

PLATONIC THEORIES OF THE PERFECT STATE AND THE HUMAN SOUL IN GULLIVER'S VOYAGE TO HOUYHNNMLAND

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Abstract

This article discusses the various ways in which Platonic philosophy shapes Houyhnhnmland as described in Voyage IV of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. As a means to do so, it takes into consideration Plato's *Republic* and his theories on the perfect state, as well as the Greek philosopher's dialogue *Phaedrus*, which contains the Platonic theory of the tripartite human soul. The final claim of this article is that both the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos are "pure souls" made up of just one of the three soul components pointed out by Plato (namely, the appetites in the case of the Yahoos, and the rational part in that of the Houyhnhnms). In contrast with both, man constitutes an ambiguous and complex being with a multi-natured soul that shares features with the Yahoos and the Houyhnhnms alike.

Keywords: Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, Plato, *Republic*, utopia, Houyhnhnms, Yahoos.

Resumen

El presente artículo discute las diferentes maneras en que diversos postulados centrales en la filosofía platónica dan forma a la tierra de los Houyhnhnms en el cuarto viaje de Lemuel Gulliver en *Los viajes de Gulliver* de Jonathan Swift. Para ello, el artículo considera la *República* de Platón y sus teorías sobre el estado ideal, así como el diálogo *Fedro*, que contiene la teoría de Platón acerca de la tripartición del alma humana. El artículo concluye con la afirmación de que tanto los Houyhnhnms como los Yahoos son "almas puras", exclusivamente formadas por uno de los tres componentes señalados por Platón respecto del alma humana (a saber, el concupiscible en el caso de los Yahoos, y el racional en el de los Houyhnhnms). En contraste con ambos, el ser humano, más complejo y ambiguo, posee un alma compuesta que comparte rasgos tanto con los Yahoos como con los Houyhnhnms.

Palabras clave: Jonathan Swift, *Los viajes de Gulliver*, Platón, *República*, utopía, Houyhnhnms, Yahoos.

Lemuel Gulliver's voyage to the Land of the Houyhnhnms is the most enigmatic part of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and by far the one that has received the greatest share of scholarly attention. The Fourth Voyage indeed has originated a considerable amount of debate and speculation about the utter meaning of the episode, and Swift's main motivations when writing it. The interpretations in this matter have been tremendously varied.¹ For instance, some critics take the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos to represent different types of human beings: the Houyhnhnms would be an intellectual minority of "supermen with the virtues of the Age of Reason", while the Yahoos, the ignorant multitude (Hight 1962:183), or even the "Old Stone Men" in the Palaeolithic Era (*ibid.*). Also, the relationship of power between Yahoos and Houyhnhnms has been interpreted from the perspective that the Yahoos stand for "the colonial oppressed", whereas the Houyhnhnms embody the "colonial oppressors", thus establishing a parallelism with the situation of the Irish under English rule (Bellamy 1992:106). This same critic believes that the distinction between the Yahoos and Gulliver is a matter of social class, and so, from her perspective, while "the Yahoos represent the lower classes, who live in the filth, muck and depravity", "Gulliver symbolises the futile attempts of the social elite to use the false refinements of clothes and manners" in order "to hide their connections with the lower orders" (Bellamy 1992:94). Finally, other critics affirm that Swift's elaboration on the Yahoos and the Houyhnhnms is, in fact, an excuse to contrast Hobbes' ideas on man in the state of nature, with Locke's postulates respecting a "rational and egalitarian commonwealth" (Tippett 1989:46). Several other critics have moreover elaborated on Swift's admiration towards Plato and have pointed out the utopian elements in the last of Gulliver's voyages. This has led some critics to conclude that *Gulliver's Travels* shares a number of features with what Henry Morley (1968) designated as "Ideal Commonwealths", namely, Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, Thomas More's *Utopia*, Campanella's *Civitas Solis*, or Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*. The relation with Plato's *Republic* and *Gulliver's Travels* was hinted by early critics such as William A. Eddy (1923) or Arthur E. Case (1958). Ever since then, a considerable number of critical studies have been devoted to show the manner in which Platonic philosophy influenced Jonathan Swift and found its way to *Gulliver's Travels*, particularly Voyage to Houyhnhnmland.

Indeed, praise of Plato in *Gulliver's Travels* is far from being relegated to dark corners of the book or consisting of obscure references, for it overtly appears in interventions by Gulliver such as the following:

¹ Ehrenpreis (1962), Rosenheim (1962) and Crane (1967) are but three of the authors that analyze in detail the stand of other critics specifically dealing with the interpretation of Houyhnhnmland up to the dates of publication of their respective articles.

