From Charioteer Myth to Shoulder Angel: A Rhetorical Look at Our Divided Soul

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Abstract
This paper connects the charioteer myth from Plato’s Phaedrus to the modern trope of the shoulder angel and shoulder devil. By first exploring the meaning behind Plato’s rhetorical use of the divided soul, and then comparing that to other uses—using the Katha Upanishad, the Bhagavad Gita, the Book of Ezekiel, Cherokee legend, Tarot cards, Freudian psychology, and modern sitcoms—this paper answers the question: Why do we keep reinventing the chariot? That is to say, why do we keep finding new rhetorical ways to represent the struggle within ourselves? We keep coming back to Plato without realizing that we are still trying to represent the same decision-making process that Plato outlined more than two millennia ago. This paper argues ultimately that the recurrence of the divided soul in our rhetoric may just be a way of policing our moral choices, subjecting ourselves to Foucauldian binary branding and our own personal panopticon.

In the Simpsons episode “The Frying Game” (Swartzwelder & Polcino, 2002), Homer accidentally kills the endangered screamapillar living in his backyard, and out of thin air pops a small devil on one shoulder, a small angel on the other. They try to influence his choice, for bad (to hide the body) and for good (not), respectively. In the episode “We’re on the Road to D’ohwhere” (Curran & Kruse, 2006), Homer instead has “Strict Homer” who looks like a futuristic police officer, and “Fun Homer,” who looks more like a clown. Still, these are smaller versions of Homer, not just abstract representations of angels and devils and police officers and clowns. Each one, rather, is a miniature simulacrum of the character in question, aspects of self that serve to direct our actions within moralistic bounds.

The shoulder angel and shoulder devil are not exclusive visuals to The Simpsons. In the Looney Toons short, “Daffy Duck Hunt” (Selzer & McKimson, 1949), for example, Barnyard Dawg must weigh whether or not to free Daffy
Duck from his master’s freezer, and his shoulder devil and shoulder angel come into play. In “Scaredy Cat” (Selzer & Jones, 1948), Sylvester the cat has only an angel version of himself show up, reminding him of how Porky Pig feeds him and mice are smaller than he is so he should go save his master from the murderous mice. Nor is this an exclusive visual to animation; live actions television shows have used the shoulder angel and shoulder devil for a quick laugh as well. For example, *Married with Children* gave Kelly Bundy’s boyfriend Vinnie his own version of this modern Freudian trio in the episode “Oldies But Young ‘Uns” (Leavitt et al, 1991). However, both his angel and his devil tell him to go for it. The sitcom *Herman’s Head* (Babcock et al, 1991-1994) complicated this further, giving the protagonist Herman Brooks not simply an angel and a devil but four separate aspects of his psyche that viewers got to see compete for control over Herman’s actions. In the opening sequence, they introduce themselves:

Genius: I’m Herman’s intellect. Without me, he couldn’t hold his job, pay his rent or ties his shoes.

Angel: I’m Herman’s sensitivity. Without me, he wouldn’t feel tenderness, honesty or love—the good things in life.

Wimp: I’m Herman’s anxiety and I keep him out of trouble. And, believe me, there’s trouble everywhere.

Animal: I’m Herman’s lust. Without me, he’d miss out on all the good stuff—you know, fun, food, babes.

Narrator: Sometimes they agree. Usually they don’t. But this struggle is going on inside all of us. (Guerdat et al, 1991)

*The Simpsons, Looney Toons, Married with Children, Herman’s Head*—these shows and others offer us a modern incarnation of the same dispute within the human soul that we see in the charioteer myth from Plato’s *Phaedrus*. This “psychological theater” involves “ideas and affects acting out a drama of universal significance in the mind” (Milowicki & Wilson, 1995, p. 225).

We can relate to Plato’s metaphor because we experience every day the struggle it depicts (though perhaps not on such a divine or literal level). The idea of the divided soul, however, is not unique to Plato; while the description in *Phaedrus* may be an exquisite bit of imagery, it is not original, nor has it remained exclusively with Plato. It is important that we continue to study Plato’s use of the divided soul and also to explore the divided soul as rhetorical symbol outside of Plato because a) we keep coming back to it in one form or another, and b) it does represent a process universal to us all. Reeve (1988) calls Plato’s
divided soul a “theory of the psyche” that is “among the greatest philosophies of mind, and one from which we can still learn” (quoted in Miller, 2005, p. 169). The following essay will first explore Plato’s rhetorical use of the divided soul, then provide examples of other rhetorical approaches to the same before finally answering the question: Why do we keep reinventing the chariot? That is to say, why do we keep finding new rhetorical ways to represent the struggle within ourselves?

