

The Search for Justice in the *Republic*

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Abstract:

Confronted, in Book II of the *Republic*, by Glaucon and Adeimantus over the question of whether it is better to actually be just or to simply strive to appear so, Plato's "Socrates" sets out to show that Justice is desirable not only for its consequences but also for its own sake. Glaucon, in a sense taking up the position of Thrasymachus – namely that Justice is merely the advantage of the stronger, gains Socrates' agreement that there are three types of good:

- (1) Goods welcomed for their own sake,
 - (2) Goods desired for their own sake and for their consequences,
- and
- (3) Goods accepted for their rewards.

It is the position of Glaucon (along with Adeimantus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus) that Justice is good for its consequences, for in seeming just, one can receive great benefit (especially if one is actually unjust and behaving so). In answering Glaucon, Socrates believes himself to have refuted Thrasymachus more strongly than in Book I and to have shown, against the views of Glaucon and the rest, that the practice of Justice is not an onerous imposition, practiced only reluctantly, but a "Two-Type" good, that is, a good loved for its own sake and for its consequences. He accomplishes this by drawing Glaucon, Adeimantus, and the others about him into a conversation concerning the Just City, for they agree that if Justice can be found in the city then its analogue will be more easily found in the individual. Ultimately, Justice in the individual is each of the parts of the soul performing the function for which it is fit by nature to perform and refraining from performing or attempting to perform the activities proper to the other parts of the soul. In other words, the virtue "Justice" turns out to be *sophrosune*.

There are considerable potential difficulties that attend this reading of the *Republic*. There is the broad complaint often leveled at Plato that the *Republic* is the foundation for tyranny and fascism, exemplified by the totalitarian flavor that some have sensed in it. Karl Popper, for example, is one who has advocated such a view. Others have argued that Plato is not a proto-fascist, but rather a paternalist of an unfortunate sort. Central to both these complaints is Plato's apparent view that the Philosopher-King is entitled to (and perhaps obliged to) engage in "noble lies" to keep the populace in line, to insure that each of the people within the city is doing that job for which he or she is fit by nature and no other. This sort of action seems contrary to Justice (as damaging to the soul) and to Plato's views expressed elsewhere. For example, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates argues that the person who knows the truth is in a better position to deceive those who hear his speeches than the person who does not because the effective deception is so very near the truth as to appear to be the truth. Thus, the person who

knows the truth and tells a lie very close to the truth is more apt to get away with it than the person who does not know the truth and tries to deceive. In not knowing the truth, the potential deceiver is likely to strike very far from it indeed and thus be found out. However, Socrates goes on to argue that the person who knows the truth would indeed not be deceptive because this would be out of character. So, if Plato is committed to the obligation to lie (or at very least, the permissibility of lying) on the part of the Philosopher-King (who is the one who knows the truth), then the view expressed in the *Republic* is straightforwardly contrary to the views expressed elsewhere. Thus, even if Plato is right that Justice in the individual is identified in his argument, it would appear that the means to that end – an autocratic, paternalistic, and perhaps fascist state – is a fairly high price to pay; indeed, one that may render the entire project a failure.

The first approach to the *Republic* ought to be making clear what Plato takes to be the argument that establishes the nature of Justice. On my view, the *Republic* is not a work in political philosophy at all. In fact, to read it as political philosophy is to force oneself to read the dialogue as fundamentally disconnected from the rest of the platonic corpus. I shall argue that the *Republic* is a long, involved, and detailed thought experiment, and nothing further. All the *Republic* is supposed to establish is the nature of the virtue Justice in the individual. Having found Justice in the individual and established the nature of that virtue, it will be necessary to assess the potential criticisms of Plato's view. Finally, I will argue that a solution to many of the problems thought to attend Plato's argument can actually be handled quite easily by paying particularly close attention to Plato's epistemology of virtue. A not at all unhappy consequence of the view for which I will argue is that it is impossible to read the *Republic* as a work in political philosophy at all.

