

The Eminence of Social Justice in Plato

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In this paper I wish to chip away at one of the major received opinions in Platonic scholarship.¹ The orthodoxy which I wish to challenge is that in the *Republic* Plato takes individual or personal justice—the diverse but integrated workings of the parts of the soul—as primary justice or justice pure and simple and takes social justice—an individual's fulfilling his distinctive function in the social division of labor—as a secondary and derivative notion. I shall argue to the contrary that social justice rather than individual justice turns out to be the architectonic principle of the two kinds of justice. A great deal turns on this issue.

For if I am right then Plato is not foreshadowing Aristotle and the whole tradition of agent-oriented ethical theorists, who claim that good actions are to be understood as those which would be performed by the good person—whose goodness must be capable of being defined independently of the acts which he performs. For Plato, the parts-of-the-soul doctrine and in particular justice viewed as psychic harmony is supposed, on this reading, to provide the requisite independent means of assessing the goodness of an agent and so derivatively of his acts.

The view that Plato is such an agent-oriented theorist was first clearly articulated in the closing speculative paragraph of David Sachs' well-known article, "A Fallacy in Plato's *Republic*":

I believe it likely that Plato held that there are allowable exceptions to every moral rule, or virtually every moral rule, of conduct . . . [For Plato,] rules of conduct do not constitute anything essential to morality or justice. This, I believe, was one of the principal motives for his characterization of justice, a characterization not in terms of conduct and relations of persons, but in terms of the relation of parts of the soul.²

¹ The paper was read at the American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division meetings March 1985 in San Francisco. It is a companion piece to "A Platonic Happiness," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 4 (1987) 131–45.

² D. Sachs, "A Fallacy in Plato's *Republic*," in G. Vlastos (ed.), *Plato I* (Garden City, NJ 1971) 50–51. That a philosopher recognizes exceptions to important moral rules, of course, need not propel him into acceptance of an agent-centered theory. All the

This view has been advanced more recently in the writings of Julia Annas.³ I shall argue to the contrary that Plato advances an act-oriented ethical theory, in which the goodness of an action is determined independently of the motives, intentions, or even virtues of its agent. I shall advance this view in two ways. First, I will show that Plato's analogy between the parts of the city and the parts of the soul leads to irresolvable paradox if individual justice is taken as primary justice, paradox that can be handsomely resolved if social justice is taken as paramount. Second, I argue that the alleged proof text of the orthodox—*Republic* 4, 443c–44a—does not require the interpretation it has traditionally been assigned.

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The orthodox view that the just society consists of individuals all with similarly diversified and integrated souls places Plato in serious difficulty. For Plato has a problem if he *both* wishes to claim that everyone in the Platonically just state has some one social function which is accounted for by the type of soul which the individual has *and also* wishes to claim that everyone in the Platonically just state is just in such a way that all three parts of the soul of each individual are diversified and integrated in the same way from individual to individual. If Plato is claiming that the state is just and integrated and that the individual is just and integrated in both cases as being a harmony of diverse parts, he backs himself into the paradox that the state will be just only if the individuals are not (for social distinctness demands distinctiveness of psychic kinds) and all the citizens will be just only when the state is not (for if every soul has the same kind of parts in the same relations, so as to be balanced, there will be in the state no division of labor based on diverse soul-types).⁴

philosopher need do is to recognize some *hierarchy* of rules and principles. The structure of principles would then explain when one rule overrides or trumps another, thus incorporating exceptions to lower-ranking rules into a system of morality. The central books of the *Republic* and the discussion of the Form of the good clearly show that Plato thought ethical principles form a hierarchy. Further, he clearly thought he could incorporate into a system of justice the exceptions which Sachs has centrally in mind (justified lying, and the failure to return "owed" goods). For Plato devotes large stretches of argument to the issue of when and to whom one may or should lie and to the issues of proper private ownership and distributive justice.

³ J. Annas, "Plato and Common Morality," *CQ* 28 (1978) 437–51 and *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford 1981) 157–69.

⁴ When Plato speaks of psychic "harmony" (e.g., 443d5) he does not mean harmony in the sense of a musical *chord* or arrangement of chords, rather he is referring to the *tuning* of an instrument (see Plato's extended discussion of psychic harmony at *Phaedo* 92a–95a). Harmonies in the former sense may, of course, be very various, but in the latter sense there can be but one harmony between instruments of the same type that are to play together.

