In the first book of Plato’s *Laws*, Cleinias and Megillus are scandalized to hear the Athenian Stranger claim that drinking wine is not only permissible under certain circumstances, but can actually be educational. Megillus is the first to mention drinking parties, or symposia, and criticizes them as licentious, pointing out that cities in which drinking is forbidden always win in battle against cities in which drinking is permitted. But as the Athenian often reminds his interlocutors, the education that he is advocating is an education in the whole of virtue and not just an education in the single virtue of courage. The drinking parties that the Athenian has in mind will only take place under the guidance of a wise and sober symposiarch. Drinking parties are meant to be educational insofar as they are a means of testing and training the character. Drinking wine stimulates the emotions – including desires for pleasures of questionable moral worth. The Athenian claims no one who has not had to struggle against, fight, and conquer his feelings of pleasures and desire can more than half realize his potential for *sôphrosunê* (I.647c10-d7). By the end of the *Laws* I, it is clear that drinking parties provide an education primarily in the virtue of *sôphrosunê*.¹

Although the Athenian claims that drinking parties are an important part of the continuing education of citizens, it is not immediately clear how this is supposed to work. In particular, drinking parties are specifically designed to get rid of the
participants’ cognitive abilities. So how can what takes away the reasoning capacity be educational? And furthermore, drinking wine makes pleasures, angers and other emotions more intense. Not to mention that the Athenian is recommending that the participants drink a decidedly immoderate amount of alcohol at these drinking parties. So it seems strange that this is an education in sôphrosunê in particular.

In this paper, I will first discuss Plato’s account of sôphrosunê in the Laws and the early educational program meant to inculcate sôphrosunê in the young citizens. I then argue that developing the virtue of sôphrosunê is critical in developing the other virtues, including and especially wisdom. Finally, I argue that what Plato has to say about the role of drinking parties shows that appropriate emotional responses are indispensable to the life of virtue.

Sôphrosunê in Plato’s Laws: Two Analogies

Sôphrosunê in the Laws is first described as “self-superiority”. Cleinias first introduces the idea of someone’s being conqueror of himself or conquered by himself. This seems strange on the face of it, since it is not at all clear that something can be superior to itself. In the Republic IV, Socrates rejects this way of putting things as nonsense (430e11). A thing cannot be superior to itself, and that is one reason to think that the soul must have parts. In order to understand what it would mean for someone to be superior to himself or a conqueror of himself the Athenian asks his interlocutors to consider several scenarios of conflict. He considers external war, civil war within a city, and a household full of fighting and rancor. In each of these cases, there is a conflict
within a unified (or unifiable) whole among the smaller parts which make up that whole. He asks his interlocutors to consider the case of the household in which the wicked majority of brothers prevail and subdue the virtuous brothers. The Athenian describes this household as “inferior to” itself. The household would be “superior to” itself if the wicked brothers were defeated in some way (I.627d). But it would be even better still if some judge were to reconcile the brothers and return them to a state of harmony and friendship.

Which of these judges would be the better, the one who put all the bad brothers to death and told the better ones to run their own lives, or the one who put the virtuous in command, but let the scoundrels go on living in willing obedience to them? And we can probably add a third and even better judge – the one who will take this single quarrelling family in hand and reconcile its members without killing any of them; by laying down regulations to guide them in the future, he will be able to ensure that they remain on friendly terms with each other. (I.627d11-628a3)

The emphasis throughout the discussion of self-superiority and self-inferiority is on peace, harmony, and cooperation among the various parts of a complex whole. We should now be able to see more clearly how the terms self-superiority and self-inferiority can be applied to the soul of a single human being. A person is inferior to himself when the inferior parts of the soul, the emotions, dominate the superior part, the reason. The better element, reason, can regain control over the worse by “killing” the bad emotions. But so much the better is a resolution where elements of the soul are reconciled and “live” together in peace and friendship. So, it is best when the emotions are well regulated, give their willing obedience to the reason, and all the parts of the soul work together in a state of harmony and friendship.
In a second analogy, the Athenian suggests that we think of human beings as a kind of puppet:

Let’s imagine that each of us living beings is a puppet ... we have these emotions in us, which act like cords or strings and tug us about; they work in opposition, and tug against each other to make us perform actions that are opposed correspondingly; back and forth we go across the boundary line where vice and virtue meet. One of these dragging forces, according to our argument, demands our constant obedience, and this is the one we have to hang on to, come what may; the pull of the other cords we must resist. This cord, which is golden and holy, transmits the power of ‘calculation’, a power which in a state is called the public law; being golden it is pliant, while the others, whose composition resembles a variety of other substances, are tough and inflexible. The force exerted by law is excellent, and one should always co-operate with it, because although ‘calculation’ is a noble thing, it is gentle, not violent, and its efforts need assistants, so that the gold in us may prevail over the other substances. If we do give our help, the moral point of this fable, in which we appear as the puppets, will have been well and truly made; the meaning of the terms ‘self-superior’ and ‘self-inferior’ will somehow become clearer, and the duties of state and individual will be better appreciated. (I.644d-645b4)

The cords that represent the emotions pull and tug the agent “back and forth... across the boundary line where virtue and vice meet.” But one should resist these violent pulls. Even better, we should cooperate with the golden cord of calculation, or reason. The faculty of calculation is described as that which is responsible for judging the relative merits of pleasures and pains (I.644d). The pull of reason is gentle and not violent, it needs assistants, or helpers.

