

In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates and his Athenian interlocutors discuss the nature of human justice. Throughout the dialogues, the group finds not only much difficulty establishing an acceptable definition of justice, but struggles still more to determine what value justice serves to its beholder. That is, is justice merely valuable for its consequences or does it also carry with it intrinsic value? After all, if justice is truly a human's ultimate virtue as Socrates imagines it is, then it must be shown to be preferable to injustice in all cases. To address these concerns, Socrates sets out to find justice in the human soul and show it to be a cardinal virtue with intrinsic value. In this quest and over the course of several books, Socrates meticulously constructs a theory of the human soul and ultimately identifies justice as a necessary element in its preservation. In what follows I will briefly explicate the challenges to justice's intrinsic value as presented by Thrasymachus and Glaucon and subsequently discuss how Socrates attempts to reconcile these concerns with his psychological theory.

Early on in the dialogues Glaucon and Thrasymachus pose a cogent challenge to Socrates' conception of justice through their concern that "those who practice justice do so unwillingly as something compulsory" (347c). One way to illustrate this claim, as presented by Glaucon, makes reference to the Ring of Gyges: After discovering a ring with the power of invisibility, a previously just shepherd turns morally corrupt upon the realization that the ring gives him complete impunity. In other words, the pair worry that justice is merely instrumentally good for its reputational consequences and that human nature may guide us toward injustice if these extrinsic consequences were of no effect. Accordingly, they challenge Socrates to show that justice is good for its own sake.

In order to illuminate the role and value justice serves for its beholder, Socrates constructs a complex psychological picture of the human soul. As a starting point, he contends that there must exist a plurality within the soul. That is, the soul is not a singular thinking agent, but a unity of multiple distinct parts that each act in accord to their own beliefs toward certain ends. While at first this account of the soul may appear arbitrary, this, according to Socrates, is the only logical way to explain the soul's full range of psychological phenomena. To motivate this assertion, Socrates begins with the broad metaphysical claim that "the same thing cannot do opposite things; in the same respect, in relation to the same thing, at the same time" (436b). For example, insofar as I am a singular object, it cannot be logically said that I am both moving and standing still at the same time. However, if I understand myself as a unified system of multiple parts, then I can feasibly move in one respect, while remaining still in another at the same time: moving my hand while keeping my feet still for example. In the case of the soul, insofar as it is a singular thing which thinks, wills, and feels, it cannot logically have two competing states of mind simultaneously. However, as Socrates points out, we frequently observe this precise type of internal conflict and the only explanation is that there exists a plurality in the soul.

A common instance of this type is the internal conflict between desire and conscious restraint; for example, I may desperately crave an unhealthy snack whilst simultaneously willing

not to consume it. Upon further examination, Socrates argues that many of these psychological conflicts that have physical gratification at their focus occur between our agents for reason and appetite. Reason here is the “rationally calculating element” (439d) that seeks to guide the soul toward what it perceives as good, while appetite is persuaded by bodily urges in pursuit of material pleasures. Continuing on, since our faculties for reason, by definition, are void of any emotion, then there must be a third agent to account for a second type of conflict: those between certain pungent emotions (e.g. anger, disgust) and our appetites. That is, the self-directed anger one feels when persuaded by their most corrupt appetites, for example an urge toward infidelity, comes from a third agent, the spirit. In this way it appears that the spirit must be an ally of reason in the sense that it provides our rational faculties with the “fiery” emotion, or spirit, to combat our irrational appetites.

After arriving at a tri-partitioned soul consisting of reason, appetite, and spirit, Socrates investigates how a soul might reach its optimal state. To begin such an inquiry, one must first consider what excellence within the soul looks like. According to Socrates, in such a state we would expect our reason to possess wisdom. That is, not only must reason “exercise” its conception of good on behalf of the soul, it must “[have] in it” true knowledge (wisdom) of what is actually good (441e). Moreover, we should expect spirit to embody absolute courage; that is, it requires courage for one’s spirit to “preserve” rationality in the face of bodily pains or temptations of bodily gratifications. Finally, we must find temperance within the soul: the parts of the soul must be in agreement with one another, letting reason guide it toward the good and in avoidance of those aforementioned psychological conflicts. Once again, these conditions may appear quite arbitrary, but if we recall Socrates’ definition of a thing’s virtue as that which allows it to “perform the things it performs well” (353c) we can see that Socrates is merely prescribing the soul’s various parts their respective virtues: Wisdom keeps reason on the path of truth, courage is the engine for spirit, and subordination tames the irrational appetites. So where is justice? Combining Socrates’ assertion in book two that justice is what “allows a soul [to] perform its functions well” (354a) with our now developed understanding of a well-functioning soul, it becomes clear that justice is what requires the soul to behave in this harmonious manner, and the just act that which preserves it.

Now that Socrates has found human justice, the final remaining step is to show its necessity for a good life. As Glaucon himself puts it, such a task now appears ridiculous given our new understanding of justice. For, if a soul is unjust, we find our internal world in a state of turmoil and rebellion: the corrupt appetites reign supreme over an ignorant soul that lacks a courageous spirit to guide it toward the good. In this way, we can perhaps see why the intrinsic value of justice was at first elusive to our interlocutors. For, just like health, justice is concerned with “what is inside” (443d) such that its value may not always be apparent to outside observers. Just like unhealthy actions damage the body in ways not always visible, so do unjust actions damage the soul and vice versa. Furthermore, both belong to the “finest” class of goods (357c)

such that they are good for their own sake and for the consequences they bring. That is, justice is intrinsically valuable for the preservative role it serves in the soul, as well as instrumentally valuable in its reputational consequences and by all the instrumental consequences of the aforementioned virtues inherent to a just soul.

In conclusion, in the Republic Plato presents an alluring argument for the value of justice that, while perhaps not bullet-proof, at least offers a unique perspective of justice through the lens of self-preservation. That is, while its mere complexity and dated account of the human psyche leave it open to a host of objections, its recognition of internal harmony as a benefit from moral action is a valuable insight that perhaps (hopefully) contains at least some truth.