I have often since reflected what Destruction such a Doctrine [“the Sentiments of *Socrates*, as *Plato* delivers them”] would make in the Libraries of *Europe*; and how many Paths to Fame would be then shut up in the Learned World. (Swift 1999:285)

Irene Samuel (1976) focuses on the manner in which Swift read Plato, pointing out that of all Platonic dialogues, Swift particularly enjoyed the *Phaedo* –the dialogue on the death of Socrates (Samuel 1976:443)–, and revealing that Swift’s study of Plato relied on the Stephanus-Serranus edition and translation (Samuel 1976:462). According to Samuel,

As his references to Plato and Socrates make plain, Swift regarded Socrates as one of the chief models of human excellence, read Plato with a pleasure he took in few systematic philosophers, specially favored the dialogues on the trial and death of Socrates, and found the tone and methods of the Dialogues as a whole supremely congenial to his own habit of mind. (Samuel 1976:440)

Furthermore, Samuel remarks that “Swift’s ultimate and highest tribute to Plato and Socrates comes in Book IV of *Gulliver’s Travels*” (Samuel 1976:459). Before Irene Samuel, R. S. Crane (1961) had already alluded to Plato’s allegory of the cave when dealing with Gulliver’s final voyage, suggesting that Gulliver is like the prisoner who gradually leaves the cave in search of the light of the sun, which he eventually finds in the land of the horses. Likewise, Curt A. Zimansky discusses the last voyage in terms of a utopia, and asserts that Swift chooses “horses as his utopians” (Zimansky 1965:47). The idea of Houyhnhnmland as a utopia is thoroughly explored by John F. Reichert (1968), who carefully relates Swift’s invented land to Plato’s *Republic*, also taking the allegory of the cave as key to understand the plot of Book IV. Despite recognizing that some of the commonalities between Swift’s and Plato’s ideal societies “are of highly general nature –eugenics, for example, is practiced in most utopian communities”, Reichert trusts “that the similarities are sufficiently numerous and detailed to suggest that if Swift was thinking of any other work while writing Book IV, it was probably *The Republic*” (Reichert 1968:180). In his comparative study, apart from focusing on eugenics, Reichert brings to the fore similarities in terms of, for instance, education of the youth in both Plato’s *Republic* and Houyhnhnmland, and their common emphasis on physical training. Reichert stresses the “markedly Platonic cast of the Houyhnhnm way of life” (Reichert 1968:188), and affirms that while “the social order and simplicity of Houyhnhnm life reflect many of the Socratic virtues” (*ibid.*:185), the Yahoos are instead “a compendium of the most conspicuously vulgar traits that Socrates had attributed to the corrupt forms of government and human nature” (*ibid.*:186). This critic summarizes his analysis in the following terms:

[...] at least in one sense of the term, Swift was very much a Platonist. He agreed with Plato that order, either political or moral, can be achieved only to the extent that the man masters the beast in us. He desired a stable and useful vision of single

goodness – a norm for ethics or for satire. [...] And he shared with Plato a strong distrust of diversity, be it of political factions, or of private interests, or of words. (Reichert 1968:189)

Following Reichert's reading, Gordon Beauchamp (1974) similarly connects Plato's *Republic* and the allegory of the cave with Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*, stating the following when discussing Houyhnhnmland:

Houyhnhnmland corresponds to the summit of the Platonic hierarchy, that realm in which the properly initiated contemplate pure Idea: and the Houyhnhnms are an equestrian version of the philosophers, creatures who transcend the imperfect modes of cognition that limit most mortals and who possess *noesis* –perfect intelligence. (Beauchamp 1974:202)

For Beauchamp, “Swift presents the Houyhnhnms as a moral ideal –an imaginary projection of life lived in accord with reason's dictates and thus closely akin not only to Plato's *Republic* but to Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* as well” (Beauchamp 1974:206). In fact, Beauchamp takes “the assumption that reason is an absolute –universal, uniform, unchanging–” as the fundamental shared feature of Houyhnhnmland and Utopia, since “from this sort of uniformitarian rationalism spring all the other practices that identify Houyhnhnmland as a subdivision in Utopia: their Spartan manner of living, their eugenic mating and breeding, their attitude toward child rearing, their didactic literature and their stoic repression of emotions” (*ibid.*:207).² Finally, the critic R. W. Burrow (1987) establishes a link between the mentality of Jonathan Swift as reflected in *Gulliver's Travels*, and Plato's political philosophy. One of the points of this critic's comparison is Gulliver's remarkable curiosity –only satisfied through his many travels–, and what Plato considered the philosophical disposition, precisely based on curiosity and a genuine keenness for study.