In the course of the conversation, Socrates leads Glaucon and Adeimantus on an imaginary construction of a city, Kallipolis (literally, the "beautiful city"). The view is that this thought experiment will, if they imagine a city which exemplifies all of the virtues; that is, it is wise, temperate, courageous, and just. Socrates suggests that after they have fixed the locus of wisdom, temperance, and courage in the city, then the only "good-making" thing that will be left will be Justice.

This inquiry we are beginning is a difficult one, not to be started lightly. It will require that our eyes are clear and focused. Given that we're not the most clever men, we should proceed as those who cannot see particularly well. If we were told to read small letters afar off and then discovered the same letters in much larger script close by, we'd be most thankful. And we'd gladly read those letters near at hand before we looked to the small ones afar off to see if they were indeed the same. ... In the same manner, let's locate Justice in the city (the larger) before looking for it in the individual (the smaller). Then we can see how much the smaller is like the larger. [368d-e]

And so begins the exploration. After constructing the imagined city, the conversation partners discover the apparent locations of the various virtues in separate sectors of the city.

Wisdom is located in the persons of the guardian/ruler class (the Philosopher-Kings). As such, wisdom is seen to be the knowledge of guardianship. Courage is located in the soldier class and as such is seen to be the true belief about what is to be feared and what is not to be feared. *Sophrosune* is discovered to suffuse the entirety of the city, adapting itself to the various classes with one unchanging aspect held by all; that is, the harmony and agreement about who should rule. Having located the first three virtues of the good city, the Socrates-led explorers have only to discover what “good-making” thing is left. This remainder will be Justice.

At first the “remainder” is not immediately apparent to the participants in the conversation. At which point Socrates realizes that it has been there all along, but they had just missed it. The remaining “good-making” thing in the good city (after the subtraction of the other virtues) is the performance, by each class of citizens, the tasks appropriate for them for which they are fit by nature, no more and no less. This, then, is Justice. For example, the guardians ought not be mimes, as this would be a task inappropriate to them, just as mimes ought not be rulers.

In summary, then, since the city is founded rightly it is good. There are four things responsible for this ascription of goodness: Wisdom, *Sophrosune*, Courage, and Justice. Wisdom is located with the ruler, Courage with the soldier/auxiliary, natural harmony and agreement about who should rule is located throughout the city, and each of the classes performs its own task, no more and no less.

If this is the Good City, in which Justice is the proper functioning of each of the constituent parts, and if the Justice of the city has an analogue in the good individual (as the conversation participants agreed) then Socrates has to show where this analogue in the individual is. He locates the virtues in the soul of the individual, which he argues is tri-partite. Each of the three classes of Kallipolis has an analogue in the tri-partite soul; reason (the guardian), appetite (the auxiliary), spirit (the part naturally aligned with reason). The analogue of Justice in Kallipolis should then be clear. It is each of the parts of the tri-partite soul fulfilling its function and only its function. Justice in the individual is a harmony in the soul created by each of the pieces doing the job for which it is particularly and naturally inclined.

It should be noted here that Justice begins to look a lot like *Sophrosune*. That is, if *Sophrosune* is the control of self, then Justice – which is each of the parts of the soul doing what it is supposed to do – seems to be coextensive with *Sophrosune*. This relationship comes to look more like an identity when Socrates turns to address Glaucon’s challenge.

Having shown that this is Justice in the individual, Socrates has yet to show that it is good for itself and good for its consequences. For Glaucon, the view is that it is better to be thought Just, to receive the benefits of being Just, and to actually be Unjust. That is, Justice is desired only because the person who behaves justly does so not because it is better to actually *be* just, but to be thought just. If one could behave as one truly wanted – which is to say, unjustly – and get away with it; indeed, more than that, but be thought just in the process, then it would be far better to be unjust and thought just. He puts an even sharper point on his

challenge by pushing Socrates to argue that the person who is thought to be just and receives the benefits of that appearance all the while behaving unjustly is in worse condition than the person who actually is just, but is thought to be unjust and punished accordingly.

