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Denigration of the Body in Plato's Philosophy

Jamie Alexander

University of Northern Colorado, alex5906@bears.unco.edu

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The denigration of the body is a common feature of Western philosophy and theology. The attempt to separate one's soul and spiritual practice from the demands and temptations of the body gets its roots in Ancient Greek philosophy, yet these ideas still impact Western culture even today due to their integration into Western society through Christianity and Islam. Since ancient times, the denigration of the body has been demonstrated through the suppression of sexual desires, fasting in ascetic religious practices, and the attempt to civilize "savage" cultures. The first known appearance of the idea that bodily hungers should be suppressed appears in the *Phaedo*, written by Plato in the 4th c. BCE. The story recounts a dialogue supposedly given by his teacher, Socrates, in the final moments before his death. Socrates had been condemned to death for "corrupting the youth" and heresy and was sentenced to death by hemlock. Rather than flee Athens, as was common—and even expected—of those sentenced to death by the Athenian democracy, Socrates chose to uphold his sentence.¹ The story is told by Phaedo, who was present at Socrates' death when Plato was unable to attend due to illness and depicts the scene of Socrates on his deathbed, surrounded by his students and fellow philosophers.²

In this dialogue, when Socrates is asked how his body should be buried after his death, he tells his friends, "However you please... he [Crito, a close friend of Socrates] thinks I am the one whom he will presently see as a corpse, and he asks how to bury me. And though I have been saying at great length that after I drink the poison I shall no longer be with you he seems to think that was idle talk uttered to encourage you and myself."³ Socrates' point, which he elaborates

¹ See earlier dialogues, Plato, "Apology," in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle, Fifth Edition*, trans. by G.M.A. Grube, ed. by S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016), 90-106, and Plato, "Crito," in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle, Fifth Edition*, trans. by G.M.A. Grube, ed. by S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016), 106-114, which depict Socrates' trial and sentencing.

² Carol Collier, *Recovering the Body: A Philosophical Story* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2013), 26.

³ Plato, "Phaedo," in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle, Fifth Edition*, trans. by G.M.A. Grube, ed. by S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016), 115c.

throughout the *Phaedo*, is that what makes Socrates “Socrates” is not his body, but his soul—the immaterial part of himself that is connected to an unseen realm called the Realm of Forms.

Socrates taught that the body and soul were separate, an uncommonly held belief prior to his time. While the separation of body and soul is a common belief in Western culture today, this shift in thought had profound implications, namely the possibility of an afterlife. Prior to Socrates, while the idea of a *psyche* (soul) likely existed, it wasn't until Plato's writings that emphasis was placed on the *psyche*'s immortality, as well as the care of the soul in order to ensure its ascension to the Realm of the Forms in the afterlife.⁴ Socrates's lack of concern for his burial illustrates his belief that the most important part of him would remain intact and live on even though his body would die and decay.

Socrates went on to say, “If it is pure when it leaves the body and drags nothing bodily with it, as it had no willing association with the body in life, but avoided it and gathered itself together by itself and always practiced this, which is no other than practicing philosophy in the right way, in fact, training to die easily. Or is this not training for death?”⁵ Philosophy, as Socrates practiced it, was meant to solidify the soul so that it would easily and completely separate from the body upon death, with no attachments to the physical form or the material world. The idea that the soul is separate from, and a purer entity than the body leads to many ideas about the impurity of the physical body, the burden of maintaining its needs and desires, and practices to free oneself from those impurities as much as possible while on Earth.

Though the dialogues in the *Phaedo* are written as if coming from the mouth of Socrates, it is important to keep in mind that Socrates never wrote down any of his philosophical thoughts.

⁴ Solmsen, Friedrich. “Plato and the Concept of the Soul (Psyche): Some Historical Perspectives.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, no. 3 (1983): 359-360.

⁵ Plato, *Phaedo*, 80e-81a.