Plato’s Charioteer
Let us take a look at Plato’s charioteer myth from *Phaedrus*, so it can serve as a baseline by which to measure other rhetorical representations of the divided soul. We cannot simply approach Plato directly, so let us also look at what scholars have said about Plato’s charioteer myth. In *Phaedrus*, Plato presents the soul as a concrete, understandable metaphor. He presents a composite figure, “a pair of winged horses and a charioteer” (Plato, 2009, p. 202). Frede (1978) suggests that Plato “treats the soul as substance” (p. 33). That is, for Plato the soul is necessarily understood as a real, substantial thing, even if we may want to understand this composite figure as a hypothetical construct. Plato’s concern in *Phaedrus* is to explain a philosophical Truth, with a capital T, about the human soul. It does not matter how literally we understand the charioteer myth (or any of the other rhetorical uses of the divided soul explored below) because the implications end up the same; this psychic division reveals a process common to us all.

Plato describes the chariot and its horses in detail:

> Of the nature of the soul, though her true form be ever a theme of large and more than mortal discourse, let me speak briefly, and in a figure. And let the figure be composite—a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. Now the winged horses and the charioteers of the gods are all of them noble and of noble descent, but those of other races are mixed; the human charioteer drives his in a pair; and one of them is noble and of noble breed, and the other is ignoble and of ignoble breed; and the driving of them of necessity gives a great deal of trouble to him. (Plato, 2009, p. 202)

The journey of a god’s soul is smooth, pulled by two horses of “noble descent,” but for man, his soul chariot is pulled by a black horse “of ignoble breed” and a white horse “of noble breed.” This provides a clear and simple metaphor. Man’s soul is divided; he struggles every day with his decisions. The black horse represents our baser appetites. As Endres (2012) tells us, “The black horse
represents *epithumia*, which includes selfishness and sexual gratification” (p. 154). The black horse pulls naturally toward the material world below. The white horse represents our noble urges, our “good conduct” (Endres, 2012, p. 154). The white horse pulls naturally upward toward the divine. Plato returns to his description of the horses with more detail:

The right-hand horse is upright and cleanly made; he has a lofty neck and an aquiline nose; his colour is white, and his eyes dark; he is a lover of honour and modesty and temperance, and the follower of true glory; he needs no touch of the whip, but is guided by word and admonition only. The other is a crooked lumbering animal, put together anyhow; he has a short thick neck; he is flat-faced and of a dark colour, with grey eyes and blood-red complexion; the mate of insolence and pride, shag-eared and deaf, hardly yielding to whip and spur. (Plato, 2009, p. 206)

Buccioni (2002) tells us that the white horse is “never headstrong. It neither craves power nor victory, but follows obediently. It is a stable force by its very nature” (p. 343). In presenting this stable and cooperative horse, needing “no touch of the whip,” Plato is suggesting that our souls are naturally inclined toward the Good. Schiltz (2006) agrees, suggesting that the chariot’s wings indicate a “unity toward a common, ‘natural’ goal” for the entire trio, “as the natural function of a wing” is to fly (p. 456).

Still, the charioteer must rein in both horses, “producing in the soul an equilibrium between the opposing tendencies of restraint, represented by the white horse, and bold movement, represented by the black horse” (Belfiore, 2006, p. 187). However, Restraint and boldness are not necessarily good and bad traits, respectively. Both are useful, which Uebersax (2007) tells us is key to understanding how Plato’s triumvirate does not correlate properly to the Freudian trio of *id*, *ego*, and *superego*. Uebersax (2007) does say, “Plato’s model naturally invites [the] comparison” to Freud, however. The black horse and Freud’s *id* are “the most closely corresponding parts” according to Uebersax, “correspond[ing] to appetites, concupiscence, and bodily desires and lusts. In Platonic psychology, this part of the soul is called the *epithumetikon.*”