Now the text says that “we” need to assist the pull of the golden cord of reason and that reason needs assistants. But this is a bit puzzling, since presumably the various puppet cords are supposed to represent the complete motivational structure of a human agent. How are we to understand how the agent intervenes in her own motivational structure in the way suggested? Just where do reason’s assistants come from? And how should we understand “prevail” here? An adequate interpretation of the puppet
analogy will square with the earlier metaphor of the peaceful household as well as the city/soul analogy that we find within the puppet analogy. First, how should we understand the sense in which the gold in us ought to “prevail” over the other substances? In the case of the warring household, we were told that the best judge reconciles the brothers and puts them on friendly terms with one another; he sets down regulations to guide them in the future. So, for the puppet analogy we can understand the wild emotion cords as the bad brothers and the good brothers warring with each other. The household is “superior to itself” when all of the brothers are on friendly terms with one another guided by the regulations that the judge sets out. So, perhaps in the puppet analogy the soul is superior to itself when the emotion cords work together, or are on friendly terms with one another, regulated by the golden cord of reason. If this is right, the gold in us prevails over the other substances when reason leads and the other substances follow along in harmoniously.

In the puppet analogy we are told that reason needs assistants in order to prevail over the other substances. On the one hand, it seems that these assistants represent a third element in the soul. They appear to be neither emotions nor reason. But introducing a third element does not square well with the analogy of the warring household that we have already seen. In that analogy, the resolution to the war involved setting up regulations to guide the brothers and to put them on good terms with one another. It seems that the clearest way to square this analogy with the puppet analogy is to read the regulations as the golden cord and the brothers as the tough iron cords. The “good terms,” or reconciliation, between the brothers, then, are the
assistants. It is the reconciliation between the brothers that encourages them to get along with one another and to follow the regulations that have been set down for them. When we extend this analogy to the soul of the individual agent, the clearest way to understand the assistants of reason is as harmony among the emotions. Emotions are harmonious when they have been correctly educated to love the good and hate the bad. Correctly educated emotions will “pull” in the same direction as reason; they will assist reason. If we understand the puppet/soul analogy in this way we can also make good sense of the city/soul analogy that is embedded in the puppet analogy passage. The code of law is the golden cord, the various citizens are the tough iron cords, and the system of education is the assistant of the golden cord. So, the ἱερὸν soul is one that is educated, the various emotion cords are on friendly terms with one another, and these cords are regulated by the dictates of reason.

**Early Education and the Principle of Assimilation**

The Athenian warns against an educational program that promotes one virtue only and against a conception of education as mere training to take up some kind of trade. The education that he proposes is an education in the whole of virtue, which gives the youth a keen desire to be perfect citizens who know how to rule and be ruled as justice demands (I.643d-644b). At the beginning of *Laws* II, the Athenian explains the first steps of such an education.

I maintain that the earliest sensations that a child feels in infancy are of pleasure and pain, and this is the route by which virtue and vice first enter the soul... I call ‘education’ the initial acquisition of virtue by the child when the feelings of pleasure and affection, pain and hatred that well up in his soul are channeled in the right course before he can
understand the reason why. Then when he does understand, his reason and his emotions agree in telling him that he has been properly trained by inculcation of appropriate habits. Virtue is this general concord of reason and emotion. But there is one element you could isolate in any account you give, and this is the correct formation of our feelings of pleasure and pain, which makes us hate what we ought to hate from first to last, and love what we ought to love. Call this ‘education’, and I at any rate, think you would be giving it its proper name. (653a5-c4)

These primitive feelings of pleasure and pain are the route by which virtue first gets into the soul. We can see that young children might be especially prone to finding some things pleasant that are not sanctioned by virtue. Overeating sweets, for example, might be pleasant for a child. But overeating sweets strengthens the appetites for things that do not contribute to health nor to the good life as a whole. It is also plausible that young children (as well as adults) would find those things which do promote virtue especially painful. Learning a new athletic skill, such as archery, will promote the virtue of courage. But the first attempts at learning a new athletic skill involve a lot of pain. Nevertheless, developing the habits of eating sweets only in moderation and becoming proficient in new athletic skills leads to a more pleasant life overall.4 The early education of citizens is meant to train them to love things and characters which are good and hate things and characters which are bad. Children will be exposed to stories, dramas, and music which portray good, just, and moderate characters in a pleasant way and which portray bad characters in a painful way (II.659d-660a).

So, the performing arts in the community should be designed by those who have “high moral standards” and the benefit of education and experience in order to develop feelings of pleasure and pain in children in a way sanctioned by the code of laws.5 Here again in Laws II, we see that the Athenian is concerned to avoid exposing citizens,
especially children, to stories and songs that glorify wrongdoing or make injustice look pleasant. This has the effect of forming the feelings of pleasure and pain to love what really is good and to hate what really is bad. That is, one’s pre-reflective emotional responses must be channeled in the right courses. And this formation of character must take place before one’s intellect can influence these emotional responses. Formation of the character must take place before the children can understand the reasons why these things are truly good, or worthy of love. As we shall see in the next section, having well-formed feelings of love and hate is critical to getting onto the project of understanding why these are the right things to love and to hate.