In developing the imaginary city, Kallipolis, Socrates thinks that he has addressed Glaucon's Challenge. Indeed, he takes it to be the case that he has shown that Justice will be good for its consequences and good in itself. The good consequences have been foreshadowed: peace, prosperity, growth. The person in whom the parts of the soul perform their own proper functions is the happiest, even if he is thought all the while to be unjust. Again, this conclusion is reached through a process of elimination. Suppose that the spirited part ruled. As the honor loving part of the soul the Timocratic individual would pursue honor, to the detriment of the rest. Suppose the appetitive part ruled. In such an Oligarchic person, the appetites (under relative control and united behind a desire for money) would pursue those appetites to the detriment of the rest. Suppose the appetites ruled completely, without governance of any sort. Such a Democratic person would be constantly trying to satisfy all of his/her desires. And finally, suppose that only one appetite ruled. The Tyrannical individual would be held forever in thrall to a single desire to the total destruction of the rest of the soul. Thus, since each of the other four options resolves into unfortunate circumstances, the happy person is the one in whom Justice (not the appearance) is present.

At this point, the connection between Justice and *Sophrosune* is complete. The virtuous person is the one in which the proper part of the soul is ruling and the spirited and appetitive parts are functioning in accordance with that rule. Clearly, this is control of the self. As such, it would appear that Justice is at most another name for *Sophrosune*. At least, Justice is a particular characteristic of the *sophron* soul.

Having shown that Justice is good for its consequences, Socrates turns to show that it is good in and of itself. This is a bit more complicated. Here, Socrates uses the analogy of proper function/health to argue that Justice is good for itself. If the body functions properly then it tends to be healthy, thus if the soul functions properly (that is, if all the pieces do their jobs and only their jobs) then the soul is healthy. If the pieces of the soul are unruly and usurp the functions proper to the other pieces, then the balance within the soul is destroyed and as a result the soul will decay and ultimately be destroyed. Thus, even if one strove to appear just (but was in fact not just) then the rewards of Justice (given in this case on the basis of appearance) would not outweigh the ultimate destruction of the soul and with it the self. Upon completing his argument/conversation, Socrates finds that Glaucon and Adeimantus (and the others gathered about) have given in to his position that Justice is good in itself and for its consequences.

This is not to conclude that there are no difficulties here. For example, Richard Kraut has argued that Plato has actually failed to show that Justice is good in itself and good for its consequences. Simply put, given the analogy that Plato makes between the health of the body and the Justice of the soul, it looks as if he has used the negative consequences of an unhealthy body as the analogue for the negative consequences that would attend and unjust soul. If this is

so, then it would be on the basis of these negative consequences that one would refrain from Injustice. While this may be an elaboration on the argument that Justice is good for its consequences, it certainly does not seem, on Kraut's view, to be an argument that Justice is good in itself.¹

A defender of Plato might take some refuge in the analogy itself. When discussing virtue, the most common analogies Plato offers involve health and/or medicine. This is not exception. Aristotle also finds the analogy of medicine/health helpful. Aristotle supposes that there are two conditions that the highest good must satisfy – it must be desired for itself and it must be desired for nothing beyond itself. Thus, Aristotle and Plato use the health analogy differently because Plato sees it as connected to the excellence of the soul and Aristotle uses the analogy to show that health is not the highest good. However, there is a commonality between their uses of the analogy that is helpful to Plato here. The difference between the actions of generalship and of medicine lies in their different ends – the end of generalship is victory, the end of medicine is health. Thus medicine is desired for its consequences; namely health. As such, health must be something desired for itself, or else it could not be the proper end of some other action. That Plato shares this sort of view is fairly clear. In Book I of *Republic*, Socrates says, “because our bodies are deficient rather than self-sufficient, the craft of medicine has now been discovered. The craft of medicine was developed to provide what is advantageous for the body. ... Medicine does not seek its own advantage, then, but that of the body.” [341e, 342c] Thus, health is the proper and desired end of medicine, and thus must be good in itself. So, while Plato's argument does indeed point out the negative consequences of doing unjust things and thus damaging the soul, it is in the context of the analogy of medicine and health. While it may appear to be a purely consequentialist reading, as Kraut supposes, we have seen that there is some reason to think that it is not.