The question arises: is the charioteer a separate construct within the soul, or our consciousness weighing a binary division of good and bad? Endres (2012) tells us that “the charioteer embodies reason and the love of wisdom” (p. 154). This embodiment implies a third part of the soul, not the decision maker but another piece of the tripartite soul. However, Endres continues: “The black and white horses are waging a continual war.” This would imply that the charioteer
is a separate entity, controlling as he may the two horses. Uebersax (2007) tells us that the charioteer is logistikon, “associated with Reason and the reasoning element of the mind,” and he “corresponds to the Freudian ego [though] Plato’s charioteer has a more definite goal and destiny: to direct the chariot to the heights of heaven and beyond, there to behold ‘divine sights.’” Uebersax (2007) makes a distinction between the charioteer and Freud’s ego, then, in that the ego exists “specifically to broker disputes between the id and superego;” there is no notion of an external goal in Freud’s model. Additionally, Plato never suggests that one would be better off without the black horse. While there is a clear goal and the charioteer is in charge, “he would be powerless without the strength of [both] desires/horses” (Schiltz, 2006, p. 457). The white horse only “roughly corresponds to the Freudian super-ego” (Uebersax, 2007, emphasis in original). This horse represents thumos, and Uebersax says, “Modern man has no concept of thumos.” He cites lines from Hamlet to demonstrate thumos:

   Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
   And by opposing, end them.

“That second option,” Uebersax says, “opposing the sea of troubles to end them, the heroic response—that’s thumos.” Miller (2005) suggests the white horse represents aspiration. This is certainly a far less negative meaning than Belfiore’s (2006) restraint.

Plato’s rhetorical notion of the tripartite soul “has had a long after-life” (Miller, 2005, p. 1). Nonetheless, the study keeps returning to Plato instead of moving forward (or backward), as if Plato created the concept rather than just described it. Miller (2005), citing Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, published in 1905, and The Ego and the Id, published in 1923, explains further: While Aristotle quarreled with the precise notion of “parts,” he nonetheless developed a psychological theory according to which the soul had three. Augustine adopted Plato’s soul for the most part, adapting it to Pauline Christianity, and thus substituting one part for another: Will (voluntas) for Aspiration (τὸ θυμοειδὲς). Aquinas later assumed Augustine’s scheme, but returned psychology to the Aristotelian idiom. In the modern period, the tripartite soul seemed for a long time to disappear; that is, until Freud, who referred to “the Divine Plato,” revived it in his so-called structural theory. Although psychoanalysts have since qualified this structural theory in many ways, most of them accept its tripartite cast all the same. There is therefore an
embattled but nonetheless vigorous tradition of tripartite psychology—practical as well as theoretical—whose distant ancestor is Plato’s *Republic*. (p. 1)

**The Charioteer Around the World**

This notion of the divided soul did not originate with Plato. Wilhelm (1982) tells us that “the image of the chariot and its mastery by the charioteer had long been used for describing the qualities and skills associated with a leader” and “the inability to control the chariot had long been a metaphor for the lack of rational control over the emotions” (p. 217). Uebersax (2007) tells us that “the myth... was ancient even for [Plato], perhaps coming from Egypt or Mesopotamia.” Slaveva-Griffin (2003) compares Plato’s charioteer to that in Parmenides’ *Proem*, which uses the charioteer’s journey as that of a “young philosopher beyond sense-perceptible reality to the realm of eternal existence” (p. 227). Slaveva-Griffin (2003) also references the chariot-rides of gods and men in the *Iliad*, the personal quest of Telemachus searching for his long-missing father and for social approval to restore the wealth of Odysseus’ household, the aggressive impetus of passionate love depicted in Sappho’s image of golden Aphrodite ruling the hearts of mortals while flying on winged chariots across the heavens, [and] Pindar’s chariot of the Muses celebrating Epharmostos’ Olympic victory. (p. 231).

Schiltz (2006) makes extensive comparison between Plato’s chariot myth and that in the Hindu *Katha Upanishad*, as does Uebersax (2007). In the *Katha Upanishad*, we are told, “Know the Self to be the master of the chariot, and the body to be the chariot. Know the intellect to be the charioteer, and the mind to be the reins” (quoted in Uebersax, 2007). Additionally, Uebersax makes comparison to Prince Arjuna’s chariot ride in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the vision of God in the Book of Ezekiel (which Uebersax specifically notes as being written “roughly 200 years before Plato’s *Phaedrus*”). In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna is joined in his chariot by Krishna. As Bowen (2012) describes it,

