

INCONTINENCE AND DESIRE IN PLATO'S TRIPARTITE PSYCHOLOGY

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In Book IV of *The Republic*, Plato attempts to demonstrate that the soul is composed of three parts: an appetitive part, an emotional part, and a rational part.¹ In what follows, an attempt is made to answer three questions concerning this demonstration. First, I ask whether Plato uses this distinction to argue for the possibility of incontinence in Book IV. On this point, I conclude that Plato is not interested in proving the possibility of incontinence. Second, I consider whether Plato intends for this division to be taken literally or metaphorically. I contend that he meant it literally. Finally, I ask whether Plato's argument succeeds in supporting the conclusion that the soul is literally divided into parts. I try to show that the answer to this question is 'no'. Here, I will argue that Plato's argument is unconvincing because it relies on the claim that an individual may experience opposite desires. I doubt that this is the case, and I will offer alternative explanations of scenarios in which we might be inclined to attribute opposing desires to the same individual. Before any of these questions is considered; however, we must first consider Plato's argument.

¹ T. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 192. Because it is not crucial to my concerns, I will accept Irwin's divisions and forego any critical analysis of this point. See also, T. Penner, "Thought and Desire in Plato," in *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by G. Vlastos (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), pp. 103–107. All quotations from the Platonic corpus are taken from Allan Bloom (trans.), *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1968) if from *The Republic* or from H. Cairns and E. Hamilton (editors), *Plato: Collected Dialogues* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961) if from dialogues other than *The Republic*.

Plato's Argument for the Divided Soul

The following propositions constitute a trimmed-down version of Plato's argument for the partitioning of the soul. This formulation of the argument is taken from Penner's article "Thought and Desire in Plato".²

- [1] A desire for *X* is a positive impulse towards *X*, and a desire for non-*X* is a negative impulse towards *X*. (Derived from *Rep.*, 437b4–d)
- [2] It is impossible for one and the same thing simultaneously to have (a) a positive impulse towards *X* and (b) a negative impulse towards *X*, where *X* is construed in the same way. (Derived from *Rep.*, 436b3–c1)
- [3] The soul is a thing
- [4] The soul sometimes desires to drink (due to appetite having thirst) and to not drink (due to reason saying it is better not to). (Derived from: "sometimes there are some men who are thirsty but willing to drink"—*Rep.* 439c2).
- [5] Appetite and reason are two different parts of the soul. (Stated at *Rep.*, 439d2–8.)

Thus, if it is impossible for one and the same thing to have both a positive and negative impulse towards the same object, and the soul is a thing which has such opposite impulses, it follows that the soul is not one and the same thing; hence, the soul is divided.

Although Plato uses a similar argument to divide the appetitive part of the soul from the emotional, this distinction will not be crucial in the following discussion; therefore, the proof for this additional division will not be considered.

Now we must turn our attention to the puzzling claim made by Plato that thirst-in-itself is desire for drink-in-itself. (*Rep.*, 439a4–6) It is the claim which some commentators use to justify the contention that Plato is interested in proving that incontinence is possible in Book IV of the *Republic*.

² Penner, p. 109.

1.1 A Question of Incontinence

Turning to the first question above mentioned, we must begin by considering Penner's and Irwin's reason for maintaining that Plato is interested in establishing the possibility of incontinence in Book IV of *The Republic*. For the most part, Penner and Irwin base their case on Plato's claim at *Republic* 439a4–6 that thirst-in-itself is for drink-in-itself. Penner and Irwin take this formulation to be a rejection of the Socratic claim that desire is always for what is good. Hence, they take the argument from 438a–439a to be a demonstration of the possibility of incontinence.³ Plato's subsequent division of the soul into three parts fits snugly into this interpretation because it seems to provide a framework from which incontinence can be explained. Here, the rational part which knows the good is simply overcome by the appetitive part of the soul. This is a case in which one knows the good; yet, one decides not to do the good, viz., a case of incontinence.

Although the position of Penner and Irwin is compelling, it runs into difficulty when we consider two of Plato's later dialogues. In the *Laws* and the *Timaeus*, Plato clearly rejects the possibility of incontinence.

