
PLATO, NIETZSCHE, AND SUBLIMATION

Sandrine Berges

Bilkent University

1. Introduction¹

In this paper I aim to refute the claim that Plato and Nietzsche are at opposite poles regarding the treatment of the non-rational elements of the soul, and argue that, instead, they share a complex and psychologically rich view of the role of reason towards the appetites and the emotions. My argument makes use of the Freudian distinction between sublimation, i.e. the re-channelling of certain undesirable appetitive and emotional forces towards more beneficial ends, and repression. I show that both Plato and Nietzsche argue in favour of sublimation and against repression of the non-rational elements of the soul.

2. Statement of the Problem

Nietzsche's moral philosophy is often seen as the antithesis of Plato's for at least the following reason: Plato's concept of psychic harmony, i.e. the state that it is best for the soul to be in, is said to involve repression of the non-rational elements of the soul (the thumos and the appetitive part) by reason. This repression, in Nietzschean terms, can be classified as a form of asceticism, and Nietzsche is seen as rejecting all forms of asceticism. I will argue in the following sections that this interpretation relies on a misunderstanding of both Plato and Nietzsche, in that it is neither true that Plato believes repression to be reason's main way of controlling the non-rational parts of the soul, nor that Nietzsche rejects all forms of rational control over one's character. In this section, however, I want to highlight these passages in which Plato and Nietzsche say things which could be misinterpreted in the way I have outlined, i.e. what lesser truths would make one believe that the interpretation as a whole is correct.

I shall start with Plato. It would be false to claim that Plato cannot, and has not been interpreted as claiming that reason should repress the appetites. Annas, in her *Companion to Plato's Republic* writes the following:

[...] reason as Plato conceives it will decide for the whole soul in a way that does not take the ends of the other parts as given but may involve suppressing or restraining them.²

The end of the rational part, according to Plato, is to decide on behalf of the whole soul what is good for it, and make sure that it pursues only those ends. In the metaphor of the soul in which the rational part is a little man, the thumos a lion, and the appetitive part a many-headed beast, Plato tells us that "all our actions and words should tend to give the man within us complete domination over the entire man, and make him take charge of the many-headed beast" (589ab). We may read this as meaning that the rational part should repress the appetitive part, and curb the thumos so that it only acts as reason would have it act. However, as I will argue in §4, this is a misreading, and all we should in fact read in Plato's proposal, is that reason should control the appetites and the thumos, but control them by means other than repression.

Nietzsche's supposed rejection of asceticism, and all forms of control over the elements of one's character, can be deduced from many passages. Here are just a few:

At bottom I abhor all those moralities which say 'do not do this! Renounce! Overcome yourself!' (GS 304).

Those who command man first of all and above all to gain control of himself thus afflict him with a particular disease; namely a constant irritability in the face of natural stirrings and inclinations – as it were, a kind of itching (GS 305).

People like St Paul have an evil eye for the passions: all they know of the passions is what is dirty, disfiguring, and heartbreaking; hence their idealistic tendencies aim at the annihilation of the passions, and they find perfect purity in the divine (GS 139).

These passages contrive to give us the following impression of Nietzsche's moral philosophy, i.e. that Nietzsche stands up for the passions, and other natural stirrings and inclinations against moralists who want to annihilate them, overcome, renounce, or control them. If we add this up to the above interpretation of Plato, then it is natural to conclude that Plato is just the kind of philosopher Nietzsche's outcry denounces – and in fact there are many passages in which Nietzsche does denounce Plato, sometimes just for this reason.³

I shall argue in §5 that this interpretation of Nietzsche as rejecting control of the non-rational parts of the soul is misleading, in that although it is true that Nietzsche rejects repression as a means of controlling those parts, he does not reject all forms of control, quite the contrary. Together with my argument in §4 that Plato does not believe the appetitive part should be repressed, this will refute the claim that Nietzsche and Plato's treatment of the non-rational parts of the soul are opposed, or indeed significantly different. First I shall need to introduce certain concepts which are useful in ascertaining the proper meaning of Plato and Nietzsche's claims regarding the control of the soul by reason.

