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Logistikon, thymos and epithymia before Plato

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Abstract: Plato’s division of the soul (Republic Book IV) into three parts - the rational, the spirited and the appetitive – had significant precedents in the works of the pre-Socratic philosophers. The Pythagoreans began a more systematic reflection, compared to

previous authors, on the tensions and desires of the human soul, linked partly to the ethics of *καῖρός* and harmony. The tripartite division of the soul also appears in the works of Diogenes Laertius and Iamblichus and would become the core doctrine of Platonic ethics and politics. Heraclitus' position is emblematic. Although he may appear to be a "rigorist" due to his outspoken critique of worldly pleasures, there is a fairly enigmatic fragment that clearly highlights the complexity of his ideas. With the writings of Empedocles, and subsequently the Sophists and the Atomists, and especially Democritus, the terms that distinguish the three parts of the soul and their functions also took on other features which would be set within the theoretical framework of Plato.

Keywords: *Presocratics, logistikon, thymos, epithymia.*

Plato's tripartite division of the soul, set out clearly in particular in *The Phaedrus*¹ and in *The Republic*,² is well-known. This Platonic stance can already be found in the musings of the Pre-Socratic philosophers who had already explored *θυμός* and *ἐπιθυμία*, highlighting their complexity, their varying significance and the variety of their compositions, albeit in ways that differed from Plato's. This short article examines several theories expounded by some of the Pre-Socratic philosophers. The first to deal with these concepts was obviously Homer. However, I shall not explore the significance of these two terms in his two poems in this paper but simply observe that *θυμός* expresses the general idea of the awareness of inner motion involving thought and desire, the heart and sensation, as in *Il.* II 409, in *Il.* IV 163, in *Od.* IX 302 and in *Od.* III 127 ff.

In general, the two approaches, which can be termed rigorist and hedonist, are to be found in the earliest works of Greek philosophy, beginning with the Seven Sages: Chilon of Sparta, for example,

¹ See the myth of the winged chariot, 256a ff.; 253c ff.

² In particular Book IV, 438d ff.

argued that it was necessary to control anger (θυμοῦ κράτει) and not to wish for the impossible (μὴ ἐπιθύμει ἀδύνατα),³ while Thales of Miletus claimed that the most pleasant thing for a person was for one's wishes to be fulfilled (ἐπιθυμεῖν).⁴ Another fairly common approach was to refer to moods or other aspects of reality using the names of the gods. For instance, Theagenes of Rhegium, one of the first cosmologists, and probably also the first author to write about Homer, produced a critique of traditional myths about the gods, incorporating it into a view shared by many early Greek thinkers,⁵ by arguing that everything said about them should be interpreted allegorically, and that moods (διαθέσεις) should be called by the names of the gods: for example, wisdom could be referred to as Athena, foolishness as Ares, and desire (ἐπιθυμία) could be called Aphrodite.⁶

However, it was the Pythagoreans who first conducted a more systematic analysis of the tensions and desires of the human soul, linked also to an ethic of *καρὸς* and harmony. The tripartite vision of the soul also appears in the writings of Diogenes Laërtius and Iamblichus and would become a cornerstone of Platonic ethics and politics. According to Diogenes,⁷ the Pythagoreans claimed that the human soul (ψυχὴ) could be divided into three parts: the intellect (νοῦν), the mind (φρένας, τὸ φρόνιμον) and the soul (θυμός). While other animals also have intellect and a soul, the mind is only a feature of humans. The soul begins from the heart and reaches the brain; the part that lies in the heart is the soul (θυμός),⁸ while the part that lies in the brain is intellect and mind. The soul is nourished by blood and

³ DK10, 3 c, 15-16 (= Stob. *flor.* III 1, 172); LM translates θυμός as “anger”.

⁴ DK10, 3 d, 10 (= Stob. *flor.* III 1, 172).

⁵ See DK8, 2 (= Schol. Hom. B *ad Il.* XX 67).

⁶ DK8, 2. This thesis was also followed by the Pre-Socratic philosophers, such as Empedocles, who indicated the four roots of all things with the names of the gods (DK31A33, B6 = Aët. I 3, 20) and Philolaus who referred to the angles of geometric figures with the names of the gods (DK44A14 = Procl. *in Euc.* 166, 25).

⁷ DK58B1a (= DL VIII 24 ff.).

