

Plato's *Republic*

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Beyond Socratic Ethics

- Socrates maintained several theses in ethical and political philosophy:
 - People ought to act only from virtue,
 - It is never right to respond to injustice with further injustice,
 - A virtuous person can be harmed only by a loss of virtue,
 - People have obligations to obey the laws of a state with which they have voluntarily associated themselves.
- But the *Apology* and *Crito* leave a number of central questions unanswered, including the following:
 - What makes a person virtuous?
 - What makes an act just or unjust?
 - How should society be organized in a virtuous or excellent way?
- Plato began to supply answers to these questions.

Plato's *Meno*

- In the dialogue *Meno*, Plato elaborates on the nature of virtue.
- He describes virtue as composed of “parts,” which include:
 - Justice,
 - Temperance,
 - Piety.
- Socrates looks for a common character which all the individual virtues have in common.
- He fails to get a positive answer to the question.
- He advances a negative argument to the conclusion that virtue is not a kind of knowledge, and that accordingly it cannot be taught.

- Based on that reasoning, he concludes that virtue is given to us by the gods.
- But he notes that the issue of the origin of virtue cannot be resolved until it is discovered what virtue is.

Plato's *Republic*

- Plato's *Republic* is a comprehensive work of political philosophy.
- Its main goal is to determine the best possible form of government.
- The conclusions reached there are important in themselves, but they also shed light on the common character of virtue.
- In Book I of the *Republic*, Plato has Socrates ask what justice (one of the virtues) is.
- He gets a number of unsatisfactory responses before giving his own account.

Justice as Rendering to Each His Due

- The first account of justice is given by Simonides and Polemarchus:
 - Justice is to give to each person what is due to him.
 - For example, it is just to repay one's debts to another.
- This account is easily refuted, since it is not just to return weapons to someone who has gone insane since they were borrowed.
- Polemarchus revises the account by explaining what "due" means:
 - Justice is to give to each person what he deserves.
- What someone deserves from me depends on my relationship to him:
 - A friend deserves benefits from me,
 - An enemy deserves harm from me.

The Defeat of the First Account of Justice

- Socrates refutes the revised first account of justice in several ways.
- It is possible to be wrong about who is one's friend and who is one's enemy, in which case one could act unjustly when he thought he was acting justly.
- This leads to a second revision of the first account:
 - Justice is to benefit the just and harm the unjust.
- Socrates then argues that it is never just to harm anyone.

1. Harming something make something less excellent with respect to the kind of thing it is.
2. Justice is “the specific virtue” of a person.
3. So, harming a person makes him less excellent with respect to justice.
4. A just person would not make another person less just.
5. So, a just person would not harm another person.

Justice as the Advantage of the Stronger

- The second account of justice is given by Thrasymachus.
 - Justice is what benefits the stronger.
- Specifically, the stronger are those in power in a state, so that:
 - Obeying the laws set down by those in power for their own benefit is just.
- An initial problem for this view is that the rulers may mistake what is for their own benefit, and so obedience to their laws will not benefit them.

The Craft of Ruling

- Thrasymachus replies that a ruler does not make a mistake when he is acting as a ruler.
- Ruling is a craft, and insofar as one practices the craft, one does so correctly.
 - A doctor does not act as a doctor when he harms a patient.
- So in practicing the craft of ruling, rulers enact laws that really do benefit them, and obeying these laws is just.
- Socrates’s further response to Thrasymachus exploits the claim that ruling is a craft.
- The important point is that what is advantageous to one acting as a craftsman is to accomplish the ends of the craft.
 - It is advantageous to the doctor, when acting as a doctor, to cure his patients.
- And the end of the craft of ruling is to build a healthy state, and not to attain personal advantage.

What Justice Is

- The rulers of a state act justly when they act for the advantage of those they rule.
- To do so, the rules must act wisely, from which Socrates concludes that justice is wisdom in ruling.
- Justice, then, is wise rule for the advantage of those who are ruled.
- Moreover, justice is more effective than is injustice.
 - A band of thieves that treated one another unjustly would not be able to accomplish much.
- Socrates ends the discussion with Thrasymachus by noting that the just soul, in carrying out its functions wisely, will live well and be blessed and happy.

Three Kinds of Value

- There are three ways in which any kind of behavior might have value.
- It may be *intrinsically* valuable, or valued for its own sake.
- It may be *instrumentally* valuable, or valued for the sake of something else.
- It may be both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable.
- Socrates believes that justice is something that is valuable both intrinsically and instrumentally.

Is Injustice More Valuable Than Justice?

- Glaucon proposes an argument to the effect that justice has instrumental value only.
- He contends that people behave justly only when they are in a position of weakness.
- Injustice is the natural state of people, because of their desire to get more and more.
 - Someone with an instrument that would make them powerful (like the ring of Gyges) would use it unjustly.
- Glaucon's brother Adeimantus notes many ways in which people recognize the advantages of injustice.

Civic and Individual Justice

- Socrates undertakes to answer Glaucon and Adeimantus in an indirect way.
- He considers the effects of justice on a city.
- He finds that justice is advantageous to the city.
- He then compares features of the city to those of the soul.
- His conclusion is that acting justly is to be valued for its own sake.

Civic Harmony

- The city exists because people must work together in order to achieve their ends.
- If a city is to function well, its citizens must take on specific roles and perform them well.
- To this end, people in the city should be trained in carrying out their roles.
- The rulers of the city must be trained as philosophers.
 - Only philosophers have the wisdom to reconcile the high spirits needed to rule with the gentleness that must be shown toward those who are ruled.
- Thus the city functions best when it is under the guidance of wise rulers who act with the best interests of those they rule at heart.

The Virtues of the Soul

- In Book IV, Socrates argues that the just soul will resemble the justly-ruled city.
- The city contains many individuals with different functions which must be co-ordinated by the rulers.
- The soul contains several parts which must be brought into harmony for it to achieve excellence.
 - The emotional,
 - The willful,
 - The rational.
- Each of these parts of the soul has its own virtue or excellence:
 - The emotional: temperance,
 - The willful: courage,
 - The rational: wisdom.
- The virtue of justice is the co-ordination of the parts of the soul, under the guidance of the rational part.

Plato and Democracy

- As we have seen, in Plato's ideal city, the rulers are those who have been especially trained for ruling.
- It is the business of the other people to fulfill their proper functions, and not to be involved in ruling.
- Thus, Plato's republic is not a democracy.
- On Plato's view, democracy is the result of a revolt of the dispossessed masses against corrupt rulers.
- It is doomed to failure, because the masses are not trained to rule.
- Most importantly, the masses are easily manipulated by those who exploit their insecurities.
- For this reason, the natural fate of democracy is to lead to tyranny.
 - The rise of Hitler is a case in point.