3. Sublimation.

The preceding section highlighted the sources of the interpretations of Nietzsche and Plato's positions on the treatment of the irrational parts of the soul as opposite. Plato, it has been said, believes that we should repress these elements or else enlist some of them on the side of reason to repress the others. Nietzsche on the other hand is said to have believed that all parts of our character are of equal value, and hence that we should get rid of nothing, but on the contrary, let all our 'instincts' rule us. This is an oversimplified view, but it expresses best the common belief amongst philosophers that Plato and Nietzsche held radically different views regarding the role of reason and of the non-rational elements of the soul. I believe this view is mistaken: not just in its exaggerated form, but in any form which contains the claim that Plato and Nietzsche disagreed significantly as to whether and how we should gain rational control over the non-rational elements of our souls.

The concept we need most here is that of sublimation⁴ (*sublimieren* in German – a concept which, incidentally, was introduced by Goethe before its meaning was developed more fully by Freud). It means the redirection of the forces of impulses towards a higher object, that is, one which is beneficial, rather than harmful, to oneself, and to society. In order to understand sublimation, however, we need to spell out two more Freudian concepts: 'impulse' and 'repression'. An impulse (*trieb*: usually erroneously translated as 'instinct') is a *force*, or pressure the *goal* of which is (sexual) satisfaction of some kind or other (e.g. oral) which it attains by discharging itself on some *object*.⁵ The force is the driving aspect of the impulse, 'the amount of force or the measure of the demand for work which it represents'.

Freud was interested in two types of impulsive behaviours, repression, and sublimation. Both exist as a means of dealing with problematic impulses, i.e. impulses that we cannot live with in society, that we are ashamed of, that would be disapproved of by others, that threatens our relationships with others. Repression is the simplest of the two: to repress an impulse is to prevent it from achieving its aim, i.e. satisfaction. The impulse is driven back, shut out, rejected, in no particular direction.⁶ As Freud argued, this self-denial is far from being the most effective manner of dealing with violent unwanted impulses. If one does not look to where one pushes them, then one will not know where they are likely to come back from. They will come back, just as the heads on the multi-headed monster of the Republic keep growing back with different shapes, as pathological symptoms.

The second mechanism for dealing with troublesome impulses is sublimation. When an impulse is sublimated, it is not prevented from reaching its satisfaction, but it is made to reach via a different route from that which it would naturally follow, i.e. by settling for its satisfaction on a different object. In Freud's words:

[Sublimation] enables excessively strong excitations arising from particular sources of sexuality to find an outlet and use in other fields, so that a not inconsiderable increase in psychological efficiency results from a disposition which is itself perilous. Here we have one of the origins of artistic creativity – and, according to the completeness or incompleteness of the sublimation, a characterological analysis of a highly gifted individual...⁷

Freud saw sublimation as society's means of achieving impulsive renunciation without appealing to repression⁸. But more importantly, he saw it as the individual's means of achieving rational control over the dark forces of her unconscious mind. Sublimation is the work of the ego, the rational self, and what it achieves is 'a defusion of the instincts, and a liberation of the aggressive instincts in the superego'.⁹ Freud thought sublimation was preferable to repression because it brings about greater rational control.¹⁰

Much more could be said about Freud's work on the human soul, and in particular, on his concept of sublimation. However, I shall now leave Freud to return to Plato and Nietzsche, and show how his concepts of sublimation and repression can be used to understand these two philosophers' moral psychologies not as

opposed, but on the contrary, both arguing along similar and very plausible lines.

4. Plato and Sublimation.

Let us turn again to the metaphor of the tripartite soul as the joining of a multi-headed beast, a lion, and a little man.¹¹ I suggested in §2 that it was wrong to read Plato's claim that we should aim to achieve 'complete dominion' of reason over the soul as a claim that reason should repress the other parts. Reading the passage in its entirety can vindicate this suggestion in part simply. At 589ab Plato writes:

And on the other hand, he who says that justice is the more profitable affirms that all our actions and words should tend to give the man within us complete dominion over the entire man and make him take charge of the many-headed beast – *like a farmer who cherishes and trains the cultivated plants but checks the growth of the wild – and he will make an ally of the lion's nature, and caring for all the beasts alike will first make them friendly to one another and to himself, and so foster their growth.*¹²

This passage is not unambiguous, but what should stand out, as well as the claim that reason must dominate the soul, is the suggestion that one should care for one's appetitive part, and foster its growth. This is surely not consistent with the claim that one should repress it. However, Plato's meaning is unclear, and in order to make sense of the metaphor of the farmer, we need to look at Plato's other recommendations as to how reason should manifest its dominion. The clearest, I believe, is to be found in Plato's portrait of the reasonable man at 571e-572a:

But when, I suppose, a man's condition is healthy and sober, and he goes to sleep after arousing his rational part and entertaining it with fair words and thoughts, and attaining to clear self-consciousness, while he has neither starved nor indulged to repletion his appetitive part, so that it may be lulled to sleep and not disturb the better part by its pleasure or pain...