Following the previously mentioned studies, the starting point of this study is the conviction that Platonic philosophy in Voyage IV of *Gulliver's Travels* is not merely at a par with other philosophical trends circulating in Swift's masterpiece, but, on the contrary, the main pillar upon which Voyage IV is built, both as far as the shaping of the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos is concerned, as well as regarding the organization of Houyhnhnmland. In the first part of this article, I will enumerate and discuss the major characteristics that the Houyhnhnm community has in common with the features of Plato's ideal state, paying attention to issues such as the rigid stratification of society in three social classes, the importance that the rational horses give to education, their lack of a written linguistic system, and their attitude respecting love,

² For a detailed comparative analysis between More's *Utopia* and Voyage to the Houyhnhnms, see Traugott (1961).

death or the family. In the second part of this article, and with a view to add new elements of analysis in treating the topic of Platonic philosophy in *Gulliver's Travels* as analyzed by the literature mentioned above, this article will not only take into consideration Plato's *Republic* and his theories on the perfect state, but also Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, which contains the Greek philosopher's theory of the tripartite human soul. In this respect my claim will be that both the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos are "pure souls" made up of just one of the three soul components pointed out by Plato (namely, the appetites in the case of the Yahoos, and the rational part in that of the Houyhnhnms). In contrast with both, man constitutes an ambiguous and complex being with a multi-natured soul that necessarily shares certain features with Yahoos and Houyhnhnms alike.

1. THE LAND OF THE HOUYHNNHNS AND PLATO'S PERFECT STATE

Plato's *The Republic* (c. 370 B.C.) is a treatise on political theory, an essay about the best type of government, and the importance of education and justice, understood as an indispensable requirement for happiness. In *The Republic*, the search for a definition of justice begins with the consideration of the origins of a state, to be found in the fact that individuals are not self-sufficient and need each other to fulfil their fundamental necessities. This same reason also explains the specialization of work of the members of society, for "it is impossible for one man to do the work of many arts well" (Plato 2000:II, 374 A). Plato's perfect state is stratified in three social classes: rulers and soldiers (the so-called guardians), and the people. The people is made up of merchants, artisans, farmers, and masons, in charge of producing the primary goods that the entire society needs to subsist. Within the category of the guardians, responsible for the general management of society, on the one hand we find the armed body of the soldiers, in charge of watching over the interests of the entire society, guaranteeing the social order within the state, or defending it from foreign enemies; and, on the other, the rulers, who govern the state and ensure justice. The rulers are characterized by their knowledge and wisdom, and are chosen amongst the "most inclined through the entire course of their lives to be zealous to do what they think for the interest of the state, and who would be least likely to consent to do the opposite" (*ibid.*: III,412 D). Hence, education acquires a key role in the formation of competent guardians, for which reason Plato spares no pages to describe the physical and mental training of that superior class of men. Indeed, the Greek philosopher is

convinced that a guardian “must be by nature a lover of wisdom and of learning,” and this “love of wisdom” should be combined with “high spirit and quickness and strength” (*ibid.*:II, 376 C). Unsurprisingly, music and gymnastics are the pillars of Plato’s ideal educational system, also based on the complete equality between both sexes, as women could also become rulers.

The guardians lack private property to avoid their transformation “from the helpers of their fellow-citizens to their enemies and masters” (Plato 2000:III, 417 A), thus ensuring that their behaviour is not aimed at enlarging their private fortunes, but exclusively concerned with the common welfare. In other words, the lack of private property guarantees that they place the needs of the community before their individual ambition or personal desires. Another factor preserving social justice is the maintenance of a balance between the three social classes, for which it is essential that every citizen sticks to his profession and carries it out satisfactorily. Injustice arises, then, when a social class tries to develop functions that correspond to a different group. Such an attempt is seen as “the greatest injury to a state”, since it would inevitably produce its ruin (*ibid.*:IV, 434 V). Furthermore, each social class of Plato’s perfect state is associated with a particular part of the human soul, for, as the character of Socrates states, “the same kinds equal in number are to be found in the state and in the soul of each one of us” (*ibid.*:IV, 441 C). The rulers can be identified with the rational part of the human soul; the class of the soldiers with the spirit; and the masses with the appetite. Hence, in the same way that justice is achieved in the perfect state when the rulers are in command, a healthy soul is the one controlled by the rational part. In Plato’s words, “the production of justice in the soul” means “to establish its principles in the natural relation of controlling and being controlled by one another, while injustice is to cause the one to rule or to be ruled by the other contrary to nature” (*ibid.*:IV, 401 D). In other words, a man is just “in the same way in which a city was just” (*ibid.*:IV, 444 D).

Likewise the society of the *Republic*, Houyhnhnmland is based on a threefold stratification of society and a notion of social justice consisting of each group’s realizing its proper job. Leaving the distinction between Yahoos and Houyhnhnms aside, the Houyhnhnms themselves were divided into different groups, as “the *White*, the *Sorrel*, and the *Iron-Grey*, were not so exactly shaped as the *Bay*, the *Dapple-grey*, and the *Black*; nor born with equal Talents of Mind, or a Capacity to improve them; and therefore continued always in the Condition of Servants” (Swift 1999:272). As in Plato’s perfect society, the criterion determining the membership to a certain social class solely depended on one’s intellectual capacities and possibilities to learn and improve. In addition to this, in both states the upper classes were a minority, which, funnily enough, was restricted in Houyhnhnmland to have two broods, one of each sex, while “the Race of inferior *Houyhnhnms* bred up to be Servants” were “allowed to produce three of each Sex, to be Domesticks in the Noble Families”

(*ibid.*:286). In order to maintain social balance in a society in which belonging to a certain social group is genetically determined, there exists a strict control to make sure that the horses pair off with members of their same social stratum. The acceptance of one's position within society becomes the basis for social justice in Houyhnhnmland as well, and indeed we are told that the lower group of Houyhnhnms never aspired "to match out of their own Race, which in that Country would be reckoned monstrous and unnatural" (*ibid.*).