This is where many believe the allegory and metaphor of the Bhagavad Gita come into play. Lord Krishna presents himself as a non-combatant. Although he is on Arjuna’s side (and has not yet revealed himself as God), he cannot fight on Arjuna’s behalf. Arjuna, like all of us, must face this life and its challenges on our [sic] own... That isn’t to say that the divine is not with us. Lord Krishna shows us here that God is always there to support and guide us even through the most perilous episodes of our lives, but we cannot expect
him to do for us what we ourselves are meant for. Arjuna, then, represents all of us as we struggle with who we are, what we are meant for—our purpose. Lord Krishna represents the voice of insight, inspiration, divine guidance, our highest self or conscience.

Arjuna, upon discovering the identity of his companion, falls to Krishna’s feet on the battlefield to beg for guidance. Bowen (2012) tells us, “no matter what is happening around you, it is never folly to bring yourself to supplication and prayer/meditation/contemplation.” This is much like the charioteer, who might attain “any vision of truth in company with a god” (Plato, 2009, p. 203); the mortal is ever seeking the divine, seeking the Good. What matters most is that this seeking is conscious as much as unconscious.

In Tarot cards, “The Chariot represents conquest, victory and overcoming opposition through your confidence and control,” and the charioteer here “holds no reins... He controls through strength of will” (Esselmont, 2003). Waite (1911), who helped design one of the most common versions of this card, tells us that The Chariot is “conquest on all planes—in the mind, in science, in progress, in certain trials of initiation... He is above all things triumph in the mind.” The card can also mean you need to “come to terms with your own aggressive impulses” (Esselmont, 2013).

These are the same impulses represented by Plato’s two horses. The vehicle in Ezekiel, like the Thoth Tarot’s version of the Chariot, is pulled by “four living creatures.” As the Tarot card of The Chariot often depicts a chariot pulled by two horses or sphinxes, the Thoth version of the Tarot has four creatures, representing the four elements. Uebersax (2007) describes the four creatures of Ezekiel, “each with four faces: human, lion, bull, and eagle. Each figure was also associated with wings, as well as ‘wheels within wheels’, conveying the idea of movement.” He cites Saint Jerome’s Commentary on Ezekiel in suggesting that

the human face corresponds to the Platonic logistikon, the soul’s reasoning faculty (i.e., the Phaedrus’ charioteer); the lion to Plato’s thumos element (white horse); and the bull to concupiscence, epithumia (dark horse)... The eagle, however, has no obvious counterpart in Plato’s psychology or chariot analogy. [Saint] Jerome, picking an eagle’s keen vision as the defining attribute, saw it as representing a transcendent part of the psyche, something that hovers above the others, able to scrutinize and discern things. (Uebersax, 2007)

Saint Jerome links this “transcendent part” of the story to the guidance of Christ, or Krishna riding with Prince Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. It is worth
noting that the creatures in Ezekiel and on the Thoth Tarot’s version of The Chariot nearly correspond to Herman’s Head’s chorus—the reasoning human to Genius, the concupiscent bull to Animal, and the transcendent eagle to Angel; the heroic lion, though, does not correspond to Herman’s Wimp aspect.

Stepping away from chariots, this binary of influences can be seen in the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil versus the Tree of life in the Biblical Garden of Eden, or the presence of a personal guardian angel in popular Christianity or the similar qareen in Islam. However, the same division exists outside Western cultures. For example, Dorian (2009) makes the link between Plato’s chariot myth and a Native American myth:

One evening, an elderly Cherokee brave told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, “my son, the battle is between two ‘wolves’ inside us all. One is evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith. The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: “Which wolf wins?” The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one that you feed.” (Tale of Two Wolves, 2011).

The first wolf is ignoble, like the black horse, the second good like the white horse. This much is obvious. The ideas are similar even though they come from separate cultural traditions. The key distinction comes in the end. While feeding the wolf is figurative, it is notable that the Phaedrus charioteer, while “putting up his horses at the stall, gives them [both] ambrosia to eat and nectar to drink” (Plato, 2009, p. 203). Plato’s charioteer feeds both of his horses. He does not favor one over the other. To lift up the “heavy burden” of the chariot, “both [sets of] wings must have the same force” (Endres, 2012, p. 157). Both of the horses are useful because it takes both horses to power the charioteer’s journey.