Everything we know about Socrates and his teachings is filtered through Plato. Scholars of Greek philosophy are cognizant of this and debate over the degree to which ideas in the *Dialogues* are that of Socrates and to what degree they are Plato's. When looking at works of philosophy through a historical lens, we must consider the reliability of the source; therefore, attempting to parse out where Socrates' teachings end and where Plato's begin is a tricky but important task for choosing whose time period to consider in analyzing how societal changes and the personal impacts of those changes are reflected in the text. R. Hackforth suggests that the *Phaedo* is particularly Platonic; evidence suggests the historical Socrates was not as hostile toward the body as he appears to be in the *Phaedo*.⁶ Therefore, the denigration of the body seen in the *Phaedo* is likely Plato's, which raises the question, why was Plato so much more adverse toward the body than his beloved teacher? If denigration of the body was not a commonly held ideal in Ancient Greece, what elements in fifth-century Greek society and Plato's own life might have led to the formation of this perspective that has had such a lasting impact on Western society?

While there are many aspects of Plato's life that could have contributed to Plato's view of the body, I suggest that growing up in a war-torn Athens set the stage for Plato's conflict between the body and the intellect, an idea that served as a foundation not only for Plato's philosophical pursuits but also his political ones. The corrupt Athenian democracy, which Plato openly condemned, failed to prevent or end the Peloponnesian War, creating an unstable and declining Athens for Plato to grow up in. Because of this, Plato desired a return to the aristocracy, led by the class that he himself was a part of. Plato was one of many aristocratic sons who were students of Socrates and absorbed his teachings about the power of the intellect. This

⁶ Collier, 26.

trust in the ability to reason seems to have led Plato to believe idealistic reason would be more effective than the violence employed by the warrior class, despite the Athenian value placed on physical excellence in previous centuries. I argue that the personal and societal impacts of the war created this opposition between the “intellectual body,” characterized by reason, immortality, and sexuality, and the “war body,” characterized by violence, greed, and ephemerality, in Plato’s philosophy.

Societal and Personal Effects of The Peloponnesian War

Plato was born in the late fifth century BCE, shortly after the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. The war lasted until Plato would have been in his early twenties in 404 BCE. According to the traditional dates of Plato’s life, he would have spent all of his formative years living in an Athens that was in sharp decline from its position as the most powerful state in the Mediterranean (and in Athens’ view, the world). Robin Waterfield imagines that Athens would have been “sunk in gloom and the certainty of defeat.” She writes: “[Athens’] financial resources had been drained and it had been humbled by defeat. It must have been both depressing and terrifying.”⁷ In addition to Athens’ financial decline, its political dominance was also on a downward trajectory. The once great Athenian democracy started to lose the people’s support after Pericles’ death in 429 BCE. In the years that followed, demagogue rulers—those who secured leadership roles by gaining popular support, often through manipulative tactics—created distrust of and resentment toward democracy in many Athenians, including Plato.⁸

Plato was an aristocrat, a class that was already at odds with democracy because of its loss of power to this new form of government in the late sixth century BCE. No doubt adding

⁷ Robin Waterfield, *Plato of Athens: A Life in Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2023), 5.

⁸ Stella Lange, “Plato and Democracy,” *The Classical Journal* 34, no. 8 (1939): 482.

fuel to the fire, the democracy's failure to end the war prolonged the city's struggles while those in power pursued personal agendas. A return to the aristocracy could have been led by one of Plato's friends and comrades, yet when the Peloponnesian War ended in Athens' defeat, Sparta installed a new form of government that was no less problematic for the citizens of Athens and Plato himself. A group of thirty aristocratic Athenians appointed by Sparta, known as the Thirty Tyrants, established an oligarchical government that killed and exiled hundreds of their fellow citizens and was characterized by its cruelty.⁹ It should have been the remedy to the corrupt democracy of Plato's youth, yet it still fell far short of Plato's idea of a just government. Perhaps what was most disturbing for Plato was that many of the Thirty were, in fact, members of his own family.¹⁰ According to Waterfield, Plato was even invited to join them. Plato admitted to being attracted to their program of moral reform initially, but ultimately, he came to condemn the Thirty's government as well.¹¹ Luckily, they only held power for eight months before they were overthrown by the citizens of Athens, but their brutality left a lasting impact on Plato.