Why the doer of a wrong, you will grant, is a bad man, and a bad man is what he is against his will. But it is mere nonsense to talk of the voluntary doing of an involuntary act. Ergo, he who declares the doing of a wrong involuntary must regard the doer of it as acting contrary to his own will, and I in particular am bound at this moment to accept this position. I grant, in fact, that those who commit wrongs always act against their own will.

(*Laws*, 860d4–e3)

No man is voluntarily bad, but the bad become bad by reason of an ill disposition of the body and bad education—things which are hateful to every man and happen to him against his will.

(*Timaeus*, 86e–87a)

Plato's insistence on the impossibility of incontinence in the *Timaeus* is particularly revealing when we remember that Plato retained the tripartite division of the soul in the *Timaeus* (69c–70b). But if incontinence is impossible, then the tripartite division is no longer required to explain the possibility of incontinence. This would seem to indicate that

³ Irwin, p. 191; Penner, pp. 103–107.

Plato is not interested in establishing the tripartite division to make sense out of the possibility of incontinence.

Even though it is apparent that taking *Republic* IV as an argument for the possibility of incontinence unveils an inconsistency between the Plato of the *Republic* and the Plato of the *Laws* and the *Tymaeus*, it is an inconsistency that we must swallow until an alternative interpretation of Plato's claim at *Republic* 439a4–6 can be found. As it turns out, another interpretation suggests itself.

In setting forth this alternative interpretation, the first point which must be recognized is that the passage in question, 438a–439a, immediately precedes Plato's claim that it is possible for one and the same individual to desire to drink and desire to not drink. This example of opposed desires is crucial to the success of Plato's contention that the soul is divided. Given that the argument from 438a–439a precedes such an important point, it seems likely that 438a–439a is intended as a defense of the point. In fact, that appears to be the case.

The passage from 438a–439a is offered in anticipation of a likely objection to Plato's claim that an individual can experience opposite desires. Plato's example involved an individual who is "thirsty but not willing to drink". Plato takes this fact as evidence for the existence of opposed desires; however, one might be tempted to offer a different explanation for the state of affairs in question. One might say that the case of a thirsty individual who refuses to drink could be explained as a situation in which the drink offered is not good drink, and, as such, is not the object that is desired.⁴ This explanation does not involve opposing desires. The failure of the individual to act on his or her desire does not entail the presence of a more powerful desire. It is, I suggest, to prevent this explanation of an individual's failure to act on a desire that Plato argues that thirst is not a desire for good drink; rather, thirst is a desire for drink-in-itself. With this point established, the alternative explanation just discussed is not viable, and Plato's example stands as an example of opposing desires.

Having suggested that Plato is concerned with partitioning the soul in Book IV and not with establishing the possibility of incontinence, we

⁴ Throughout the paper I will use 'the object of desire' to refer indifferently to whatever one takes to be the object of desire (individuals, states of affairs, or meanings). Since I believe that all of these can serve as the object of desire in certain contexts, it will be unnecessary to further clarify my use of the phrase 'object of desire'.

may now turn to the question of whether Plato meant this partitioning to be taken literally or metaphorically.

1.2 A Question of Interpretation

In his article "Plato's Separation of Reason from Desire," Richard Robinson contends that the argument of *The Republic* does not explicitly endorse a literal partitioning of the soul. Robinson's position seems to be that Plato leaves the question open. Although Plato's position is not clear for Robinson, the option that Plato should have chosen is clear for Robinson.

Plato's psychic entities cannot be real agents... There is only one agent, the man... We know that from time to time we think and reason. And we know that from time to time we passionately desire something. And we know that from time to time we think about our passionate desirings and their consequences, and in our thoughts we sometimes reach practical decisions about our desirings, which we then carry out or do not carry out. And we find it very convenient to have nouns 'reason' and 'desire', by which to refer to these events as if they were the word of some agents other than ourselves, advising or pressing or assaulting us as other men advise and press and assault us. But in truth there is no agent here but ourselves.⁵

Thus, for Robinson, talk of reason and desire should not be construed as establishing the existence of different parts of the soul. There is but one agent, the human being, which can engage in different kinds of activities. Desire and reason are but two headings under which the agent's different kinds of activities are filed. They are used to indicate a particular mode of operation in which the undivided agent is engaged. Thus, the distinction is semantic and not ontological.

