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AKRASIA AND SELF-RULE IN PLATO'S *LAWS*

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IN book I of Plato's *Laws* the unnamed Athenian Visitor, seeking to shed some light on the notion of being 'stronger or weaker than oneself', offers an image: we are all like puppets crafted by the gods, he suggests, pulled in opposite directions by the 'cords' within us. We are pulled towards vice by 'iron' cords associated with feelings of pleasure and pain, and we are pulled towards virtue by a 'golden' cord associated with reasoning and law (644 D–645 B). The standard interpretation of this passage takes it to be an explanation of what goes on inside an agent in a case of akratic action—that is, roughly, a case in which the agent performs some action while believing, and despite believing, that it would be best for her not to perform it. *If* the person's iron cords prevail, this interpretation has it, then the person ends up performing an akratic action. The standard view, then, is that in the puppet passage, and in the dialogue as a whole, Plato accepts that agents can and sometimes do act akratically.¹ In-

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¹ The standard interpretation is worked out in most detail by C. Bobonich in 'Akrasia and Agency in Plato's *Laws* and *Republic*' ['Akrasia'], *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 76 (1994), 3–36 at 17–23, and in *Plato's Utopia Recast: His Later Ethics and Politics [Utopia]* (Oxford, 2002), 260–82; and by R. F. Stalley in *An Introduction to Plato's Laws [Introduction]* (Indianapolis, 1983), 50–62. Bobonich argues that the puppet passage reflects a shift in Plato's views on *akrasia*, and on moral psychology in general, and he holds that that shift parallels and underlies changes in Plato's ethical and political views that Bobonich finds in the *Laws*. Stalley, on the other hand, emphasizes a contrast between the *Laws*' acceptance of *akrasia* and the *Protagoras*' denial of it. The reason for the change, he argues, is that in the *Protagoras* it is assumed that any akratic action would be voluntary. Plato accepts the possibility of *akrasia* in the *Laws*, Stalley claims, but only because Plato now believes that when a person acts akratically, she does so *involuntarily*. The standard interpretation of the puppet passage is also advocated, implied, or presupposed in G. R. Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City [Cretan]* (Princeton, 1960), 556–7; L. P. Gerson, 'Akrasia and the Divided Soul in Plato's *Laws*' ['Divided'], in L. Brisson and S. Scolnicov (eds.), *Plato's Laws: From Theory into Practice [Theory]* (Proceedings of the VI Symposium

deed, there is such consensus on this point that as recently as 2003 one commentator was able to write, ‘It is universally agreed that *Laws* acknowledges the phenomenon of *akrasia*.’²

I would like to challenge this consensus. I will argue that the puppet passage does not offer an account of *akrasia* in the sense specified above (I will use the term ‘*akrasia*’ in this paper to refer to akratic action of that kind), but rather illustrates a much broader notion of self-rule (or lack of self-rule) as a state or condition of the soul. Indeed, I will argue that Plato *never* addresses the topic of akratic action in the *Laws* and that nothing he says commits him to acknowledging its possibility. Let me be clear that I am *not* claiming that Plato never talks about, or acknowledges the possibility of, something that he calls *akrateia* in the *Laws*. Indeed, he has much to say in the dialogue about being ‘stronger’ or ‘weaker’ than oneself, and he sometimes uses variations of *enkrateia* to refer to the former and *akrateia* to refer to the latter. My claim is that these locutions neither refer to, nor entail the possibility of, akratic action.³ The reason it is important to understand what they *do* refer

Platonicum; Sankt Augustin, 2003), 149–54; D. Frede, ‘Puppets on Strings: Moral Psychology in *Laws* Books I and II’ [‘Puppets’], in C. Bobonich (ed.), *Plato’s Laws: A Critical Guide [Guide]* (Cambridge, 2010), 108–26 at 116–20; R. Kamtekar, ‘Psychology and the Inculcation of Virtue in Plato’s *Laws*’ [‘Psychology’], *ibid.* 127–48 at 142 n. 15; M. M. Sassi, ‘The Self, the Soul, and the Individual in the City of the *Laws*’ [‘Self’], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 35 (2008), 125–48; I. M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato’s Doctrines*, i (New York, 1962), 275–7; and P. Friedländer, *Plato*, iii, trans. H. Meyerhoff (London, 1969), 402. Others who accept the possibility of *akrasia* in the *Laws* include H. Görgemanns, *Beiträge zur Interpretation von Platons Nomoi [Beiträge]* (Munich, 1960), 155–61; H. Tarrant, ‘Development, Non-Philosophers, and *Laws*’ [‘Development’], *Polis*, 21 (2004), 147–59 at 157; J. C. B. Gosling, *Plato* (London, 1973), 93; *id.*, *Weakness of the Will* (London, 1990), 23; and M. M. Mackenzie, *Plato on Punishment [Punishment]* (Berkeley, 1981), 174. Görgemanns provides an especially thorough defence of the claim that the *Laws* accepts the possibility of akratic action, and his position is emphatic: ‘In den *Nomoi* wird nun ganz klar ausgesprochen, daß die Affekte direct auf das Handeln einwirken können, während das richtige Wissen unvermindert weiterbesteht’ (*Beiträge*, 159).

² Gerson, ‘Divided’, 149.

³ The Athenian and his interlocutors indiscriminately employ a variety of terms throughout the dialogue to refer to ruling or failing to rule oneself. These include variations of: being stronger or weaker than oneself (*κρείττων/ἥττων αὐτοῦ*, 627 E 7; cf. 645 B 1); being victorious over oneself (*τὸ νικᾶν αὐτὸν αὐτόν*, 621 E 1); being defeated by oneself (*τὸ ἡττᾶσθαι αὐτὸν ὑφ’ ἑαυτοῦ*, 626 E 2); and being *ἐγκρατής* or *ἀκρατής* (see 636 C 6; 645 E 8; 710 A 7–8; 793 A 2; 886 A 9–B 1; 908 C 2–3; and 934 A 4–5). They also equate failing to rule oneself with failing to rule non-rational feelings and impulses such as pleasure or pain, and hence they also use expressions such as *ἡττων τῶν ἡδονῶν* (633 E 2; cf. 635 D 1; 633 E 1; 869 E 7–8; and 863 D 6–8). That no termi-

to is that these concepts prominently appear in several key discussions throughout the *Laws* and play a critical role in shaping the educational, political, and legal policies that are advocated in the text. The puppet passage provides the moral psychological picture that informs the rest of the dialogue, and therefore a proper understanding of the notions of psychic strength and weakness that it is intended to elucidate is crucial to our interpretation of the text as a whole. It is doubly important given that the puppet passage (on account of the widely accepted late dating of the *Laws*) is looked to as one of Plato's *last* expressions of his views on moral psychology. Misconstruing it, then, threatens not only our understanding of the *Laws* itself, but also our understanding of the development of Plato's thought.

In Section 1 I will look at the puppet passage itself more closely and will examine some implications of the standard interpretation of it. In Section 2 I will offer my own, new interpretation of the passage. One of the noteworthy advantages of my interpretation will be that it makes better sense than does any previous interpretation of two of the most striking features of the puppet metaphor: that the golden cord associated with reasoning is described as being 'gentle' and in need of assistance, and that *we* are described as being able to assist it in some way by 'pulling along' with it (645 A 5–6). In Section 3 I will point to several important passages in the *Laws* that support my interpretation. As we will see, the notion of self-rule and lack of self-rule that my reading of the puppet passage generates proves to be the one with which Plato is concerned in key passages throughout the text. Finally, in Section 4 I will briefly consider passages in the *Laws* that are commonly cited as acknowledgements of the possibility of akratic action, and I will show why they should not be interpreted that way.

nological distinctions are intended among the various expressions used to refer to self-rule and lack of it is clear in several places in which the term used to denote the positive condition is paired with a variant term to denote the negative condition. For example, at 840 c 5–6 the Athenian states that if children learn to be *ἐγκρατεῖς* with respect to pleasures, then they will live happily, but if they are *ἡττώμενοι* by pleasures, then they will live unhappily. That being defeated by a state such as pleasure is considered a case of being weaker than oneself is clearest at 633 E 4–5: *λέγομεν τὸν ὑπὸ τῶν ἡδονῶν κρατούμενον τοῦτον τὸν ἐπονείδιστος ἦττονα ἑαυτοῦ*.