The Binary Division of Good and Evil
But why are there two? On the one hand, Foucault might suggest that this is just binary branding, but such branding involves authority “exercising individual control” (Foucault, 1979, p. 199). Foucault is talking about standards put upon us by outside forces, primarily. However, I argue, the same binary division can exist within us, put upon ourselves to make sense of the world. The kinds of rules that come from Foucault’s “discursive formation” determine what we say and what we do. Foucault (1979) describes “a double mode; that of binary
division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal); and that of coercive assignment, of differential distribution (who he is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized show a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way” (p. 199). Imagine now that we might coerce ourselves into believing that the things we do are normal or abnormal, dangerous or harmless, good or bad. The question then becomes, why would we use a binary division to weigh our actions and survey ourselves?

As described above, the divided soul can be depicted in many ways, and not always in pairs. Much like the vehicle in Ezekiel or the Thoth Tarot or Herman’s Head, this internal battle can involve more than just a duo or trio of players. Milowicki and Wilson (1995) suggest Prudentius’ Psychomachia as a template for this “allegorical vision of struggle within the human soul” (p. 225). In Psychomachia, the struggle is “between such virtues as Faith, Patience, and Good Works and such vices as Pride, Deceit, and Heresy” (Milowicki & Wilson, 1995, p. 225). Much like Herman’s Head (1991-1994), we get more than just good and bad influence. For Herman, his influences are his lusts personified in the overweight Animal; his sensitivities by Angel, the only female; his anxieties by nerdy Wimp; and his intellect by prim and proper Genius. Arguably, Herman’s chorus is closer to Plato’s triumvirate than Prudentius’ collection. Genius often plays the part of the mediator between the other three, like the charioteer driving his horses.

So, why is the binary pairing of good and bad the more common rhetorical representation of our inner struggle? I offer that it could be our internalization of outside control. If we are told by our myths that choosing the good leads to reward and choosing the bad leads to punishment, then we will operate as if these ideas are Truth. And, there are two options because that is a reasonable demarcation, easily understood, easily believed and easily taught to others. Foucault (1979) tells us,

It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised on those punished—and, in a more general way, on those one supervises, trains and corrects, over madmen, children at home and at school, the colonized, over those who are stuck at a machine and supervised for the rest of their lives. This is the historical reality of this soul, which, unlike the soul represented by Christian theology, is not born in sin and subject to punishment, but is
born rather out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint. (p. 29)

Foucault is in the process of exploring punishment as he writes this, but the idea that the soul—especially, Plato’s tripartite version of it—is created in our homes and in our schools as we are taught right from wrong is compelling. We can then understand the soul as a construct, and we take part in its construction just as the authorities around us do. If we combine Foucault’s take on the soul with Plato’s version in *Phaedrus*, we can come to an interesting understanding of why we may believe in a simplistic binary of good and bad rather than a more nuanced spectrum of possibilities. For Foucault (1979), the soul inhabits each of us and “brings [us] into existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body” (p. 30). That is to say, if we *do* operate as if our soul is a division between the good influence and the bad influence pulling us toward the heavens or toward the ground, then we accept *forward*. Taken literally, Plato’s charioteer drives forward; sure, there is up or down, but there is no right or left, there is no turning backward. There is but one choice: white or black, good or bad. The charioteer may feed both of his horses, but ultimately, if he wants to reach the Beauty and Truth he has glimpsed in the heavens, he must choose the white horse just as the Cherokee grandson must feed the good wolf, just as Herman Brooks must choose Angel over Animal, just as Homer Simpson must choose his shoulder angel over his shoulder devil.

On a rhetorical level, we must keep coming back to this representation because it is the easiest way for us to reify our sense of the world. The good/bad binary, however it is represented, delineates our actions into categories of what is acceptable or unacceptable, and this positions us within or without the society around us. McGee (1980) writes, “Human beings are ‘conditioned,’ not directly to belief and behavior, but to a vocabulary of concepts that function as guides, warrants, reasons, or excuses for behavior and belief” (p. 6). In the construction of our soul, then, we are limited by the terms we are given; the binary division provides simple, memorable terms. Dorian (2009) calls this “a fair assessment of human nature.” He writes, “Humanity, it seems, has a ‘good side’ and a ‘bad side.’ And it is up to our own rationality to keep them both (namely the bad side/dark horse) in check.” Plato, writing *Gorgias*, might agree, as he argues that “in fact there’s nothing worse than doing wrong” (Plato, 2008, 469b). Whether we agree with Plato or not, we choose to do right. Or, so we want to assume; we prefer the idea that we
choose what we do, and invariably we choose what is *good*, for *us* if not for the world.