The Platonic ideal that the social caste of the guardians should lack private property is extended in Houyhnhnmland to the entire society. Money was unknown because it was unnecessary: everyone had everything one needed, and greed and ambition were vices unheard of by the rational quadrupeds. What is more, while the lack of private property also meant in Plato's republic that children did not belong to their families but to the state—as Plato was aware that "it may sometimes happen that a golden father would beget a silver son and that a golden offspring would come from a silver sire" (Plato 2000:III, 415 A)—, in Houyhnhnmland the feeling of being part of a community was stronger than family bonds, and in a way the young horses were treated as communal property. As a result, for instance, if a district had an "overproduction" of young male horses, and another an excess of females, they would exchange the necessary number to achieve a balance.

Another point of agreement between Houyhnhnmland and Plato's perfect state is education, which was inclusive of both sexes in the land of the horses too, for Houyhnhnms believed that it was "monstrous" to give "the Females a different Kind of Education from the Males" (Swift 1999:287). Similarly, in Houyhnhnmland equal attention was paid to training body and soul, for physical exercise was regarded as a necessary complement to mental fitness:

The *Houyhnhnms* train up their Youth to Strength, Speed, and Hardiness, by exercising them in running Races up and down steep Hills, or over hard stony Grounds [...]. Four times a Year the Youth of certain Districts meet to shew their Proficiency in Running, and Leaping, and other Feats of Strength or Agility; where the Victor is rewarded with a Song, made in his or her Praise. (Swift 1999:287)

The above fragment also introduces in the discussion the role of music and poetry in Houyhnhnmland. Plato's relationship with poetry was ambivalent. On the one hand he distrusted poets because of the immorality and inappropriateness of the subjects of their poems, which explains that the character of Socrates in *The Republic* defends "a censorship over our storymakers" (Plato 2000:II, 377 C). On the other hand, if poetry deals with what is good and desirable, then, it can become an ally, for it fosters in the young ones the desire to pursue what is fair and just. In Houyhnhnmland, reason alone is sufficient to dictate rational and sensible poets the appropriate contents of their works, and as vice is alien to the Houyhnhnms, their

works must necessarily deal with praiseworthy matters. Gulliver describes the poetic production of the quadrupeds in the following terms:

In *Poetry* they must be allowed to excel all other Mortals; wherein the Justness of their Similes, and the Minuteness, as well as Exactness of their Descriptions, are indeed, inimitable. Their Verses abound very much in both of these; and usually contain either some exalted Notions of Friendship and Benevolence, or the Praises of those who were Victors in Races, and other bodily Exercises. (Swift 1999:291)

In this manner, the topics for artistic production in Houyhnhnmland are, just as Plato proposed, either physical exercise or lofty virtues –let’s remember that “Friendship and *Benevolence* are the two principal Virtues among the *Houyhnhnms*” (Swift 1999:285)–; that is, the main means for cultivating one’s soul. Thus, in Houyhnhnmland, poetry and the rest of the arts only focused on what was reasonable, proportional, and morally virtuous.

The fact that the Houyhnhnms “have no Letters” and “their Knowledge is all traditional” once again has a relation with Platonic philosophy (Swift 1999:290), since in his *Phaedrus*, Plato dismisses the importance of written texts, claiming that writing would “produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practise their memory”, and so, it just offers “the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom” (Plato 1999:275 B). Thus, the fact that the Houyhnhnms lack a written system in a way guarantees that their knowledge is not superficial but constitutes a thorough understanding. What is more, the Houyhnhnms do not seem to truly need a written system: they do not need it to record the laws of the country because their society has no laws (the only law in their country being their equally powerful reason), and they do not need it to write down the history of their community because they lack a bulky history. As Gulliver states: “there happening few Events of any Moment among a People so well united, naturally disposed to every Virtue, wholly governed by Reason, and cut off from all Commerce with other Nations; the historical Part is easily preserved without burdening their Memories” (Swift 1999:290). In other words, their history lacks any episodes of civil wars or internal revolts, conflicts or commercial treatises with other nations, great scientific discoveries or political feats. Following the belief in the Classical world that perfection means the absence of change (for to improve is impossible), it seems that the Houyhnhnms had achieved a high degree of excellence.