1. *Laws* 644 D–645 B: the standard interpretation

Let us now look more closely at the passage in question. As mentioned above, the Athenian introduces the image of the puppet in an attempt to illustrate what it means to be ‘stronger’ or ‘weaker’ than oneself, or, as he also puts it, to rule (*ἀρχεῖν*) oneself or fail to rule oneself (644 B 6–7). The context is a discussion between the Athenian and his interlocutors—Clinias from Crete and Megillus from Sparta—about the virtues of courage and moderation, which they associate with the ability to rule oneself in the face of pleasures and pains.⁴ They agree that the good are able to exercise self-rule while the bad are not, and the Athenian wants to get clearer on what this claim amounts to.⁵ He says:

Let’s think about these things in this way: let’s consider each of us living beings to be a divine puppet, put together either for their play or for some serious purpose—which, we don’t know. What we do know is that these affections [*πάθη*] work within us like tendons or cords, drawing us and pulling against one another in opposite directions towards opposing deeds, struggling in the region where virtue and vice lie separated from one another. Now the argument asserts that each person should always follow one of the cords, never letting go of it and pulling with it against the others; this cord is the golden and sacred pull of reasoning [*λογισμός*], and is called the common law of the city; the other cords are hard and iron, while this one is soft, since it is golden; the others resemble a multitude of different forms. It is always necessary to assist this most noble pull of law, because reasoning,

⁴ As Frede points out (‘Puppets’, 114–15), the Athenian is hesitant, at this early point in the dialogue, to state explicitly that moderation is endurance against pleasures, because he is trying to make his educational proposals convincing to his interlocutors, whose Spartan and Cretan practices and institutions emphasize only the promotion of courage through endurance of pains and fears. If he had treated the endurance of pleasures as the task of moderation alone, therefore, he would have risked losing their interest in practices such as supervised wine-drinking that aim at the endurance of pleasures. Instead, his approach is to suggest that complete courage must be able to guard against pleasure, too (634 A–B), and he introduces the need for moderation (635 E) separately without specifying what it does. Later, the identification of moderation with mastery over pleasures becomes clearer (647 D; 710 A–B).

⁵ The topic of being stronger or weaker than oneself is taken up almost immediately in the *Laws*, when Clinias claims that every city is in a sense an enemy to itself and every individual an enemy to himself. To be defeated by oneself, he says, is the most shameful defeat, and to be victorious is the best of victories (626 D–E). The first book of the *Laws* is primarily concerned with getting clear on the meaning and implications of these claims, which Plato reworks for his own ethical purposes.

while noble, is gentle rather than violent, and its pull is in need of helpers if the golden kind in us is to be victorious over the others. (644 D 7–645 B 1)⁶

The key elements in this picture are the iron cords and the golden cord. Surrounding remarks by the Athenian indicate that the iron cords are associated with emotions and feelings of pleasure and pain, including anger, erotic passion, boldness, and fear. In other words, the iron cords represent the *non-rational* impulses and desires to which agents are subject. That much is clear and is generally agreed upon, so I will take it as given.⁷ Regarding the golden cord, however, there are difficulties. We are told that the golden cord pulls us towards virtue, that it is 'noble' and 'sacred', and that it is associated with reasoning and law. We are also told that, whereas the iron cords are 'hard', the golden cord is 'gentle' and consequently *always* needs assistance. Moreover, it is *our* responsibility to assist it by 'pulling along with it' against the iron cords. This description raises several questions. (1) What precisely does the golden cord represent? (2) Why is it 'gentle' and in need of assistance—that is, why is it unable to pull us towards virtue all by itself? And (3) what does it mean for us to 'assist' it, and who exactly is the 'us' that does the assisting?

Because the standard interpretation takes the puppet passage to be an explanation of akratic action, it takes the psychic situation described in the passage to be one of akratic *conflict*: the agent non-rationally desires to perform some specific action X but rationally judges that it is best *not* to perform action X (or: the agent is non-rationally averse to action X but rationally judges that it is best to perform X). Such an agent, in other words, has come to recognize and believe that action X should be avoided and rationally desires to avoid it, but she non-rationally desires to do it anyway. The iron cords, on this picture, pull the agent towards X, and the golden cord pulls the agent away from X. If the golden cord prevails, then the person acts enkratically and is 'stronger' than herself; if the iron cords prevail, then she acts akratically and is 'weaker' than herself.

⁶ Translations of the *Laws* are from T. L. Pangle, *The Laws of Plato* (Chicago, 1980), with modifications. In this passage the Athenian refers to the cords collectively as *νεῦρα* and *σμήρνωθαι*, and he calls the golden cord an *ἀγωγὴ*. Pangle translates the latter as 'pull', which may be preferable to the more common 'cord'. I will follow custom in using the term 'golden cord', however. In support of Pangle's rendering see E. B. England, *The Laws of Plato [Laws]*, 2 vols. (New York, 1976), i. 256–7.

⁷ See Görgemanns, *Beiträge*, 160; Stalley, *Introduction*, 60–2; Bobonich, 'Akrasia', 19, and *Utopia*, 263; and Sassi, 'Self', 131.

This interpretation has important implications for answering all three of the questions raised above. First, it offers a direct response to question (1): if the passage depicts akratic conflict, then the golden cord must represent the individual's all-things-considered judgements about the value of specific actions and the rational desires that correspond to those judgements.⁸ Regarding question (3), the standard interpretation suggests an innovation in Plato's moral psychological theory. If the image is an illustration of akratic conflict—that is, a case in which both our non-rational desire to do X and our rational desire to abstain from X are already in place and 'struggling' against each other—then our 'assistance' of the golden cord must be something distinct from our desires, and the 'we' that does the assisting must be something over and above those desires. This is, indeed, the view advocated by Christopher Bobonich, one of the most prominent proponents of the standard interpretation.⁹ Bobonich makes several suggestions about what 'assisting' reason—which I will follow him in calling 'psychic intervention'—might amount to: a process of reasoning that somehow results in an increase in the strength of one's rational desire; an additional psychic state such as decision or intention; or some sort of psychic activity that is caused by or expresses the self-motion of the soul.¹⁰ While he does not think the text decides among this range of options, it is important to note that *all* of them suggest something new in Plato's moral psychological picture: they all posit something extra that we can do to make ourselves act *after* all of our desires are in place, and they all suggest that the 'we' who does it is something over and above our desires and judgements.¹¹ That something extra was not in the picture in the tripartite moral psychology of the *Republic*, so

⁸ This is explicit in Bobonich ('Akrasia', 19), who says that the golden cord must pick out instances of calculation, and that it represents an all-things-considered judgement about what is best for the agent. Cf. Bobonich, *Utopia*, 263–6.

⁹ To be clear, in this context I am identifying the standard interpretation merely with the assumption that the puppet passage is designed to explain akratic action. I do not think that Bobonich's views or his interpretation of the puppet passage *in its details* are representative of all those who hold this assumption, but I do think that he, better than any other commentator, works out what the consequences of that assumption are for interpreting the passage.

¹⁰ See Bobonich, *Utopia*, 273–82; cf. id., 'Akrasia', 21–2.

¹¹ Stalley agrees that the puppet's ability to intervene represents an innovation and that the puppet's choosing self is distinct from both reason and from the passions. He also acknowledges that this is problematic: 'It is difficult to see how this model could be worked out coherently' (*Introduction*, 61).

at least on the surface, this reading strongly suggests a change in Plato's thinking about the embodied human soul.¹²

Finally, let us consider question (2). Here the standard interpretation has two striking and potentially problematic implications that I do not think have been adequately addressed by its proponents. First, if the golden cord represents our rational desires to perform or abstain from specific actions, and if the golden cord is too gentle to pull us on its own without our help (it *always* needs our assistance, we are told), then the clear implication is that our rational desires are not motivationally efficacious in the absence of the additional support provided through psychic intervention (whatever that turns out to be). Reason, all by itself, is simply not forceful enough to make us act contrary to our non-rational motivations. Plato does not express such a view in any other dialogue, so if he expresses it here, we would need to explain why he does so.