Through most of the *Republic* Plato studiously avoids confronting this paradox, which results from viewing the good individual and the good state as strictly parallel in structure.⁵ Even through most of Books 8 and 9, Plato formally maintains the soul/state parallelism with the structures of unjust individuals paralleling exactly the structures of unjust states. Finally, and significantly, right at the end of Book 9, Plato gives us the equipment we need to resolve the paradox.

I suggest that Plato's way out of the paradox is to hold that social justice is the architectonic ordering principle of individual justice, that an individual's psychic parts are distinct yet balanced only as the result of his holding his position in the Platonically just, functionally diversified state. The individual's internal balancing is a balancing that occurs as the result of external forces provided from the Platonically diversified state; indeed, social functions viewed as external forces are constitutive of the integration and harmony of the state. The relation of individual balance and state diversification is to be understood, I suggest, along the lines of the following medical analogy.

Imagine an individual who is diseased, say, by leukemia or some other similar form of cancer, in such a way that one part of the body is manifesting an unlimited propensity to proliferate at the expense of other essential body parts and that this is occurring because some other part of the body, say the body's natural immune system, is underdeveloped and so is not keeping in check the propensity of the disease-causing part to proliferate, with the result that the totality of bodily functions is thrown wildly out of kilter. Now, the bodily parts can be brought back into balance by external forces, say, through injections of compensatory bodies, irradiation, or drugs, all of which enhance or supplement the body's weak immune system and so make the immune system effective in ways it could not be on its own (for Plato's analogous views on bodily cures, see *Timaeus* 89a-d). Thus the body could be said to come to be in balance again, but *only* as the result of external forces which are able to come into play just exactly because the external world is not homogeneous, but rather is functionally differentiated, having ready repositories of medicine and medical knowledge.

The paradox, then, cannot be resolved by claiming that Plato is thinking of individuals differing as chords differ. In any case, given the components of the Platonic soul, especially the appetites and ambition with their propensities to excess, there can be only one right combination of them. Other combinations are not chords but discords: the various unjust souls of Books 8-9 (e.g., 554d9).

⁵ Bernard Williams has shown that to maintain strict soul/state parallelism Plato must go to the extreme of performing a number of intellectual sleights of hand, "The Analogy of City and Soul in Plato's *Republic*," in E. N. Lee, et al. (edd.), *Exegesis and Argument*, *Phronesis* Suppl. 1 (Assen 1973) 196-206.

The parts of the soul and their relation to the external world are, I suggest, very much like this for Plato. The lowest part of the soul is an unlimited appetite with a propensity to take over and completely disrupt the functions of the other parts of the soul (for the appetites as boundless and insatiable, see 442a, 555b, 562b, 586b, 590b, 604d; and as always tending to disruption, see 577c–e, 579c–e, cf. *Philebus* 63d–e). The intelligence which keeps these passions and appetites in check and so in balance is not equally or sufficiently the possession of every man. Therefore, if every man were to use only his own resources in balancing his soul, the Platonic state would be impossible; rather we would have the chaotic flux of the democratic state, in which the very possibility of diversified yet integrated functions is destroyed (562b–64c; n.b. the disease metaphors in 563e, 564b–c). Plato gives us the remedy for this situation as the final substantive point which is made in the main sequence of Books (2–9). Plato claims that in the Platonically just state the majority of citizens will be enslaved to the wisdom of the philosopher (590c), and continues:

It is best that an individual should have divine intelligence within himself, but if he has not, then it must be *imposed from outside*, so that as far as possible we should be all *alike* and friendly, since governed by the same principle. (590d3–6)

When finally here Plato briefly sketches what “rubbing together” individual and social justice would look like—the project entertained at 434e–35a—we find that the integration of the diversified parts of the individual soul is dependent upon and results from the individual’s position in the *state’s* division of labor. That all individuals are “alike,” are equally, individually just and balanced, is the result of the relations of the individual to other parts of the state, rather than the result of the workings of the individual’s parts *in themselves*. Thus Plato resolves the paradox of the strict parallelism of individual and state by claiming that the balance within the individual is the relational result of external forces which are made possible by individuals having different types of souls which in and of themselves have psychic functions which are *not* in balance. The derivative, relational balance of the individual occurs as the result of balanced diversity in the state. The balanced diversity of the state is the result of the imbalance of psychic functions in individuals. This imbalance of the individual holds even for the philosopher, who *qua* philosopher no longer exercises as he did in youth (537b, 539d) and so has an attendant atrophy of the middle part of the soul (410b, e) requiring balancing in the state by others (519c–20c). In this way it finally turns out that social justice is the architectonic principle for individual justice. Parts of an individual’s soul fulfill their functions in major part because the functions are enhanced by external forces provided from the functionally diverse state.

