

## **Plato and Justice – Part II**

### **(From Book IV of the *Republic*)**

#### **I. Preliminary Comments**

As with the first half of the excerpt, the second half of the assigned excerpt on Plato (which comes from Book IV of the *Republic*) also requires a bit of background. Thematically, the second half of the excerpt is linked to the first half insofar Plato continues to explore the idea of justice. However, regarding the dialogue itself, much has happened in the conversation, and there is much ground that the editors of the selection leave out. The excerpt from Book IV almost begins with Plato's famous definition of justice as "to do one's own business and not be a busybody" (or, as other translations suggest: "to mind one's own business"). However, it is helpful and important to be aware of how and why Plato has Socrates define justice in that way—and for this it is necessary to know, more or less, how Socrates and his friends arrive at this point in the conversation. Moreover, Plato's comments regarding justice, the city, the soul, and nature make more sense within the context of the conversation.

#### **II. Plato's *Polis*<sup>1</sup>: It's Birth and it's Order**

Much of what happens between Books I and IV concerns the notion of justice regarding the city. In fact, after much meandering and speculation regarding justice, in Books I and II of the *Republic*, near the beginning of Book III, Socrates and his interlocutors come to realize that they are not sure what justice is. They know it is important, but they cannot find a definition of justice that they can agree on. Faced with this uncertainty, Socrates suggests that one fruitful way of examining what justice is, is to understand its function in the city. (At this point it is helpful to remember that for the Ancient Greeks, the *polis*, or also the city-state, was how many Ancient Greeks conceived their

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<sup>1</sup> As I'll mention in the following paragraph, the *polis* was the general name that Ancient Greeks gave to their cities. Although these cities (urban areas where many people lived) were small in comparison to modern cities, they had a unique importance in Ancient Greek life. Ancient Greeks identified much more with the *polis* they came from, than with any general Greek identity. This is why the Greek *polis* is better described as a city-state. It had the population of a city, and covered a rather small area, and yet the citizens identified with their city as strongly as citizens in modern nations do nowadays.

social order. Many of the Greeks lived in these “urban” areas, which took the form of small cities, but they had almost the conceptual and cultural robustness of a nation or state. In this sense, for example, Athenians were Greek, yet nevertheless they were quite different from Spartans, and Spartans thought of themselves as being very different to Athenians, etc.) However, soon Socrates realizes that neither he, nor his interlocutors, know very well how a city is formed. If they are to understand what justice is, they better have a good grasp on what a city is, how it is organized, and where it comes from.

Pushing forward with this examination, Socrates suggests that the city is born mostly from humans attempting to satisfy needs for life. But what needs are these? Socrates points out that anything that is required to sustain human life, is a need. He lists three things: food, clothing, and shelter. Yet, how is the birth of the city connected to this? Socrates argues that, as humans, we are limited creatures and we cannot do everything for ourselves. Moreover, he suggests that nature itself endows us with our own unique set of talents and dispositions, which means that some of us will be better at designing and building houses and buildings, others will be better at growing crop and tending livestock, and others will be better at confectioning clothes and footwear. Since this is the case, those who are good at producing food will be able to exchange the excess of their labor for, say, clothes, or a well-built home to live in; and vice versa. Thus, the city is really born from of the act of exchanging the products humans produce looking to satisfy our needs to stay alive and well. In other words, the city is born from the marketplace—which is the place where humans begin to exchange the products of their labor. This leads Socrates to suggest that the first group of people that make up any city will necessarily be the class of laborers (farmers, builders, cobblers, seamstresses, etc.) and merchants. Again: The production of needs and their exchange is what leads to the birth of the city.