The more troubling critique of Plato's *Republic* is that the political views expressed are the cornerstone of fascism. The charge of fascism has been leveled at Plato at least since Karl Popper's “Open Society and Its Enemies.” This interpretation of the *Republic* is read through the lens of National Socialism in Germany and Fascism in Italy; totalitarian regimes that Popper argues were philosophical descendents of the view of the ideal state in Plato. Central to this argument or view is the assumption that Plato is engaging in political philosophy as he constructs the imagined Kallipolis in Books II-V. It is easy to see how one might suppose this is the case. Again and again, Socrates suggests that he and his interlocutors are constructing this city rightly, that this is the *good* city. And, if Socrates/Plato is to be taken literally, this state is truly a totalitarian one. The Philosopher-Kings are entitled to all manner of controlling mechanisms; from eugenics to governance of the military to propaganda for keeping people in line. The “noble lie” is but one of the many tools available to the Philosopher-Kings for controlling the populace. And it certainly seems like this structure is central to the construction of the city.

Socrates recognizes that only a few inhabitants will fully grasp the Forms and thus have Wisdom or true knowledge. Acting from ignorance will result in disorder. Acting beyond one's capabilities will result in disorder. So, much like a benevolent parent, the Philosopher-

King is charged with guiding the development of the governed. This guidance can and, in some cases, must include lying to the governed so that they will do what is best for them, rather than pursue what they imagine is best. This is but one form of coercion available to the Philosopher-King.

However, despite the very political language, I see no reason to conclude that Plato is advancing a political vision. Indeed, it seems clear that Plato's concern is *individual* virtue; namely, Justice in the individual soul. I shall argue that this is Plato's *only* concern. This view rests on two arguments. First, the development of the city is done solely in the context of an analogy to the individual soul. However, even if this is so, one could still conclude that while Plato's primary focus is the individual soul, the political philosophy – constructing a Just State – is a secondary concern. I shall address this with the second argument, showing that on Plato's broader view, it is impossible for cities to have virtue. If this is so, then it is impossible for a city to be Just. Thus, if it is impossible for a city to be Just, then Plato cannot be arguing about the construction of the Just City. The result of these two arguments is that Plato is not engaging in political philosophy at all in the *Republic*.

We have already seen that the development of Kallipolis in the dialogue between Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus begins with the question of locating Justice in the individual soul. It could be argued that there is little in the earlier cited passage (368d-e) that indicated that this was merely a thought experiment. Could one not also argue that Socrates actually supposes that the “larger surface” on which are written the “larger letters” exists? However, as they start to found Kallipolis, Socrates says several times that this exercise is a hypothetical one. “Suppose we could witness it coming together in theory?” [369a] and “Let us build a city, from scratch, in theory” [369c], and “So, a person seeking to attain this state of the soul will engage in politics? Only in this city we’ve founded in theory. It certainly does not exist anywhere besides in theory.” [392a] Given this, it is at least plausible to suppose that Socrates is engaging solely in hypothetical thought experiments. If this is the case, if this analogy is the engine that drives the dialogue, then that exploration should be evident by taking a broader view of the *Republic*. Thus, it might be helpful to look briefly at a synopsis of the books of the dialogue. Book I, generally accepted to be independent of the rest of the dialogue as it is fairly clearly an early Socratic dialogue, has as its centerpiece an elenchus performed by Socrates on Thrasymachus showing that the view that Justice is the will of the stronger is incoherent. Book II reexamines this question as Glaucon takes up the cause of Thrasymachus with his challenge. From the proposal of the analogy at [368d-e] in Book II through Book V, we have the development of Kallipolis, always harkening back to the analogy to the individual soul as a way of keeping the development grounded in the point of the thought experiment. The attention in Books VI and VII turn to the question of education of individual soul. Book VIII may be the only book of the *Republic* in which Plato engages in political philosophy, examining the various possible constitutions and judging whether or not they are effective as means of governing a state. However, even here, the connection is always made to the individual soul that functions under this sort of rule. Books IX and X return to the question that began the example as Socrates sums up the forgoing conversation by addressing first how Justice is good for itself and then how it is good for its consequences.