The reasonable man – i.e. the man whose soul is governed by the rational part, in other words, the just man – as he is portrayed in Book Nine of the *Republic*, does *not indulge nor starve* his appetitive part. This is why his sleep, unlike the tyrant's, is undisturbed by violent dreams. If reason is not in control and if the appetites are not

lulled to sleep, then the 'terrible, fierce and lawless brood of desires' which exists 'in everyone of us, even in some reputed most respectable' will reveal themselves in our sleep as 'lawless' dreams (572a-b).

This very Freudian analysis tells us the following: appetites, which are not controlled by reason, are likely to come back and disturb us in our sleep as violent dreams. But the control which reason must exert is not repression: we have to make sure that the lawless appetites are neither indulged nor starved, and what is repression but the starving of impulses, i.e. preventing them from ever being satisfied? Repression, or starvation of the appetites, Plato tells us, is as much the cause of tyrannical behaviour patterns as indulging appetites. The 'lawless pleasures and appetites' should not be repressed, but 'controlled by the laws and the better desires in alliance with reason' (571b).

That the rational control Plato proposes is not a repressive kind is one thing, but what else is it, and do we have grounds for supposing that it is a kind of sublimation? In the following I propose to show that Plato is indeed familiar with the mechanisms of sublimation, and that it would not be far fetched to propose that he does believe we should sublimate the appetites which need to be controlled.

Does Plato use the vocabulary of sublimation when he defines psychic harmony? Certainly he does in the case of the thumos. The emotions which are so unruly in children ('for they are from their very birth chock-full of rage and high spirits' 441a), are brought to 'marshal themselves on the side of reason' (440e), and this through 'the blending of music and gymnastics that will render them concordant, intensifying and fostering the one [reason] with fair words and teachings, and relaxing and sobering and making gentle the other by harmony and rhythm' (441e).

The idea that the appetites should be sublimated is present elsewhere in the *Republic* at 485d-e:

"But, again, we surely are aware that when in a man the desires incline strongly to any one thing, they are weakened for other things. It is as if the stream had been diverted into another channel. So when a man's desires have been taught to flow in the channel of learning and all that sort of thing, they will be concerned, I presume, with the pleasures of the soul in itself, and will be indifferent to those of which the body is the instrument if the man is true and not a sham philosopher."

Plato seems to accept the following: the lawless appetites should be controlled and prevented from ruling the soul, but at the same time, they should not be repressed, i.e. extinguished. Their motivational force should be redirected so that it assists the whole soul in its pursuit of the Good. More precisely, it seems that Plato is arguing that bodily impulses can be sublimated through philosophy, i.e. that sexual desires, for instance, will be replaced, to a degree at least, by desires to acquire philosophical knowledge.¹¹

We can conclude this section by answering the initial challenge as follows. It is not the case that Psychic harmony involves the repression of a whole genus of desires: Plato makes it clear that the appetites of the reasonable man must neither be starved nor over-indulged. He believes control is necessary, but preferably, a creative type of control, i.e. not one which seeks to extinguish appetitive or emotional drives, but one which sublimates them, transforms them into drives of a similar but more beneficial nature.

5. Nietzsche and Sublimation.

Having argued that Plato does not believe that unruly impulses should be repressed, but instead advocate a kind of control which we can properly refer to as sublimation in the Freudian sense of that term, we must now turn to the claim that Nietzsche rejects all kinds of control of the non-rational elements of the soul as forms of asceticism, and therefore repression. I shall argue that Nietzsche, like Plato, believes that a kind of control like sublimation is both necessary and beneficial.

There is no question that Nietzsche rejects repression as unhealthy – as indeed does Plato – nor that he claims that philosophers in general, and Plato and Socrates in particular favour a certain kind of asceticism. But it does not follow that Nietzsche does not believe some control of the desires is necessary. Although sublimation is incompatible with repression - an impulse cannot be redirected in other channels if it is repressed (a criminal cannot be rehabilitated if he is executed) - it can be seen as some kind of control, and is thus quite compatible with the pursuit of psychic harmony as described by Plato. In particular, one passage from *Daybreak* shows how close the two philosophers really are regarding the treatment of appetites, which threaten psychic health:

one already stands before the irrefutable insight that there exists no essential difference between criminals and the insane [...] One should place before him quite clearly the

possibility and the means of becoming cured (the extinction, transformation, sublimation of this [tyrannical] drive).¹⁴

That Nietzsche mentions extinction along with sublimation or transformation, does not mean that he sees repression as a good general policy any more than Plato does. Here he is talking about the tyrannical drive of the criminal. Had that drive not been allowed to become tyrannical, (and that this kind of prevention need not appeal to repression but may be achieved through sublimation) it would not need to be extinguished.

