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Final Essay

Plato's Tripartite Soul in the *Phaedrus* and Freud's

Division of the Psyche in *The Ego and the Id*

Introduction

Human beings have, for a long time, sought to understand the workings of the soul (or psyche). By exploring how internal conflicts shapes one's actions, desires, and morality, Plato and Freud both approached this longstanding question, each with their own distinct framework. Plato offered the tripartite soul in the *Phaedrus*, in which he imagines the soul as a charioteer steering two opposing horses, while Freud, in *The Ego and the Id*, divides the psyche into the id, ego, and superego; wherein each represents a different layer of thought and behavior. Despite the obvious difference between the two thinkers - over two-thousand years - their two frameworks offer similar structures and focuses, but differ in their foundations and purposes.

This essay will explore the similarities and differences between the two authors' frameworks, and engage with the original texts to explore the link between Plato's metaphysical ideals and Freud's psychological 'realities.' It follows a straightforward format.

Plato's Tripartite Soul in the *Phaedrus*

Freud's Division of the Psyche in *The Ego and the Id*

Similarities

Differences

Plato's Tripartite Soul in the *Phaedrus*

Plato's idea of the soul is seemingly simple: by its name - tripartite - we can understand that it is composed of three parts. However, through the use of a vivid and lengthy metaphor, we can come to flesh it out more. In his writing, Plato describes Socrates's description of the soul as a charioteer steering two horses - one white and one black. The white one - noble, pure, and well-behaved - represents one's desire for honor and properness. The black one - unruly, tainted, and stubborn - represents one's appetites and human desires. One may wonder, 'why is it called the tripartite soul but there are only two horses?' The third piece of this metaphor is the charioteer himself, who, as the one in true control, represents a person's reason, trying to maintain a balance between the two horses, and ultimately move upward - along with the white horse.

Plato writes, "...a charioteer rules over and guides a pair of horses... one of these horses is noble and good... but the other is the opposite...." (Phaedrus, 246b)." A constant struggle exists, wherein reason - via the charioteer - tries to direct the appetitive parts towards a higher *goodness*. For Plato, this higher goal is the *goodness* just mentioned.

In examining what is *goodness*, we take a brief detour to try to understand his metaphysical forms, or ideals. These concepts transcend space and time. They exist forever, and everywhere. They're perfect, unchanging, and eternal ideas that represent the truest reality. *Goodness*, is an embedment of many different ideals. In his *Republic*, Plato envisions a society ruled by philosopher-kings, where said society is fair, just, and true. Education, enlightenment, and transcendence are necessary to be just, which is necessary to be *good*. We can see how *goodness*, to Plato, is one of the highest forms of perfection.

Returning to the charioteer, we can understand how Plato writes of him ascending to the realm of the divine, characterized by the perfect *goodness* we just explored - when the human appetites can be suppressed to allow the white horse to guide him up. However those appetites are not suppressed, the soul is drug downwards. Plato uses this not only as a metaphor but as a guide too. Instructing his readers how to live a good life and the benefits it brings; we can see how Plato places reason as the primary, and most important guide, but still allies nobility and appetite to have their place. When the three parts work in harmony, the result is an upward move to divinity and *goodness*.

Freud's Division of the Psyche in *The Ego and the Id*

Over two thousand later, Freud created a similar framework for what he called the 'psyche.' Instead of using the metaphor of chariots and horses, Freud, a neurologist, used the language of science. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud divides the psyche into three parts: the id, the ego, and the superego.

The id, or the most primitive part of the psyche, is what Freud calls "the great reservoir of libido (The Id and the Ego, III, 31)." In this sense, the id contains man's deepest, most innate, most carnivorous desires. It is where one's instincts live, demanding immediate pleasure and gratification. If the id were allowed to operate alone, man would have no care for anyone or anything. Taking what it wants by force, willing to kill, hurt, or destroy anything. On the other end of the spectrum lies the superego, representing one's most moral state. If the superego were allowed to fully operate, man would live a life unable to do anything, in a state of virtuous paralysis. Between the two lies the ego, a rational mediator. Freud describes it as a man on horseback using the reins to control the id horse - a striking

similarity to the position of reason in the charioteer that Plato writes of. The ego tries to balance the id's desires and the superego's demands.

Freud doesn't write of reaching a harmonious virtue, but rather of managing conflict. The ego is in the middle, constantly juggling the id's impulsivity, the superego's rules, and the limitations of reality. Unlike Plato, Freud does not see a defined path to peace. Instead, he thinks we can *try* to keep things under control. He goes on to elaborate on this using the concept of sublimation, finding socially acceptable ways to express the id's desires, but we won't expand on this now.

Similarities

Comparing Plato and Freud, we see some obvious overlaps. For one, they both recognize that humans are divided. They can understand that humans are complex, multifaceted beings with different forces at work within themselves and that there is an inherent conflict within that human. Both writers use a three-part structure to explain these conflicts and describe the divisions. Plato's rational, noble, and appetitive parts overlay with Freud's ego, superego, and id in various ways. The rational charioteer is much like the ego, trying to maintain balance between the two extremes. The noble white horse, focusing on honor and morality, is similar to the superego, with a sense of ultimate virtue and ethicality. And the unruly black horse, the id and its instinctive desires.

In addition, both authors write of a focus on balance, although with different end goals. Plato writes of harmony and divinity coming when reason leads the two other parts of the soul to *goodness*. Freud, on the other hand, writes of control and appeasement, wherein the ego acts as a mediator and negotiator between the id's desires and the superego's duty. For both authors, when balance is lost, chaos follows.

Differences

The difference between the two authors lies in how they see the purpose of their frameworks. Plato writes of ethics and philosophy, using his tripartite soul as a moral guide as a way to demonstrate how one can strive for virtue and truth - or *goodness*. Freud, rather pessimistically, focuses on the psychological aspect. He uses his framework as a way to understand the mind - not accept it for what it is as Plato does - specifically as it relates to mental illness and what can be changed.

This carries over into their views of human nature at its core. Plato is optimistic about this; he believes that reason can tame our innate appetites and guide us toward a better, more virtuous life. Freud isn't as confident in this, as he viewed the id's desires as deep and sometimes uncontrollable. Even if one can sublimate them, via the ego, they always exist. For Freud, this conflict is inevitable. Similarly to this, Freud sees desire as primal and inescapable; it is who we are at our essence. While Plato views desire as something that can be tamed, like a wild horse. Like human nature, they approach desire in different ways.

And in a more overarching aspect, they serve different cultural purposes. As noted above, Plato writes with a sense of guidance, providing a map for his readers to live a more virtuous life in the hopes of creating a more virtuous - good - society. Freud, on the other hand, writes from a scientific standpoint. From a medical standpoint, he writes to help those with serious mental illnesses. Freud's writing is therefore less metaphoric than Plato's, whose reads like a story.

Conclusion

Plato and Freud approach the human soul and psyche in ways that reflect their times and purposes.

Plato's tripartite soul is a path to virtue and a vision of the divinity that could be if reason ruled.

Freud's division of the psyche is a map of our inner conflicts, based on the complexity of human desires. Both frameworks offer similar valuable insights while serving distinct purposes, and positing distinct realities. They help us understand why we sometimes feel torn in our actions, and how one can manage that feeling. They both acknowledge the universal struggle that exists in us all.