The general moderate attitude of the Houyhnhnms also emerges in their views regarding death and love. For them death was a natural and logical event, and so, they expressed “neither Joy nor Grief” at somebody’s “Departure” (Swift 1999:292). For Plato, complete naturalness was exactly the way to behave: for him, having no fear of death was an indication of courage, while grief for somebody’s death was utterly incompatible with wisdom –which was why he advocated “doing away with the

lamentations of men of note" (*ibid.*). Similarly, Plato despised passionate and uncontrollable love, which only shows irrationality, and to it he opposes "a sober and harmonious love of the orderly and the beautiful" (*ibid.*:III, 403 A). Once again, it is the kind of love that Plato advocates the one felt by the Houyhnhnms, who are alien to passionate love. To start with, they only pair off with horses from their same social class, previously approved by their parents and friends. Furthermore, they solely feel for their couple "the same Friendship, and mutual Benevolence that they bear to all others of the same Species" (Swift 1999:286).

Nonetheless, it should be also mentioned that, apart from the numerous similarities, there are additionally some differences between the Land of the Houyhnhnms and the perfect state devised by Plato. They come into existence as a direct consequence of the dissimilar natures of humans and the Houyhnhnms. Indeed, since the nature of the latter is alien to passion and wholly subject to the dictates of reason, there must necessarily be some contrast with a society made up of human beings, who are simultaneously rational and passionate. Thus, Houyhnhnmland lacks a government, a judicial system, and an army (and consequently, politicians, judges, lawyers, and soldiers) precisely because the rational Houyhnhnms do not need them. Furthermore, since the Houyhnhnms have no contact with other countries, they do not have to worry about foreign policy issues. Of course, when Plato designed his perfect state he did take into account commercial or belligerent relations with other nations, and so, there was a necessity for the society to have a class of warriors. In contrast with this, the Houyhnhnms do not need one: first because there is no contact with foreign peoples, and secondly, because there are no internal revolts, as all the members of the community behave according to the dictates of their reason, which push them to preserve their social structure. Similarly, while in Plato's republic there was a government made up of the wisest guardians in charge of the internal affairs of the country, in Houyhnhnmland there is no proper government or politicians in the traditional sense simply because there was not an actual need for them. All matters affecting the community are discussed every four years in a general assembly which Gulliver describes in the following manner:

Every fourth Year, at the *Vernal Equinox*, there is a Representative Council of the whole Nation, which meets in a Plain about twenty Miles from our House, and continueth about five or six Days. Here they inquire into the State and Condition of the several Districts; whether they abound, or be deficient in Hay or Oats, or Cows or *Yahoos*? And wherever there is any Want (which is but seldom) it is immediately supplied by unanimous Consent and Contribution. (Swift 1999:287)

These assemblies are conventions in which the different districts informed of their needs, and asked for supplies. There do not witness debates or discussions, as all Houyhnhnms think essentially alike. The lack of a proper political system is regarded by Gulliver as another example of the high degree of perfection of the

Houyhnhnm community. An equally relevant indication of the great degree of perfection achieved in Houyhnhnmland is, from Plato's perspective, the absence of judges, lawyers and physicians: there is certainly no need for laws –and therefore no need for lawyers and judges–, or doctors, because, as Gulliver affirms, the Houyhnhnms “are subject to no diseases, and therefore can have no need of physicians” (Swift 1992:206). Indeed, Plato considered the need for those professionals an indication of something going wrong in a republic: “Will you be able to find a surer proof of an evil and shameful state of education in a city than the necessity of first-rate physicians and judges, not only for the base and mechanical, but for those who claim to have been bred in the fashion of freemen?” (Plato 2000:III, 405 A).

From this perspective, it seems that Houyhnhnmland constitutes an even more perfect society from Plato's viewpoint than the one he devised in *The Republic*. Indeed, the community designed by Jonathan Swift in Voyage IV of *Gulliver's Travels* amounts to a radical practical application of the philosophical postulates put forward by Plato. After all, the Greek philosopher was somewhat realistic when planning a perfect republic, because he admitted that its citizens were flesh and blood human beings also moved by passions and instincts. Nonetheless, when Swift creates a utopia following Plato's precepts, he takes as the ideal republic's citizens completely rational beings instead of humans, whose complex soul gathers both a rational and a passionate component.

2. HOUYHNNHNS, YAHOOOS AND THE PLATONIC THEORY OF THE HUMAN SOUL

Voyage to the Houyhnhnms constitutes a perfect occasion for Jonathan Swift to comment on human nature through a comparison of man's temperament with the rational Houyhnhnms and the instinctive Yahooos, two exceedingly different collective characters. Indeed, the Houyhnhnms and the Yahooos appear to stand for two different extremes of human nature, for indeed, both the Houyhnhnms and the Yahooos share some commonalities with humans. Firstly, the Yahooos have their physical appearance in common with men, and Gulliver is forced to admit in “Horror and Astonishment” that he could distinctly observe in that “abominable Animal” “a perfect human Figure” (Swift 1999:244). The extent of this similarity is such that a female Yahoo even felt instinctively attracted to Gulliver, and episode

that greatly disturbed Gulliver as an unequivocal sign: "I could no longer deny, that I was a real *Yahoo*, in every Limb and Feature, since the Females had a natural Propensity to me as one of their own Species" (Swift 1999:284). Beyond the sphere of the physical, Gulliver recognizes "a resemblance in the disposition" of both the human and the Yahoo minds, and the Yahoos are described as "cunning, malicious, treacherous and revengeful", violent animals with a "perverse" and "restive Disposition", "of a cowardly Spirit, and by Consequence insolent, abject, and cruel" (*ibid.*:283). By the end of Voyage IV, Gulliver ends up fully identifying human kind with the Yahoos.