A final point about the relation of feelings of pleasure and pain to virtue is that Plato’s view includes a principle of assimilation of character. The Athenian Stranger uses a staple of the Greek system of education, mimetic pedagogy, and shapes it to his own account of virtue.6

Surely there must be a precise analogy here with the man who comes into contact with depraved characters and wicked people, and who does not react with disgust, but welcomes them with pleasure, censuring them half-heartedly because he only half-realizes, as in a dream, how perverted such a state is: he just cannot escape taking on the character of what he enjoys, whether good or bad – even if he is ashamed to go so far as to applaud it. In fact we could hardly point to a greater force for good – or evil – than this inevitable assimilation of character. (656b1-7)

People will come to resemble those things and characters which they find pleasant. So it is critically important that their loves and hates are directed towards the right kinds of things. At II.659d, the Athenian describes education as a process of attraction. Children should be taught to appreciate and take pleasure in the character types and actions that are genuinely good and are sanctioned by law. In this way, citizens will be educated in
a way that disposes them to want to perform just actions and to have a just character. Similarly, the Athenian advocates awarding prizes and honors for those who are able to “communicate” the virtues of *phronēsis* and *sōphrosunē* to others as well as displaying these virtues themselves. On the other hand, those who jealously guard their own virtues should be censured (V.730e-731b).

The principle of assimilation of character also points to a potential problem for adult citizens of Magnesia. From what is said in the above passage about judging dramatic competitions, we have no reason to think that adults will be immune from assimilation to “pleasant but depraved” characters even with a background in early character education. This is especially a problem for those who do not have a firm understanding of why depraved characters are depraved and one who is capable of feeling delight in such characters. The charismatic pirate (or rogue) who tells colorful stories about his exploits may be able to convince a few of his listeners that he is not such a bad guy after all. And they may even desire to emulate him. You might think that citizens of Magnesia would be protected from exposure to this sort of colorful, but depraved person. All of the adult citizens will have the benefit of the early character education, after all. So how could any citizen fall into the wrong crowd in this way?

One problem is that not all of the residents of Magnesia will be citizens. At VIII.850a-d the Athenian Stranger introduces a surprisingly lax policy on resident aliens. Anyone with a skill who wants to take up residence in Magnesia may do so for at least 20 years. Among the non-citizen population, we can easily imagine that there will be colorful and interesting characters who are unjust. Given the principle of assimilation of character, it
is important that citizens are trained as well as possible in such a way that they do not find these unjust characters pleasant.\textsuperscript{7}

\textbf{Clouded Vision and the Greatest Ignorance}

The formation of feelings of pleasure and pain and training one’s pre-reflective emotional responses constitute the early education of citizens largely because emotional responses have \textit{cognitive} effects on the person. The Athenian indicates that without having the right emotional responses, one will not get hold of the real nature of justice and pleasure. In particular, one will not get hold of the fact that the just life is also the most pleasant life.

Looking at a thing from a distance makes nearly everyone feel dizzy, especially children; but the lawgiver will alter that for us, and lift the fog that clouds our judgment: somehow or other – by habituation, praise, or argument – he will persuade us that our ideas of justice and injustice are like pictures drawn in perspective. Injustice looks pleasant to the enemy of justice, because he regards it from his own personal standpoint, which is unjust and evil; justice, on the other hand, looks unpleasant to him. But from the standpoint of the just man the view gained of justice and injustice is always the opposite. (663b6-c5)

The Athenian is convinced that the just life is truly more pleasant than the life of injustice. And that this is something that anyone who has had a correct education will agree with.\textsuperscript{8} A young person who has not had the benefit of the educational program is likely to think that the life of pleasure and the life of justice are incommensurable. The bad education that this person has received makes it impossible for him to have good judgment about these things. Without correctly formed emotional responses, his ability to make certain correct judgments is affected. He will think that the life of pleasure is unjust and that the life of justice is unpleasant.\textsuperscript{9} Recall that II.653a-c states a child must
have his emotions appropriately channeled before he can understand the reason why. And when he does understand, his emotions and reason “agree in telling him that he has been properly trained by inculcation of appropriate habits.” But from the passage above, we see that those who do not have their emotions channeled in the right courses have a clouded view of the real natures of and relations between pleasure and justice. In other words, without having appropriate habits a person will not be able to appreciate, or know, why these are the right habits to have.