In addition, Robinson suggests that if Plato takes the division of the soul literally the result is a proliferation of parts of the soul. Each mode of the soul's operation demands a unique spiritual agent. The soul is reduced to a rabble of vying emotions, desires and reasons. Robinson notes: "If differences in the quality of our mental life were signs of

⁵ R. Robinson, "Plato's Separation of Reason from Desire," *Phronesis* 16 (1971), p. 47.

different agents within us, there would be more than three of these agents".⁶

Considering Robinson's position is helpful because it raises two questions concerning Plato's argument: (1) Is Plato's division of the soul meant literally or metaphorically, and (2) If Plato does intend for the division of the soul to be taken literally, does his argument support this conclusion. First, let us turn to the question of interpretation.

1.3 Some Reasons for a Metaphorical Reading

Three reasons for accepting the division of the soul as metaphorical will be considered. The first reason is one drawn out effectively by Robinson. The language Plato uses in the crucial passage from *Republic* IV is consistently ambiguous. Without rehashing Robinson's helpful presentation of the Greek, it may be said that Plato's depiction of these parts of the soul swings between an analogy with the parts of a city and an analogy with tools. When not attached to one of these images, the nature of the parts is rendered in the Greek by a word no more informative than the English word "entity" (*eidōs*).⁷ In his article, "Thought and Desire in Plato," Terry Penner gives a brief summary of the argument for a metaphorical reading on the basis of the language used.

One ought to feel a need to explain this use of "reason" and of "appetite". Is it that one is using these terms to refer to entities of some type, or do we have here just a metaphorical turn of speech? The latter has often been maintained, maintained by insisting that when Plato speaks of the "parts of the soul" he uses two words interchangeably—*meros* (part) and, more frequently, *eidōs* (type of, form of)—and that the latter shows Plato is speaking metaphorically.⁸

A second point which favors a metaphorical reading is that "part" is a notion which has sense only when it is applied to spatial or temporal regions. However, the soul is not a physical entity; hence, it is not extended in space. On the other hand, while the soul is extended in time, it is clear that Plato's tripartite division is not founded upon a

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 44–46.

⁸ Penner, p. 104.

temporal division.⁹ (After all, the divisions of the soul are introduced to explain how it is that a person can experience opposite urges at the same time). Given that the word “part” has meaning only in a spatial or temporal context, and given that neither of these contexts is applicable to Plato’s tripartite division, it follows that we must take Plato’s talk of “parts” metaphorically and not literally.

One further reason for accepting the tripartite division only as a metaphor is that the metaphorical reading can be used to de-claw a difficult passage at *Republic* IV, 443e1–6. Having characterized individual justice as the harmony of the different parts of the soul, Plato goes on to note for the just man:

In all these actions he believes and names a just and fine action one that preserves and helps to produce this condition...while he believes and names an unjust action one that undoes this condition.

Irwin regards this passage as an inversion of our normal conceptions of justice. It makes more sense, contends Irwin, to speak of just actions as such because they exhibit the harmony found in the soul, and it is a peculiar twist of our notion of just action to insist that all just actions are such because they contribute to the harmony of the soul.¹⁰ The problem is this: we like to think of the relation between the just soul and just action as one in which the just soul promotes action which has its just end in the world and not in the self. Plato’s characterization by the so-called health analogy is too incestuous for our taste.

One of the benefits of the metaphorical reading of the tripartite division is that it tempers the bitterness of Plato’s incestuous model. In particular, a metaphorical reading which assumes Robinson’s semantic division of the soul seems committed to such a relation between the just soul and just action. If the three parts of the soul are nothing but nouns which we use for easy reference to three different kinds of actions, then the degree to which each part of the soul is present in an individual is identical with the extent to which a particular kind of action predominates. In this way, the extent to which the rational part of the soul orders the other two parts is nothing more than the extent to which an individual establishes a pattern of rational action. Therefore, the justice of

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁰ Irwin, p. 210.

the soul would consist in nothing more than a proper ratio among the three kinds of actions. This means that any action which helps establish the proper ratios among the patterns of the three kinds of actions is a just action. An individual's actions are tallied, and if the proper ratios emerge, the individual is said to be just. However, this characterization of a just action is thoroughly consistent with the notion that the end of a just action is often in the world and not necessarily in the self. All just actions do contribute to the justice of the soul, but on Robinson's view, this is no more a causal claim than the statement that all made-free-throws contribute to a basketball player's free throw percentage. Justice, when attributed to the soul, is simply shorthand for the patterns of action an individual exhibits. Clearly, just action determines the fittingness of attributing justice to an individual; nonetheless, just actions do not contribute to the justice of the soul in any causal sense. But it is the causal sense which makes one recoil. Remove it under Robinson's schema and the problem disappears.

