

Plato's *Republic*

An Introduction

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5. Starting to Answer the First Question The Political Virtues Book IV

In Book IV Socrates answers the *Republic's* first question, *What is justice?* Keeping to the plan devised in Book II, he first tells us what *political* justice—justice in the *polis* or city-state—is and then, arguing that the ideal *polis* and the human soul (*psuchê*) share the same three-part structure, he applies his definition of political justice to the *psyche*, arriving at his definition of *personal* justice. His definition is interesting in many ways, not least of which is its accounting for justice not as a matter of outward behavior, as Cephalus' and Polemarchus' definitions did, but rather as an inward matter of psychic harmony.

Happiness: Parts and Wholes, Individuals and Communities (4.419a–421c)

Book IV begins with Adeimantus jumping back into the conversation with a concern that brings to the fore the tension between individualism and communitarianism. He worries that the guardians and auxiliaries will not be especially happy, given the lifestyles Socrates described at the close of Book III: communal living, no privacy, not much money, etc. 'The city really belongs to them', Adeimantus says, 'yet they derive no good from it' since they lack 'the things that are thought to belong to

people who are blessedly happy' (4.419a). This is certainly a plausible view about what the best kind of life is like. The Greek verb translated as 'thought' is νομίζεται (*nomizetai*), which is cognate with νόμος (*nomos*: custom or law), and thus indicates what is thought or deemed or customarily taken to be the best life—not necessarily what actually *is* the best life.

Plato has Socrates give a twofold response to Adeimantus. First, he suggests that far from being unhappy, the guardians may well be the happiest group in the ideal *polis*. They are performing the task or function for which they are best suited, after all, and if they are performing it well, they are probably delighting in it. It is another reminder that while the good of the community is Socrates' primary concern, it is not his only concern. Socrates then reminds Adeimantus of the plan they have adopted, to investigate the nature of *personal* justice and its connection to *personal* happiness by discovering the nature of *political* justice and its connection to happiness. His focus, then, is on *political* happiness, on 'making the whole city happy' (4.420c); he does not aim to make 'any one group outstandingly happy, but to make the whole city so' (4.420b). Even though he seems to be doubling down on the holistic or communitarian ethos that is regularly contrasted with the individualism which many readers will find intuitively more attractive, his communitarianism here is largely methodological, a useful device to get to his ultimate concern, which is individual happiness. In Book V he will suggest that individual wellbeing depends in no small way on whether the *polis* one lives in is just, which suggests a more modest community-first ethos than he has been espousing heretofore.

The Ideal City: Finishing Touches (4.421c–427d)

After giving a warning about the damage economic inequality can wreak in a city—a theme to which he will return in Book VIII—Socrates reminds Adeimantus of the importance of the guardians' preserving the educational system as they have received it, lest it be corrupted by seemingly minor and innocuous changes.

Many readers will have witnessed versions of such cultural conservatism in their lifetimes, for example, panicked responses to the

threats posed by jazz, Elvis, the Beatles, and rap music. But lest Plato seem like just another cranky old fuddy-duddy bemoaning music he did not grow up with, we should remember that the ideal city's music was chosen intentionally and with great care, since it is meant to cultivate traits of character necessary to the city's thriving. The worry is that 'lawlessness easily creeps in [...] unnoticed' (4.424d), so, given how malleable young people are (a fact of human nature that is highly relevant to the educational system developed in Books II and III) it is important that music and culture generally provide sustenance to young souls. Children will absorb lawfulness or lawlessness—Plato mentions no neutral third option—from the games they play and the songs they sing and hear, so it is vital that the healthy system be preserved. Changes of mode and meter can seem trivial and morally neutral, but they are not, on Plato's moral-aesthetic conception of character development. Even if we do not share Plato's worry that 'changing to a new form of music [...] threatens the whole system' (4.424c), keeping in mind his beliefs in the malleability of young minds and the inseparability of morality and aesthetics should render his worry at least less curmudgeonly.