⁸ LM in [10c] PYTHS. R33 translates φρένας as “intelligence”, and θυμός as a “vital spirit”.

reasoning, using a beautiful image, is referred to as the *breaths of the soul* (λόγους ψυχῆς ἀνέμους).

Iamblichus⁹ devotes considerable space to a discussion of desire (ἐπιθυμία), even outlining an aetiology of the subject. According to Pythagoreans, shying away from all seriousness and composure, thinking about games and giving in to unrestrained pleasure is the privilege of childhood; however, they also see how violent desires (ἐπιθυμία) and ambition and other inclinations (ὀρμαί) and passions proceed from youth to adulthood so young people need to learn that order (τάξις) and composure (συμμετρία) are beautiful things. With regard to bodily desires, they pointed out that ἐπιθυμία is a motion (ἐπιφορά) of the soul and an impulse (ὀρμήν) and a tendency (ὄρεξις) to satisfy needs or to create certain sensations and this is a disease (πάθος) of humankind. They make the acute observation (even for his time!) that most desires are acquired and created artificially by humans so great care is required for this type of affection (πάθος), and young people need constant supervision and education. They added that vain, harmful, superfluous and unrestrained desires are found mainly among those who live a life of plenty.¹⁰ Lastly, another passage from Iamblichus¹¹ also mentions how to deal with human desires and tensions in interpersonal relationships from a perspective which, far from being rigorist, is linked to a relativist approach expressed using the important concept of καιρός: “in dealings with others...there is a right way and a wrong way of talking to people (εὐκαιρον, ἄκαιρον); it varies with age, status, kinship and favours done, and with any other such difference between people (ποικίλην τινὰ καὶ πολυειδῆ τὴν τοῦ καιροῦ χρείαν): of those who get angry or indignant, when people have a desire or wish or impulse (ὀρεγομένων καὶ ἐπιθυμούντων καὶ ὀρμώντων) for something, for some it is the right moment to follow and for others not. And they concluded, here too anticipating a Platonic theory, that “both ruler and ruled must

⁹ DK58D8 (= Iambl. v. *Pyth.* 200-213; Stob. *flor.* III 10,66) = LM [17] PYTHS. ANON. D54f, D54g.

¹⁰ See Stob. *flor.* III 10,66.

¹¹ See DK58D5 (= Iambl. *V.P.*. 180 ff.) = LM [17] PYTHS. ANON. D54e.

want there to be government, just as in learning, when it happens properly, both teacher and pupil want it”.¹²

It could be said that this Pythagorean approach remained a constant feature of pre-Platonic thought, naturally with variants and emphases that differed with individual philosophers. According to Athenaeus and Cicero, Archyta warns against excessive pleasure which can damage the mind and prevent it from carrying out its function: Athenaeus tells of a discussion about desire (ἐπιθυμιῶν) between Archyta and Poliarchus, sent as an ambassador by Dionysus the Younger to Tarantum, a man who loved bodily pleasures and willingly talked about them and was therefore known as “the pleasure-seeker” (ἡδυσπαθῆ).¹³ Cicero¹⁴ also mentions the “ancient speech of Archyta”: No more deadly curse," he stated, "has been given by nature to man than carnal pleasure (*voluptatem*), through eagerness for which the passions are driven recklessly and uncontrollably to its gratification. And since nature – or some god, perhaps - has given to man nothing more excellent than his intellect (*mens*), therefore this divine gift has no deadlier foe than pleasure. Imagine a person enjoying the most exquisite bodily pleasure to be had. No one will doubt, I think, that such a man, *while in the midst of this enjoyment*, is incapable of any mental action, and can accomplish nothing requiring reason and reflection. Hence there is nothing so hateful and so pernicious as pleasure, since, if *indulged in too much and too long*, it turns the light of the soul (*animi lumen*) into utter darkness. In conclusion, Cicero states that Plato was also present and heard Archytas deliver this discourse.

Heraclitus appears to belong to the school of “rigorists” due to his criticism of carnal pleasures¹⁵. Yet there is an enigmatic fragment, like many of the fragments of the work of “The Obscure”, in which θυμός appears as a vital force of humankind that is hard to combat.

¹² So too Stob. *ecl.* II 31, 119.

¹³ DK47A9 (= Athen. XII 545 A).

¹⁴ Cicer. *Cat. m.* 12, 39 ff. = LM [14] ARCHY. D24, [18] PYTHS. R6e.