Notice the structure of the dialogue. The dialogue can be outlined briefly as follows:

To be shown: Justice is good for itself and good for its consequences.

Analogy 1: “In search of Justice” – Justice in the individual soul to Justice in the imagined city. [Book II]

Analogy 2: Health is to the body as Virtue is to the soul. [Throughout Platonic corpus]

Premise: Health is good for itself and good for its consequences.

Conclusion 1: Justice is good for itself. [Book IX]

Conclusion 2: Justice is good for its consequences. [Book X]

The structure of the dialogue follows precisely what would be predicted if my claim about the point of the dialogue being a concern for *individual* virtue is correct. Analogy 1 begins the dialogue as the justification of the conclusion is sought. Analogy 2 is developed again and again as the training of the virtuous person is developed from Book III through Book VII. And Books IX and X return us to the conclusion. So, the first argument – that the development of Kallipolis is done in the context of a discussion about individual virtue – seems plausible.

Let us turn now to the second argument. Two of the most famous analogies in all of Plato’s work are found in the *Republic* – the Divided Line and the Analogy of the Cave. Both of these examples are used to show the connection between the actual world (or the real world – the Intelligible World or World of the Forms), knowledge (or Wisdom), and virtue. The Forms are the most real objects, true knowledge is of the Forms, and the relation between knowledge and the Forms is central to virtue. Socrates advances a claim early in the dialogues that Plato does not abandon. Socrates says that to know the good is to do the good. Thus, the person with true knowledge (the Wise person) will know the good (the Form of the Good, the Just, the Sophron, etc.). In virtue of knowing the virtue, the person with true knowledge will act in accordance with the structure of the universe and thus will act on that knowledge and will be virtuous. This view is generally without controversy among interpreters of Plato. However, there is an aspect of this view that is particularly helpful with our difficulties in the *Republic*. It certainly appears to be Plato’s view that only individual human beings can have knowledge.

Knowledge, then, does not look like something that can be held by an entire city – especially when it is granted at the outset that not all people will have the same grasp of the Forms. If this is so, then cities cannot have knowledge. If it is impossible for a city to have knowledge, then it is likewise impossible for a city to have virtue. Thus, if a city cannot have virtue, then it cannot have Justice (as Justice is a virtue). So, whatever else may be said about the imagined Kallipolis, it cannot be the case that it is Just. This is a direct result of Plato’s

own deeply held commitments. So, it makes little sense to suppose that he has abandoned these sentiments for the space of a couple of chapters of a single dialogue. Instead, it is much more plausible to suppose that he has maintained these views and thus is not engaged in political philosophy.

If this interpretation is correct, then we need not be sidetracked from the primary focus of the dialogue – the character of the individual with virtue. It may be the case that Plato is somewhat of a paternalist – however, the paternal figure is Justice (or, more properly, the paternal figures with regard character, the paternal figures are the Virtues). Given the emphasis on the development of individual character, then it is reasonable to suppose that the position Plato is really advocating is one of true self-governance rather than fascistic rule by another.

Works Cited

Kraut, Richard. “The Defense of Justice in Plato’s *Republic*,” *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, Richard Kraut, ed., Cambridge University Press, 1992, 311-337.

Biographical Sketch

Dr. Kevin K. Durand is Associate Professor of Philosophy. He has taught at Henderson since 1999 and has several recent publications. His essay, “Wicked? The Ethics of Perception” appeared in the book, *The Wizard of Oz and Philosophy: Wicked Wisdom of the West*. He coordinated the Third International Conference on the Works of Joss Whedon in 2008 and is coordinator for OZ 2009: The Yellow Brick Road in the 21st Century. Dr. Durand is the editor of the collection of essays *Buffy meets the Academy: Radical Interpretations of Television as Text* and *A Philosophical Life: The Collected Essays of William C. Gentry*. He is also the author of several books, including *Virtue: Essays in Ancient Philosophy* and *Sidgwick’s Utility and Whitehead’s Virtue*.