Usually, however, just the opposite is claimed. The critical tradition holds that primary justice for Plato is an attribute of the relations of the

parts of the soul and that social justice is somehow derivative upon this personal justice. This position is generally thought to be unequivocally stated near the close of Book 4, in a highly compressed and turbid passage, 443c–44a. I will suggest that this passage makes no such claim and is committed to no more than the soul/state parallelism so far discussed. The purpose of the passage, I claim, is simply to establish the surprising result that there *is* a sense of justice that can be applied to an individual in isolation. It is not the purpose of the passage, along the way, to deny that social justice, the fulfilling of social functions, also really is justice.⁶

When in the passage 443c–44a Plato denies that justice lies in a man's external affairs or in concerns extrinsic to his proper self (τὴν ἔξω πρῶξι τῶν αὐτοῦ 443c10), he does not mean, I suggest, for social functions to fall under the description "extrinsic concerns." Plato has just claimed that all along he has been maintaining that fulfilling social functions is a principle and mold of justice (ἀρχὴν τε καὶ τύπον) and now he reaffirms that this is in fact true (443c1, 9). Rather, the extrinsic concerns which are denied the status of proper loci of justice are things like the acquisition of wealth, the care of the body, politics, and contract making. These are immediately catalogued (443e3–4). The denial that these are an independent source of moral and social concern is important. For it was these things which formed the proper concerns of justice for all of Socrates' interlocutors. The whole passage harks back to the long discussion earlier in Book 4 on the status of wealth, contracts, and law at 422a–27a, where it was also denied that these concerns constitute proper arenas of justice.

The two passages vary as follows. The later (443) claims that the proper disposition (ἔξις 443e6) of the parts of the soul is a chief and necessary *means* by which we achieve what is appropriate in regard to our extrinsic concerns. For the proper relations of soul parts, especially the repression of the insatiable appetites, keep one from naturally running off to excess in *whatever* course of action one takes with regard to money, the body, and day-to-day relations with others. Thus, this passage bears the burden of establishing that the Platonically just man will also be just as that notion is commonly understood. Thus the passage continues the point of 442e–43a: The man who has his aggressive appetites under control will not rape, steal, or cheat. But the mere correct balance of soul parts does not establish—how could it?—the determinately correct course of action with regard to sexual relations, wealth, and contracts. Knowing the (often open-ended) extremes of which we are capable, and towards which our appetites propel us, does not tell us how we ought determinately to act in regard to acquisitions, contracts, and other day-to-day affairs.

⁶ The phrase ὡς ἀληθῶς (443d1), which posits a personal dimension of justice, should be seen as balancing, not superseding, the phrase τὸ ἀληθές (443c9), which re-affirms proper social functioning as justice.

For Plato—and this is the point of the earlier passage (422–27)—our social functions establish what our *ends* are to be regarding money making, care of the body, and dealings with others, and determine what positive form these activities are to take. In Book 5 this establishment of *ends* by reference to social functions is extended even to cover familial and sexual relations. Considerations of wealth, politics, civil law, and contracts all are derivative from and take their proper form from the way in which they can best serve in establishing Platonic social justice—each person's fulfilling his proper task. How much money we have, with whom we have dealings, and the like are all governed and molded by our social tasks; our social tasks are not governed and molded by them. This is the reason Plato wishes to deny that justice is primarily concerned with affairs extrinsic to one's proper self.