Second, the puppet passage makes it clear not only that the golden cord always needs our assistance, but also that we always *should* assist it. If we take it for granted, as Plato certainly did, that our rational judgements about the value of specific actions are not infallible, then the standard interpretation of the puppet passage naturally yields a Good Conscience reading of the *Laws*, according to which a person's actions are right just as long as they are in accordance with what the person believes to be best, *whether or not she is mistaken about what is best*.¹³ While Good Conscience interpre-

¹² The issue of whether Plato abandons the theory of tripartition in the *Laws* is highly contentious. Rees claims that although tripartition may be compatible with the *Laws*, the text more naturally suggests *bipartition* (D. A. Rees, 'Bipartition of the Soul in the Early Academy', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 77 (1957), 112–18 at 115–17). Bobonich argues, on the basis of the puppet passage, that Plato rejects the *Republic's* tripartite theory of the soul in the *Laws* in favour of a unitary conception of the soul (*Utopia*, 260–7). Frede agrees that 'apart from their triadic structure the "cords" have little in common with the *Republic's* tripartite soul or with the *Phaedrus's* winged steeds and its charioteer' ('Puppets', 118). Stalley (R. F. Stalley, 'Justice in Plato's *Laws*', in Brisson and Scolnicov (eds.), *Theory*, 174–85 at 178), Kamtekar ('Psychology', 141–2), and Kahn (C. Kahn, 'From *Republic* to *Laws*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 26 (2004), 337–62 at 361–2) argue that tripartition is compatible with the puppet passage and the psychology of the *Laws*, even if it is not explicitly advocated in the text. Mackenzie (*Punishment*, 175) and Saunders (T. J. Saunders, 'The Structure of the Soul and the State in Plato's *Laws*', *Eranos*, 60 (1962), 37–55) both argue that tripartition is still present in the *Laws*.

¹³ Bobonich accepts this consequence of his interpretation: 'This does not entail that such an intervention cannot be in some way mistaken, since the person might pull along with the golden cord although it embodies a mistaken judgment while still acting on behalf of his judgment of what is overall best' (*Utopia*, 274–5).

tations of the text have enjoyed some popularity in the past, problems with them are by now well documented.¹⁴ At any rate, once again, Plato does not advocate a Good Conscience view of ethics elsewhere, so attributing the view to him here would demand an explanation of the shift in his views.

The standard interpretation has implications that raise problematic issues and suggest radical changes in Plato's philosophy. The interpretation that I will offer avoids those issues and does not require positing radical changes.

2. A new interpretation

The crucial differences between my interpretation and the standard interpretation concern the status of the golden cord and the nature of psychic intervention. Let us begin with the golden cord. The standard view is that the golden cord represents rational desires to perform specific actions, whether or not those desires are misguided. My interpretation diverges in two ways. First, the golden cord does not include desires that are misguided or incorrect (a

¹⁴ The Good Conscience view has been adopted by Ritter (C. Ritter, *Platons Gesetze: Kommentar zum griechischen Text* (Leipzig, 1896), 282–3); Grote (G. Grote, *Plato*, iii (London, 1867), 395–9); England (*Laws*, ii. 402–3); and Adkins (A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford, 1960), 304–11). For arguments against the view see especially M. O'Brien, 'Plato and the "Good Conscience": *Laws* 863 E 5–864 B 7', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 88 (1957), 81–7; id., *The Socratic Paradoxes and the Greek Mind* (Chapel Hill, 1967), 191 n. 15; T. J. Saunders, 'The Socratic Paradoxes in Plato's *Laws*' ['Socratic'], *Hermes*, 96 (1968), 421–34 at 428–9; and Stalley, *Introduction*, 158. The primary motivation for the Good Conscience interpretation comes from *Laws* 863 E 5–864 A 8, where the Athenian states that when the opinion about the best (ἡ τοῦ ἀρίστου δόξα) rules in a person's soul, then *even if it is in some way mistaken* (κἂν σφάλληται τι), what the person does on account of that opinion is just. The Good Conscience reading takes ἡ τοῦ ἀρίστου δόξα to mean 'the person's belief about what is good' and κἂν σφάλληται τι to mean 'even if that belief is mistaken'. The alternative way of reading the passage is to take ἡ τοῦ ἀρίστου δόξα to mean 'correct opinion about what is good' and κἂν σφάλληται τι to indicate error of a kind that does not impugn the basic moral rightness of the opinion (e.g. a practical error about the means of carrying out one's judgement). This reading fits well with the interpretation of the puppet passage that I will advocate below. The main problems with the Good Conscience interpretation of the *Laws* are well expressed by Stalley: (1) it does not square with the dialogue's intolerance of dissent; and (2) it does not square with the Athenian's treatment of the 'just atheist' in book 10, who clearly does what he believes to be best (and does not believe it to be best simply under the influence of vicious non-rational impulses, since he has a naturally just character) but is sentenced to five years in prison for his behaviour and faces the death penalty if reform is unsuccessful (*Introduction*, 58).

point to which I will return shortly). And second, the golden cord represents, not our rational desires to perform *specific* actions, but rather the basic rational motivation that Plato thinks we all, as human beings, have to pursue what is good for us and our associated rational desires to live in accordance with correct laws and principles that we rationally accept as promoting our good. The idea is that part of what it is to be a rational creature, for Plato, is to seek one's own good and happiness.¹⁵ Pursuing our good, moreover, involves reasoning about what sorts of lifestyles, actions, and behaviour are good and why, and when we arrive at conclusions about which sorts are good, those conclusions take the form of more or less general principles: one ought always to act courageously, it is shameful to get one's way through violence rather than persuasion, it is bad to hoard money, and so on. In accepting that those ways of life are good and conducive to our happiness, we become motivated to pursue them. Note here that the word *agōgē* (in 'the golden and sacred *agōgē* of reasoning', 645 A 1) can mean both 'pull' or 'training or regimen'. My interpretation brings to the fore this double sense: the golden cord is not just a *pulling*, and it is not just a pulling towards some specific action; it is a pulling towards a *structured way of life*.¹⁶

The reason the golden cord is described as the pull of reasoning *and law* has to do with the important psychological role that Plato seeks to cast for law in the text: the laws of a city are supposed to embody correct reasoning about what is good for its citizens and to guide each citizen in her reasoning about her own good.¹⁷ Once

¹⁵ See *Laws* 726 A ff., and cf. *Rep.* 505 D–E; *Meno* 78 A–B; and *Gorg.* 467 D–468 C.

¹⁶ Plato exploits this double sense of *ἀγωγή* throughout the *Laws* (see 659 D 2, 673 A 9, and 819 A 5, and cf. the use of *παιδαγωγῆντρος* at 641 B 1 and 641 B 3 and *παιδαγωγῆθεισαν* at 752 C 8). Morrow (*Cretan*, 301 n. 14) notes the twofold meaning of *ἀγωγή* in the text and draws a connection between its use in the *Laws* and its traditional use as a designation for the Spartan discipline (e.g. Plut. *Ages.* 1: τὴν λεγομένην ἀγωγήν ἐν Λακεδαιμόνι).

¹⁷ Law, the Athenian says, is reasoning about better and worse that has become the 'common conviction' of the city (644 D 1–3). The preludes to the laws, which offer the citizens some (albeit by no means complete) rational grounds for the principles embodied in the laws, are designed to enhance the effectiveness of the laws by making them more (rationally) acceptable to the citizens. This much is clear, despite controversy about *how* precisely the preludes are supposed to accomplish this psychologically. For discussion of the role of the preludes see especially A. Laks, 'The *Laws*', in C. Rowe and M. Schofield (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2000), 258–302 at 285–90; Bobonich, *Utopia*, 97–123; Stalley, *Introduction*, 42–4; and J. Annas, 'Virtue and Law in Plato', in Bobonich (ed.), *Guide*, 71–91.

an individual accepts a given law as promoting her happiness, she will be motivated to live in accordance with that law precisely *because* she takes it to promote her happiness. The golden cord, then, represents the collective pull of all the correct laws and principles (I will henceforth refer to all of these as ‘laws’) that a person accepts in her pursuit of what is good for her. Or, in other words, the golden cord’s constant tug is the individual’s desire to achieve her own good and her consequent desire to adhere to the correct laws that she believes optimally promote that good.