Though there are several other things worth discussing in this part of Book IV, I will mention just one, what we might call Plato's legislative minimalism. It is foolish, Socrates says, to think that legislation can overcome failures of education. Though some of his examples are trivial—regulating hairstyles and clothes—others are not: how the young treat the old and how they care for their parents, for example. This brief stretch of the *Republic* might seem little more than harrumphing about 'kids today', but Plato is doing more than mere griping here. He might not agree with the details of Ed Tom's diagnosis in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*—'*It starts when you begin to overlook bad manners. Any time you quit hearin Sir and Mam the end is pretty much in sight. I told her, I said: It reaches into ever strata.*'¹—but in principle they seem to be of one mind. Communities are held together by more than rules and laws; they are held together by shared values and affections. Education in Plato's broad sense is primarily *character* education, after all, and there is something to his point that legislation cannot repair defective character

1 Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), p. 304. Spelling, syntax, and italics as in original.

education. Still, we might worry that his view ignores the expressive function of law—the law's power to say something about the shared norms and values that bind a community together. If, in addition to governing behavior, the law can also shape attitudes and beliefs, then it may have a contribution to make to character education, if only an ancillary one.

In my home state of Wisconsin, adultery is a crime—a felony, in fact. Prosecutions are extremely rare—there have been none in the last thirty years—but presumably that is not because there have been so few violations of Wisconsin Statute §944.16. I know of no empirical studies of this law's efficacy in reducing adultery, but it seems unlikely that potential adulterers would be deterred by it, especially given its non-enforcement. But even if there is no direct causal link between criminalizing adultery and reducing extramarital adventuring, its criminalization may yet serve an important function: expressing the citizenry's collective disapproval of adultery. If the law plays this expressive role, striking the adultery statute from the books might seem to signal, if not the community's approval of adultery, at least its non-disapproval, and it is not implausible that this would have negative behavioral consequences, by changing attitudes and feelings about the importance of marital fidelity, promise-keeping, etc. So there may be a dimension to the law that Plato is missing here. On the other hand, a law's remaining on the books because of its expressive function might cultivate the sort of cynicism and hypocrisy Adeimantus complains about in Book II: many citizens make a great show of the importance of the values just mentioned, because it is important to *seem* just, but in practice their conduct suggests a preference for *being* unjust.

The Political Virtues (4.427d–434d)

Now that the ideal city is complete, it is time to look for justice in it. But before we do that, I bring up a seemingly minor point that, as is so often the case with Plato, is surprisingly deep upon examination, carrying more philosophical weight than initial appearances suggest.

In announcing the completion of the ideal city, which paves the way for the inquiry into the nature of justice, Socrates says to Adeimantus, 'your city might now be said to be established' (4.427d). This seems

innocuous enough, but up to this point, Socrates' possessive pronoun of choice has been the first-person plural: he speaks of 'our city' and 'our citizens' (2.370d, 2.371e, 2.373b, 2.378b, 3.387e, 3.394d, 3.397d). At the corresponding point in Book II, at the completion of the first city, Socrates says, 'Well, Adeimantus, has our city grown to completeness, then?' (2.371e; emphasis added) Why the shift here from *our* city to *your* city? Perhaps it is merely stylistic variation on Plato's part. After all, within just a few lines Socrates shifts back to 'our city' (4.427e), and then it is soon back again to 'your city' (4.431c). I suspect that the shift in pronouns is Plato's way of reminding us that Socrates, despite being the chief theoretical architect of the just-completed ideal city, still regards the first city, the rustic utopia rejected by Glaucon as 'a city for pigs' (2.372d), as 'the true city [...] the healthy one' (2.372e). Perhaps Plato hopes his readers will pick up on Socrates' ambivalence and reflect further on his allegiance to his rustic utopia. That city, which has been all but forgotten by this point in the *Republic*, was without guardians and auxiliaries and indeed without classes of any kind. The just-completed city is not only structured by political classes but in fact, we will soon see, has the same structure as the human soul. This is a perfect place to remind attentive readers of the second-best nature of the ideal city, if only to make us think through how seriously to take Socrates' attitude toward it.

So what seems a matter of mere style may turn out to be really a matter of substance, though we will not pursue so fine a point any further. Hopefully, though, this brief discussion reminds us of what a subtle work the *Republic* is and why it rewards repeated rereading.

Cardinal Virtues

If the city is well founded, Socrates argues, it will be 'completely good' (4.427e) and thus it will not be missing any of the moral virtues. For Socrates and Plato, there are four primary virtues: courage, moderation, wisdom and justice. Aristotle had a much longer list, including friendliness, wit, generosity, and proper pride, among others. Philosophers often speak of Plato's four virtues as 'the cardinal virtues', which suggests at a minimum that the virtues are important or paramount. But in another, stronger sense, to call a virtue a *cardinal*