In order to understand how correct or incorrect feelings of pleasure and pain can affect one’s cognitive abilities, it may be helpful to refer again to the puppet analogy. Recall that in this analogy, we are told that the pull of the golden cord of calculation is gentle and needs helpers. If we take these helpers to be correctly educated emotions, we can start to see how they might help reason to accomplish its work. Suppose that the emotion cords are not well trained. In this case the emotions will prevail in the soul. The emotions cords will “pull” the golden cord of reason along with them as they lurch about grasping at bad objects. Suppose that one’s emotions have not been well trained to love the good and hate the bad. In this case, the emotion cords will violently lurch towards those objects that they seek. And they will drag the golden cord of reason along with them. Say, for example, that someone has an unhealthy desire for chocolate cake. Desire pulls the agent herself in the direction of chocolate cake. And indeed, her desire for chocolate cake may influence how she thinks about chocolate cake, or how she judges the relative merits of eating chocolate cake. She may come to think that just one (more) small piece of chocolate cake cannot hurt. Or she may think that she cannot
possibly concentrate on her archery practice until her desire for chocolate cake is satisfied. The tendency to rationalize unhealthy desires illustrates the domination of reason by the emotions. When the emotions have bad objects they prevail over the reason. The emotions tyrannize the soul. But, by contrast, if the emotion cords have as their object the same thing that reason says is best, then the whole soul works harmoniously together. The emotions support the reasoning part in its judgment about what is best. So, for example, suppose that a person has correctly trained emotions and has an appetite for a healthy, delicious garden salad. In this case, her emotions tell her that the salad would make the perfect lunch. Her emotions are in sync with what is best and allow the reason to do its work of thinking about why this is best.

In Book III, the Athenian calls a lack of harmony between reason and the emotions the greatest kind of ignorance.

So what kind of ignorance would deserve the title ‘greatest’? ... The kind involved when a man thinks something fine and good, but loathes it instead of liking it, and conversely when he likes and welcomes what he believes is wicked and unjust. I maintain that this disaccord between his feelings of pleasure and pain and his rational judgment constitutes the very lowest depth of ignorance. It is also the ‘greatest’, in that it affects the most extensive element in the soul (the element that experiences pleasure and pain, which corresponds to the most extensive part of a state, the common people). So when a soul quarrels with knowledge or opinion or reason, its natural ruling principles, you have there what I call ‘folly’. (689a1-b4)

This is a bit different than the claim that one’s pre-reflective emotional responses should be hooked up in the right way to the right objects. The claim made at III.689a has to do with choosing in accordance with the dictates of reason. It is strange that the issue here is described as one of ignorance and wisdom, rather than one of dis-harmony (or *akrasia*) and harmony in the soul. Nevertheless, the Athenian goes on to claim that no
one should be called wise if what he loves and hates is not in line with his reasoned judgments even if his ability to calculate, read, and swim is outstanding (III.689c-d). The problem is that without concord between reason and the emotions one could never “get even a glimmer of sound judgment,” (III.689e4-5).

But why should we think that sound judgment (or *phronēsis*) should depend on the emotions following the guidance of reason in addition to responding to the right things in the right ways? Of just what kinds of judgments are the unharmonious unable to get a glimmer? It seems to me that the unharmonious will lack the kind of calculation that we saw in the puppet analogy. That is, they will be unable to judge the relative merits of pleasures and pains. They will not know that the most just life is also the most pleasant. But why does psychic dis-harmony in particular preclude such judgment?

There are two ways in which someone could fail with respect to psychic harmony as described in this passage. First, one could be stupid and not have the mental strength to perform calculations. But a stupid person might, at the same time, have well-trained emotional responses. In this case, her reason and her emotions might pull in different directions due to the weakness of the reasoning part. The emotions pull her towards the good things and the reason, not knowing any better, pulls her towards worse things. Second, a person might be smart and able to figure out all kinds of things, but have ill-trained emotions. In this case, his calculations about what is good or bad might be correct, but his emotions pull in the direction of bad things. In both of these cases a kind of ignorance is at work. In the first case, the intellect is clearly lacking and the solution is an intellectual one. In the second case, is no less a problem of ignorance. This person
lacks a kind of knowledge that can only be acquired through experience. If he did know that the things that he thinks are good bring pleasure, he would love them. Fixing this person’s ignorant state is not an intellectual matter, however, but a matter of training the emotions. For example, you will not have much success just telling someone who has not skied before about the true pleasures of skiing. You cannot expect a non-skier to really grasp the joys that come from skiing. That is only something that can be learned through the practice of skiing itself.10

So, the state of one’s character can affect one’s ability to reason appropriately in at least two ways. First, if one has not been trained to love what actually is good and hate what actually is bad, one will have a cognitive block against seeing the true nature of the good and the true nature of pleasure and pain. Second, if what a person loves and hates does not follow what his reason says is good or bad, he will be unable to develop even a “glimmer of sound judgment.”