It is important to note that, on my view, the golden cord represents the pull only of *correct* rational desires that the agent has. If it did not, then we would once again be left with a Good Conscience interpretation of the passage. On such an interpretation, if an individual came to rationally believe that she ought to act unjustly whenever she could get away with it—a false moral belief, on Plato’s view—then according to the passage, it would be *right* for her to follow that belief, and following it would lead towards virtue. But it is clear that living and acting in accordance with that belief would *not* lead to virtue, on Plato’s view.¹⁸ Thus, on my interpretation, while the individual would no doubt be rationally motivated to act in accordance with her false belief (just as she would be if it were a true belief), her motivation to do so would not belong to the pull of the golden cord. When Plato refers to the ‘most noble pull of law’ in our passage, then, he means *correct* law (645 A 4–5).¹⁹

¹⁸ A further reason for insisting on the *correctness* of the rational desires that constitute the pull of the golden cord is that this interpretation is supported by later passages that allude to the puppet metaphor. At 659 D 1–4, for example, education is called ‘the drawing and pulling of children towards the argument that is said to be correct by the law and is also believed . . . to be really correct by those who are most decent and oldest’, and at 689 A 7–9 the Athenian defines ‘the greatest ignorance’ as ‘dissonance between pleasure and pain on the one hand, and the opinion that is in accordance with reason on the other’. Both passages emphasize the correctness of the opinions or reasoning that evidently correspond to the golden cord.

¹⁹ It should be noted here that, on Plato’s view, most people rationally accept at least some, or perhaps even many, laws, customs, and principles that are *correct*. Therefore, even those who are not raised in ideal cities such as Magnesia will still feel the ‘noble pull of law’. Of course, that does *not* mean that most people understand the realm of moral value or how to live and act in a way that coheres with their principles, but it does mean that people tend to hold some important, correct beliefs about right conduct. Whether that tendency is due to the god-given nature of law itself (even law in imperfect regimes such as Crete and Sparta; see *Laws* 624 A) or to the rationality inherent in us all is a further question, of course. Presumably these beliefs include not only very general beliefs, such as that courage is a good thing, but also more relatively specific ones. Consider, for example, *Laws* 838 A–E, where

My interpretation provides an appealing explanation of the fact that the golden cord cannot pull us towards action all by itself, but requires our intervention on its behalf. The reason is that our motivations to pursue our own good and to follow correct laws are not (or not yet) motivations to perform specific actions. Our desire for our own good cannot make us act in any specific way unless we have come to believe, on the basis of deliberation, that some specific action is the best one for us to perform. Our desire to adhere to a given set of laws can provide further guidance, but even that cannot make us act in any specific way unless we have come to believe, on the basis of reasoning and deliberation, that those laws apply to a specific action. Plato himself acknowledges this limitation of law: it sees and looks to most things, the Athenian says, but is incapable of seeing *everything* (875 D 3–5). Or, as Aristotle succinctly puts it, ‘written law is necessarily about the general, but actions are about the particular’ (*Pol.* 1269^a11–12). The reason the pull of the golden cord is ‘gentle’, then, is simply that although we all want what is good for us and feel the constant tug of that fundamental rational desire, that desire itself—or even the desire to follow certain laws—is not sufficient for making us act virtuously on any given occasion (*especially* if our non-rational desires are pulling us towards vice).

The golden cord needs our assistance, then, and our assistance or intervention consists in deliberating about the value of specific actions and arriving at conclusions about those actions that are entailed by the correct laws that we accept. If we correctly reason that a specific action X is the best one to perform right now, then we will have a rational desire to act in that specific way. Concerning psychic intervention, then, the key difference between my interpretation and the standard one is that on my interpretation, intervention is a process of deliberation that culminates in an individual’s rational desire to perform (or abstain from) a specific action. On the standard reading, on the other hand, that rational

the Athenian notes the unanimity with which people condemn incest, or *Republic* 603 E–604 C, where any ‘decent’ man is said to know that one should not express one’s grief publicly. It is, to be sure, a consequence of this account that if someone accepted *no* rational principles that were correct, then it would not be appropriate to describe him as subject to the pull of law, and his ‘golden cord’, which would presumably be quite weak indeed, would represent only the debilitated pull of his desire for the Good. Plato does not seem to think such individuals exist very often. The tyrant of *Republic* 9 would presumably be one example, however. And, indeed, Plato characterizes him as ‘lawless’ (575 A 2).

desire to perform (or abstain from) a specific action is the golden cord *itself*, already in place, and psychic intervention is something mysteriously *extra* that supplements that desire with an additional motivational force. On my reading, there is nothing mysterious about the force or pull provided through psychic intervention: it is simply the force provided by a new desire—namely, the rational desire to perform a particular action. If we do *not* assist the golden cord, then it cannot on its own make us perform any given action X. And if the iron cords happen to be pulling us away from X, then in the absence of our intervention, refraining from X is what we will do.²⁰

As an example, let us consider the Athenian's law that one must not shamefully abandon one's weapons of war (944 E 5–6). If an individual rationally accepted this law, then that law would partly constitute the pull of the golden cord on him. If he were in a situation in which, say, non-rational fear made him desire to throw down his weapons and retreat, then his affections would be pulling him in opposite directions: his rational desire to obey the law would pull him in one direction (towards *not* abandoning his weapons shamefully), his fear in the other (towards abandoning his weapons *now*). However, the fact that he is rationally motivated to resist shamefully abandoning his weapons does not necessarily mean that he will recognize that abandoning his weapons *in this instance* would be a case of abandoning them *shamefully*. He may antecedently have mistaken ideas about what is shameful that lead him to the wrong conclusion, or his fear might interfere with his reasoning, compromise his judgement, or make him act without thinking at all. Indeed, in his criticism of excessive naval power, Plato acknowledges that reasoning about this law in particular can go astray. The

²⁰ On my interpretation, nothing precludes the possibility that someone might 'pull along' with one of the iron cords. This would happen if the person came to judge, on the basis of deliberation, that the vicious action towards which her iron cords were pulling her was, in fact, the best one to perform. She would then have a rational desire to perform the action, and hence the additional force provided through psychic intervention would be *contrary* to the pull of the golden cord. Bobonich disagrees with this analysis: 'In terms of the image, could the person ever pull along with one of the iron cords? Nothing in Plato's language suggests such a possibility. With regard to the iron cords, the person is seen only as passive' (*Utopia*, 274; cf. Tarrant, 'Development', 157). Bobonich is correct, of course, that the Athenian does not explicitly acknowledge the possibility of intervening on behalf of the iron cords. But that can be explained by the fact that the Athenian's message about psychic intervention is a normative one: he is telling us which cord we *should* pull along with. That does not entail that it is the only one with which we *can* pull along.

Athenian says, 'Marines are quick to jump forward, then to retreat at a run back to their ships . . . They're quite prepared to throw away their weapons and flee, in certain routs that they claim are not shameful' (706 c 2–7). The marines may well accept that they should not shamefully abandon their weapons, but because they wrongly believe that in certain circumstances it is *not* shameful to abandon them, their golden cord pulls them to no avail in those cases, leaving them at the mercy of their iron cords.²¹

3. Law and self-rule

On my interpretation, the puppet passage provides an illustration, not of akratic conflict, but simply of the psychological situation in which all human beings find themselves throughout their lives: we all seek our own good, and if we properly pursue it, then we become virtuous; if, on the other hand, we let our non-rational impulses or 'iron cords' control the way we live our lives, then we become vicious. Or, in other words, when our souls and lives are ruled by