virtue is to say that it is theoretically basic: there are no virtues more basic than it and any non-cardinal virtue is somehow reducible to or a version of the cardinal virtue in question. Socrates says that 'there are four virtues' (4.428a) and that together they make the city 'completely good' (4.427e), which suggests that these virtues are cardinal in the stronger, theoretically basic sense. To see what is at stake here, consider the attention paid earlier in the *Republic* to cultivating the virtue of piety by regulating stories about the gods—and consider Plato's having devoted an entire dialogue (the *Euthyphro*) to investigating the nature of piety. If piety is not a cardinal virtue, perhaps it can be subsumed under justice, since piety concerns what is owed to the gods and justice is plausibly thought of as giving to each what they are owed. Viewing piety as a requirement or form of justice would preserve the cardinality of Socrates' four virtues. One problem with this view, however, is that in Book I Socrates casts doubt on defining justice in terms of what is owed, and we will soon see that the definition of justice Socrates proposes is *not* couched in terms of giving to each what they are owed. Another, related, worry is that what goes for piety can also go for the other virtues. If courage, for example, can be thought of as what soldiers owe the city, then like piety courage is not itself a distinct virtue but instead a kind of justice. So by seeking to preserve the cardinality of the four cardinal virtues we end up destroying their cardinality.

This concern about piety is in a sense *internal* to Plato's moral thinking and to the account of virtue he is offering here: he seems committed to piety's being a genuine, stand-alone virtue and yet he excludes it from his 'official' list. A different kind of concern is *external*: when looking at Plato's list *we* might think he is excluding some traits *we* take to be virtues. Many readers will think of kindness and generosity, for example, as virtues of character, and thus think Plato's list is mistaken not because of an internal inconsistency or tension but because it fails to include traits that belong on the list. When thinking about the attitudes Socrates expresses toward the disabled in Book III, many readers will think that the virtue of compassion is in short supply in his ideal city. It would be difficult to subsume generosity under justice, since generosity is at least in part a matter of giving which goes *beyond* what is owed.

Yet another worry concerns the argument Socrates gives for the complete goodness of the ideal city:

- P1 If our city has been correctly founded, it is completely good.
 (4.427e)
- P2 Our city has been correctly founded.
- C Therefore, our city is completely good.

While we might question why correctness must imply completeness, P1 seems plausible. But many readers, noting the absence of individual liberty and equal political rights in the ideal city, will have grave doubts about P2. Socrates' more community-minded interlocutors raise no such objections, but as thoughtful readers we will want to engage in philosophical dialogue with our author by thinking through the issues for ourselves, in both senses of *for ourselves*. We want to think about these issues independently, not merely relying on what Plato or Socrates or whoever has to say. And we want to think about what Socrates' claims mean *to us*. As he reminds his readers at various points, Socrates' method depends upon his interlocutors' 'saying what [they] really think' (1.349a). Good philosophical reading often requires adopting another's point of view, examining whether the claims an author makes from within that point of view are consistent with it. But good philosophical reading also requires scrutinizing that point of view itself, not just for its internal consistency but also for its substantive correctness. Of course, there is a danger here of taking our own points of view as sacrosanct and beyond criticism and rejecting points of view at odds with them. But one of the values of reading a book like the *Republic*, which expresses perspectives very different from our own, is that they can prod us to think through our deeply-held but not always carefully, critically scrutinized beliefs.

As usual, there is more to be said here and by no means am I suggesting that Plato has no plausible responses to these worries. But in questioning the adequacy of his claim about how many virtues there are we honor him by doing the thing he most wants of us: to think philosophically and critically.

Wisdom (4.428a–429a)

The first virtue discovered in the city, wisdom (σοφία [*sophia*]), is the virtue of a particular class: the guardian-rulers. Wisdom is often thought of as an intellectual virtue, rather than a character virtue, as it is a kind of knowledge. Aristotle distinguished the intellectual and character virtues (although he ultimately thought that some of them were mutually dependent). While this is not a distinction Plato explicitly makes, it is a helpful one, both in itself and for the light it will shed in Book VII of the *Republic*, when Plato is busy distinguishing philosophers from non-philosophers.