However, although the foundation of the city lies on laborers and merchants of different sorts, Socrates and his interlocutors realize that if the city they are beginning to imagine is like a real city (at least of Ancient Greek times), they will also have the need of soldiers. Socrates and his interlocutors realize that if the laborers and merchants of their city are successful, the city and its citizens will begin to want to satisfy more than just needs. The city, in other words, in becoming successful, will become rich, and its citizens will want to indulge in luxuries: they will want to surround themselves with arts and entertainment, they will want to dress lavish and ornate clothing, they will want extravagant foods, they will want all sorts of comfort, etc. This leads to two possible

situations: First, in wanting more than just needs (i.e., food, clothing, shelter), the city will have to produce more in order to finance and satisfy its life of luxury. This might require that the city conquer more lands in order to be able to produce more goods. Second, along with financial success and luxury, will come the envy of other cities, which represents a danger for our city—in seeing our richness and luxury, other cities might want to come and steal our riches away. It is for these two reasons that Socrates suggests that the city needs soldiers: 1) they will be useful in the conquest of new lands that will allow our city to produce more goods; *and* 2) they will be useful in protecting our city from invaders that might want to take away our riches.

Thus far Plato's ideal city has at least two "classes" of people living in it and serving the city in different ways: the class of merchants and laborers, and the class of soldiers. Plato, however, points out that, if our laborers and merchants are going to be good at what they do (exchanging goods, producing clothes, producing food, etc.), *they can only do what they are good at*. The same goes for the soldiers: only if the soldiers are trained in protecting the city, and work *only* at that, will they be able to *really* protect the city. Realizing this, Socrates declares that neither of these two groups of people will have the time, or the education, to be able to create and enforce the right sorts of rules and laws that can guarantee the internal order of the city. Thus, Socrates argues that a third group of people is needed for a city to function properly: *the rulers*. If the city is going to be truly successful and therefore truly just, it will need the best sorts of rulers to guide it.

### **III. Important Parenthetical Remark on the Rulers of Plato's City**

At this point a parenthetical remark regarding Plato's rulers might be helpful: Plato argues that the rulers of his ideal city must be philosophers. Obviously, being a philosopher, Plato is partial to philosophers. However, he also has good reasons to believe that philosophers are well-suited for the task. Ideally, philosophers are pursuers of knowledge (the word 'philosophy' comes from the Ancient Greek words 'philo' (love) and 'sophia' (wisdom), which, when put together mean 'the love of wisdom'). Plato expects that since philosophers are lovers of knowledge, they will be able to acquire the best and clearest knowledge that will produce the best rules and laws in order to lead the city. And one of the concepts that philosophers are expected to examine and pursue, according to Plato, is justice. Moreover, he assumes that the citizens that become philosophers will spend

their time doing nothing else other than acquiring knowledge in order to guide the city. These philosopher-rulers, then, are rulers not because they imposed themselves on the other citizens, nor have they been elected into office. Rather, they have been groomed and educated by the city itself to become thinkers and legislators that *serve* the city. They are rulers only on account of their capacity to examine and become knowledgeable of the right sorts of rules that will allow the city to become the best possible city it can be. Plato, of course, is quite idealistic in this respect—some would even say naïve.

#### **IV. The *Polis* and Justice**

It is in the context of the examination of the city, then, that Plato arrives at the notion of justice as “minding one’s one business”. Given that the city is organized in three broad classes: 1) laborers and merchants; 2) soldiers; and 3) rulers, Plato insists that each class has a role to fulfill in the city, and each individual should stick only to doing what s/he is best at doing. In fact, Plato hints at the idea that it is *nature* that which determines who is going to be good at what. Plato seems to think that if you show talent at being a seamstress, then you’ll be good a training and working as a seamstress; if you show talent at physical activity and have a courageous disposition, you will do well in training and becoming a soldier; if you show intellectual talent you’ll do best for the city in training and becoming a philosopher, and thus a ruler; etc. Identifying and nurturing our natural talents, and making them our sole activity in life, is what will benefit the community the most—which in turn, also benefits each individual. This, more or less, is what Plato has in mind. Moreover, if you are a seamstress, Plato expects that you hold off any desire to becoming anything else than a seamstress and pursuing another career, as it were. The same will go for soldiers, potential rulers, builders, farmers, etc. This constraint regarding our desires to do anything else but what we are good at, is at the heart of what Plato means by justice as “minding your own business”. In other words, what he means is that rulers are expected only to work for the city, providing it with the right sorts of laws that will help its citizens maintain order in the city. At no moment, however, should a ruler attempt to become anything else but a ruler—from Plato’s point of view it would be odd for a ruler to want to become a seamstress, or a tailor, or a farmer, or a soldier, etc. And the same goes for any other sort of work: a farmer should stick only to farming, and never