Now, for an individual to fulfill his social function and to order correctly his derivative civil affairs, his soul cannot be in a chaotic state. Further, if he is to be able to carry out his function, he must be the subject of certain basic forms of consideration from others, or at least non-interference in his affairs on the part of others. An individual cannot carry out his social function in a social climate where rape, murder, cheating, and theft are rife in the land. Therefore, if an individual is to possess a social function, it is necessary not only that his own soul possess individual justice but that the souls of others also possess individual justice. The parts of everyone's soul must be distinct and must not meddle with each other and so manifest individual justice, if social justice is to be possible throughout the state.

The purpose of our passage (443) then is to complete the discussion started earlier in Book 4 of the way in which the common arenas of justice are subordinately incorporated into the Platonic state. The purpose of the passage is not to dislodge social justice as a principle of justice but to establish individual justice as one.

This purpose is sufficient to explain the rhetorical exuberance of the passage. No reader uninitiated in Platonic ethics would suppose that it makes sense to say that an individual in isolation could be just. It would seem that unlike, say, bravery and prudence, which may be either social or purely personal in their locus and effect, justice is a virtue which must be social in its arena. It deals essentially with our relations with others. Indeed it is typically taken to be synonymous with social virtue. So Plato's claim that there *is* a sense in which it is appropriate to say that an individual even by himself is just is quite revolutionary when set against the background of common opinion. But it is revolutionary (or at least revisionary) even set against the language of justice which Plato himself has been developing heretofore in the *Republic*.

Even as late as 443b2 the phrase "the things proper to oneself" (τὰ αὐτοῦ) was being used, as it had been since Book 2 (370a ff.), as a stand-in or paraphrase for "function." The phrase describes, quite generally,

something that a discrete, unified entity performs. Indeed, the possession and performance of what is peculiar and proper to oneself (ἡ τοῦ οἰκείου τε καὶ ἑαυτοῦ ἕξις τε καὶ πράξις) was given as the *definition* of social justice at 433e12–34a1. But suddenly at the end of Book 4, this well-established vocabulary of “things appropriate and peculiar to oneself” is used without prior warning to define not the operations of a unified self, but (rather surprisingly) the *parts* of the self (τὰ οἰκεία 443d3, certainly; τῶν αὐτοῦ c10 and ἑαυτὸν καὶ τὰ ἑαυτοῦ d1, probably).⁷ It is therefore not surprising that Plato draws attention to this shift in usage and claims that the new use of the vocabulary is legitimate in the new context. He does this by saying that the parts of the soul “really” and “truly” (τῶ ὄντι 443d3, ὡς ἀληθῶς d1) are things proper and distinctive to an individual. But this is not to say that all other dimensions of justice are sham, derivative, or in some other sense less than real.⁸ To say that one type of thing is truly F is not to deny that other types of things are also truly F. Further, it is perfectly natural in ordinary discourse to use “truly” and “really” to describe unexpected discoveries or surprising turns of events. It is in this sense that Plato’s use of the terms in this passage is even to be expected, since he describes the unanticipated discovery that there really is a sense in which an individual thought of in isolation can be just and wishes to signal the surprising malleability of the language of justice. But we must not mistake the justified rhetorical exuberance of the passage for more than what it is. Plato is not throwing out or even demoting his social conception of justice. *Republic* 443 is not, then, the star passage for those who wish to claim that for Plato justice per se is individual justice. But the orthodox have nowhere else to turn in the *Republic* to establish their position. I suggest that they should begin to doubt it.

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⁷ I think it possible that these phrases at 443c10, d1 are vague in scope and are not simply extensionally equivalent to the later expression τὰ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ γένη, 443d3.

⁸ When at 443c4 Plato calls social justice an “image,” he is not thereby giving it a status inferior to that of individual justice or claiming that individual justice is the original of which social justice is an image—something he might easily have said if he were so inclined. Rather Plato is contrasting social justice with a third sort of justice which is in both the just man and the just state (444a4–5). The claim that the definition of social justice is an image is simply part of the general acknowledgment throughout Books 2–4, 8–9 that the definitions of the virtues (and indeed all of these Books’ substantive moral claims) are tentative hypotheses, which in the terminology of the central Books are dream-images of eternal certainties (533b–c). Even the doctrine of the tripartite soul is viewed as tentative (435c–d). And at 506d the *individual* virtues (504a) are said to have been discussed as the Idea of good will be, that is, through images and likenesses. For both social and individual justice as tentatively understood when compared to some third more fundamental form of justice (probably the Idea of justice is intended), see 543d–44a.