²¹ Note that there are at least two different kinds of mistake that one might make in one's practical reasoning about which action is best in a given set of circumstances. The first way is that one might fail to see that the laws to which one desires to adhere in the pursuit of one's good apply here and now. In other words, one might fail to recognize the minor premiss of a practical syllogism. This is the kind of mistake made by the marines. The second kind of mistake that one might make is that one might recognize that the laws apply to a given action—say, by forbidding it—but one might mistakenly judge that the law does not *in this particular case* promote one's good. Plato seems to address this kind of problem at 731 E 3–732 A 1: 'The truth is that excessive friendship for oneself is the cause of all of each man's wrongdoings on every occasion. Everyone who cares for something is blind when it comes to the thing cared for, and hence is a poor judge of what is just and good and noble, because he believes he should always honour what belongs to him more than the truth.' The problem, it seems, is that even when we recognize that a given law expresses the truth about good and bad, we have a natural tendency to make *exceptions* for ourselves. I believe it is bad shamefully to abandon my weapons, and I even recognize that abandoning my weapons *now* would be shameful, but I also fear death, and so I judge that it is better *for me, now*, to retreat than to keep my weapons and risk death at the hands of the enemy. T. Irwin, 'Morality as Law and Morality in the *Laws*', in Bobonich (ed.), *Guide*, 92–107 at 103–5, provides a valuable discussion of practical reasoning in the *Laws*. He suggests that the golden cord represents a twofold rational principle that affirms both the reflective supremacy of one's own happiness and the practical supremacy of the common good. The foolishness of the foolish person, Irwin argues, consists not in his unawareness of which specific actions his rational principles prescribe, but in his failure to prefer to follow his principles rather than his non-rational impulses. Hence Irwin's picture focuses on mistakes of the second kind just discussed.

our desire for what is good for us, such that we pursue our true good by adhering to correct laws, then we are ruling ourselves and are 'stronger' than ourselves. When our non-rational feelings and emotions rule our souls and lives, then we are not ruling ourselves and are 'weaker' than ourselves. Self-rule, or lack of self-rule, on this view, is not about individual actions; rather, it a *state or condition* of the soul.²²

In this section I will examine several key passages in the *Laws* in the light of my interpretation of the puppet passage. My aim is to show that the notion of self-rule (or lack of self-rule) that I have interpreted the puppet passage as illustrating is the kind of self-rule that concerns Plato in the dialogue.²³ The primary obstacle to human virtue in the *Laws*, we will see, is not akratic conflict, but rather the systematic subversion and corruption of our rational judgement by our non-rational desires that results in our failure to rule ourselves. It is *this* condition that it is the primary aim of the *Laws* to prevent and correct.

3.1. *The drunken puppet*

The fact that the broad notion of self-rule, and not akratic conflict and action, is the concern of the puppet passage is evidenced by the discussion of drunkenness that it introduces. Immediately after offering the image of the puppet, the Athenian provides an ingenious argument for the good of supervised public intoxication. He begins by describing the psychological effects of wine-drinking. While drunkenness makes an individual's pleasures, pains, feelings of anger, and sexual desires more intense, he claims, it has the opposite effect on his opinions and prudent thoughts: it makes them abandon him *completely*, so that his soul is in the same state as it was when he was a young child.²⁴ 'At such a time', the Athenian asserts, 'he

²² This is precisely what we should expect, given that the discussion of self-rule in book I identifies ruling oneself in the face of pleasures and pains with courage and moderation, both of which are virtues and hence *conditions* of the soul, not instances of the individual's behaviour.

²³ Frede, on the other hand, suggests that the image of the puppet serves only a limited purpose in the text and that it does not fully disclose the moral psychology of the *Laws* ('Puppets', 118). The only further use made of it, she claims, is in the discussion of the effects of wine-drinking that immediately follows it. I will argue, against this suggestion, that the puppet passage is alluded to throughout the *Laws* and that it provides the moral psychological foundation for the views articulated in many of the text's key passages.

²⁴ Cf. 672 c 1-2: 'Every living thing, to the degree to which it is appropriate for it

would be least of all in control [*ἐγκρατής*] of himself' (645 D 6–E 6). The Athenian's purpose here is to establish that when a person is very drunk, his rational capacities abandon him. This, it turns out, is precisely why drinking is so useful. Because a drunken individual does not reason about how he ought to act, his behaviour is determined entirely by his non-rational impulses. Hence, by getting a man drunk, one can see what motivations he has that he might merely *restrain* when his rational judgements and desires are present. In order to test whether a man has perverse sexual desires, the Athenian points out, it is much easier, and certainly much safer, to get him drunk in a controlled environment and observe him than, as he puts it, 'to hand over one's sons and daughters to him' and hope for the best (650 A 3–4).²⁵

This practice works because the drunken individual does not reason about the value of specific actions while he is drunk. None the less, the Athenian describes him as being 'least of all *enkrateēs* of himself'. This cannot mean that he is acting, or is disposed to act, akratically, however, because he is not even a *candidate* for acting akratically: he cannot act *against* his rational judgement because he makes no rational judgement at all about what he is doing. Rather, the fact that he is not *enkrateēs* clearly means simply that his *psychic condition* is one in which he is not exercising self-rule: his golden cord—his rational motivation to pursue what is good for him and to follow correct laws—is not in charge of his soul and his behaviour when he is drunk, because he is incapable at that time of engaging in the reasoning and deliberation that has to intervene between the pull of the golden cord and actual *action*.

Bobonich attempts to reconcile the discussion of drunkenness with his interpretation of the puppet passage by appealing to the notion of 'weak' *akrasia*. Because the drunken man does not have a rational judgement at the time he acts, Bobonich admits, he cannot act akratically in the strict or 'strong' sense. However, he can still act against his better judgement in the 'weak' sense that he can act contrary to what he *would* have judged if he were sober, or contrary to possess intelligence when fully developed, to this same degree it *lacks* intelligence when it is first born.'

²⁵ The idea is that when a sober man acts correctly, there is no guarantee that he is acting out of genuine virtue, rather than merely restraining his vicious impulses for the time being. When a drunken man acts correctly, on the other hand, one can be fairly certain that his non-rational emotions and desires are decent. Cf. A. E. Taylor, *Plato* (London, 1926), 467–8, on this topic.

to judgements he held *before* he became drunk.²⁶ However, there are two major problems with this interpretation, the second of which I will discuss in Section 3.3, where it reappears. The first problem, though, is that Bobonich's interpretation of the drunken man assumes that the drunken man will act *contrary* to what he would, in fact, have judged if he were sober. However, the whole point of getting the man drunk, for the Athenian, is to see whether he will act decently or indecently. The Athenian assumes that either is possible, and presumably, if the drunken man acts decently, then he is not acting contrary to what his rational judgement would have been. None the less, it is clear that *whichever* way he acts while he is drunk, he still counts as being 'least of all *enkrateēs*' because of something about the state of drunkenness itself. Bobonich's interpretation cannot make sense of this. Mine can: he is not *enkrateēs* because drunkenness renders him incapable of acting on the basis of reasoning, of 'assisting' the golden cord.

3.2. *Education and the greatest ignorance*

We can also see that Plato is concerned with self-rule rather than *akrasia* in his discussion of ignorance and education. In *Laws* 3 the Athenian undertakes to explain how and why the ancient regimes of Argos and Messene became corrupt. He attributes their deterioration to 'the greatest sort of ignorance [*ἀμαθία*]', which he describes as:

... when someone doesn't like, but rather hates, what in his opinion is noble or good, and likes and welcomes what in his opinion is wicked and unjust. This dissonance between pleasure and pain on the one hand, and the opinion that is according to reason on the other, I assert to be the ultimate and greatest ignorance, because it belongs to the major part of the soul. In the soul, you see, the part that feels pain and pleasure is like the populace and the majority in the city. So when the soul opposes knowledge, or opinions, or reason—the natural rulers—this I call lack of intelligence [*ἀνοία*]. (689 A 1–B 4)

A common assumption is that the 'dissonance' described here is *akratic* conflict—the person either 'hates' doing some specific thing that he rationally believes he should do, or he 'likes' doing some specific thing that he rationally believes he should not do. Hence some commentators, including Bobonich, have taken this passage

²⁶ See Bobonich, *Utopia*, 267–73.

as a further acknowledgement of the possibility of akratic action in the *Laws*.²⁷

However, as the Athenian continues his account of the downfall of the regimes, it becomes evident that the conflict or dissonance that he has in mind is not akratic. The 'greatest ignorance' of the regimes belonged to their kings, he explains, and it arose when the kings were seized by the desire to have more than the established laws allowed and were no longer in consonance with what they praised in speech and with the oaths they swore as rulers—specifically, oaths they swore not to rule harshly and to protect the populace against injustice (691 A). The Athenian does *not* indicate that the kings' desires are in conflict with rational judgements that they make about specific actions, but rather with general principles they accept. That leaves open the possibility that they are rationally unaware that their corrupt actions conflict with those principles or that those actions are *bad* for them. Indeed, the Athenian characterizes their failure as in part a rational one, for he explains:

Didn't their mistake consist in the fact that they were ignorant of what Hesiod has stated very correctly—that 'the half is more than the whole'? When it is harmful to take the whole, but the half is a measured amount, then the measured amount should be considered more than the amount that is unmeasured—for the one is better and the other is worse. (690 E 1–5)

In the language of the puppet passage, we would say that the golden cord, embodying in this instance the lawful oaths that they have sworn and accepted, is pulling them in the direction of ruling justly and taking their fair share, but their iron cords are pulling them towards actions that conflict with those virtuous principles. Because they do not make correct use of their reasoning, they do not recognize the tension.²⁸ They fail to 'assist' the golden cord and are led astray by their base desires. The 'dissonance' that constitutes 'the greatest ignorance', then, is not akratic conflict at all, but rather precisely the sort of conflict illustrated by the puppet passage: conflict

²⁷ See Bobonich, 'Akrasia', 17 n. 32, and *Utopia*, 264; Stalley, *Introduction*, 51–2; and Görgemanns, *Beiträge*, 157–8. For an opposed reading see Saunders, 'Socratic', 424.

²⁸ The text does not seem to determine whether their mistake is that they do not recognize that what they are doing constitutes ruling harshly and taking more than their fair share, or whether they recognize it, but none the less make an *exception* for themselves and conclude that in their case it is better for them *not* to adhere to their laws and oaths. See n. 21 for more on these two kinds of error in practical reasoning.

between one's non-rational impulses on the one hand, and the laws that one rightly takes to promote one's good on the other.²⁹

This interpretation of 'the greatest ignorance' receives further support from the Athenian's discussion of early education. He characterizes education as the process of habituating the child's feelings of pleasure and pain so that they are in harmony with reason and law—and thus in harmony with the laws and principles the child will, or at least *should*, rationally accept once he becomes capable of reasoning. As the Athenian puts it:

Education is the virtue that first comes into being in children. Pleasure and liking, pain and hatred, become correctly arranged in the souls of those who are not yet able to reason, and when the souls do become capable of reasoning, these affections can in consonance with reason affirm that they have been correctly habituated in the appropriate habits. This consonance in its entirety is virtue. (653 B 1–6)

He goes on to call education 'the drawing [*ὀλκῆ*] and pulling [*ἀγωγῆ*] of children towards the argument that is said to be correct by the law', and he says that education's purpose is 'to prevent the child's soul from becoming habituated to feeling delight and pain in a way opposed to the law' (659 D 1–6).

The Athenian describes virtue in terms that are precisely the converse of those used to describe 'the greatest ignorance'. The latter is *dissonance* between feelings of pleasure and pain on the one hand and correct reasoning on the other; virtue is *consonance* between these same things. Education, moreover, is the process of ensuring virtuous consonance from the side of pleasure and pain. Hence the Athenian tells us that what makes the greatest ignorance 'greatest' is not that it represents the highest possible degree of ignorance—this is neither a universal definition of ignorance nor an identification of its extreme—but rather that it belongs to the 'greatest' portion of the soul, namely, its non-rational elements.³⁰ The implication, then, is that one possesses 'the greatest ignorance' any time one's feelings of pleasure or pain have not been 'educated' and hence are not aligned with correct reasoning.

Bobonich's interpretation cannot accommodate this clear impli-

²⁹ Morrow gets this right: he calls the ignorance of the kings 'the discrepancy between their principles and their ambitions' (*Cretan*, 55). T. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford, 1995), 349, suggests a somewhat more neutral 'discord between rational belief, on the one hand, and pleasure and pain on the other'.

³⁰ See Görgemanns, *Beiträge*, 157, on this point.

cation of the passage, however. For one can have improper, 'un-educated' feelings of pleasure and pain without being in a state of akratic conflict, and certainly without *acting* akratically. A greedy individual who is ruled by his appetitive desires and judges the life of moneymaking to be best clearly lacks virtuous consonance and is not 'educated'. None the less, his feelings of pleasure and his mistaken judgements are in consonance *with each other*, which means that he does not experience akratic conflict. On Bobonich's reading, which identifies the greatest ignorance with akratic conflict, we could not attribute the greatest ignorance to such an individual. On my interpretation, however, we can and should attribute 'the greatest ignorance' to the greedy individual, because the 'major part' of his soul has not been educated. Although, under pressure from his appetites, he may also have come to *rationally* believe that moneymaking is the best goal for structuring a life, he still possesses a genuine kind of dissonance, for his non-rational feelings are opposed, at the very least, to his desire for his own good, and in addition to any correct laws that he accepts.³¹

The reason why 'the greatest ignorance' is problematic, from Plato's perspective, is that if one's feelings and emotions conflict with one's rational principles, then, almost inevitably, they will interfere with one's reasoning in various ways to prevent one from arriving at the correct practical judgements about the value of specific actions. And in the absence of correct practical judgements, one will be at the mercy of one's feelings and emotions. That is why education—the habituating of pleasure and pain—is designed to prevent *this* kind of dissonance (and not merely akratic conflict and action). It is significant that the language the Athenian uses to describe education vividly recalls the image of the puppet: education is the 'drawing' and 'pulling' of children. It is clear, then, that we are to have the moral psychological picture of the puppet metaphor in mind, and given my interpretation of both passages, this allusion makes good sense: just as education is designed not merely to prevent akratic conflict, but to produce virtue, so also the puppet

³¹ Although the Athenian initially describes conflict between what the person likes and hates, on the one hand, and 'what in his opinion is noble or good', on the other, he immediately specifies that by the latter he means 'opinion that is according to reason' (689 A 8). Hence, despite common assumptions, 'the greatest ignorance' is not dissonance between the person's non-rational feelings and his own opinions, *whatever those opinions may be*, but rather dissonance between his feelings and *correct* opinions that he holds.

passage does not merely discourage akratic behaviour, but exhorts us to virtue and self-rule.

3.3. *The psychic causes of wrongdoing*

If all goes well, education and law will foster the kind of consonance in citizens' souls that constitutes virtue. When the two fail, however, and when people commit injustice, law has another function: to correct what went wrong in their psychology that made them act unjustly. In book 9 the Athenian Visitor sets out to identify the causes of criminal behaviour in order to determine which punishments will best target those underlying psychological problems.³² He identifies three main kinds of cause—anger, pleasure, and ignorance—and describes their effects in language that once again recalls the image of the puppet.³³ ‘With regard to pleasure and anger’, he explains, ‘we almost all say that one of us is “stronger”, while another is “weaker”’; and this is the way it is’.³⁴ But *all three*

³² For thorough examinations of Plato's proposed penal code see Mackenzie, *Punishment*, and T. J. Saunders, *Plato's Penal Code* (Oxford, 1991).

³³ Ignorance is further divided into (1) simple (*ἀπλοῦν*) ignorance, (2a) double (*διπλοῦν*) ignorance with power, and (2b) double ignorance without power (863 c–d). About (1) we are told very little. We know only that it is the cause of ‘light’ faults. Double ignorance, on the other hand, occurs when someone ‘partakes not only of ignorance but also of the opinion that he is wise, and believes he knows completely things about which he knows nothing’ (863 c 4–6). (2a) is the cause of great faults, he says, while (2b) is responsible for faults that the laws will treat gently and with understanding (such as the faults of children and the elderly). The passage is open to a wide range of interpretations, but the arrogant ignorance of *Laws* 732 a–b seems to represent double ignorance well. Presumably it is distinguished by the belief that one knows something about serious matters, and especially about what is *good*. One might wonder why, if crimes due to anger and pleasure involve ignorance, as they clearly do in the Athenian's subsequent discussion, it is necessary to name ignorance as a distinct cause of wrongdoing at all. Although I do not have the space to provide a complete response to this question, a gesture in the right direction would appeal to the discussion of the just atheist of book 10 (908 b–909 a). The Athenian contrasts the just atheist with the unjust one, whose ignorance is the result of the bad condition of his soul. The just atheist, on the other hand, possesses a naturally just character but holds false beliefs owing to lack of intelligence (and, one might speculate, owing to the persuasive influence of ignorant or malicious others). Thus, Plato recognizes that at least some ignorance arises independently of the influence of feelings of pleasure and pain.