In addition to the long-standing political and social upheaval in which Plato spent his early years, he also suffered a personal loss at the hands of the revived democracy after the Thirty—the condemnation of his beloved teacher, Socrates. Though Plato was not present at Socrates' death, his portrayal of Socrates' final moments in the *Phaedo* captures the sadness and dismay of Socrates' followers—Plato's friends—at the loss of their teacher. As Lange suggests, "...the democracy killed Socrates. Plato could hardly be expected to forgive them that deed."¹² Plato's subsequent dedication to recording Socrates' teachings in the *Dialogues* emphasizes the

⁹ Susan Wise Bauer, *The History of the Ancient World: From the Earliest Accounts to the Fall of Rome* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 553-554.

¹⁰ Waterfield, 35.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Lange, 482.

importance of Socrates in Plato's life and the influence Socrates had on Plato's philosophy. Physical violence, a lack of political training, and what Plato likely saw as small-mindedness, led to many of the hardships Plato suffered in his young life. Considering the tumult of Plato's childhood and early adulthood at the hands of two forms of government that relied on violence to attempt—and ultimately fail—to provide stability to the people of Athens, it's hardly surprising that his most famous work, the *Republic*, outlines an idealized form of government that places citizens into positions they are naturally well-suited and educated for. Who was fit to govern, then, according to Plato? The answer is the philosophers—those who used their capacity for reason to rule the state, as opposed to those who relied on physical violence or the lure of worldly desires.

War Bodies

One of the most defining features of Ancient Greek art is its nude male sculptures. In her chapter, “The Impenetrable Body: Armour and the Male Nude in Greek Art,” Marina Haworth states, “While nudity is remarkable in ancient art outside of the Hellenistic world, it is so ubiquitous in Greek art that Andrew Stewart has called it the ‘default setting’ of male representations in Greek sculpture.”¹³ The male nude in Ancient Greek art not only represents the ideal body of Ancient Greek culture, but also emphasizes the importance of the body itself. Mireille M. Lee in *Body, Dress, and Identity in Ancient Greece* states, “The free, adult male was the ideal against which all others were measured in Greek society.”¹⁴ This ideal was opposed to animals, female bodies, slave bodies, and barbarians.¹⁵ Though not all men were born with the

¹³ Marina Haworth, “The Impenetrable Body: Armour and the Male Nude in Greek Art,” in *Fashioned Selves: Dress and Identity in Antiquity*, ed. by Megan Cifarelli (Oxbow Books, 2019), 164.

¹⁴ Mireille M. Lee, *Body, Dress, and Identity in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 41.

ideal body, Lee suggests they could work to achieve this body through diet and exercise.¹⁶ The creation of the first gymnasiums in Ancient Greece reflects this cultural value. Aristophanes (c. 450 BCE - c. 388 BCE), playwright and poet, elaborates on how the ideal body could be achieved in his play, *Clouds*. He states, "If you follow my recommendations, and keep them ever in mind, you will always have a rippling chest, radiant skin, broad shoulders, a wee tongue, a grand rump and a petite dick. But if you adopt current practices, you'll start by having a puny chest, pasty skin, narrow shoulders, a grand tongue, a wee rump and a lengthy edict."¹⁷ In his recommendations, Aristophanes places the size of one's tongue in opposition to the size of one's muscles, suggesting that a Greek man could develop his capacity for speech or his capacity for sport and battle, but not both. Aristophanes' tone clearly suggests that muscles are what one should strive for. The features of the ideal body would lead a Greek man to be good at sport and worthy of emulating in sculpture, but they culminate most purposefully in the warrior body.

Plato himself served as a warrior in the Corinthian War, which lasted from 395-386 BCE. Waterfield suggests that Plato would have likely seen action between the late 390s and early 380s, and would have served as a cavalryman, considering his wealth.¹⁸ This would have occurred after Socrates' death and around the time Plato started writing the *Dialogues*. Socrates was also a warrior in his early years, having fought in at least three battles of the Peloponnesian War. Because of this, it might be surprising that the *Dialogues* denigrate the body when the body is such an important part of being a warrior. Yet perhaps it is precisely because of their experiences on the battlefield that they are able to compare the pull of violence and wealth to the

¹⁶ Ibid, 40-41.