**Self-Love**

One final point about the account of sôphrosunê in the *Laws* has to do with how this cognitive aspect of sôphrosunê plays out in the larger social context of Magnesia. Sôphrosunê seems to include a general sense of “knowing one’s place”. A citizen should know which situations or decisions he can handle on his own and which he should leave to others. In the general preamble to the legal code, the Athenian discusses the problems caused by selfishness, or self-love:

> It’s because of this same vice of self-love that stupid people are always convinced of their own shrewdness, which is why we think we know everything when we are almost
totally ignorant, so that thanks to not leaving to others what we don’t know how to handle, we inevitably come to grief when we try to tackle it ourselves. (732a4-b2)

Self-love leads to the vice of thinking you know what you do not know. And this seems especially pressing within a society such as Magnesia. The code of law makes prescriptions about how one is to live one’s life. There are guardians of the laws to help guide citizens and the nocturnal council is there to help with specialized knowledge. A citizen gets into trouble, it seems, when he relies on his own private judgments instead of adopting a life according to the code of laws, which is described as “a certain distribution of reason.” In other words, the law includes reasonable prescriptions about what one ought to do and what one ought not to do. If one’s own faculty of reasoning cannot do this job well, he should look to the reason that is inherent in the law.

What the Athenian says about self-love relates to the public aspect of sôphrosunê. Recall the puppet analogy. A person ought to follow the pull of the golden cord of reason (calculation). The Athenian notes that the golden cord is “a power which in the state is called the public law.” (1.645a1-2) A citizen ought to follow the pull of the golden cord of reason. For some this might mean following own internal reason. But more likely this means the reason inherent in the prescriptions of the code of law.

Sôphrosunê as the Mainspring of Virtue

Earnest Barker famously calls sôphrosunê “the mainspring of the Laws.” We are now in a position to understand how sôphrosunê can provide the basis for virtue as a whole. At III.696b-697c, the Athenian indicates that self-control (sôphrosunê) is a
necessary ingredient for the other virtues: courage, justice, and wisdom. We are told that courage is no good without \textit{sôphrosunê}, that justice will not spring up without it, and that neither will the “wise man...who keeps his feelings of pleasure and pain in tune with right reason and obedient to it.” (III.696c) Since the knowledge that justice is pleasant and injustice is painful depends upon having correct pre-reflective emotional responses, early education in loving the good and hating the bad plays a critical role in the development of the virtues.

\textbf{The Educational Value of \textit{Symposia}}

Given this account of \textit{sôphrosunê}, then, with its emphasis on psychic harmony and the connection between \textit{sôphrosunê} and intellectual development, how can we understand the Athenian’s claim that drinking parties are an effective means of educating adult citizens? The Athenian makes explicit that drinking wine intensifies the desires and emotions and takes away the cognitive capacities of knowledge, opinion, and memory. But drinking wine is also called a safeguard of education (II.653a). We are also told that education is a matter of correctly disciplined feelings of pleasure and pain and that throughout one’s life education can wear off or be lost altogether (II.653d).

Elizabeth Belfiore argues that what the Athenian says about drinking parties shows that \textit{sôphrosunê} in the \textit{Laws} requires constant tension between the “anti-rational” emotions and reason.\textsuperscript{15} Anti-rational emotions are those emotions that cannot be brought under the control of reason; they always oppose reason. Examples of anti-rational emotions include unnecessary desires, such as lust and gluttony. Non-rational
emotions, by contrast, are not capable of reasoning themselves, but can be brought under the control of reason. Examples of non-rational emotions include the necessary desires, such as food, drink, and sex.

According to *Laws* I-II, sôphrosunê requires “being superior to oneself” and “conquering oneself”. Belfiore takes this to mean that sôphrosunê requires the citizen to continually fight off the anti-rational emotions.

Plato’s new view that anti-rational emotion is valuable in itself depends on a new view that sôphrosunê involves constant strife… [In the *Laws*] he still believes that the best situation for individuals or cities is complete health and harmony that has never been weakened by sickness or strife, and that a restoration to health and harmony after sickness or combat is only second best. It would be foolish, Plato writes, ‘if someone should think that a sick body that has received medical purgation (catharsis) is in the best possible condition and should give no thought to the body that has no need at all for a purge’ (I.628d2-4). However, in this as in other respects, the *Laws* is concerned with what is second best. It therefore treats sôphrosunê not only as a state of health after sickness has been cured, but also as a somewhat precarious condition in which there is constant need for rehabilitation. The concept of strife is much more important in the ethical theory of the *Laws* than in that of the *Republic*. Courage is now defined as ‘combat against fears and pains and also against desires and pleasures’ (I.633c8-d3). Only the soul that successfully combats the cowardice within itself can be completely brave. Similarly, only someone who has to struggle continually against pleasure and desire can become perfect in sôphrosunê, defined not as harmony and agreement, but as ‘victory over oneself’.16

On her view, the reason that the older gentlemen (age 60 and over) of the third chorus drink wine is to restore the anti-rational emotions that they had in their youth. She claims, in the *Laws*, “a deficiency of anti-rational emotions can be as harmful as excess.”17 The anti-rational emotions are to be controlled, but continual strife and resolution constitutes psychic harmony in the *Laws*.

There are a number of reasons why I think we should reject Belfiore’s interpretation of sôphrosunê in the *Laws*. First, although the Athenian mentions a tension between rational and anti-rational forces in both of his analogies the emphasis is on
resolving that tension. The resolution seems to be more valuable than the fight. The Athenian makes the point that a civil war is worse than an external war. The warring brothers are put on friendly terms with one another and will live by regulations that keep them that way. Second, the examples of anti-rational emotions that Belfiore gives us are extreme forms of non-rational emotions. It may be true that gluttony, for example, is always unnecessary and is always unreasonable. But what is gluttony other than a version of the necessary desire for food? Gluttony is an extreme desire for food that takes the wrong foods or the wrong quantities of food as its object. So although the so-called “anti-rational” emotions are always unreasonable, it seems that there is some hope of smoothing them out and rendering them more reasonable. And this can be done without rendering the agent passionless.