1.4 The Case for Taking the Tripartite Division Literally

In defending a literal interpretation of Plato's tripartite division, I will first attempt to respond to each of the points raised in the previous section. Second, I will argue that the division is real on the basis of a text from *Republic* IV. Finally, I will suggest that the doctrine of a real division is consistent with the doctrine of the soul found in the *Timaeus*.

With regard to the ambiguous language cited in defense of a metaphorical reading, it can simply be noted that ambiguity is not always the hallmark of a metaphor. In this case, it seems reasonable to suggest that Plato chooses ambiguous language not for metaphorical purposes; rather, he chooses it in order to avoid any connotations that would imply the spatial extension of the soul.

The second point in defense of a metaphorical reading mentioned in the previous section is rejected by Penner on the grounds that:

Plato had quite a good idea of what it is to commit oneself to the existence of an entity (whether physical or non-physical), and...he gives an admirably clear criterion for parthood (whether physical or non-physical).

Penner goes on to note that for Plato:

To think something an entity is to be ontologically committed to it...

and concludes

It seems to me no more difficult to see what kind of entities the parts of the soul are than to see what kind of entity the soul is.¹¹

Thus, Penner concludes with the reasonable point that one can be ontologically committed to non-physical parts of non-physical entities as easily as one can be ontologically committed to non-physical entities. Mathematical sets, though non-physical, do have components or parts.

Concerning the final point raised in defense of the metaphorical reading, it can be noted that notions of justice other than Robinson's are available which require that all just actions contribute to the justice of the soul without simultaneously denying that the ends of just actions are often in the world and not the self. (For instance, a relation between just action and the parts of the soul might be so-drawn as to maintain that just action helps establish a habituation of the parts of the soul into the desired state of harmony).

Turning towards positive evidence for a literal reading, the passage at 436a4–b2 of the *Republic* may be introduced. Referring to appetitive, emotional and rational dispositions, Plato poses the question which the demonstration outlined in the second section of this paper is supposed to answer.

Do we act in each of these ways as a result of the same part of ourselves, or are there three parts and with a different one we act in each of the different ways? Do we learn with one, become spirited with another of the parts within us, and desire the pleasures of nourishment and generation and all their kin with a third; or do we act with the soul as a whole in each of them once we are started?

(*Rep.*, 439a3–b2)

In this passage, Plato sets up two possible natures for the soul: (1) A simple thing acting in three different ways. or (2) a soul divided into three parts, each of which is the source of a particular kind of action. But if the proposed division of the soul is metaphorical, then what becomes of our alternatives? What the metaphor stands for is no longer clear once

¹¹ Penner, p. 104.

the possibility that it stands for a simple soul variously acting has been removed. (This, of course, is the possibility eliminated by Plato's argument).

Finally, evidence that Plato meant the tripartite division literally can be found in the *Timaeus* where Plato not only admits of the division (69c–70b), but he goes into a detailed account of the mechanism by which the rational part of the soul controls the appetitive part. (70e–71e)

2

One Attack on Plato's Argument for the Division of the Soul

As mentioned earlier, Robinson agrees that: "If differences in the quality of our mental life were signs of different agents within us, there would be more than three of these agents." There is good reason to doubt that Plato's argument in *Republic* IV commits him to myriad divisions in the soul. In any case, Robinson's formulation of this charge is not satisfactory. Robinson forgets that [2] must be violated before one can begin partitioning entities. Thus, Robinson's statement that "differences in the quality of our mental life were signs of different agents within us" is not supported by the argument of the *Republic*. Nonetheless, a stronger argument for the proliferation of agents can be formulated. Penner considers such an argument.