It is possible that all of this—the charioteer, the shoulder angel, the two wolves—is just our own internal panopticon keeping us in line because we want to believe there will be some measure put to our choices in the future. Foucault (1979) suggests that we—he refers to “the inmate” but the effect is the same—“must never know whether [we are] being looked at at any moment; but [we] must be sure that [we] may always be so” (p. 201). The only reason to ever choose between the good horse and the bad horse, the good wolf and the bad wolf, the shoulder angel and the shoulder devil is that we believe in the existence of moral rightness. This belief presumes that our actions will be weighed by, if not a God or gods, then by the society around us. The good/bad binary keeps us in line because we believe one option is the correct one. Foucault’s (1979) “guarantee of order” comes from the “invisibility” inherent in narrowing down the panoply of real choices we have to an obvious, and omnipresent, two.

On a personal level, we need our choices to be good or bad, because then anything that isn’t strictly *bad* must be good, and anything that someone else might do that we don’t consider strictly *good* must be bad. This provides us the agency—or at least the illusion of it—to decide who is good and who is bad. Recall the quotation from the *Katha Upanishad* above: “Know the Self to be the master of the chariot, and the body to be the chariot. Know the intellect to be the charioteer, and the mind to be the reins.” As long as we can believe that we are the masters of our own chariots and that we have the intellect to choose between the good and the bad options, we will feel a sense of control over our lives and not that we are simply responding to the possibility that we are being watched. And, as long as we can keep representing this binary in our stories, we can assume the idea to be universal and timeless and, thus, correct.

In conclusion, the shoulder angel and shoulder devil, like the ones we see in *The Simpsons*, are an even clearer take on the divided soul. This version of the divided soul is simplistic, and deliberately so; it is specifically aimed at an audience that includes children. Gerbner et al (1986) argue that “Television cultivates from infancy the very predispositions and preferences that used to be acquired from other ‘primary’ sources” (p. 18). Television—cartoons especially—provide us with the same moral lessons, presented as entertainment, that old mythologies once did. Gerbner et al continue: “The illumination of the invisible relationship of life and society has always been the principal function of story telling. Television today serves that function” (p. 18).
Television reinforces the binary division of good and evil. But, not every moral decision we make can be boiled down to the good option or the bad option. Reality has far more nuance than we find in cartoons. Williams (2009) tells us that “the true nature of the soul is beyond ‘mortal discourse,’ and he is reduced to relying on a poetic allegory” (p. 192). This allegory puts into simple terms a complicated idea. One of the virtues of Plato’s version is that it is simple to understand but still “gives us a tangible framework for considering a complex idea and to reflect on it” (Uebersax, 2007).

Ultimately, it does not matter how literally we take the details of the chariot myth, whichever version. Plato did not even use it consistently; his Phaedo “assumes that the soul is simple, or non-composite” (Miller, 2005, p. 3). Figuratively, the vision of the soul chariot, the wolves battling within us, the “chorus” of Herman’s Head, as well as the shoulder angel and shoulder devil of Homer Simpson et al, each represent a way to measure the conflict we face when making moral and ethical decisions. These myths show us “direction towards greater immediacy of experience, inner and outer; greater clarity of mind; greater connection to reality; the ‘pure experience’ of the here and now” (Uebersax, 2007, emphasis in original). In other words, each of these myths can simply be taken as representing a psychological process universal to us all. And, we make them our own. As Mary Renault’s protagonist realizes upon reading Phaedrus in her novel, The Charioteer:

In his imagination the pages were printed not with their own paragraphs only, but with all that he himself had brought to them: it seemed as though he must be identified and revealed in them, beyond all pretense of detachment, as if they were a diary to which he had committed every secret of his heart. (quoted in Endres, 2012, p. 154)

Ultimately, we all have some knowledge of what is good and what is bad. Regardless of how that knowledge has been constructed within us, we must weigh all of our options before deciding how to act. We must decide which horse to urge on, which wolf to feed, whether we listen to the angel on one shoulder or the devil on the other. In the end, these binaries don’t matter, though; what matters is the decision that we make.

References


