, Myles. *The Theaetetus of Plato*. (Hackett: 1990), 35.

The holiness model is not limited to the *Theaetetus* and the *Republic*. Other holiness passages include *Laws* 715e-718c where Plato says that virtuous are “those who follow in the company of God” which is explained as subduing physical passions and desires; *Timaeus* 90b-d where virtue is described as identifying our self with our rational soul rather than our body and bringing our mind to take on the transcendent and divine form of the good; and *Phaedo* 67c-e where Plato says the purpose of philosophy is to release the soul from dependence and imprisonment to body. Annas identifies two major “strands” in these and similar “becoming like God” passages. Sometimes (in what she calls the “worldly strand” exemplified by the *Republic* and *Laws* passages quoted above) holiness means living in accord with Reason (i.e. the divine in us) and coping with the mixture of good and evil in the world, and sometimes (as in what she calls the “unworldly strand” -- e.g., in the *Theaetetus* and *Phaedo*) it means “escape” or “flight” from the physical world to a communion with eternal realities which are pure and unmixed good -- “a realm which is not human at all.”²³ Let us look more closely at these two strands.

Toward Unity

Again we seem to have caught Plato in an inconsistency. But, while not every tension found in Plato’s thought can be resolved, the hermeneutic principle of charity compels us to do our best to bring coherence to Plato’s views.²⁴ Here, as with the reconciliation of the health and harmony models, I think the closing section of the *Timaeus* can provide guidance on reconciling

²³Annas (1999), 65

²⁴ Here, of course, I am following Annas in rejecting the modern “developmental” reading of Plato in favor of the classical “doctrinal” reading. See “Many Voices: Dialogue and Development in Plato” in Annas (1999), Chapter 1. Note further that the doctrinal approach to Plato is consistent with the skeptical approach mentioned above in note 9 on page 3. Even if the skeptical reading is right and we are never justified in attributing positive doctrines to Plato himself, there are at least *apparent* doctrines on the surface layer of the dialogues. My position

the two strands of the holiness theme into a single model of happiness and then on reconciling the holiness model with the harmony/health model. The worldly kind of holiness can be seen in the *Timaeus*'s insistence that "in determining health and disease or virtue and vice no proportion or lack of it is more important than that between soul and body" (87d). Here we see Plato backing off from the *Phaedo*'s extreme and unworldly claims that the body is evil and that philosophy is the pursuit of "freedom and separation of the soul from the body" (67d). In the *Timaeus* Plato argues instead that the body and soul must each be "balanced by the other and so be sound" (88b). In other words, both body and soul must be healthy if one is to achieve a happy life. But the unworldly strand of holiness can be seen in the *Timaeus*, too. Plato says that the healthy harmony between the parts of the body and soul should be "in imitation of the structure of the universe" (88c) and that "our guiding spirit .. raises us up away from the earth and toward what is akin to us in heaven" (90a), and goes on to explain that this kinship is found in "the thoughts and revolutions of the universe" whose harmony we ought to imitate (90d). In other words, not only must body and soul each be in harmony with itself and with each other, the resultant union must also be in harmony with the universe.

Thus at *Timaeus* 88d we have all three of Plato's models of morality united under a single aim: both the harmony (expressed in the passage by terms such as "proportion", "balance", "equilibrium", "order", "regularity") and the health of the body-soul are achieved by modeling ourselves after God ("what we have called the foster-mother and nurse of the universe"). And after Plato establishes godlike resemblance to the universe as the goal of morality, he sums up the role of philosophy in the process of moral development: "If a man has seriously devoted himself to the love of learning and to true wisdom, if he has exercised these aspects of himself

is neutral with respect to the existence of a deeper layer which might show that Plato is not committed to the surface doctrines.

above all, then there is absolutely no way that his thoughts can fail to be immortal and divine, should truth come within his grasp. And to the extent that human nature can partake of immortality, he can in no way fail to achieve this: constantly caring for his divine part as he does, keeping well-ordered the guiding spirit that lives within him, he must indeed be supremely happy.” (90b-c).

In this way Plato concludes the *Timaeus* with a reminder that the *telos* of morality is happiness. Our goal is to achieve “that most excellent life offered to humankind by the gods.” (90d). But in Platonic thought (perhaps uniquely among ancient ethical theories), happiness is linked to a transcendent reality. Most ancient philosophers would agree that happiness is a kind of spiritual or psychic health. It is no surprise then that the health model is the model Plato mentions most widely in his writings. But, as we have seen, Plato’s concept of health is actually based on the harmony model. Whenever Plato explains what he means by health, he appeals to harmony. Following Irwin, then, we can read the harmony passages (Irwin calls them “psychic order” passages) as an attempt to make the health analogy more precise.²⁵ Therefore, since Plato thinks of health as balance and harmony, and thinks harmony of the soul is achieved by resemblance to divine (i.e., godlike or holy) perfection, then it follows that health of the soul (and hence happiness) is ultimately holiness. But while Plato’s holiness model thus turns out to be his ultimate (and perhaps the most influential) model, it too turns out to be defined in terms of the harmony model. So, on my reading, harmony turns out to be the most basic model -- a result that is not surprising given the fact that the “master virtue” of temperance turned out to be a form of harmony. It is upon this fundamental commitment to harmony that Plato builds first his health and then his holiness models. And therefore it is this conception of harmony which provides the necessary unity for a Platonic ethical theory and demonstrates Plato’s position in the ancient

debate about *eudaimonia*. For Plato a harmonious soul is the content which fills in ancient's formal conception of happiness.

²⁵Irwin, 109.