Penner recognizes the importance of proposition [2] to Plato's division of the soul; therefore, Penner recognizes that any further division of the soul hinges upon the possibility of setting up an opposition between two desires of one part of the soul. The possibility that one part of the soul has more than one kind of desire is not problematic, but the possibility that one part of the soul has opposite desires results in a further division of that part of the soul. Penner suggests the following argument as an attempt to divide the appetitive soul.

[6] Appetite desires to drink.

[7] Appetite desires to be warm.

[8] In this situation, (to drink) = (to get this glass of water and then to drink it) = (to not stay warm in bed) = (to not be warm).

[9] Appetite desires not to be warm.¹²

¹² Ibid., p. 109.

Of course, if this argument is accepted, then Plato must accept a further division of the appetitive soul because of proposition [2]. Penner, however, rejects this argument on the following grounds:

To make the move from [8] to [9] even plausible, one has to assume the substitutivity of equivalents in desire-contexts. However, it seems to me plausible to suppose that Plato would have regarded it as a necessary condition for substituting equivalents after "desires" that the author of the desire...know or believe that the equivalents in question are equivalents.¹³

Penner goes on to note that since Plato assigned no power of reasoning to the appetitive part of the soul, it (the appetitive part of the soul) would never be able to make equality judgements. Therefore, the necessary condition for substituting in desire contexts is not satisfied and the argument collapses.

While Penner's reply is a strong one, I think that the argument to generate further divisions of the soul fails at a more fundamental level. To see this, it will be necessary to set forth a particular account for distinguishing the object of a desire from the means employed in achieving that object. Ironically, while this account can be used to protect Plato against further divisions of the soul, it is also effective in overturning the argument of Book IV of *The Republic*.

2.1 The True Object of Desire

The problem with the argument considered by Penner and Plato's argument for the divided soul is that they both hinge on a confusion between an object of desire and the means of achieving that object. The mistake that both make is the assumption that the desire for an object entails desire for the means of obtaining that object.

We can see that desire for an object does not entail desire for the means to that object if we consider the nature of desire as a psychological state. It is a psychological state characterised by such features as joyful anticipation and the relish of achievement. In addition, the subject of the desire for x will respond affirmatively to questions of the form: does the thought of obtaining x for its own sake appeal to you? It is not hard to see that the attribution of such characteristics to the means for a

¹³ Ibid., p. 110.

desired object will often wed a noble desire to a sadistic lust. Surely, the father who takes his child to the doctor because the child has suffered the bite of a rabid animal does not desire the rabies-shots and the concomitant pain, but rather, only desires the health of his child.

It seems to follow from the above that a desire for an object does not entail a desire for the means of procuring that object. But where there is no such entailment, then the identities expressed in [9] above cannot be substituted into the desire context of [7].

With regard to Plato's argument in Book IV, it is now possible to give an account of the individual who thirsts while refusing to drink without invoking opposite desires and hence proposition [4]. All we need do is maintain that the two desires involved are: (a) thirst and (b) desire for health. The avoidance of drink can then be attributed to the soul's pursuit of the stronger though not opposite desire. In this way, the individual's refusal to drink is only a means for (b) and as such need not be desired. Thus, in the end, there is no simultaneous desire to drink and desire not to drink, and the conflict of desires which Plato used to divide the soul disappears.

2.2 Reference and the Object of Desire

A strong objection to this treatment has been suggested by Professor Joan Kung.¹⁴ She notes that my attack on Plato's argument is only successful because of the particular example of opposed desires suggested by Plato in *Republic* IV. The example is one in which the means of satisfying one desire is opposed to another desire; however, Dr. Kung suggests that "the proponent of the view to which you are objecting is then free to respond by simply coming up with two opposed descriptions of the object of desire..." which do not involve the relation between a desire and the means of obtaining that desire. This objection is a strong one, and a response will involve problems of reference; thus, I turn first to consider the problems of reference which surround desire sentences.