It seems to me more promising to give an interpretation of the value of drinking parties for sôphrosunê that takes this virtue to be unity among the parts of the soul, rather than as requiring continuous struggle between them. In order to get clear about the way that drinking parties can be valuable in the development or maintenance of sôphrosunê understood as psychic harmony, let us first consider the effects that daily living might have on the souls of citizens of Magnesia.

In the early childhood education that citizens receive in Magnesia, the tough iron cords that represent the emotions are trained to “go after” the right sorts of objects. A citizen’s pre-reflective emotional responses should include loving the things which really are good and hating the things which really are bad. As the student progresses, ideally her loves and hates will accord with what her intellect determines to be good
things or bad things. But over time and once the student is not under the watchful eye of instructors, her pleasant and painful activities are no longer so carefully controlled and monitored by others. She may begin to find things pleasant that are contrary to the law. When she finds the wrong things pleasant or painful, we might picture what happens in the soul as the iron cords losing some of their shape. The iron emotion cords become bent and are not straightforwardly pointed towards good objects and actions, and pointed away from bad objects and actions. Due to the principle of assimilation and the colorful, but dangerous, people she meets in Magnesia her out-of-shape emotion cords will become distorted and will have a deleterious effect on her cognition.

Eventually, the malformed emotion cords pull the gentle, golden cord of calculation (which has the job of judging the relative merits of pleasure and pains) along with them. And this causes the golden cord itself to become somewhat bent and out of shape. Thus the agent no longer has the same capacities for judgment that someone with a “smooth” soul has, wherein the emotions and judgment are all pulling in the direction of the good as sanctioned by law. The agent begins to think that those things that he (erroneously) finds pleasant are good for him. Or she begins to think that justice is unpleasant and injustice pleasant. If a citizen’s capacity for judgment or calculation is perfect and her iron emotion cords always act as friends or helpers to the golden cord of calculation, this situation will not occur. But for most citizens, it seems, calculation will not be so perfect nor the emotions so perfectly well tamed. Some of their education wears off somewhat. They need routine maintenance to ensure that their emotional responses assist their rational judgments.
The worst case scenario is when a person’s wild emotions pull so hard that the delicate, golden cord of calculation “breaks”. Repeated akratic action might have this result. If the golden cord breaks, the soul has become so perverse that there is no hope of straightening it out. The person who suffers from such perversion is on the path to becoming an incurable criminal. But if we only had a way of testing the pre-reflective emotional responses of citizens and a means of early detection of problems in the soul, we could prevent the disease from taking such a serious hold.

Luckily, drinking parties can help to mend psychic short-comings in at least three ways. Drinking wine is a method of testing the soul to see whether one’s pre-reflective emotional responses have been trained well enough and have retained their shape in the face of the various temptations available in the city. The Athenian also claims that drinking wine allows the wise and sober symposiarch to give the citizen additional training to reform the emotions. And in addition, the drinking parties will serve the further function of re-inspiring appropriate emotions in citizens over sixty who, on Plato’s account, have grown cold and passionless.

Testing

In the controlled environment of the well-run drinking party we can safely test a person to see whether he has overcome the pleasures that are most pressing in his own nature, by reducing his shamelessness to the lowest possible level. At 649e-650a, the Athenian proposes two cases suggesting that there are alternate ways of testing these characters. First, consider the man with the savage temper. We could make contracts
with him to see whether he defaults on these contracts and whether he gets angry about it. This would be a way of testing him through a temptation that he is especially susceptible to. Second, consider the person who is dominated by sexual lust. The legislator could test him by putting the lustful man in charge of the legislator’s own wife and children, to see whether he would be overcome by the temptation. But both of these scenarios are very dangerous. In the context of the drinking party we can see whether someone who has a reputation for having a temper becomes angry when provoked and we can see whether someone who is naturally lustful acts inappropriately when tempted by beauty in a way that is safe, regulated, and overseen by a wise and sober symposiarch. Under the influence of wine, a person becomes bold, shameless, and loses his reason. Drinking wine gives the symposiarch more or less direct access to the character of the drinkers. Observing a citizen while drunk and in the presence of temptation will tell us whether his pre-reflective emotional responses will be the ones that are sanctioned by law.

In addition, by comparing the way that a citizen acts and responds to temptation when in possession of his reasoning faculties with the way that he acts and responds when he is out of his mind with drink, we can tell something about the harmony in his soul between his reason and his emotions. Are all of the cords that make up his motivational structure pulling in the same direction? Or do his emotions pull the puppet-agent in one direction, while the calculation cord pulls in another? The symposiarch will observe the citizen to see whether he likes the same things when wine takes away his capacity for reason as he likes when in full possession of his faculties. If
he does like the same things, this is good evidence that the reason and emotions are in tune. If he does not like the same things, this is evidence that his reason and emotions are out of tune.18

Training

Now it seems that those who pass the initial, testing phase of the drinking parties will have no need for further training. Those who pass the test have shown that their desires and fears are in line with what really is good and bad. But there are others who will fail this test. The Athenian notes that the effects of early education can wear off over time and in some cases are lost altogether (II.653d). In order to restore the psychic harmony that has been lost, one must struggle against those temptations.