¹⁷ Aristophanes, "Clouds," *The Comedies of Aristophanes*, trans. by William James Hickie (London: Bohn, 1853), 1009-1019.

¹⁸ Waterfield, 73-74. Some suggest that Plato also fought in the Peloponnesian War, though Waterfield believes he would have been too young to fight and no evidence has been found of him serving during these years. See Waterfield, 3.

moderate intellect of the philosopher. Though it was the democratic leaders who made decisions about how the Peloponnesian War progressed, the warriors enacted the orders given by the government. It seems unlikely that Plato would blame the warriors for this, per se, however, warriors and their violence represent the very idea of war.

In Plato's works, the body is held in opposition to the soul and the intellect, but the body can also be understood as a representation of a set of characteristics typically found in individuals of a particular order. The war body is characterized as strong, muscular, sweaty, bloody, aggressive, clad in armor, and bearing weapons. Everything about the warrior is built for fighting and the pure physicality of the warrior cannot be separated from their identity. In Book 20 of the *Iliad*, Homer illustrates the brutality of a war scene, with Achilles, the ultimate Greek warrior, at the helm: "...so as the great Achilles rampaged on, his sharp-hoofed stallions trampled shields and corpses, axle under his chariot splashed with blood, blood on the handrails sweeping round the car, sprays of blood shooting up from the stallions' hoofs and churning, whirling rims – and the son of Peleus charioteering on to seize his glory, bloody filth splattering both strong arms, Achilles' invincible arms."¹⁹ *The Iliad* depicts countless gory deaths, with no detail spared, which Plato would have read as a child and experienced firsthand as an adult.²⁰

The warrior is the antithesis of the rational intellectual Socrates taught his students to strive to be. In lines 66c-d of the *Phaedo*, Socrates says, "Only the body and its desires cause war, civil discord, and battles, for all wars are due to the desire to acquire wealth, and it is the body and the care of it, to which we are enslaved, which compel us to acquire wealth, and all this makes us too busy to practice philosophy." In this section, Socrates—through Plato—suggests that it is the physical needs of the body that require wealth to eat, drink, and provide shelter at

¹⁹ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 20.559-569.

²⁰ Waterfield, 15-17.

the very least. However, the implication—and what we see in history—is that meeting the basic needs of the body is often not enough. Once a person's basic needs are met, needs grow larger and require the acquisition of more wealth in order to fulfill them. What Socrates also suggests in this passage is that those who are drawn to war—in this case, warriors—are not engaging in the intellectual pursuit of philosophy, implying a lack of reason. One imagines a mindless pull toward wealth without taking the time to question how much a person truly needs or what they are willing to sacrifice in order to acquire it. “When the soul and the body are together,” Socrates goes on to say, “nature orders the one to be subject and to be ruled, and the other to rule and be master. Then again, which do you think is like the divine and which like the mortal? Do you not think that the nature of the divine is to rule and to lead, whereas it is that of the mortal to be ruled and be subject?”²¹ Plato and Socrates themselves are evidence that warriors do not lack the capacity for intellect or reason, yet the brutality of war, the death of their comrades, and witnessing greed on the battlefield must have turned Plato, Socrates, or both of them away from the violent hungers of the body.

The other detriment of the war body is that it is ephemeral. While all bodies are, indeed, ephemeral, the frequency and young age at which warriors die makes this fact readily apparent. Another line from the *Phaedo* states, “And does purification not turn out to be what we mentioned in our argument some time ago, namely, to separate the soul as far as possible from the body and accustom it to gather itself and collect itself out of every part of the body and to dwell by itself as far as it can both now and in the future, freed, as it were, from the bonds of the body?”²² Platonian thought is known for its separation of the body and the soul, an idea that was previously unwritten about, and is the crux of Plato's denigration of the body. Throughout the

²¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 80a.

²² Plato, *Phaedo*, 67d.