Nonetheless, it should be also remarked that the differences between humans and Yahoos are greater than their similarities: while humans are rational beings, Yahoos lack any spark of rationality and are completely governed by their instincts, and while man communicates by means of a linguistic code, the Yahoos lack a language. Gulliver himself recognized that those two features of his nature were the ones that surprised his Houyhnhnm master the most: "he desired I would go on with my utmost Diligence to learn their Language, because he was more astonished at my Capacity for Speech and Reason, than at the Figure of my Body, whether it were covered or no" (Swift 1999:252). Certainly, language became Gulliver's main tool for demonstrating his rationality, and thus, that he was not a Yahoo, as his physique had led the Houyhnhnms to believe.

Since the Yahoos are deprived of reason, and instead are totally driven by their instincts, they are not subject to moral assessment. It is precisely for this reason that Gulliver's Houyhnhnm master claims that "although he hated the *Yahoos*", "he no more blamed them for their odious Qualities, than he did a *Gnnayh* (a Bird of Prey) for its Cruelty, or a sharp Stone for cutting his Hoof" (Swift 1999:263). Thus, the Houyhnhnm master recognizes that the Yahoos lack intentionality, consciousness, responsibility, and morality, in the same way that a bird or a stone lack them too. The case of humans is, from Gulliver's master's perspective, wicked, as being rational being, humans are conscious of the morality or immorality of their actions and hence can be consciously and deliberately cruel and mean. After being informed of the wars in Europe, Gulliver's Houyhnhnm master concludes that, "when a Creature pretending to Reason, could be capable of such Enormities", it must mean that "instead of Reason, we were only possessed of some Quality fitted to increase our natural Vices" (*ibid.*:263).

The previous quotation offers an insight into the Houyhnhnm conception of rationality, which is based on the belief that virtue and reason go hand in hand, and that the one cannot occur without the other. Consequently, Houyhnhnms are unable to conceive a rational creature behaving in an evil, cruel, or selfish way, or their institutions of government being imperfect –which is why Gulliver's Houyhnhnm

master stated that the defects of human “Institutions of *Government and Law*” were the result of man’s “gross Defects in *Reason*, and by consequence, in *Virtue*” (Swift 1999:275). The following extract elaborates on the great extent to which reason controls every single field in the life of a Houyhnhnm:

As these noble *Houyhnhnms* are endowed by Nature with a general Disposition to all Virtues, and have no Conceptions or Ideas of what is evil in a rational Creature; so their grand Maxim is, to cultivate *Reason*, and to be wholly governed by it. Neither is *Reason* among them a Point problematical as with us, where Men can argue with Plausibility on both Sides of a Question; but strikes you with immediate Conviction; as it must needs do where it is not mingled, obscured, or discoloured by Passion and Interest. (Swift 1999:284-285)

The reason of the Houyhnhnms can be thus said to be monological, as it completely drives their behaviour and operates in the same way in every individual, offering them the same response. As a result, there is no possibility of disagreement or debate among them, in contrast with what occurs in human societies, where the same circumstance can be viewed from more than one perspective, and where rationality is separable from virtue and goodness in moral terms. Indeed, the idea that reason goes hand in hand with virtue constitutes part of the mentality of the Enlightenment, which Swift was so fond of criticising (Bullit 1953:16). Reason, man’s most distinctive capacity, was then considered the basis of scientific, technological, and social progress. It was certainly striking to think that such a positive quality could be employed for morally wrong purposes, and in *Voyage to the Houyhnhnms* Swift’s satire mocks man’s rationality by presenting horses as both rationally and morally superior creatures (Bullit 1953:20-21; Rosenheim 1963:210-215). In this situation, humans seem to occupy the middle grounds between the natures of both the absolutely rational Houyhnhnms, and the irrational Yahoos.

