



The tripartite model of Soul: Plato and Freud - A Comparative Study

¹ Prof. Mrinal Kanti Sarkar, Associate Professor,
Dept. of Philosophy, Bidhannagar College, Kolkata, India

² Prof. Sangita Dey Sarkar, Associate Professor,
Dept. of Philosophy, Sammilani Mahavidyalaya, Kolkata,

Abstract:

In this paper we actually have tried to make an attempt to show the line of similarities between two great philosophers; one is the Greek Philosopher Plato and the other is modern time Psychologist Sigmund Freud. And the point of similarities is in respect of tripartite division of soul/mind. Here we intend to focus on the concept of Soul as conceived by Plato in *the Republic* and will try to show some similarities with that of Freud's division of three levels of mind. The main concern of this paper is to show that how deeply the tripartite model of soul as conceived by Plato influenced Freud in conceiving three levels of mind in later period.

Plato's three element of soul are appetitive, the spirited part and the logical part. The first element is primitive that works impulsively. The same is seen in Freud's theory and in this case this primitive element is the Id. It does the same. These elements drive us to act without considering act's consequences and create chaos. But the other two elements in both the theories lead us to a better life or personality. We will discuss about all those elements and their impact on human's lives.

Key words: Tripartite model, Soul, the id, the ego, the super ego, harmonious relations.



Introduction:

The paper deals with the concept of soul as conceived by Plato in *the Republic* and the three levels of mind as conceived by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. We have divided the entire discussion into two parts. In the first part of the paper we would try to show that *why* and *how* Plato conceives of the tripartite model of Soul. In the second part, we shall try to discuss about the three levels of mind as stated by Freud. After doing that, we shall try to show the influence of Plato on Freud in conceiving the three levels of mind.

Let us start with a Socratic dialogue “one and the same thing cannot act or be affected in opposite ways at the same time in the same part of it and relation to the same object”. This principle is marked by the scholars as the principle of Opposites or principle of Conflict. According to this principle, it is impossible for a thing to be at rest and in motion at the same time and in the same part of it. Plato explained the principle in two ways to avoid ambiguities in using it. First, it is wrong to say that a man, who is standing still and moving his hands, is at rest and in motion simultaneously. Rather we should say that a part of him is standing still and another part of him is moving. Secondly, we should say that a spinning top whose circumference is in motion, but whose axis is at rest; is moving in one respect but not in another. Plato at this point thought that this principle is valid. And from this point of view he proceeds to use the tripartite model of Soul to demonstrate that there are three different parts in soul which coincides with each other in a harmonious state. Plato observed that one and the same person has the desire to satisfy their basic needs such as hunger, thirst etc on one side and tries to retain by the sense of individualism on the other.

So according to Plato, one and the same person may seek understanding and search for truth simultaneously. This leads Plato to have detected the three main sources for motivation within people. These are:

- Desire for satisfy one’s instincts.
- Desire for preservation
- Desire for understanding and truth



PLATO'S TRIPARTITE SOUL

Plato actually explained the concept of soul from two different angles. In his book *Phaedo*, he concentrated on proving the immortality of soul. And in *the Republic*, Plato introduced a new understanding of the human soul and rationality: *the tripartite model of Soul*. Plato argued that the soul is composed of three parts.

1. The appetitive part - This includes our all bodily pleasures, desires, comforts, satisfactions etc. Plato mentioned that there can be conflicts between these elements also. The appetitive has been depicted as an ugly black horse on the left.
2. The spirited part - The spirited part is also mentioned as hot blooded part. This part is attracted towards challenges, hurdles, ethics etc. It becomes angry on experiencing injustice. It enjoys victory, overcoming challenges, honor. The term "spirited" is not anyhow associated with the concept of "spirituality". Here "spirited" means, energetic. Highly enthusiastic. This spirited part has been depicted as a white noble horse on the right.
3. The logical or the rational part - This part is our mind that decides and analyses everything rationally and logically. This part guides us to live a balanced and ethical life. The rational part has been depicted as a charioteer who is guiding the chariot and previously mentioned two horses to keep everything in place.