Dialogues, Plato/Socrates suggests that while the body will die and decay, the soul will return to the Realm of Forms where it will, essentially, be immortal. Haworth argues that Greek warriors wore armor as a second, less penetrable skin, which is meant to protect them from the weakness of the human body. She harkens back to Achilles's story and how his mother dipped him in the river Styx in an attempt to make him immortal. She likens it to the quenching process in forging metal in which "iron can be made harder than bronze by rapidly cooling a hot iron object in water."²³ When this fails to protect Achilles, his mother, Thetis, turns to Hephaistos, the forger of the gods, for a shield to protect him instead. Haworth argues that by donning armor, human warriors desire to "embody the immortal skin of the heroes and gods," but that ultimately it highlights "the all too vulnerable and sensual skin, with the fatalistic knowledge that man is inescapably mortal."²⁴ Plato's answer to this is philosophy, which works to pull the soul away from the body and all its desires and weaknesses, essentially making the soul immortal, something the body cannot accomplish.

Intellectual Bodies

In opposition to the war body, the *Dialogues* seem to encourage an intellectual body. As opposed to the physical strength and aggression of the warrior body, the intellectual body diverts its energy to the mind. It is in control of its animal urges and is distanced from the senses. The philosopher's mastery and repression of the senses allows him to use the intellect as a tool to free the soul from the physical body in preparation for the afterlife. The power of the intellectual body is focused above the neck, compared to the warrior body's power below the neck. The *Phaedo* states, "Haven't we also said some time ago that when the soul makes use of the body to

²³ Haworth, 168.

²⁴ Haworth, 171-172.

investigate something, be it through hearing or seeing or some other sense—for to investigate something through the body is to do it through the senses—it is dragged by the body to the things that are never the same, and the soul itself strays and is confused and dizzy, as if it were drunk, insofar as it is in contact with that kind of thing?”²⁵ Platonic thought is distinct in its ideas about the senses. Compared to Aristotelian thought, which argues that the material realm and observing it through the five senses is necessary to understand the Forms, Platonic thought argues that Forms can be known purely through the soul with the use of the mind and reason; anything that is observed through the senses is not only inferior, but a distraction. What follows, then, is that the intellectual body is a mastered body so as not to distract the philosopher. It is cultivated to serve the soul's pursuit of immortality through disconnection from the material world.

Plato is most noted for his philosophical concept, The Theory of Forms, which suggests that for every individual existence in the material world, such as an individual chair, there is a concept of a chair in the Realm of the Forms that lends its qualities (its “chairness”) to each chair that exists in the tangible world. For Plato, these concepts, called “universals,” are as real, if not more real, than anything experienced in the material world. Universals are the most perfect, most ideal essence of each material existence, including individual humans, and it is to the Realm of the Forms that the soul returns after death. Because of this, Carol Collier states in *Recovering the Body: A Philosophical Story*, “...the Forms can be apprehended by the soul alone, but only if the soul is unfettered by the body, its senses, needs and desires.”²⁶ She goes on to say, “Knowledge is both the object of the good life and the means to achieving it. True knowledge, as we have

²⁵ Plato, *Phaedo*, 79c.

²⁶ Collier, 27.

seen, is knowledge of the Forms, and it is achieved through the soul alone.”²⁷ This pursuit of the knowledge of the Forms is the ultimate achievement in the *Dialogues*.

The idea of contemplating the Realm of the Forms may seem unusual when we think about the religion of Ancient Greece. Greek Mythology is host to a pantheon of gods whose main expectations of adherents, as evidenced in myth and ritual, are loyalty and sacrifice. Most Athenians were satisfied with this, but Waterfield tells us that Plato’s beliefs were unorthodox, even in his own time. Waterfield states, “Our souls are immortal, and the point of philosophy is to purify the soul until it is capable of achieving communion with God and breaking free of the constant cycle of reincarnations. Anyone who manages to be a philosopher in three successive incarnations will never have to be incarnated again.”²⁸ Plato’s theology speaks of a single God, which is perhaps why Christians were later able to map Neo-Platonic thought onto the Abrahamic God, despite Plato’s ambiguity about the characteristics or being of the God about whom he writes. Waterfield goes on to say, “Plato came to hold the startling view that philosophy itself had a religious purpose, assimilation to God. Most ethical thinkers would maintain that the perfectibility of a person lies in their fulfilling their human nature, not in transcending it. But Plato believed that human nature has a divine as well as a bestial aspect—that we are attracted to what is true as well as to what is pleasant—and that it is our purpose to develop the divine in us, to become godlike ourselves.”²⁹ The obstacle, of course, is the body. Socrates laments, “The body keeps us busy in a thousand ways because of its need for nurture. Moreover, if certain diseases befall it, they impede our search for the truth. It fills us with wants, desires, fears, all sorts of illusions and much nonsense, so that, as it is said, in truth and in fact