Wisdom is a kind of knowledge, Socrates thinks, but not just any old kind of knowledge and certainly not the kind of knowledge that craftspeople possess. Nor is it the kind of abstract, theoretical knowledge a mathematician might possess. It is more general than the craftsman's know-how and more practical than the mathematician's know-that. It is knowledge of what is best for the city as a whole (4.428c). Although many readers are leery of Socrates' holism and communitarianism, here they seem unproblematic: wisdom is knowledge of what is best for the city *as a whole*, not what is best for any particular group of citizens. If the city is to function well, it must be unified, and it can only be unified if its rulers aim at the good of the whole, rather than at what is good for a particular part of it at the expense of the whole. Socrates has already implied that good rulers will strive to minimize economic inequality, given its dis-integrating effects. Some economic inequality is to be expected and may well be beneficial, but too much leads to there not being 'a city [...] [but] two cities at war with one another, that of the poor and that of the rich' (4.422e [*italics in the original*]). Just as the ideal city's founders aimed not to 'make any one group outstandingly happy but to make the whole so, as far as possible' (4.420b), its rulers must aim at the good of the city as a whole.

It should make sense that this is the virtue distinctive of the guardians, if we remember the earlier account of a virtue as what enables its possessor to perform its function well. Since the function of the rulers is—unsurprisingly—to rule, they can rule well only if they possess wisdom. A ruler who makes only lucky guesses, or even educated guesses, about what is best for the city is less likely to rule

well than a ruler who *knows* what is best for the city. Now of course we can agree that rulers require wisdom to rule well without agreeing with Socrates' conception of it or with his belief that only a few citizens are capable of it. One might be skeptical that *knowledge* about what is best for a city-state or country is really possible, settling instead for experience-grounded *beliefs*. And one might think wisdom is at least in principle within the grasp of ordinary citizens. We have already seen, and will see in more detail in Books VIII and IX, that Socrates is no fan of democracy—presumably because he is skeptical that ordinary citizens are capable of the sort of knowledge needed to rule well.

Courage (4.429a–430c)

Courage, like wisdom, is also a virtue distinctive of a particular class: the soldiering auxiliaries. It becomes clear that the guardians, who emerge from the auxiliaries, will also possess courage, but their *distinctive* (rather than sole) virtue is wisdom, not courage. As above, their possessing courage makes sense when we remember that the auxiliaries' function is to protect the city, which they can do well only if they possess courage. A surprising way in which courage is similar to wisdom is that courage, at least as Socrates characterizes it, is at root a cognitive affair: it is 'th[e] power to preserve through everything the correct and law-inculcated *belief* about what is to be feared and what is not' (4.430b [emphasis added]). Attentive readers will have noticed that the wisdom the guardians possess is a kind of *knowledge*, but the auxiliaries' courage is a matter of *belief*, not knowledge. Making clear how knowledge and belief differ will be a central focus of Books V, VI, and VII. It might be helpful to bring the JTB (justified true belief) conception of knowledge into play again (reminding ourselves that it is not Plato's view but rather a heuristic to help us make sense of some features of the *Republic*). The auxiliaries believe that certain things are worse than death—slavery and dishonor, for example—but the guardians know *why* these things are worse than death: they have, in addition to a true belief, a justification for their true belief. While the auxiliaries' beliefs lack the intellectual backing the guardians possess, this in no way prevents their holding it firmly and unshakably. Their belief that there are fates worse than death must be dyed-in-the-wool, in Socrates' memorable metaphor: dyed in so

deeply that 'the color is fast—no amount of washing [...] can remove it' (4.429b). If the Spartan soldiers holding the pass at Thermopylae against Persian invaders—an event that, until the film *The 300*, was the province of classicists and history nerds—valued their own lives over the good of the community, they would have thrown down their weapons and run for safety. The opening pages of Book III, attentive readers will remember, were rife with constraints on stories and poetry designed to cultivate courage. Any would-be auxiliary who believes that their death would be the worst thing that could happen believes a true falsehood, a belief that is radically false and distorts an important dimension of reality. The auxiliaries' education, both poetic and physical, is meant to cultivate the virtue of courage.

We should note a subtle but important refinement Socrates makes to his definition of courage. He first describes courage as the auxiliaries' 'power to preserve through everything its belief about what things are to be feared' (4.429b), but he quickly adds a qualifier: courage is 'preservation of the belief *that has been inculcated by the law through education* about what things and sorts of things are to be feared' (4.429c [emphasis added]), a qualification he repeats a page later: '*the correct and law-inculcated belief*' (4.430b). He is making a distinction between what Aristotle will later call *natural virtue* and *virtue proper*. Some people and indeed many animals seem by nature courageous, born with correct beliefs about what is properly feared and with the power to preserve those beliefs in the face of danger. But unless these beliefs are the product of education, what is present is not 'courage but something else' (4.430b). Socrates does not elaborate, but presumably he thinks this because proper courage's natural analog may misfire without the guidance of reason and education. We have already seen that too much physical education and not enough musical education results in a person's becoming 'hard and harsh' (3.410d) rather than courageous.