Plato's strategy in *The Republic* is to explicate the primary notion of political justice, then to derive an analogous concept of individual justice. Plato defines political justice as being inherently structural. A society consists of three main classes of people—the producers, the auxiliaries, and the guardians. The just society consists in the right and fixed relationships between these three classes.

In this section, Plato sets out to show that the three classes of society have analogs in the soul of every individual. In other words, the soul, like the city, is a tripartite entity. The just individual can be defined in analogy with the just society; the three parts of his soul are fixed in the requisite relationships of power and influence. In order to make this claim work, Plato has to prove that there are really three parts of the soul. As Plato had derived



the concept of tripartite model of the soul right from his very observation of the city-state, he argued that the three main classes of society can be compared with the different parts of the human body. The workers or the producers are the body and limbs of the state, the auxiliaries are its heart and the philosophers or the guardians of the state are its head. Similarly, to him, the appetitive part of the soul is the most irrational part in which ones' cardinal appetites reside. This is the part that loves food, drink, sex, money etc. Plato identifies this part of the soul that involves with the worldly pleasures. On the other hand, the spirited part of the soul is to be considered as the substratum where one's courage and higher passions reside. This is the part by which we get angry or get into a temper. This part may be aggressive and competitive. This is the part that makes one ambitious and seeks honour. This part of the soul is in higher level from appetitive part and is in lower level from the logical or rational part. And finally, the logical or the rational part of the soul is the level in which one seeks and loves wisdom, knowledge, truth. In his stage one can use the power of reasoning, becomes skilled and can be calculating or mathematical. According to Plato, the logical or the rational part of the soul would and should rule the other parts of the soul as in Plato's ideal or just state, Philosopher king governs. This part, according to Plato is the reflective part of the soul.

Plato explains this tripartite division of soul with an allegory of chariot. The charioteer is trying to control two horses; one is good (symbolized by white horse) and the other is bad (symbolized by black horse). The white horse is obedient to the charioteers' instructions while the black one has to be restrained by the whip. Here in the allegory, the charioteer is being symbolized as the rational part of the soul, the bad or the black horse is being represented as the appetitive part of the soul which is kept in check by the good or noble horse. And this noble or the white horse is being characterized here as the spirited part of the soul.

FREUD'S TRIPARTITETHEORY:

In 1923 Sigmund Freud introduced a three layered psyche (personality) theory of human beings. This theory was actually influenced by Plato's tripartite theory of soul. Freud's three layers are - Id, Ego and Super Ego. These are not part of our brain and they don't



have any physical existence. These layers get developed with time in human life. Life experiences construct these. These three have equal important roles to play in human life to develop a proper personality and these decide a human's behaviour. These, we can term as parts of our personalities. Each and every part has its own eccentric component. Let's discuss about each of personality individually step by step to understand Freud in better way.

Id: The first part of personality, Id is the primitive element of personality. According to Freud, the Id comes under unconscious part of our brain. This consists of all the urges and impulses. The Id contains libido - it is sexual drive or desire of a person. Libido is biologically, socially and psychologically influenced. Biologically libido is controlled by sex hormones, socially it is controlled by social situations like work, family life etc. And finally it has psychological influences like stress, personality and so on. Libido is related to sexual drive or desire but still it is an energy that is associated with many other desires or drives as well like survival instinct and more.

The Id consists inherited components of personality at the time of birth of a baby. A baby is fully controlled by the Id, and ego and super ego develop later in life with time. The Id remains same thorough out a person's life in the unconscious.

The Id has no logical, realistic, ideological, rational expressions. It drives a person in impulsive way. It just knows to satisfy desire on the moment without caring about its result in future. The Id driven behaviour knows to satisfy desire only, otherwise it gets sad or disappointed.

Ego: Ego is a modified version of the Id by the influence of external world or society. The ego is logical and realistic in nature. It controls the Id from committing any impulsive act. It makes balance between Id's desire and the reality of the outer world and helps a person to act accordingly. That means it helps to develop a balanced personality.