²⁷ Collier, 27.

²⁸ Waterfield, 32.

²⁹ Waterfield, 31-32.

that no thought of any kind ever comes to us from the body.”³⁰ Those who focus on the mind—namely, philosophers—are the only ones with any hope of reaching the Realm of the Forms after death, something a war body cannot hope to accomplish.

Interestingly, sex seems to be one area that is exempt from the repression of the senses in the intellectual body. Socrates was well known for indulging in his attraction to beautiful young men.³¹ In *Symposium*, a dialogue about love, he is portrayed flirting with Agathon. In Lines 175e-d, Socrates says to Agathon, “How wonderful it would be, dear Agathon, if the foolish were filled with wisdom simply by touching the wise. If only wisdom were like water, which always flows from a full cup into an empty one when we connect them with a piece of yarn—well, then I would consider it the greatest prize to have the chance to lie down next to you. I would soon be overflowing with your wonderful wisdom.” Plato is also known to have had at least one lover, Glaucon, though he never married.³² In Greek culture, it was traditional for older men to take up affairs with young boys as an act of mentorship. In exchange for the boys “gratifying” their older lovers, the men would support their education, introduce them to upper class social circles, and sometimes, help them enter politics.³³ These affairs were meant to end by the time the boy gained facial hair, and were not necessarily an indication of homosexuality. Many would go on to marry women. In *Symposium*, love and sexuality are generally portrayed in a positive light and something that could support the pursuit of philosophy, which would seem to go against the avoidance of sensual acts. In *Laws*, Plato seems to take an opposite stance. He states, “And whether one makes the observation in earnest or in jest, one certainly should not fail to observe that when male unites with female for procreation the pleasure experienced is held to

³⁰ Plato, *Phaedo*, 66c-d.

³¹ See *Symposium*, 216d.

³² Waterfield, 12-14.

³³ Waterfield, 13.

be due to nature, but contrary to nature when male mates with male or female with female, and that those first guilty of such enormities were impelled by their slavery to pleasure.”³⁴ Scholars tend to agree that this statement is not a condemnation of homosexuality, but the condemnation of the pursuit of pleasure. While Plato’s sometimes contradictory philosophy can be confusing, it is generally accepted that Plato supported sex in moderation. In some cases, sex can even be a vehicle for philosophical elevation.³⁵ Finally, one other possible window into the exception of sexuality in the intellectual body comes from Aristophanes’ recipe for the ideal body as previously mentioned, where the athletic body has a small penis and the less athletic body is presumed to have a larger penis, posing a potential correlation between higher levels of sexuality and the intellect.

In addition to philosopher, one role the intellectual body is particularly well-suited for is politics. In Plato’s mind, after witnessing the failure of the democracy, a new type of leader was required—one that was moderate and not driven by personal ambitions. The *Republic* details a form of ideal government in which people are sorted into castes based on the work for which they are best suited rather than the family they were born into. The *Republic* states, “Although all of you in the city are brothers...when the god was forming you, he mixed gold into those of you who are capable of ruling, which is why they are the most honorable; silver into the auxiliaries; and iron and bronze into the farmers and other craftsmen.”³⁶ The auxiliaries, as stated here, are the soldiers and protectors of the city, while the leaders are, naturally, the philosophers. Plato promoted the idea of what has come to be called the “philosopher king.” Socrates describes the

³⁴ Plato, “Laws,” *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vols. 10 & 11*, trans. by R.G. Bury (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 1.636c.

³⁵ Waterfield, 162-164.