The manner in which the natures of the Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos and Gulliver as representative of mankind are presented in *Gulliver’s Travels* can be explained by their connection with Plato’s theory of the human soul. Indeed, it can be claimed that both the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos have souls made up of just one single component, whereas the human soul is more complex because it is tripartite. As a result, humans are characterized by their internal struggle between the forces of instinct and the dictates of their reason. Plato’s ontological dualism, based on the distinction between the intelligible realm of Forms, and the realm of sensible objects, runs parallel to his anthropological dualism. Certainly, the Greek philosopher made a clear-cut distinction between body and soul, understanding the soul within the superior realm of Forms (and consequently, eternal, immutable, immaterial, and unique), and the body within the category of physical entities. The human soul is moreover the engine that moves the body and that keeps it alive, and

the basis of all rational understanding, hence the only means for humans to achieve true knowledge. For these reasons, the soul longs to free itself from the body and its demands and caprices, which prevent the soul from contemplating the Forms. Indeed, Plato regarded the union of body and soul as unessential, unnatural, transitory, and accidental, and he had to come up with the Chariot Allegory to explain such an artificial coexistence of both elements. After describing, in a first moment, the relationship between body and soul from the perspective of a radical dualism by which the soul meant reason, and the passions and all conflicting desires, the body, the Platonic idea of the human psyche evolved into the conviction that passions were psychological phenomena rather than bodily instincts. This latter and more complex view of the human soul can be found in works such as *The Republic* or the *Phaedrus*, in which Plato explained through the Chariot Allegory his distinction within the soul of three different parts or constituents:

We will liken the soul to the composite nature of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. Now the horses and charioteers of the gods are all good and of good descent, but those of other races are mixed; and first the charioteer of the human soul drives a pair, and secondly one of the horses is noble and of noble breed, but the other quite the opposite in breed and character. Therefore in our case the driving is necessarily difficult and troublesome. (Plato 1999:246 C)

Thus, the job of the Charioteer is complicated by the disruptive horse that eventually deviates the chariot from its original route, and leads it to the physical world, as we are later told in the *Phaedrus*: “for the horse of evil nature weighs the chariot down, making it heavy and pulling toward the earth the charioteer whose horse is not well trained” (Plato 1999:247 C). In this manner, the human soul falls from the intelligible realm of the Forms to the material world, where it ends up being attached to a body and where “the utmost toil and struggle await the soul” (*ibid.*:247 C). In the Chariot Allegory, the Charioteer stands for reason; the horse of noble nature for spirit; and the problematic horse, for the concupiscent part of the soul.

Each constituent of the soul has a specific function within it: reason enables the knowledge of the Forms, and controls the appetitive element; the spirit, which is courage and strength, sometimes gives in to the demands of the appetitive part, although primarily acts as an ally of reason in controlling the irrational constituent; and finally the appetitive element encompasses all irrational desires and pleasures. Putting the description of the Yahoos and the Houyhnhnms into the terms of the Platonic views on the human soul, the Houyhnhnms would correspond to the rational part of the soul, and the Yahoos to the concupiscent one. From this perspective, the conflicts between the two species coincide with those between reason and the appetitive element. Indeed, the purely rational and morally virtuous and wise Houyhnhnms are exclusively concerned with the irrational Yahoos, solely

motivated by their selfish caprices. As a result, the Houyhnhnms are constantly watching the behaviour of the irrational Yahoos in order to assure harmony and justice in their society, in the same way that the rational component of the soul has to control the concupiscent part. The only commonality between the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos is that, unlike Gulliver, they can be said to have “simple souls” in Platonic terms, as their souls seem to have a single constituent: in the case of the Houyhnhnms, the rational element, and in the case of the Yahoos, the appetitive. Indeed, there is no internal struggle within them: the Houyhnhnms cannot be passionate because passion is not in their nature, and the Yahoos cannot struggle with their reason because they lack any spark of rationality (Price 1963:101). In this sense, they both lack human’s complexity, and so, Gulliver unsurprisingly appears trapped between the extremes represented by the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos, questioning his own identity.

The problematic between Houyhnhnms and Yahoos can be also understood as the external and social representation of what daily happens within the human mind: a struggle of the antithetical forces of reason versus passion and instinct. From this perspective, when Gulliver meets the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos he actually faces the two extreme constituents of his soul. As a result of this meeting, Gulliver acquires important knowledge about his own nature by understanding the features of the other two species, he also becomes aware that, as a human being, he cannot ignore his similarities with the Yahoos both physical and instinct-wise, and he understands that no matter how hard he tries he will never achieve the degree of rational perfection of the Houyhnhnms precisely because he is not a purely rational being. That is, Gulliver acknowledges that he is not a Yahoo –despite how often he repeats his fellow humans are– nor a Houyhnhnm, but a creature that not only shares features with both species, but who is also something else. Certainly, the human species is the most complex of the three presented in the last Voyage of *Gulliver’s Travels*. In other words, whereas the inhabitants of Houyhnhnmland have a “simple soul” which unambiguously dictates their behaviour, and enters in no conflict with any other element, Gulliver is torn apart by the internal struggle within his soul between its rational and irrational constituents, which make of him a far more ambiguous and complex individual. Indeed, Gulliver has to deal with, on the one hand, his obedience to his reason and, on the other, he has to face the demands of his instinctive side.