¹⁵ See Albertus M. *de veget.* VI 401 = DK22B4; Clem. Alex. *Strom.* V 60 = DK22B29.

In this fragment¹⁶ he states: θυμῷ μάχεσθαι χαλεπὸν ὃ γὰρ ἂν θέλη, ψυχῆς ὠνεῖται, “It is hard to contend with one’s heart’s desire θυμός: for whatever it wishes to have it buys at the cost of the soul ψυχή”. The two key terms are naturally θυμός and ψυχή which have been understood and translated in various ways.¹⁷ Those who translate ψυχή as “life” generally mean that in order to obtain one’s desire, a person is even prepared to die.¹⁸ However, even those who translate the term as “sentiment” and “soul” mean that contending with desire, pleasure or passion puts the life of the soul in jeopardy.¹⁹ Robinson provides an overview of the possible translations of the fragment, concluding that the most likely meaning, assuming that *thymos* refers to the full range of desires and passions, indicates that fighting against it nevertheless leads to the loss of a part of the life of one’s personal soul (Robinson, 1987, p. 134-135.).

I believe that the two key terms should be translated in their most general sense, and thus with their most complex and ambiguous meaning, as *desire* and *soul*. The fragment therefore expresses a laceration that takes place within a person: θυμός is juxtaposed with something, and plausibly with *logos* or with *nous*²⁰ which contrasts with it. If θυμός expresses the desiring part, the “heart” of a person, their sentimentality in general, contending with θυμός is undoubtedly challenging since it is a constituent part, just like *logos* and *nous*, of

¹⁶ Plu. *Cor.* 22 = DK22B85 = LM [9] HER. D116.

¹⁷ The fragment is also mentioned by Aristotle: *EE* 1223b22-24 (where Donini translates θυμός as “impetuosity” and ψυχή as “life”; similarly, Fermani uses the terms “impetus” and “life”); see also *EN* 1105a7-8, where it is stated that it is harder to fight against pleasure than against θυμός, and Zanatta translates θυμός as “rage” and Natali as “impetuosity”. A few examples from other translations: Giannantoni, in DK, translates them as “desire” and “life”; Reale “desire” and “soul”; Diano-Serra “soul” and “life”; Robinson “passion or heart” and “soul”; Pasquinelli “desire” and “soul”; Marcovich “heart’s desire” and “soul”; Mouraviev “rage” (ire) and “soul” (âme) or “life” (vie); Fronterotta “the passion that seethes in the heart” and “life”; LM translates θυμός as “ardour” and ψυχή as “soul” or “life”.

¹⁸ So too Diano-Serra, p. 180.

¹⁹ So too Marcovich, pp. 269-270.

²⁰ With regard to *nous*, see for example fragments 104, 114.

the soul in its entirety, so that the victory against θυμός is nevertheless a wound inside the soul, something that is paid for with all one's soul: it is a way of experiencing, in a certain sense, one's own death, to use another beautiful image employed by Heraclitus.²¹

A position that is extremely close to that of Heraclitus is taken by the philosopher who has been regarded for many centuries as his adversary: Parmenides. In his poem, θυμός appears in the very first verse of the *Proem*, which describes how the mares that brought him before the goddess who, in his account, reveals to the philosopher the truth about the world of reflections on the cosmos, and the realism of the world of phenomena, lead him according to his θυμός.²² Soul, heart and will are the most frequent translations although I feel that the term also comprises, as mentioned above in reference to Parmenides, not so much the desiring part of mankind but a mixture of desire and the mind: it is indeed a form of anxiety and eagerness although it more closely resembles the thirst for knowledge. The urge to embark on a journey, which is similar (ὄσον) to the passion of the mares, is not an irrational or arational impulse. The first words that the goddess uses to address the youth standing before her convey the need to learn everything (v. 28: χρεῶ δέ σε πάντα πυθέσθαι), in other words the truth but also the need to learn the importance of human experience (28B1, verses 31-32: καὶ ταῦτα μαθήσεται, ὡς τὰ δοκουντα χρῆν κτλ.). Thus, the anxiety or eagerness, the sense of θυμός felt by Parmenides, is aimed precisely at this discourse: the thirst for knowledge. It is an *intellectual passion*, in which sentiments and intelligence are equally involved: the close relationship between sensibility and intellect expressed in B16, humankind in its entirety.²³

²¹ DK22B77.