Moderation (4.430d–432b)

Unlike courage and wisdom, moderation is *not* distinctive of any particular class in the city; instead, 'moderation spreads throughout the whole' (4.432a). Socrates starts with the commonsense connection between moderation (also called temperance) and self-control. If you

decline and I insist on a third slice of cheesecake, you seem to have and I seem to lack the virtue of moderation. But explaining this in terms of self-control is puzzling, Socrates thinks, since what does the controlling and what is controlled is the very same thing. The puzzle is solved when we realize that our souls have better and worse parts, with the better part comprising our capacities for reason and choice and the worse part our appetite and desires. In the self-controlled person, 'the naturally better part is in control of the naturally worse' (4.431a), so they decline that third slice of cheesecake while I do not.

There is something problematic about Socrates' procedure here. The plan is to figure out the nature of the *political* virtues in order to discover the nature of the *personal* virtues. But here he is appealing to the structure of the soul or person in trying to understand the nature of the *political* virtue of moderation, so he is building into the *polis* the psychic structure he will soon claim to find there. As a grad school professor once wrote in the margins of a paper of mine, 'if you are going to try to pull the rabbit out of the hat, it is best if you are not seen putting it in'. But perhaps there is no big problem here. After all, Socrates is simply appealing to an ordinary belief about moderation as a kind of self-control; he is not importing any high-level psychological theory, and he may well have been able to arrive at his conclusion—that 'something in which the better rules the worse is properly called moderate and self-controlled' (4.431b)—without the appeal to commonsense psychology.

The ideal *polis* is self-controlled and thus moderate, Socrates thinks, because it is ruled by the guardians, who are the best part of the *polis*. But there is more to it than that. A city in which the guardians only tenuously hold power over the rebellious craftspeople is not moderate, nor would Socrates think it is, for it is lacking the harmony distinctive of true self-control. In a moderate or self-controlled *polis*, the three classes 'all sing the same song together' (4.432a): there is 'agreement between the naturally worse and the naturally better as to which of the two is to rule' (4.432a).

As with the wisdom and courage, Socrates plays up the cognitive nature of this virtue: 'ruler and ruled [...] share *the same belief* about who should rule' (4.431d [*italics added*]). They are in agreement, not in the way in which a good drawing or measurement agrees with its object or in the way in which some food agrees with my finicky stomach but

other food does not, but in the way that only rational creatures can be: consent. We should tread carefully here, however, for the idea of *consent* can be misleading. Socrates is not offering the modern, liberal view that the legitimacy of a government turns on the consent of the governed. The consent Socrates has in mind is a *symptom* of good government, not a condition of its legitimacy. Presumably, in a well-governed city, the craftspeople consent to being governed by the guardians because things are going well for them economically; they are happy with the arrangement and are happy to be left alone to their cobbling, baking, doctoring, etc., and their family lives. The entitlement of the guardians to rule depends not on the consent of those they govern but on their possessing the relevant virtue, wisdom.

A word or two about the 'spread out' nature of moderation is in order. Unlike wisdom and courage, which are what we might call *particular* virtues, which are virtues distinctive of particular classes, moderation is a *holistic* virtue, a virtue of the whole city, not of any of its particular classes. This is a subtle point, easily misunderstood. Although a city is wise because its rulers are wise and brave because its auxiliaries are brave, Plato is *not* saying that the city is moderate because every class is moderate. Moderation does not work that way. By way of analogy, think of a basket containing red balls, green balls, and yellow balls. The collection of balls has a property which none of its members has: the property of being multi-colored. The collection is multi-colored because of the colors of the individual balls: if the basket contained only green balls, the collection would not exhibit the property of being multi-colored. But none of the individual balls in the basket is multi-colored: each is either red or green or yellow. (Of course, nothing prevents individual balls from being multi-colored: a particular ball might be red, green, and yellow—but none of the balls in our example has this property.) So the collection's having this property depends upon the members having certain properties—but it is the collection, and not its members, that has the property of being multi-colored. Being multi-colored, in this example, is a holistic property, depending on the nature of the individuals but not reducible or equivalent to them.

The political virtue of moderation, as Socrates conceives of it, is the same kind of holistic property, belonging to the whole and not to the parts. It is *not* the case that the city is moderate because each class is

moderate; rather, the city is moderate because the different classes agree about who should rule, just as the basket of balls is multi-colored even though none of the balls are.