³⁶ Plato, “Republic,” in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle, Fifth Edition*, trans. by G.M.A. Grube, ed. by S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016), 4.415a.

characteristics of philosophers as “good at remembering, quick to learn, high-minded, graceful, and a friend and relative of truth, justice, courage, and temperance”—all traits that emphasize the mind and intellect rather than the physical body.³⁷ In Line 484b, Socrates asks, “Since the philosophers are the ones who are able to grasp what is always the same in all respects, while those who cannot—those who wander among the many things that vary in every sort of way—are not philosophers, which of the two should be leaders of a city?” The “things that vary in every way” are the things of the material world, which attract the senses and distract the mind. Since the philosopher king would be “high-minded,” they could be trusted to avoid these distractions and provide stable leadership. Plato's castes are not meant to establish a hierarchy. He believed that each caste of society should serve each other through the talents they were given, and philosophers, he concluded, were given the best talents for leadership. “Plato knew that mentally as well as physically all men are not alike,” Lange states, “that not all men are fit to govern, and that if the unfit govern, the state is sick.”³⁸

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to elucidate some of the social and personal reasons Plato might have been influenced to take the stance that the body is inferior to the intellect or soul. Plato argues that the Forms can only be understood through the soul by way of the intellect, and that we should therefore attempt to eliminate as many of the distractions of the body as possible through philosophical training. His successor, Aristotle, would make a sharp break from this perspective, arguing that the Forms can *only* be understood with the senses, yet because Neo-Platonic thought would influence Christianity in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, it

³⁷ Plato, Republic, 5.487a.

³⁸ Lange, 486.

created a lasting influence on how we understand and interact with the body even in modern times. The Peloponnesian War created a hostile and unstable environment for Plato to grow up in, and I suggest that it is this environment that bred Plato's disdain for the senses. The democracy of his time failed to prevent or end the war because of personal ambitions of those in power, which Plato suggests in the *Phaedo*, are created by the body. The desire for wealth first stems from an attempt to meet the body's needs of hunger, thirst, and shelter, but can spiral into an insatiable greed, as in the case of fourth- and fifth- century BCE Athenian democracy.

Additionally, the war body is led by the senses into violence and greed. The war body is often portrayed as being antithetical to reason and moderation, such as in *The Iliad*. Plato serving as a warrior himself proves that warriors are capable of higher levels of thinking, though perhaps many of them choose not to engage in philosophical rhetoric. In opposition to the war body—a body driven by the senses—is the intellectual body—a body driven by the mind. Through the deprivation of the senses, the philosopher is able to use the intellect to serve the soul in pulling away from the body to consider, and even commune with, the Realm of the Forms (sometimes associated with God in Plato's works). An exception to avoiding the desires of the senses seems to be sex in moderation, which may be surprising, since abstinence from sex would become such an important focus of Christian ascetic and ecclesiastical practices.

Based on his writings in the *Republic*, I argue that Plato believed that if either those in positions of power had abstained from the pull of the senses, or that those placed in power were less inclined to the world of the senses—namely, the philosophers—that the Athenian democracy would have been able to subvert the Peloponnesian War and hold onto its status as the most powerful city-state in the Mediterranean. As this was not the case, Plato set out to define ideal personal and political standards for a society he felt would be much more effective in the future.

Unfortunately for Plato, Athens would never re-gain its status, but many Western governments have been modeled after his writings.

Culturally, ideas and practices that focus on the deprivation and mastery of the senses have evolved from Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought, especially in Western religions. They have greatly impacted Western ideas about morality, including in the ideal of moderation of food, sex, and the acquisition of material wealth. We accept many of these ideals as a given, yet it is important to understand their origin so that we can navigate differences in various cultural beliefs that do not have a Platonic influence. Moderation of the senses has a long-standing history in the West, yet there was a time before Plato when it was not an important cultural focus. Plato's motivation for developing such a theory can help us understand the historical context of the denigration of the body and the body-soul division. It also gives us the opportunity to challenge long-held ideas about the correlation between the body and immorality, allowing for the possibility of a more integrated understanding of the body-soul connection.

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