3. TO CONCLUDE

Plato's political philosophy pervades Voyage IV of *Gulliver's Travels*, affecting both the description of Houyhnhnmland –in some respects modelled after Plato's theories on the perfect state– as well as the analysis of natures of the Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos, and their similarities and differences with respect to Gulliver as representative of mankind.

Of course, all the previously similarities with Plato's *Republic* do not necessarily imply that from Swift's perspective the Land of the Houyhnhnms actually represented the perfect state. Debate on this issue has been great. Professor James L. Clifford (1965) divided the scholarly research in this respect in two groups: the so-called "hard", and the "soft". The hard-liner scholars accept that Swift's purpose when designing the Houyhnhnms was to propose a positive ideal from which to judge the irrationality and evil of humankind. In contrast with this, the soft-liners argue that Swift's satire aims at the Houyhnhnms. Professor Clifford belongs to the latter group, stating that the Houyhnhnms were "so completely unattractive an ideal" that it is easy to see that "Swift is satirizing them just as much as he is the Yahoos" (Clifford 1965:128). The critics that oppose that Houyhnhnmland actually represents a desirable utopia for Jonathan Swift, and therefore a model for humans to look up to, are numerous, and among them we find (Tippett 1989:47-50; Bellamy 1992:91-108; Rosenheim 1963:216; Price 1963:101-102). They use as arguments to defend their views the lack of sense of humour in the Houyhnhnms, their lack of conjugal or filial affection, their illiteracy, their lack of religious beliefs, the incompatibility of their extreme rationalist philosophy with Christian principles, or their plans to exterminate the Yahoos and wipe them out of the face of the earth.³ In this line, other critics such as Curt A. Zimansky have remarked that the fact that the Houyhnhnms lack manual dexterity makes them able

³ Claude Julien Rawson deals in detail with such plans, remarking, in this respect that "a Houyhnhnm plan to exterminate the Yahoos most closely resembles some hygienic undertaking to exterminate a farmyard pest, except of course that in the reader's perspective the Yahoos resemble humans. In the terms of the story the extermination is trans-specific, and designed to get rid of a population of beasts" (Rawson 2001:259). Furthermore, she establishes a relation between the Yahoos in Houyhnhnm society with the Helots in Sparta, who were massacred by the Spartan *krupteia*, a secret police. Rawson argues that this story may have been Swift's inspiration (*ibid.*:260). Furthermore, Rawson states that Swift "nourished a particularized distaste for the Helots, whom he is likely to have identified with the savage Irish (quite apart from the latter's connection to the Yahoos): the identification of the Irish with the Helots was an obvious one, and later became current in European and English thought" (*ibid.*:261).

to “illustrate only the most basic premises of a good society, the elementary principles of the right use of reason, certainly not the society that men should form” (Zimansky 1965:47). Among the representatives of the hard-liners, to which I subscribe, we find Gordon Beauchamp (1974) and John F. Reichert (1968), who reminds “that the relatively uninteresting and joyless tone of life among the Houyhnhnms is a quality inherent in the *Republic* and most of its utopian offspring and therefore need not to be taken as a sign of Swift’s disapproval of whatever they may represent” (Reichert 1968:179). Finally, it is worth mentioning T. O. Wedel’s study on the philosophical background that *Gulliver’s Travels* encountered when it was published. For Wedel, the manner in which the work was analyzed is intrinsically related to the transition in thought from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, which signified the passage to a more optimistic conception of mankind. As a result, the analysis of the entire book, as well as the perception of the role of the Yahoos and the Houyhnhnms in it changes dramatically:

Yet if Swift had written *Gulliver’s Travels* a few generations earlier, he would have given little cause for complaint. Pascal would have understood him, as would La Rochefoucauld and Boileau; so would Montaigne; so would Bayle. For the transition from the seventeenth century to the eighteenth was experiencing a revolution in ethical thought. [...] The pessimism of Pascal has given way to the optimism of Leibnitz; the theory of self-love of La Rochefoucauld to the theory of benevolence of Hutcheson and Hume; the scepticism of Montaigne to the rationalism of Locke, Toland, and Clarke; the dualism of Nature and Grace to a monistic inclusion of Nature under the rule of a beneficent God; the bold warfare between atheism and faith to a mere gentlemen’s quarrel between revealed and natural religion. In fact, it is this revolutionary background which alone can explain Swift’s purpose in writing *Gulliver’s Travels*. (Wedel 1926:435-436)

Indeed, it is certainly hard to firmly establish that Houyhnhnmland actually represented a fully ideal community for Jonathan Swift. In any case, understanding the presence of Platonic philosophy in the last of Gulliver’s voyages is essential to explain both the personal features of the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos, and the characteristics of Houyhnhnmland. It is for this reason that at the beginning of the present article it was stated that Platonic philosophy ought not to be considered at the same level of importance with other philosophical trends or currents also present in Swift’s masterpiece. Instead, Platonism should be viewed as the foundation upon which Jonathan Swift erected Voyage IV of *Gulliver’s Travels*.

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