²² DK28B1 = LM [19] PARM D4, R8, R16, R39, R52 = Sext. Emp. *M.* VII 111 ff. In this case too, the term has been translated in various ways.

²³ The term *noos* in B16 represents the close relationship between sensibility and intellect: For just as the mixture of the much-wandering limbs on each occasion, so is the mind (νόος) present to humans; for the same thing is the very thing that cognises – in all humans and in each: the nature of the limbs; for the full is thought (νόημα)."

Empedocles uses the term *θυμός* in two ways: one refers to the joyous life of a wonderful past, where *θυμός* takes on the meaning of life, while the second regards the sadness of his own era, in which the term stands for life but also for the soul. Fragment 128²⁴ refers to a golden age when neither Ares nor Homados (Tumult) existed, nor any of the other male gods with their killings and wars; the only goddess who ruled the world was Cypris and she reigned with love and harmony, and the sacrifices made to her were bloodless: paintings and refined, sweet-smelling ointments, libations of golden honey, rather than sacrifices of noble bulls, whose limbs were eaten after being killed (*θυμός*). The other two fragments concern the disastrous present, and are part of the heartfelt polemic of Empedocles against luxury and the wild, unbridled behaviour of his fellow citizens: thus in B137²⁵ he paints a bleak picture of degeneration that causes fathers to kill sons, sons to kill fathers and mothers, taking their lives (*θυμός*). This process of “devouring” each other takes place because of the blindness of their minds (*νόος*),²⁶ and therefore, troubled by these terrible sins, they “will never free their soul (*θυμός*) from sad anxieties.”²⁷

In the works of the Sophists and the Atomists, the two terms examined here take on other characteristics which they would also acquire in the theoretical overview provided by Plato. There are two brief observations about Prodicus of Ceos and his skill in making distinctions between the meanings of words in order to ensure a more correct use of language: one appears in the works of Plato, and concerns the distinction between wishing (*βούλεσθαι*) and desiring (*ἐπιθυμεῖν*)²⁸; the other occurs in the writings of Stobaeus in which a close relationship is established between desire, love and madness

²⁴ DK31B128 = Porphyr. *Abst.* II 27) = LM [22] Emp D25, R64.

²⁵ DK31B137 (= Sext. Emp. *M.* IX 129) = LM [22] EMP D29, R39, R86

²⁶ DK31B136 (= Sext. Emp. *M.* IX 127).

²⁷ DK31B145 (= Clem. Alex. *Protr.* 2, 27) = LM [22] EMP D30, R80; LM translates it as “heart”.

²⁸ DK84A14 (= Plat. *Prt.* 340a-b); [34] PROD. D21c, D21d. LM translates them as “to wish” and “to desire”]]].

(desire, ἐπιθυμίαν, desire doubled is love, ἔρωτα, love doubled becomes madness, μανίαν γίγνεσθαι).²⁹ A difference can also be seen between the two verbs employed, a positive significance attributed to love, and a dangerous shift when love becomes excessive and turns into madness.

Lastly, a similar approach to the Platonic perspective can be found in Democritean ethics. Naturally, Democritus also condemns unrestrained pleasure, where passion can throw the human soul into confusion:³⁰ Craving (ἀμέτρως ἐπιθυμεῖν) is typical of children rather than adults³¹ (hence education is crucial for young people and consists in looking after the perfection of their soul, in other words their λογισμός³²); moreover, the desire to have more (ἐπιθυμία τοῦ πλείονος) makes us lose what we already have.³³ Giving in unconditionally to pleasure and passions ends up transforming ἡδοναί into λύπαι, as is stated in fragment 235.³⁴ ἐπιθυμεῖν is

²⁹ DK84B7 (= Stob. *flor.* IV 20, 65).

³⁰ In a fragment with an uncertain attribution (DK68B298a (Demetr. Lac. *de poem.* B 20), LM [27] ATOM. R4a).

³¹ DK68B70 (= Democrates Orelli 35). See also DK68B214 (= Stob. III 7,25): the brave man is not only superior to his enemies but also to pleasure.