Socrates' talk of better and worse parts may be easier to hear when the parts in question are parts of the soul rather than the city. Thinking of the guardians as 'naturally better' than the craftspeople has a dissonant ring to egalitarian ears. As we noted when discussing the Noble Falsehood, the kind of equality that most readers will insist on (and which Plato has Socrates denying) is not factual equality. Some people can run or swim faster than others; some people are better at knitting than others; some people are better at differential equations than others. What is at issue is *political* equality, the belief that all citizens have equal rights to participating in the political life of their communities. We will see in the next chapter that Socrates expresses the view that being a woman does not in itself disqualify a person from being a guardian. But he certainly does not think that all women, or all men, are capable of being guardians, since so very few of us are capable of acquiring the requisite virtue, wisdom.

We will return to this topic in the next chapter and then again when discussing Plato's attitudes toward democracy in Chapter 12, so for now the egalitarians among us should merely note our disagreement with Plato. But we should also be thinking of how we might go about trying to convince him, drawing on premises he himself would accept, that he is mistaken to reject political equality. It is not an easy task. But, as I have said before, one of the great benefits of carefully reading the *Republic* is that doing so can lead us to wrestle with difficult tasks like this, to question and defend propositions that seem self-evident *to us* but do not so appear to others.

Justice (4.432b–434d)

Since three of the four cardinal virtues have been identified, Socrates thinks that justice must be whatever is left. 'Justice: it's what is left over' does not exactly inspire confidence, either as a bumper-sticker or a philosophical methodology. But Socrates' point is that the answer to the *Republic's* first question is staring them in the face, so to speak. They have been talking about it without even knowing it, he thinks, because

justice is based on, and indeed seems to be a moralized version of the Specialization Principle: 'justice', he says, 'is doing one's own work, and not meddling with what is not one's own' (4.433a).

Although it is initially stated in terms of individual behavior, justice as a virtue of the *polis* is really a matter of each *class* doing its work: the craftspeople produce and exchange goods, the auxiliaries protect the city, and the guardians govern it. If this is indeed what justice is, Socrates' earlier insistence that the guardians' most important task is to protect against the mixing of the metals grows in importance. If their task is to ensure justice and prevent its opposite, then they must prevent the craftspeople from ruling, since, the Noble Falsehood informed us, 'the city will be ruined if it ever has an iron or a bronze guardian' (3.415c). When cobblers bake and bakers cobble, the city will have suboptimal bread and sandals (and not enough of them), since this violates the Specialization Principle, which requires specialization as a way of producing 'more plentiful and better-quality goods' (2.370c). But occupation-switching is disastrous, and not merely suboptimal, when bakers and guardians switch roles. A baking guardian who lacks the baker's skill will produce bread that is not very good, but a ruling baker who lacks the guardian's wisdom will produce disaster, on Socrates' view.

Justice as non-meddling has intriguing parallels in Confucius' *Analects*. When asked about good governing, Confucius replies, 'The ruler must rule, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son' (12.11). Underlying Confucius' somewhat odd way of making his point is that roles are not merely descriptive but rather normative, providing rules and norms of conduct. (This echoes the discussion of the 'precise sense' of craft-terms such as 'ruler' back in Book I.) A widely heard complaint about contemporary American parenting is that too many parents seek to be their children's friend (searching Google or Yahoo for 'be a parent not a friend', for example, yields millions of hits). But even without investigating the complaint's merits, we see its point, which is both a Platonic and Confucian one. We each inhabit many roles: citizen, friend, neighbor, mother, cousin, customer, boss, etc., and it may not always be clear which role is appropriate in a given situation. To a great degree, practical wisdom is a matter of seeing which role is appropriate in the circumstances so one can then act accordingly. And of course it

is not always clear what the role requires, even when one determines which role is called for. It may be that in interacting with a particular employee on a particular day, being a friend rather than a boss is what is called for. But it may be that a different situation calls for just the opposite.

Although this idea of the normative status of roles is plausible and intriguing—indeed, Confucianism is often thought of as a kind of role ethics—many readers will be understandably uncomfortable with the *political* implications of Plato's role-based account of justice, rejecting the idea of assigning to a fellow citizen 'the rank appropriate to his nature' (3.415c), for it seems an easy, morally problematic slide from here to insisting that others 'know their place'. Role ethics is a fascinating topic, but exploring it in more depth would take us too far afield. So instead, let us briefly explore two arguments Socrates makes in support of his definition of political justice.