³⁴ The Athenian claims that we do *not* say that we are ‘stronger’ or ‘weaker’ than ignorance, however (863 d 10–11). On my reading of the puppet passage, this claim makes perfect sense. For the ‘we’ with which we are identified in the image of the puppet is the rational self that is responsible for reasoning and deliberating about what to do. It makes sense to say that we are stronger or weaker than pleasure or pain, therefore, because those are items in our psychology that are in some sense

causes, he says, often lead individuals in directions opposite to that towards which their wish simultaneously draws (*ἐπισπώμενον*) them (863 D 6–E 3). The crucial point for my purposes is that the Athenian clearly considers *any* crime committed out of anger or pleasure—out of the ‘tyranny’ of non-rational impulses in the soul, as he puts it a few lines later—to be a case in which the agent fails to exercise self-rule and is ‘weaker’ than himself (863 E 8).³⁵ None the less, not one of the many crimes committed out of anger or pleasure that the Athenian subsequently discusses is a crime that is committed *akratically*. Let us consider first pleasure-crimes, ‘which spring from weakness in the face of pleasures, appetites, and feelings of envy’ (869 E 7–8). Plato goes out of his way to emphasize that such crimes are not committed contrary to the person’s better judgement about which way to act. Such crimes are exercised from forethought (*ἐκ προνοίας*), are voluntary (*ἐκούσια*), and they involve rational wish (*βούλησις*), plotting (*ἐπιβουλή*), and scheming (*ἐπιβούλευσις*).³⁶ In other words, they are characterized by the fact that the agent not only rationally approves of committing the crime, but indeed puts significant rational effort into planning it. Pleasure-criminals are ‘weaker’ than themselves, but they are not akratic agents.

The primary example of anger-crime that the Athenian discusses is murder. He distinguishes two versions of killing in anger. One involves plotting (*ἐπιβουλή*): the agent plans out his crime, and he feels no regret after committing it (866 E 3–6). Hence, like those who commit crimes out of pleasure, this angry killer rationally approves of his crime and cannot be considered akratic. The other version involves no prior deliberation: the agent acts on a sudden, angry impulse, without having wanted to kill beforehand, and he feels regret immediately afterward (866 D 7–E 3). What happens in the second

‘outside’ of the part of ourselves with which we are to identify. When ‘we’ are ignorant about what we should do, on the other hand, that ignorance is something that belongs to the reasoning and deliberating self, and hence it no longer makes sense to say that ‘we’ are weaker than it. A related issue is that ignorance is not the sort of thing that one *resists*, because in order to resist it, one would have to be aware that one’s belief is false; but to be aware that one’s belief is false is no longer to hold that false belief. Cf. discussions in England, *Laws*, ii. 401; Saunders, ‘Socratic’, 426–7; and Mackenzie, *Punishment*, 246–7.

³⁵ Being ‘weaker’ than pleasure, anger, fear, etc. is being ‘weaker’ than oneself; see n. 3 above.

³⁶ See esp. 869 E 6–7; 871 A 2; 872 A 1–2; 872 B 1; 872 B 5; 872 D 1; 872 D 6.

version is evidently that the individual's anger leads him to commit the murder so precipitously that the individual never has *time* to think about whether he ought to do it. The fact that he feels immediate regret indicates that if he *had* had time to deliberate about the crime, he would *not* have rationally approved of it. Once again, however, such murderers do not kill akratically, because that would require them to act against an all-things-considered rational judgement about whether to commit the crime, and that judgement is precisely what they never have time to make.³⁷

The discussion of criminal psychology in book 9, then, shows that cases of being 'weaker' or 'stronger' than oneself are cases of failing to exercise the broad notion of self-rule that I have advocated, and not cases of akratic action or conflict. Bobonich acknowledges that the crimes discussed in book 9 are not committed against the agent's better judgement, but he attempts to square them with his interpretation of the puppet passage by, as in the case of the drunken individual's lack of self-rule, characterizing them as varieties of 'weak' *akrasia*. They are cases in which the agent *would* have arrived at an opposed rational judgement if she had had time to reason, or arrived at an opposed judgement but lost it prior to acting, or simply never arrived at an opposed judgement at all owing to the interference of her desires and emotions. One immediate worry that this approach raises is that, on Bobonich's interpretation, the puppet metaphor is designed to illustrate the phenomenon of 'strong' *akrasia*, but in Plato's most prominent and explicit uses of that illustration in the text—in the discussion of drunkenness and in book 9—Plato *never* discusses a case of 'strong' *akrasia*, but rather only modified, impure versions of it. The more that Bobonich insists that the image of the puppet can accommodate 'weak' versions of *akrasia*, the less plausible is his claim that the image is designed to explain (and hence assumes the possibility of) 'strict' or 'strong' *akrasia*.

The more significant failure of Bobonich's interpretation of both

³⁷ Aristotle would classify criminal action of this sort as 'impetuous' (*προπετής*) *akrasia* (see *NE* 1150^b19–29), which occurs in those who, 'because they have not deliberated, are led by their passions' (*διὰ τὸ μὴ βουλευσασθαι ἄγονται ὑπὸ τοῦ πάθους*). However, it is clear that the phenomenon Plato acknowledges in the second version of angry killing (the phenomenon Aristotle would call 'impetuous' *akrasia*) is not the *strict* kind of *akrasia* that I am denying the *Laws* recognizes—*akrasia* in the sense of performing an action while believing, and despite believing, that one should not perform it.

the drunken individual and book 9, however, is that it cannot account for the sense in which the golden cord pulls on these agents *while they are intoxicated* or *while they are committing their crimes*. If they never arrive at judgements about their actions, or arrive at them but abandon them while they are acting, or simply never arrive at them at all, then the golden cord is simply *absent* while they are drunk or while they commit injustice. However, the image of the puppet clearly illustrates a *synchronic*, not a diachronic or counterfactual, conflict between the iron cords and the golden cord: they are both there pulling the individual in opposite directions *simultaneously*. To reaffirm this, Plato tells us in book 9 that pleasure and anger, on the one hand, and our rational wish, *boulēsis*, on the other, draw us in opposite directions *at the same time* (ἀμα: 863 E 3). On Bobonich's interpretation of the drunken man, however, the two operate at *different* times—the golden cord before he is drunk, the iron cords while he is drunk. Similarly with the impetuous angry killer: the golden cord pulls him before and after he kills, his anger *while* he kills. And in the case of the corrupt pleasure-criminal, it seems that the golden cord *never* actually pulls on the individual at all. At most, it merely *would have* pulled on her if she had not had vicious appetites.

My interpretation, on the other hand, can readily explain the pull of the golden cord—or of the person's *boulēsis*—*while* they act drunkenly or commit crimes. Drunken individuals and criminals all, as human beings, have the standing rational desire for their own good, and they presumably also have standing desires to obey at least some correct laws and moral principles with which their actions conflict. We can attribute those desires to them *at the time* that they act drunkenly or commit crimes, and hence we can preserve a sense in which they are pulled—albeit 'gently'—away from their vicious drunken or criminal behaviour.

4. *Akrasia* or self-rule?