Ego also wants pleasure and doesn't want to face pain like the Id but there is difference in the process. Ego takes a realistic way to have pleasure. Ego has secondary process thinking that means if one plan fails, it doesn't give up or doesn't act in immature way. It



continues trying still it is achieved. It is called, reality testing. Target of each and every person must be to develop own ego.

Super Ego: Super ego grows around 3-5 years of age. It is related to moral value system. It is developed with the help of parents and other seniors. It also comes under unconscious. It is associated to self-criticism. Super ego is developed by experiencing codes and directions, specially “don’t” sentences. Super ego controls the id from performing any immoral act and adds a moral value to ego instead of plain realistic approach.

Super ego consists of two systems - conscience and ideal self. The conscience gives us guilt feeling after doing wrong deeds. It can be called the “inner voice”. And the latter one is about a state of personality that decides how we represent ourselves in the society or how we treat other people.

These three elements work together and there are conflicts also among these. Being a realistic part, ego keeps balance between the Id and superego. But a balance is required among them to develop a healthy personality.

COMPARING PLATO AND FREUD:

The centre word of Freudian theory, psyche (brain or mind), is actually rooted to Greek philosopher Plato’s “psuche” that is core part of Plato’s philosophical theory. It is a direct indication that Freud’s work is influenced by Plato’s philosophy.

The second similarity is the number of elements in their theories. Both have given to total three elements in life and both have mentioned that these three have very important impact on us and these are influenced by each other as well.

Plato’s appetitive element is equal to Freud’s the Id element. Both are primitive in nature. They only focus on physical needs and desires. These both are based on impulsive acts.

The second element of Plato, spirited part is similar to Freud’s super ego. Both are responsible for acting rationally. Both factors restrain us from doing something in



impulsive way. Both the elements guides us how to act in the society and what to do and what not to do on the basis of previous experiences.

Finally Plato's rational part is similar to Freud's ego. In the theories of both of them, these elements are responsible for controlling desires and pleasures wished by previous two elements.

As Freud has mentioned that if the Id becomes superior, we start to act impulsively and unrealistically. We mainly become desire or pleasure driven. Our morality stops working logically. In the same way, Plato also cited that if the appetitive part becomes superior, the same things happen us as discussed earlier.

Dissimilarities:

There is a big difference of physical construction of the theories. In Freud's theory, the ego is at the middle of the Id and superego. Means the series is the lowest, middle and the highest elements respectively. But in Plato's theory, the lowest gets the highest element after it and then the middle element comes.

The second difference is Plato's theory is focused on social morality. He was concerned about depicting justice in the society but Freud's psyche based theory focused on unconscious and subconscious parts of brain. It is more individual approach.

Thirdly, Plato mentioned aggression as a positive element that is associated to spirited element. As per Plato it motivates people to act. But as per Freud, aggression is a negative element that is result of the Id part of our personality. This aggression takes place when we encounter any dissatisfaction or we fail to fulfill our desires.

Fourthly, Plato's view is a person can behave properly when rational element controls the whole soul suppressing other two elements. But Freud didn't believe in this stability of the self. He claimed a continuous conflict between these three elements.

CONCLUSION:

As we discussed in the article that though Freud is influenced by Plato in his own tripartite theory of psyche, both the theories are not same. Freud got influenced by Plato's



tripartite theory of soul, but his own tripartite theory mainly focuses on human psychology. Freud cited that the conflicts between these three elements lead to psychological illness but Plato didn't consider conflict between these elements but talked about a stability in soul when rational part is highly active. Both the tripartite theories are concerned about human beings but approach are different and observations too.

Bibliography:

- I. Annas, Julia. *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981
- II. Campbell, Douglas (2021). "Self- Motion and Cognition: Plato's Theory of the Soul". *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*.
- III. Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. XIX (1999) James Strachey, Gen. Ed. [ISBN 0-09-929622-5](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/9780099296225)
- IV. Plato, *Republic*, Book 1, 353d. Translation found in Campbell 2021: .
- V. Santas, Gerasimos. *Plato and Freud: Two Theories of Love*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.
- VI. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id, On Meta psychology* (Penguin Freud Library 11) p. 369.

00000