The first argument is explicitly marked in a way that should garner our attention: 'Look at it this way if you want to be convinced' (4.433e), Socrates says. The argument turns on the proper role of a judge, which is not surprising, given the focus on roles. The ideal city's rulers will also be judges, Socrates argues, and a judge's 'sole aim' is that 'no citizen should have what belongs to another or be deprived of what is his own' (4.433e)—because this, intuitively, is just. Therefore, Socrates concludes, 'the having and doing of one's own would be accepted as justice' (4.434a). This seems plausible, and Glaucon finds it so. But a more critically disposed reader might question the sudden appearance of 'doing one's own' in the conclusion, when the premises have concerned only *having* one's own. Socrates' argument is commonsensical and intuitive because it concerns property: justice requires that I not be wrongfully deprived of my property. Is what one *does* properly thought of something one *has*? Are one's roles to be counted among one's property? Perhaps, but if *being*, *doing*, and *having* are distinct metaphysical categories, we should be leery of fusing them into each other.

The second argument is also simple and straightforward. Since 'meddling and exchange between these three classes'—that is, the mixing of the metals—is the greatest harm that can happen to the city' and injustice is the worst thing one can do to one's city, it follows, Socrates argues, that 'meddling is injustice' (4.434c). And if meddling is injustice,

it must follow that its opposite, not meddling, is justice. A reader who suspects that this argument begs the question—that it assumes the truth of what it is trying to prove—seems to be on the mark. Only someone who already accepts the proposed definition of justice would accept the argument's first premise, that meddling is the worst evil that could befall the city. And even waiving that worry, egalitarian-minded readers who are friendly to democracy are likely to think that the first premise is simply false. They are likelier to think that the hierarchical, elitist structure of Socrates' ideal city is among the worst evils that can befall a political community. And sharp-minded readers will wonder whether Socrates is confusing cause and effect, thinking that even by Socrates' lights the meddling itself is not the great evil but rather is the *cause* of the evil, which presumably is the disintegration of the city. Many such readers will be skeptical that meddling or metals-mixing will cause the great harm Socrates claims for it.

In addition to these external worries about Socrates' definition of justice, there is an *internal* worry about it—that is, a worry from *within* Socrates' point of view—concerning the cardinality of the cardinal virtues. Piety, the reader will remember, is treated elsewhere in the *Republic* (and elsewhere in Plato's dialogues) as a distinct virtue in its own right. But Socrates does not count it as a cardinal virtue (or even mention it) in Book IV. Earlier I suggested that attempting to regard piety as a form of justice (and thus retaining Socrates' view that there are only four moral virtues) did not pan out. Here, the concern is that justice, as Socrates describes it, and moderation are so similar that it is difficult to count them as *two* virtues. A city is moderate when all three classes 'share the same belief about who should rule' (4.431de) and it is just when each class does its own work, but it is hard to see how those are really different, since each class doing its own work seems to be the embodiment of the agreement. Although making an agreement and acting on it are not the same thing—as anyone who has had a contractual dispute or, to choose a homier example, anyone who has experienced a child not being willing to go to bed at the agreed-upon time, can attest—the difference here does not seem sufficient to justify viewing moderation and justice as distinct cardinal virtues. If we are tempted to insist that the difference between agreement and action *is* sufficient to justify claims of cardinality, we might find our position turned against

us. After all, an opponent might argue, could not the same be said about courage? Surely a *belief* that *x* is an appropriate object of fear and *acting* on that belief are not the same thing, even if they are closely related. If so, there would need to be another virtue, related to but distinct from courage; and if that is the case, then Socrates is mistaken that 'there are four virtues' (4.428a).