Bobonich defends the assumption that the puppet passage provides an account of akratic action with the following claim: 'Since failing to rule oneself and being weaker than oneself are standard descriptions of akratic action for Plato, we have Plato's own assurance that the puppet image is designed to make clear what goes on in an agent

when she acts akratically and when she successfully resists.³⁸ It is beyond the scope of this paper to determine whether these locutions generally refer to akratic action in Plato's other dialogues. It is, however, *demonstrably false* that they refer to akratic action in the *Laws*. The passages I have discussed show that in this text, being 'weaker or stronger than oneself' refers to a broad psychic condition in which one either fails or succeeds in exercising the kind of self-rule that I have suggested.³⁹

One might accept my interpretation of self-rule in the *Laws*, however, and still think that the *Laws* acknowledges the possibility of akratic action, perhaps as a special case of failing to exercise self-rule. Indeed, it should be noted that, given my interpretation of it, the image of the puppet *could* be expanded into an account of akratic action: if the person's iron cords were pulling her towards some specific vicious action, X, and the person 'assisted' the golden cord, such that she deliberated and came to judge that she should abstain from X, then, as a result of her 'assistance', she *would* be in a state of akratic conflict. One could then say that what she does will simply be determined by which strings pull harder, and if the iron cords pull harder, then she will act akratically. However, it must also be noted that the puppet passage does not *require* this account. One could say instead, for example, that *if* an agent intervenes on behalf of the golden cord, then that intervention is always motivationally efficacious as long as the agent maintains the rational judgement and desire that constitute the intervention's motive force. If the agent acts against the golden cord despite intervening, on this view, then her rational judgement about the action must have been compromised in some way. The puppet metaphor does not decide between these readings. It is consistent, therefore, both with the view that *akrasia* is sometimes possible and with the view that it is

³⁸ 'Akrasia', 18.

³⁹ The use of terms referring to self-rule throughout the *Laws* confirms my reading. See, for example, the description of the unjust atheist: 'There are those who, in addition to the opinion that all things are bereft of gods, are also afflicted by ἀκράτειαί τε ἡδονῶν καὶ λυπῶν . . . From this type come many diviners and men equipped in all of magic, and sometimes tyrants, demagogues, and generals, and those who plot by means of private mystery-rites, and the contrivances of those called "sophists"' (908 c 1–D 7). The *akrateia* of the tyrants, demagogues, and generals is clearly a condition of the soul that determines the way they live their lives (cf. 886 A 9–B 1); it is *not* an akratic act, nor even a state that gives rise to such an act. See also 897 B 7 and 966 E 2, where ἐγκρατής is used to mean simply 'in control' in contexts that have nothing to do with akratic conflict.

never possible. This is precisely my reading of the *Laws* as a whole. Although I have argued that Plato never acknowledges the possibility of *akrasia* in the text, I do not think that he ever explicitly *denies* its possibility either. My claim is simply that the *Laws* never addresses the topic, and that nothing said in the text commits Plato one way or the other on it.

To complete my argument, here I would like briefly to consider two further passages that have prominently been taken to indicate that the *Laws* does accept the possibility of akratic action. The first is from book 10, in the context of the Athenian's argument against those who would deny that the gods exercise attentive supervision over all things. He asks:

Are we to set you down as saying that they are ignorant and neglect what ought to be supervised because of ignorance, or that they know what is necessary, and, as the lowest of human beings are said to do, they know it is better to act otherwise than the way they're acting, but they don't do so on account of some sorts of weaknesses in the face of pleasures or pains? (902 A 6–B 2)

The kind of weakness in the face of pleasures and pains that the Athenian describes here is clearly the kind involved in akratic action: they know they should not act the way they do, but do so anyway. However, two features of his remarks indicate that he wishes to distance himself from the view of akratic action implicit in his question. First, he says that the lowest human beings 'are said' (λέγονται, 902 A 9) to act in that way, using the impersonal to disassociate himself from the common claim. Second, he refers to 'some sorts' of weakness (τινας ἡττας, 902 B 1) in the face of pleasures or pains, which suggests suspicion towards the idea that knowledge could be weaker than pleasure or pain. This passage, then, does not commit the Athenian, or Plato, to any view about akratic action; it merely reports a popular view.⁴⁰

In the second passage the Athenian explains that laws are necessary because human nature, and hence human rulers, are inherently corruptible. To begin with, he says, it is difficult to understand that the political art cares not for the private, but for the common, good. But, moreover:

⁴⁰ Görgemanns rightly notes that Plato is reporting a common view here, but he none the less thinks that Plato is adopting that view as his own in the *Laws* (*Beiträge*, 159–60). Bobonich, 'Akrasia', 17 n. 32, cites the passage as evidence of *akrasia* in the *Laws*.

Even if someone should advance sufficiently in the art to know that this is the way these things are by nature, and after this should rule the city . . . he would never be able to hold fast to this conviction [οὐκ ἂν ποτε δύναίτο ἐμμεῖναι τούτῳ τῷ δόγματι] and spend his life giving priority to nourishing what is common in the city. . . . Mortal nature will always urge him towards getting more than his share and towards private business, irrationally fleeing pain and pursuing pleasure, and putting both of these before what is more just and better. Creating a darkness within itself, it will completely fill both itself and the whole city with everything bad. (875 B 1–C 3)

Bobonich and other commentators have taken this passage to indicate not only that it is possible to act against one's rational belief in the *Laws*, but that it is even possible to act against one's *knowledge*.⁴¹ The person comes to know what is right, but on account of the weakness of human nature, he acts contrary to that knowledge. It is true that the individual described here does come to possess the knowledge of what is politically right. However, what the passage suggests is not that his non-rational desires cause him to act *contrary* to that knowledge, but rather that they cause him to *lose* that knowledge. We are told that he will be unable to hold fast to his conviction: this indicates a *change* in his beliefs. Moreover, if his nature becomes filled with darkness and everything bad, then presumably it is *not* filled with knowledge any more.⁴² Therefore, this passage does not describe akratic action; it describes the difficulty of maintaining good objectives and convictions in the face of pressure from our non-rational impulses.

5. Conclusion

The interpretation of the puppet passage that I have advocated avoids the difficulties faced by the standard interpretation, and it also avoids the need to posit radical revisions in Plato's moral psychology, which the standard interpretation evidently requires. Of course, even on my interpretation of it, nothing about the passage entails that Plato is still working with the tripartite theory of the soul that he advocated in earlier works such as the *Republic*. More

⁴¹ See Bobonich, 'Akrasia', 17 n. 32, *Utopia*, 264–5; Tarrant, 'Development', 157; and Görgemanns, *Beiträge*, 155–6.

⁴² Bobonich admits that the politicians in the passage lose their knowledge and acquire false beliefs, but he none the less insists (largely in the light of 902 A–B) that that loss of knowledge begins with akratic conflict (*Utopia*, 265).

work would have to be done to support that claim, including providing an explanation of why, if Plato still retained the earlier theory, he did not make that commitment explicit in the *Laws*.⁴³ However, my reading avoids committing Plato to theses or to the existence of new psychic activities that were not included in, and that may be straightforwardly incompatible with, his earlier views, and in doing so it at least leaves open the possibility that Plato did not abandon tripartition in the concluding work of his career.

My interpretation also provides a picture of moral psychology and a notion of self-rule that better cohere with the rest of the *Laws* and that allow us better to understand some of its key passages. Interpreting the puppet passage in the standard way, as an account of akratic action, is likely to mislead us in our interpretation of other important passages and to distract us from the real issues that concern Plato in the text. Plato's purpose in the *Laws* is to identify what goes wrong in the soul that causes people to live unvirtuous lives, and to recommend policies and legislation that will prevent and correct the underlying psychological problems. The main concern, for Plato, is not that people 'pull along with' the golden cord, but are pulled more strongly by their iron cords anyway; it is that they *never pull along with the golden cord to begin with*. The puppet passage, and the *Laws* as a whole, is nothing less than a systematic effort to make sure that people do just that: to make sure that, through obedience to law and the proper use of reasoning, they become rulers of themselves.⁴⁴

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⁴³ I take up this issue in a work in progress, 'Tripartition and the Causes of Criminal Behavior in Plato's *Laws*'. I argue that invoking tripartite moral psychology in the *Laws* would have complicated the criminal penology of books 9 and 10 in unnecessary ways. The dialogue's silence on tripartition, therefore, reflects not Plato's abandonment of the theory, but rather his sensitivity to the aims of the *Laws*.

⁴⁴ In *Republic* 9 Socrates argues that those who are unable to rule themselves should make themselves 'slaves' to the 'best man who has the divine rule within himself' (590 c). In the *Laws* Socrates again recommends that individuals 'enslave' themselves. However, this time the prescribed enslavement is not to better *people* (presumably in the light of the Athenian's warning at 875 b-c), but rather to the laws themselves (see 762 e; cf. 698 b and 700 a). I am indebted to Michelle Jenkins for this point.

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