³² DK68B33 (Clem. Alex. *Strom.* IV 151): nature (φύσις) and education (διδαχή) are extremely similar: because education transforms a person and, by transforming them, constitutes their nature (φουσιοποιεῖ). On the importance of education for young people, see DK68B178-179. See DK68B36 (it is the same as B187 = Stob. *flor.* III 1, 27): it is appropriate for men to take more account of their souls than of their bodies: for perfection of soul corrects (ὀρθοῖ) the bad state of body but strength of body without reasoning (ἄνευ λογισμοῦ) in no way makes the soul better. See also B40.

³³ DK68B224 (= Stob. III 10,68); LM [27] ATOM. D251. See also DK68B234 (Stob. III 18,30); [27] ATOM. D240.

³⁴ DK68B235 (Stob. III 18,35); LM [27] ATOM. D248: Those who take their pleasures from their belly, exceeding what is appropriate (τὸν καιρὸν) in food, drink, or sex, to all of them their pleasures are meagre and brief, lasting just so long as they are eating or drinking, and their pains are many. For this desire for the same thing (ἐπιθυμεῖν) is always with them, even when they get what they desire, and the pleasure soon passes, and they have no profit except brief delight; and then they need the same thing again.

dangerous for the soul, especially when it leads to violent cravings.³⁵ However, with echoes of Heraclitus' ideas, Democritus also recognises that it is hard to fight against one's own θυμός: it can only be dominated by the person who knows how to use their λογιστικόν.³⁶

Naturally, Democritean ethics are not equivalent to rigorist ethics which devalue the body and its pleasures ("a life without festivity is like a long road without an inn"³⁷). The reference to the rational part and temperance is made with a view to *knowing how to enjoy* pleasures, as well as making the right choice.³⁸ It is not necessary to search for all kinds of pleasure, but only the pleasure for what is beautiful³⁹, and this desire for beauty is referred to by Democritus as "virtuous love."⁴⁰ The situation of the wise person, who knows how to choose pleasures and enjoy them in the right way, using intellect and reason, who knows how not to mortify but to enhance their own θυμός, is referred to by Democritus as εὐθυμία which simply means overcoming the restlessness of the soul and the attainment of a serene, happy life.⁴¹ Ensuring one's own θυμός is in good condition

³⁵ DK68B72 (= Democrates Orelli 37). See DK68B284 (Stob. IV 33, 24-5), LM [27] ATOM. D259.

³⁶ DK68B 236 (= Stob. III 20, 56); LM [9] HER. R106, [27] ATOM. D296: to fight against an ardor is hard (θυμός); [LM translates the term as 'ardor']; it is the task of a man to prevail over it, if he has good sense (εὐλογίστου). Another similarity with Heraclitus is in DK68B98: the friendship of a single man with intelligence (ένος ξυνετοῦ) is worth more than that of all those without intelligence.

³⁷ DK68B230 (= Stob. III 16, 22).

³⁸ Untimely pleasures (ἄκαιροι) produce aversion (DK68B71 = Democrates Orelli 36), while temperance (σωφροσύνη) increases the enjoyable (τὰ τερπνά) and makes pleasure greater (ήδονήν) (DK68B211 (Stob. III 5, 27); LM [27] ATOM. D244). On the foolish (ἀνοήμονες) who live "without enjoying life" see B199-206.

³⁹ DK68B207.

⁴⁰ DK68B72 (Democrates Orelli 38): virtuous love (δίκαιος έρως) means desiring beautiful things without using violence (ἀνυβρίστως, from ύβρίζειν = giving into excess, offending, treating people with insolence, committing physical injury) in order to obtain them.

⁴¹ DK68B286 (Stob. IV 39, 17); LM [27] ATOM. D278: a happy man is someone who with moderation has a serene soul (εὐθυμεόμενος, from εὐθυμεῖν), whereas an unhappy man is someone who, due to his immense wealth, has a troubled soul (δυσθυμεόμενος, da δυσθυμέω).

(εὐθυμία) can be achieved by temperance (μετρίοτητι) in pleasure and moderation (συμμετρίῃ) in life in general: excess and insufficient pleasure can change easily and can therefore cause turmoil in the soul. The souls that are always jolted between extreme opposites are neither stable nor calm (εὖθυμοι): “and if you hold fast to this judgement (γνώμη), you will live in greater contentment (ἐπιθυμότερον) and drive away those plagues of life, jealousy, envy and malice.”⁴²

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⁴² DK68B191 (Stob. III 1, 210); LM [27] ATOM. D226.

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