While Socrates does not wrestle with this problem directly, his view that justice is a sort of meta-virtue might implicitly solve his problem. The prefix 'meta-' suggests a higher-level or higher-order aboutness. Meta-cognition is cognition about cognition: thinking about thinking. Though it is often more at home in psychological contexts, there is a sense in which *we* are engaged in meta-cognition here: we are thinking about Plato's thinking about justice. So to call justice a *meta*-virtue is to suggest that it is a virtue *about* the other virtues. Even so, there is a sense in which thinking of justice as a meta-virtue can be misleading. Cognition comes before meta-cognition: there is no thinking about thinking unless there is first some thinking to think about! But on Socrates' view, justice comes before the other virtues: it is the condition of their possibility, 'the power that makes it possible for them to grow in the city and that preserves them when they have grown for as long as it remains there itself' (4.433b). It is worth emphasizing the word 'power' in this description (the Greek word is δύναμις (*dunamis*), from which the English word 'dynamic' derives). Justice is a power that enables agreement about who should rule; it is what makes it possible for there to be an agreement in the first place. Justice so conceived is not merely everyone's doing his own work, but is rather '*the power* that consists in everyone's doing his own work' (4.433d [emphasis added]). Similarly, courage is not merely the correct belief about what is appropriately feared, but is '*the power* to preserve through everything [the] belief about what things are to be feared' (4.429c). Earlier, I emphasized the *belief* at the center of courage, to draw a contrast with the *knowledge* that constitutes wisdom. Indeed, that is what enabled the imaginary interlocutor above to drive a wedge between belief and action. Reminding ourselves that courage is not merely a belief, but rather the power to preserve that belief through thick and thin, closes that gap.

Socrates' idea that justice is what makes the other virtues possible certainly makes sense for moderation, especially if we remember that

the shared agreement about who should rule is a symptom of a well-governed city, and not, as we moderns tend to think, the ultimate condition of the government's legitimacy. It seems initially to make less sense for courage and wisdom, since they are particular rather than holistic virtues (virtues distinctive of particular classes rather than of the city as a whole). Would would-be rulers and auxiliaries still possess their distinctive virtues even if justice did not prevail in the city? Those capable of ruling would still know what is best for the city as a whole even if they are not in fact ruling, and the same would seem to go for would-be auxiliaries. Indeed, just these sorts of situations arise as the ideal city begins to disintegrate, as described by Socrates in Books VIII and IX. Perhaps. But the time and attention Socrates has devoted to education in the ideal city suggests that while wisdom and courage can be defined and understood independently of justice, they cannot be manifested or made real in its absence. Much of the program of education Socrates spells out in Books II and III is devoted to educating the auxiliaries. He will return to education in Book VII, but there his focus will be on educating the guardians, sketching out a program that will ultimately enable them to grasp the nature of goodness itself, which they will need if they are to *know* what is best for the city as a whole and not merely have correct beliefs about this. So even if we can understand what courage and wisdom *are* independently of justice, we can imagine Socrates saying, those virtues will never come to be without the rigorous educational program of Books II, III, and VII, which is why it is so crucial for the guardians to defend it and resist all attempts to change it even slightly. In Book III Socrates indicates that the guardians' most important task is to prevent the mixing of the metals described in the Noble Falsehood: 'there is nothing that they must guard better or watch more carefully than the mixture of metals in the souls of the next generation' (3.415b). What he says in Book IV initially seems to conflict with this, since there he suggests that their most important task is to 'guard the one great thing [...] education and upbringing [...] [that] those in charge must cling to education [...] guarding it against everything' (4.423d–24b). It seems that these distinct tasks cannot be the *one* most important task. But indeed, they really are one and the same task, since the only way to prevent the mixing of the metals is to preserve the educational system. Indeed, as we will see when Socrates describes

the disintegration of the ideal city in Books VIII and IX, the decay begins when 'they have less consideration for music and poetry than they ought [... and] then they will neglect physical training' (8.546d). These changes to education are quickly followed by '[t]he intermixing of iron with silver and bronze with gold' (8.546e).

So while justice is *conceptually* distinct from the other cardinal virtues, they depend upon it for their coming into being in the city. Justice and the other virtues, while conceptually distinct, are not *really* or *existentially* distinct: justice is the condition of their coming into existence. Thus it is a tad misleading to call it a 'meta-virtue', since it is *about* the other virtues in a distinct way: it is the condition of their reality. It is their basis—their ἀρχή (*archê*) or foundation.

Some Suggestions for Further Reading

Readers interested in Plato's other Socratic dialogues on the virtues will want to read the *Euthyphro* (on piety), the *Charmides* (on temperance), and the *Laches* (on courage), all of which are available both online and in print form. Excellent translations of all of Plato's dialogues and letters can be found in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. by John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

Readers interested in the ethics of virtue generally and the question of the cardinal virtues in particular might start with Rosalind Hursthouse and Glenn Pettigrove's excellent overview in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>.

Readers interested in role ethics will find a good overview in John Ramsey, 'Confucian Role Ethics: A Critical Survey', *Philosophy Compass*, 11 (2016), 235–45, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12324>.

Readers interested in the expressive function of law might start with Cass Sunstein, 'Law's Expressive Function', *The Good Society*, 9 (1999), 55–61.