A man has to fight and conquer his feelings of cowardice before he can achieve perfect courage; if he has no experience and training in that kind of struggle, he will never more than half realize his potentialities for virtue. Isn’t the same true of self-control? Will he ever achieve a perfect mastery here without having fought and conquered, with all the skills of speech and action both in work and play, the crowd of pleasures and desires that stimulate him to act shamelessly and unjustly? (I.647c10-d7)

Those who need this kind of routine maintenance with respect to character training must face and conquer those temptations. What Cleinias and Megillus have proposed all along is that drink should not be permitted because it can lower a citizen’s state of shame and increases his desires. But the Athenian suggests that these incorrect loves and hates should be brought out into the light of day so that they can be fought, conquered, and re-molded. The temptations and desires that come out when someone “fails” the drinking test and “becomes a different sort of person” (I.648e) are bad elements that are already present in the soul. Drinking wine shows that these elements
are there and at the same time removes the reasoning faculty, returning the drinker to a childlike state where formation of the character is possible.

The methods for this training are to include encouraging, rebuking, rewarding, and punishing the drinker until he becomes “in every respect the kind of man you want.” (I.648c) The idea seems to be that we take away the citizen’s rational capacity and incite the passions. Under the influence of drink the lustful become more lustful; the gluttonous become more gluttonous. The symposiarch will then use the method of punishment and reward to train the citizen to associate pleasure with good things and characters and to associate pain with bad things and characters. In this way, he will come to have the appropriate emotional responses; he will come to love the good and hate the bad.

But why should one have to return to the childlike state that drinking induces in order to be retrained in this way? The fact that drinking takes away the cognitive faculties is critical to the Athenian’s case. This person’s early education has “worn off” somewhat; he has been exposed to various kinds of shady characters that he has met in the city. By the principle of assimilation, the idea that some unjust characters and actions are actually pleasant has taken root in his soul. This kind of belief forms the sort of cognitive block that we saw occurring in the enemy of justice (II.663b-c). Injustice looks pleasant to him and justice looks unpleasant. And this kind of cognitive error cannot be corrected through arguments and explanations about the good: one must be shown that the life of justice is the most pleasant life. Or, at very least, one must be taught to see the life of justice as the most pleasant life. And in order to do this, the
cognitive block must first be removed by getting rid of the cognitive faculty altogether, so that the symposiarch has “direct access” to the character. The drinker’s own faculty of reason has gone astray and so he ought to follow the reason of the wise and sober symposiarch. Fighting against the bad tendencies in the soul will allow one to enjoy greater psychic harmony in the future either by getting the emotions to live in willing obedience to reason, or by restoring the parts of the soul to friendship.

**Re-Inspiring Good Pleasures: Once More, With Feeling**

Drinking wine has an additional function in connection with the development and maintenance of *sôphrosunê*. The members of the “third chorus” are to drink wine in order to prepare for their performances. The members of this chorus will be citizens age sixty and older who will tell stories and sing songs about noble characters. These distinguished gentlemen will have much to teach the younger citizens about good characters. The one problem is that those over sixty have grown sober and crabby, and have developed a hard cast of mind (II.665d-e, 666b-c). This makes it more difficult for them to muster the necessary enthusiasm to sing songs in public. Earlier in the text the Athenian takes appropriate emotional responses to be the mark of good musical education and the mark of effectiveness as a chorus member.

Now then, take a man whose opinion about what is good is correct (it really *is* good), and likewise in the case of the bad (it really *is* bad), and follows this judgment in practice. He may be able to represent, by word and gesture, and with invariable success, his intellectual conception of what is good, even though he gets no pleasure from it and feels no hatred for what is bad. Another man may not be very good at keeping on the right lines when he uses his body and his voice to represent the good, or at trying to form some intellectual conception of it; but he may be very much on the right lines in his feelings of pleasure and pain, because he welcomes what is good and loathes what is
bad. Which of these two will be the better educated musically, and the more effective member of a chorus?

Cleinias: As far as education is concerned, sir, the second is infinitely superior. (654c2-d4)

So the members of the third chorus, having grown hard and cold with age, will need to be re-inspired to associate the correct feelings with the correct things or characters. They may know very well which things are good and which are bad, but it is important that they also have the feelings that ought to be associated with these things.

Drinking wine re-inspires the older, passionless citizens to correct feelings of pleasure in the good. (Of course, if it should be revealed that some members of the third chorus have those bad elements of character that come out when drinking wine, then a wise and sober symposiarch should reform those passions prior to the chorus going on stage (II.671b-d).) Thus, Plato emphasizes the role of the emotions in the sôphrôn life. It is not enough for the emotions to be absent. It is not enough for one to be free of wild emotional responses that pull one towards the bad pleasures. Sôphrosunê requires the participation of the emotions. Having appropriate emotional responses is an indispensable part of sôphrosunê.