attempt to dabble in becoming a soldier or becoming an engineer. *It is only by cultivating and pursuing what nature has determined we are good at, that the city will truly benefit from our labor.* As a long as every member of the city sticks to what s/he is good at, the city will be a just city.

## V. The Human Soul and Justice

Interestingly, for Plato, the way the human soul is organized mirrors the order of the city. Just like the city has a class of laborers/merchants, a class of soldiers, and a class of rulers, the human soul has a desiring part, a spirited part, and a rational part<sup>2</sup>. The rational part rules the desiring and spirited part of the soul—it pursues knowledge, logical thought processes, and truth. The spirited part contains all those emotions that are felt in a morally beneficial manner (say, like righteous indignation, or virtuous courage). Finally, the desiring part contains all of that which we desire—regardless of whether it is good or bad. Plato believes that only a soul that cultivates reason, and uses reason to control and pursue the right sort of desires and emotions, is a soul that can be described as just. This is why in the excerpt Plato alludes to souls which are just—because just as a city that is well organized can be described as just, an individual’s soul can be described as just, if it is ruled by reason. In fact, Plato believes that a city where rulers are doing their job in the best way are able to create laws that allow all of the other citizens of the city to develop into rational and just individuals. In other words, a city that is truly just is a city where individuals themselves are virtuous and just. A city where true justice is practiced is a city in which individuals that are constantly just live.

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<sup>2</sup> The mirroring can be sketched out this way:

### **The Order of the City**

### **Parts of the Human Soul**

Philosopher Rulers ----- Rational Part

Soldiers ----- Spirited Part

Laborers and Merchants ----- Desiring Part

Just like a city that is just, is one where the citizens “mind their own business”, in the sense that they stick to what they are good at (and thus, rulers rule with laws that benefit all the citizens), a soul that is just is one where each of its parts do what it is best at. This, for Plato, means that the rational part will control the other two parts of the soul, nurturing desires, passions, and feelings that produce actions that are beneficial to the life of the soul, and suppressing desires, passions, and feelings that produce actions that are detrimental to it.

Although in this excerpt Plato doesn't go into too much detail about what the laws of a just city look like, the general gist of his thought is that, instead of punishing an individual's wrongdoing with pain, imprisonment, or banishment, perhaps a better solution is the right sort of education and training. In fact, one possible interpretation of Plato's political and moral theory at this point is to assume that, if a city has allowed its citizens to harm each other, it is because its laws and its education system has failed to form just and virtuous individuals. It seems that Plato's view of justice and its relation to merit (or desert) is two pronged: On the one hand, he seems to suggest that only the right sort of education can shape just and virtuous citizens, and whenever that fails, the society/city that those individuals belong to, better revisit and reconsider their educational and cultural practices (instead of punishing the individuals that have failed to become just). On the other hand, he also seems to suggest that the cultural practices and education of a city must always take into consideration the way in which nature determines what each individual can do best. If someone strays from his/her natural talents, then perhaps s/he has done so out of a lack of right education. Nevertheless, it is interesting to point out that Plato, it seems, doesn't believe that anyone is evil or vicious by nature. In this sense, injustice, for Plato, is ultimately a product of ignorance—and, in very broad strokes, the main correction for any injustice, vice, or evil action, isn't retribution, imprisonment, or painful punishment. Instead, the best way to correct an injustice is by education. (Albeit, what counts as education in Plato's theory is subject to its own class.)