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PLATO ON 'MULTIPLE SELVES'



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Introduction: Human history shows that Plato is one of the most influential thinkers of all the centuries. His input is still being analysed from different scientific viewpoints, including psychological. Although, usually, it is assumed that the founder of Psychology is Aristotle¹, many important psychological ideas can still be found before him.

In this essay I decided particularly to take a look from a certain psychological sight which concerns the problem of *multiple selves*. I came to this idea after getting acquainted with Greg Nixon's article entitled "Imaginal Dialogues"². And, for this research I stopped on Plato's "Phaedrus". What I would like to mention preliminary, is that in Plato's works the problem of multiple selves appears in metaphoric and implicit form and which can be found in several works of Plato, including "Republic" and "Phaedrus". The given is approved also by Ronnie de Sous: "*Ever since Plato's tripartite model of the soul, metaphors of multiplicity have been applied to the human mind...My first example is also the first developed psychological model of the mind as multiple. It is Plato's tripartite³ soul in the fourth book of the Republic.*"⁴

But I decided for studying this problem to emphasize on "Phaedrus". In the farther text I will clarify the reason of my decision. If we describe "Phaedrus" in two words, than it should be said that here Plato touches numerous topics and problems, including nature of love, the soul, immortality, dialectic, knowledge as recollection and etc, which sometimes seem very hard to combine with each other⁵. And before starting to discuss the main problem, let me first shortly touch some information about Plato and his works.

Briefly about Plato: Plato is an Ancient Greek Philosopher who lived in V-IV centuries B.C.: "After pursuing the liberal studies of his day, he became in 407 B.C. a pupil and friend of Socrates. From about 388 B.C. he lived for a time at the court of Dionysius the Elder, tyrant of Syracuse. On his return to Athens, Plato founded a school, the [Academy](#), where he taught mathematics and philosophy until his



¹ See e.g.: Klimes J. History of Psychology. <http://web.ff.cuni.cz/~klimjaff/common/psychology/soul.pdf>, p. 12.

² Nixon G. Imaginal Dialogues. http://web.ff.cuni.cz/~klimjaff/common/partnership/imaginal_others.doc
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³ Emphasized by A. Hakobyan

⁴ Ronnie de Sous (1998). Metaphors of mental multiplicity. <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~sousa/METAPHOR.html> Also, for differences of tripartition in Republic and Phaedrus, see: in this essay, p. 9.

⁵ See: Helmbold W. C. (1956). Introduction. In: Plato. Phaedrus Indianapolis/New York. The Liberal Arts Press, Inc, p. vii-xvi.

death. His teaching was interrupted by two more visits to Syracuse (367 and 361 B.C.), which he made in the vain hope of seeing his political ideals realized in Sicily.”⁶ What about his works, then it is worthy to mention that: “Plato was a superb writer, and his works are part of the world’s great literature. His extant work is in the form of dialogues and epistles...In the various dialogues he touched upon almost every problem that has occupied subsequent philosophers.”⁷

What are Multiple Selves? “The idea that each of us consists in reality of multiple selves is not new. What may be new is our tendency to call all these personæ and potential personæ “selves,” as though they all somehow belonged to a central command station which we entitle “me” or “I”” ... what once was felt to be the external influences from mostly invisible divinities is now felt as inner influences from such things as moods, fantasies, inspirations, or even inexplicable actions: “She was beside herself in frustration,” or “I can’t believe I did that!” Most often such possessions are dismissed as my mood swings or simply an unimportant aberration , blamed on nerves: “I am just not myself today.” When “you are not yourself,” you must be someone or something other. It may be wondered just who you are, or who is you in such situations. What other beings inhabit the space we generally label as “self?” This is recognized when we cry, Homerically: “I don’t know what possessed me!””⁸

How was the “Multiple Selves” Conceived in Ancient Times and Plato’s Approach: I think, although Plato belong to the ancient world he was the carrier of his century’s values, way of thinking and etc, he could realize, what people connect with external factors, have inner nature, the point is about the factors that influence on our behavior. In “Phaedrus” we read: *“We must realize that each of us is ruled by two principles which we follow wherever they lead: one is our inborn desire for pleasures, the other is our acquired judgment that pursues what is best. Sometimes these two are in agreement; but there are times when they quarrel inside us, and then sometimes one of them gains control, sometimes the other. Now when judgment is in control and leads us by reasoning toward what is best, that sort of self-control is called ‘being in your right mind’; but when desire takes command in us and drags us without reasoning toward pleasure, then its command is known ‘outrageousness’. Now outrageousness has as many names as the forms it can take, and these are quite diverse (237d-238a).”*⁹

⁶ The Columbia Encyclopedia (2001-1005). Sixth Edition. Columbia University Press.
<http://www.bartleby.com/65/pl/Plato.html>

⁷ The same place.

⁸ Nixon G., mentioned work, http://web.ff.cuni.cz/~klimjaff/common/partnership/imaginal_others.doc

⁹ All the references of citations made from “Phaedrus” are noted in the text in () and are done from: Plato (1997). Complete works. Indianapolis/Cambridge. Hackett Publishing Company.