Other Benefits of Drinking Parties

In addition to testing, training, and re-inspiring one’s pre-reflective emotional responses, there are other benefits of well-run drinking parties. Two of these additional benefits relate sôphrosunê in the individual to a well-run and harmonized society at large. First, recall that one way in which citizens might go terribly wrong is by having an abundance of self-love. When a citizen is taken over by self-love, he thinks that he
knows what he doesn’t know and tends to think that he can handle making decisions for himself that are better left to someone else. The participants in drinking parties become accustomed to taking direction from the symposiarch. Having their own capacity for reason taken away, they must rely on the external reason that comes from the symposiarch’s guidance. This is important because citizens of Magnesia will have to rely on the law as a distribution of reason and on the commands and directions of the guardians of the laws and other officials. Drinking parties give people practice in taking direction from someone else.

The second additional benefit of well-run drinking parties has to do with the feelings of friendship that will develop among the drinkers. At II.671e-672a the Athenian points out that in the raucous drinking parties that often happen nowadays without guidance and rules the drinkers go away loathing each other and feeling embarrassed about their poor behavior. Drinkers will go away from a well-run drinking party, on the other hand, on better terms with each other than they were before. So, not only will the elements in the souls of the individual participants be better off in terms of harmony and friendship than they were before due to the training of drinking parties, but the elements of the city, the participants themselves, will also be better off – more harmonized and friendly towards one another.

Conclusion

In the *Laws*, the Athenian sets out a plan of education for children that is meant to align their feelings of pleasure and pain with what truly is good and to maintain that
initial, early education through drinking parties. The Athenian notes that over time the early education of the character that citizens receive can wear off or be lost altogether. Drinking parties serve to illuminate bad elements that may develop in the soul and make the soul as malleable for reformation as it was in childhood. This allows the citizens to have the full measure of sôphrosunê and to have a well-functioning faculty of calculation which has the task of judging the relative merits of pleasures and pains. Some truths are inaccessible to those who do not have the appropriate experience, and the appropriate emotional responses. For example, the person who has not practiced just behaviors cannot know that justice is pleasant. Finally, the fact that even the third chorus of distinguished, elderly gentlemen will drink wine in order to stir up the emotions shows that the emotions are an essential part of virtue in general, and of sôphrosunê in particular.
"Sôphrosunê" is often translated as “moderation” or “temperance”. But, as is often the case with Greek terms, this translation is not entirely accurate. The Greek term “sôphrosunê” has a somewhat wider meaning than the English “moderation”. Sôphrosunê indicates not only moderation with respect to food and drink, but also includes the ideas of restraint, self-knowledge, and “knowing one’s place”.

The problem of who is it that intervenes in the motivational structure that is meant to explain the agent himself points to a general problem with explaining human motivation via agent-like parts of the soul. For more on this issue see Christopher Bobonich “Akrasia and Agency in Plato’s Laws and Republic,” Archiv fur Geschichte des Philosophy 76 (1994): 3-36.

3 Cf. Republic IV.

The Athenian concedes that the life of virtue will not be a life of great pleasures. But the life of virtue will not include great pains either. The life of virtue keeps us on an even keel. The virtuous person will experience small pleasures and only small pains. But, on balance, the modest pleasures will outweigh the pains in the life of virtue (V.732e-734e).

Dramatic or musical performances which are meant to help inculcate correct feelings of pleasure and pain in children may also have the effect of maintaining or continuing to develop correct feelings in adults as well.

For more on mimetic education in Greek culture and in Plato’s corpus see Ruby Blondell, The Play of Character in Plato’s Dialogues (Cambridge, 2002) especially, 80-113.

The testing aspect of drinking parties will also give us some insight into whether a citizen’s character has shifted from his childhood training at all.

Cf. the discussion of judging dramatic competition 658eff.

The Athenian follows up his argument that the just life is the pleasant life by claiming that even if the argument had turned out differently one would be justified in telling a lie to this effect. Nevertheless, the Athenian seems perfectly convinced that the just life is pleasant.


The code of laws has something to say about almost every aspect of a citizen’s life. The code of laws prescribes certain religious beliefs, tells citizens how to eat, when to marry, when and how to have children and how many children to have, how to exercise, what plays to see, what songs to sing, etc. So the citizens will not lack for advice.

See, for example, 714a.
For the sake of completeness, a person ought to follow the reason of the guardians of the laws and other officials as well. Later on in the text, the Athenian notes that there are “unwritten rules” presented to the citizens via the guidance of the guardians.

Earnest Barker, *Greek Political Theory* (Barnes and Noble, 1918) 343-345, Barker claims that sôphrosunê is the chief virtue of the *Laws* in the way that justice is the chief virtue in the *Republic*.


Note that in the *Symposium*, Socrates is said to be immune to the influence of wine. (See, e.g., *Symp.* 176c, 214a) This suggests that Socrates’ character is so firm that what he loves and hates while sober are the same things that he loves and hates when drinking.