Nietzsche also believes that sublimation is the explanation for the existence of asceticism. Cruel impulses are sublimated through resentment and bad conscience and give birth to ascetic impulses. Desires to murder, arson, rape and torture are replaced by desires for self-castigation.¹⁵ Civilisation seeks to prevent the gratification of the cruel instincts (for obvious reasons), and by introducing the ideas of responsibility for one's actions and guilt, helps to turn these instincts against themselves, i.e. transform desires to hurt others into desires to hurt oneself.

A crucial concept in the Nietzsche's reflections on control of the non-rational elements of the soul has to 'self-overcoming' or 'giving style' to one's character. This is discussed at length in *Gay Science* §290 of which this is an extract:

One thing is needful: – to 'give style' to one's character – a great and rare art! It is practised by these who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until everyone of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye [...] It is the weak characters without power over themselves who *hate* the constraint of style... [and] are always out to form or interpret themselves and their environment as *free* nature – wild, arbitrary, fantastic, disorderly, astonishing. [...] For one thing is needful: that a human being should attain satisfaction with himself, whether it be by means of this or that poetry and art; only then is a human being at all tolerable to behold. Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is continually ready for revenge, and we others will be his victims, if only by having to endure his ugly sight. For the sight of what is ugly makes one bad and gloomy.¹⁶

One way of interpreting this passage is to understand it to mean that one must come to accept all of one's defects and not attempt to eliminate or control them. Something like this can be suggested by the following comment by Staten:

His stance towards himself is the antithesis of, say, St Augustine's; instead of judging, condemning, and paring away at his impulses, Nietzsche says he has simply tried to arrange them so that they might all co-exist. 'Contrary capacities' dwell in him, he says, and he has tried to 'mix nothing', to 'reconcile nothing' (EH II, 254).¹⁷

However, Staten's analysis is vague. Granted, Nietzsche does not think so-called weaknesses should be repressed. We discussed his arguments against repression of instincts earlier in this section, and argued that they were not in fact incompatible with Plato's views on rational control of the soul. Both Nietzsche and Plato, we saw, advocate some form of control of the impulses which does not involve 'paring away' at them, but insofar as possible, involves their redirection towards an object more suited to the well-being of the soul or character as a whole, i.e. some form of sublimation of the instincts. Does what Nietzsche say at GS290 contradict these arguments in any way? What he suggests we actually do with the undesirable instincts is this:

Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime. Much that is vague and resisted shaping has been saved and exploited for distant views; it is meant to beckon towards the far and immeasurable. GS290.

I will not attempt to explain what each of the transformations described in this passage actually amounts to - unfortunately, the passage is vague and metaphorical beyond interpretation. What matters here, is that Nietzsche proposes several ways of dealing with undesirable instincts, and that whatever these ways are, they certainly do not amount to leaving them untouched. Maybe Nietzsche does not pare away at his instincts (although the phrase 'the ugly that could not be removed' may suggest that he in fact does.) But he does judge them, i.e. he has to decide whether they must be concealed, or transformed, or saved up. There is no suggestion that any instinct is as good as another and that all will hold a place of honour in the character to which style has been given. To 'style' is to constrain and control, and one cannot give style to one's character and thereby render it tolerable to behold, if

one is not able to *control* one's instincts. As Nietzsche writes later on in that passage, 'it is the weak characters without power over themselves that *hate* the constraint of style'. Weakness is equated with lack of self-control, and not, as the quote from Staten may suggest, with control of one's instincts.

Nietzsche does not reject moral theories that demand that we control our desires. What he does reject is repression qua extinction. On the contrary, he seems to believe that an ideal life would involve sublimation - a form of control - of the appetites for the benefit of the pursuit of one's ideal. It follows from these conclusions that there is in fact no significant difference between Nietzsche's and Plato's moral psychology regarding the control of the appetites: neither is in favour of repression, both advocate a certain creative **control** involving sublimation.