Desire statements fall under what are called propositional attitudes. Without going into the details of the problems of reference in

¹⁴ Unpublished comments by Dr. Kung. I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Professor Joan Kung who offered numerous helpful comments and criticisms on an earlier version of this paper.

propositional attitudes, let it suffice to say that there is extensive debate over the question of whether expressions which fall within the scope of the propositional attitude denote anything or not. E.g., take the sentence: "Sue wants to marry Muscles".¹⁵ The question is: what is the role played by the name 'Muscles' as denoting its usual referent, a specific person, then one should be able to substitute any co-designator of 'Muscles' for 'Muscles' in the above context without changing the truth-value of the whole sentence. However, if we suppose that Muscles = Sue's future murderer, then by substitution we arrive at: "Sue wants to marry her future murderer". Because of paradoxes such as this, some philosophers have concluded that the occurrence of expressions within the scope of propositional attitudes do not always refer but are sometimes only components of longer expressions. It is with this in mind that Quine writes:

We are not unaccustomed to passing over occurrences that somehow "do not count"—'Mary' in 'summary', 'can' in 'canary', and can allow similarly for all non-referential occurrences of terms, once we know what to look out for.¹⁶

Other philosophers have rejected the idea that expressions within propositional attitude contexts do not refer; rather, they conclude that the expressions involved simply do not have their usual referents. Thus, philosophers such as Frege and Carnap posit 'senses' and 'intensions' which are denoted by the expressions found in propositional attitude contexts. These 'senses' and 'intensions' are the meanings of the expressions rather than the objects that the expressions usually designate.¹⁷ In what follows, I will make use of Frege's solution.

These issues pertain to our present concerns because it would seem that by the substitution of co-designative terms into desire contexts, opposite desires of the kind needed for Plato's argument can be generated. From our example above, most people would contend that the propositions:

(A) Sue wants to marry Muscles.

¹⁵ Example taken from the same source as reference 14.

¹⁶ Willard van Orman Quine, *Word and Object*, New York: Wiley, 1960, p. 144.

¹⁷ Rudolf Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967, p. 125ff.

and

⟨B⟩ Sue wants not to marry her future murderer.

are both true. But, it was stated above that

⟨C⟩ Muscles = Sue's future murderer

is also true. By substitution we can derive:

⟨D⟩ Sue wants not to marry Muscles.

In this way, we have derived directly opposed desires ⟨A⟩ and ⟨D⟩ which Plato can plug into his argument to complete his division of the soul.

I reject this conclusion on the grounds that ⟨B⟩ is false in the relevant sense. Our temptation to regard it as true stems from the fact that there are two possible interpretations for ⟨B⟩ which correspond to different logical forms. ⟨B⟩ can be translated as:

(i) $\neg\exists x(\text{Sue wants to marry } x \wedge \text{Sue is killed by } x)$

or as

(ii) Sue wants that $\neg\exists x(\text{Sue marries } x \wedge \text{Sue is killed by } x)$

Taken as (i), ⟨B⟩ is false in that it denies that there is some individual whom Sue wishes to marry and who will kill her. Taken as (ii), ⟨B⟩ is probably true.

But now we must note that ⟨A⟩ has the form:

$\exists x(\text{Sue wants to marry } x \wedge \text{Sue is killed by } x).$

Thus, ⟨A⟩ has the same form as (i), and we may demand that for a truly opposed desire to be present (i) must be true. Under our present scenario, however, (i) is false. In addition, the truth of (ii) does not serve our purposes here because the expression which follows 'wants' denotes a meaning and not the state of affairs denoted in ⟨A⟩ and (i). In this way, the substitution which results in ⟨D⟩ is not warranted, because ⟨B⟩ is only true when it is interpreted as (ii); but, such an interpretation changes the referent of Sue's future murderer and thereby renders the true identity statement ⟨C⟩ inapplicable. Therefore ⟨B⟩ as (i) is false and ⟨B⟩ as (ii) does not serve Plato's purposes; therefore, it is only by confusing forms (i) and (ii) that we are misled to believe that opposing desires have been generated.

I hope that a similar analysis is to be found for all such seemingly opposed desires. Such an inquiry, however, is far beyond the scope of this paper. I am content if I have succeeded in showing that there is a problem with Plato's claim that the soul can experience opposing desires. The problem I have been concerned with is that many such seemingly opposed desires depend upon a confusion of the object of desire with the means of obtaining this object or upon a failure to distinguish between statements with the same grammatical form but different logical forms.

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