As the above mentioned passage precisely shows, Plato tries to explain that we are ruled by *inner* principles, which in this case, are two. Instead of this, in his times people were generally trying to ascribe those principles to some external Rulers who can force humans, thus, I suppose, it could sound quite extra-ordinary for his times. Arguments for defending this fact can be found in the same dialogue: as all the authors who want to make their compositions' characters as real as possible, to create a real scene, Plato also tries to give his dialogue tinge of reality, as if the discourse happens between two real people. For this purpose, it is just obvious, that one should try to present his characters acting as all real people at those times, using the language typical to his time, etc. Thus, Plato uses the language and presents behavior that is typical for an ancient Greek man in Phaedrus. I'll bring just couple of examples. But in order to see how Plato skillfully ascribes his time values, way of thinking to his characters (*Socrates* and *Phaedrus*), let's try to treat them as real people. Thus, in the first example Socrates becomes amazed with his own skills and the reason connects with an external force: *"There, Phaedrus my friend, don't you think, as I do, that I'm in the grip of something divine?"*

Phaedrus: This is certainly an unusual flow of words for you, Socrates.

Socrates: Then be quiet and listen. There's something really divine about this place, so don't be surprised if I'm quite taken by the Nymphs' madness as I go on with the speech (238c-d)." So, here we see how Socrates connects his enlightening with deities, divine place, in one word, external things. That's exactly the point mentioned by Nagel: "...what once was felt to be the external influences from mostly invisible divinities is now felt as inner influences..."¹⁰ But let's continue with one more example: *"My friend, just as I was about to cross the river, the familiar divine sign came to me which, whenever it occurs, holds me back from something I am about to do. I thought I heard a voice coming from this very spot, forbidding me to leave until I made atonement for some offense against the gods (242c)... Phaedrus, that speech you carried with you here-it was horrible, as horrible as the speech you made me give...It was foolish, and close to being impious. What could be more horrible than that? (242d)"*¹¹ In this example we see how Socrates is amazed with his negative attitude towards a certain object (Deity of 'Love'), with his last speech. To express it with the terms of our topic, one can say that it could be an amazement from the revealing the extreme differences of *selves* in one person. When the other *self* starts ruling, or however this leadership is called, Socrates connects it with an external voice telling him something. If we

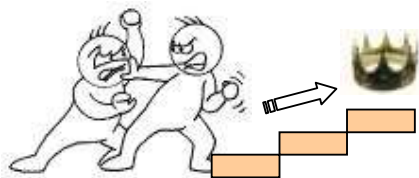
¹⁰ Nixon G., mentioned work, http://web.ff.cuni.cz/~klimjaff/common/partnership/imaginal_others.doc

¹¹ Another interesting example can be found in 257a, where he asks Love (a god) to forgive his earlier speeches, i.e. previous self's proclamations.

express it in special terms, then deity, voice, and other things are just the *fantasy figures* of Socrates. He externalizes his self into a separate, objectively existing mental representation of god. And as we know, fantasy figures are no way smarter than its carrier, the subject (in this case Socrates)¹², he rather expresses here his own skills than an inspiration from god. It is not being “*in the grip of something divine*” but it’s some inner change in the individual.

So, in this way Plato describes the reality in his times, the reality where people were convinced that it’s common when a divine force can just directly, sometimes extremely, influence on their activities, behavior, speech, etc and change them. And, for finishing this short historical approach, let me also bring another quotation from Nixon: “In Homer, the heroes at Troy all had personalities and considered themselves to be themselves in most daily intercourse or when they were speaking. But even in this last case—speech-making—their “self” could be subject to possession by a god or *daimonion* who may inspire their tongues to winged words of wisdom or to emotional displays of suicidal stupidity. “What god was it who brought this rage upon me?” they may ask. Or even: “What god was it who put these dishonourable thoughts in my mind?” One was conceived as being put “out of one’s head” under the influence of any of a multiplicity of divine or semi-divine beings. The “I” was more of receiving station than a central command post”¹³. Now, I suppose, the general picture of how the problem was treated in ancient times and how originally Plato perceived it, is ready. It’s time to come back to the context of “Phaedrus” and try to interpret Plato’s approaches of the problem from modern point of view.

Multiple selves: bipartition or tripartition? As it was mentioned above¹⁴, Plato distinguishes



two inner principles which guide us; one is our inborn desire for pleasures, and the other is our acquired judgment that pursues what is best. The later has only positive attributes, and the first one, only negative.

And these principles are always in quarrel for gain ruling position (See: 237d-238a). “Plato’s model is motivated by the need to explain inner conflict. Among its most intriguing features is the fact that, like Freud’s (1933) model of ego, id and superego, it involves three rather than two parts, incorporating a correspondingly more

¹² See: Klimes J. Reaction to an Ambivalent object, <http://web.ff.cuni.cz/~klimjaff/common/partnership/fantasyfigures.pdf>, p. 14.

¹³ Nixon G., mentioned work, http://web.ff.cuni.cz/~klimjaff/common/partnership/imaginal_others.doc

¹⁴ See: p. 4.