6. Conclusion.

In this paper I have argued the following: Far from defending opposite theories about how we should control the non-rational elements of the soul, Plato and Nietzsche in fact hold very similar views. Their views can be explained by referring to certain Freudian concepts: sublimation and repression. According to Freud, impulses lend themselves to more than one kind of control. They can either be repressed, i.e. prevented from attaining satisfaction, or sublimated, i.e. their force can be redirected towards a more beneficial object. The first kind of control is rejected by both Plato and Nietzsche (at least as a general policy) as ineffective and unhealthy. Plato sees repression as one of the paths to tyrannical behaviour patterns (those impulses, which are repressed come back at night as violent dreams). Nietzsche views it as one of the worst manifestations of asceticism, one which prevents the 'one thing needful', giving style, i.e. the integration of all of one's character traits, and makes us 'continually ready for revenge ... bad and gloomy'.

The second means of controlling impulses, sublimation, is one which we found to hold an important place in both Plato's and Nietzsche's moral psychologies. Both believe that potentially harmful instincts can be redirected towards higher goals, and contribute to the perfection of the character. We saw that Plato used the vocabulary of sublimation in the *Republic*, where he talks of the appetitive impulses being redirected towards a love of learning. Nietzsche, we saw, actually uses the term sublimation when he

describes the kind of control one must impose on one's character in order to give style to it.

When two philosophers who are amongst the more concerned with the question how we should live turn out to hold very similar moral psychologies, then the concepts they use are probably concepts which should hold an important place in any moral psychology. That these concepts are Freudian is certainly no objection. Freud himself was deeply concerned with the problem of how best we could live our lives, and how we could deal with the dark forces of our unconscious. These forces are recognised by Plato (even the most respectable of us, he says are subject to them) and certainly also by Nietzsche. Should not a central concern of moral philosophy be how best to deal with them, how best to control them rationally? If so, then it certainly seems that we need a moral psychology which explains what role these dark impulses play in the human soul, and how reason might control them. This, I have argued, is exactly what Plato and Nietzsche attempt to do.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Moral Philosophy seminar at the University of St Andrews, UK. I would like to thank the audience on that occasion and the audience at the Third SASGPH Conference.
2. Julia Annas, p.134.
3. See, for example *Twilight of the Idols*, (The Problem of The Portable Nietzsche, §§4, 6 and 10; *Ecce Homo* (The Birth of Tragedy, §1).
4. The main source for what follows is Freud (1915) "Instincts and their Vicissitudes" selected by Anna Freud and translated by James Strachey in *The Essentials of Psychoanalysis*. In that collection see also (1905) "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" and (1923) "The Ego and the Id"
5. Freud also says the instinct has a source (Quelle) which is its somatic origin, i.e. some chemical or other stimuli. This is not especially relevant here.
6. Bruno Bettelheim mentions that because it implies no direction, 'Verdrangung' should be better translated as 'repulsion'.
7. Three Essays on Sexuality, Summary. p.371.
8. Richard Wollheim, p.222. Freud believed that religion and morality and a 'social sense' were originated in the sublimation of the Oedipus complex, mastering of which involves the creation of the superego, which imposes moral restraint (*The Ego and the Id III*, p.460).
9. The Ego and the Id, V, p.477.
10. Bettelheim commented on this:
All of Freud's work to uncover the unconscious was intended to give us some degree of rational control over it, so that when acting in line with its pressures was not appropriate, the releasing of these pressures could be postponed or neutralised – most desirable of all – the powers of the unconscious could be redirected through sublimation to serve higher and better purposes.¹
11. All the texts quoted are from Edith Hamilton, Huntington Cairns.
12. My italics.

13 This idea is also present in the *Symposium*, where Plato has Diotima describing a process of sublimation whereby the sexual desires are redirected towards love of the Beautiful itself, a form of intellectual knowledge.

"Well then, she went on, those whose procreancy is of the body turn to woman as the object of their love, and raise a family, in the blessed hope that by doing so they will keep their memory green, 'through time and through eternity'. But those whose procreancy is of the spirit rather than the flesh - and they are not unknown, Socrates - conceive and bear the things of the spirit. And what are they? you ask. Wisdom and all her sister virtues; it is the office of every poet to beget them, and of every artist whom we may call creative."208e-209a.

14. *Daybreak*, Book III, §202.

15. See *Genealogy of Morals*, I, and Maudemarie Clark, ch 6.

16. *The Gay Science*.

17. *Staten* p.22.

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