

The city state analogy in the republic



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

I. Introduction Plato's definition of justice in *The Republic*¹ is based upon his division of the individual soul (psyche) and the state (polis) into three mutually interrelated parts. In this essay I will examine the structure of Plato's analogy between the soul and the state in order to determine whether it is able to support a meaningful definition of justice in spite of charges of circularity and incoherence that are levelled against it.

I will begin by considering Plato's argument for the division of the soul into three logical elements, or parts, along with various objections to it, before moving on to consider the relationship between soul and state. In particular, I will argue that the precise nature of this relationship highlights a crucial aspect of Plato's conception of justice that allows him to overcome the above criticisms of his analogy, which is more complex and subtle than might first appear. In order to understand Plato's analogy between soul and state, we must first be clear about what he means by the 'soul' and its 'parts'. Soul' is the common translation of the Greek word psyche, which may also be rendered as 'character', 'personality' (Pappas 1995: 84), or even 'mind' or 'self'. However, despite the religious connotations, its use in this context does carry any particular spiritual or theological significance. The terms that Plato uses to refer to the parts of the soul are similarly generic and suggest a general categorisation of impulses, or logical element, rather than the primarily constitutive role that the English word 'part' might suggest (Lee in Plato 2003: 140).

It will be helpful to bear these points in mind in order to clarify various aspects of Plato's account that might otherwise be obscured by an overly literal interpretation of the translated text. II. The Three Parts of the Soul

Plato divides the soul into three distinct parts (illustrated in Figure 1) according to what might be called the ‘ Principle of Opposites’ (Stalley 1975: 110). The principle states that, with respect to any aspect or part of an object, a single entity cannot apply opposing influences or be in opposing states at the same time (436b). The presence of such opposing influences may be taken to show that either (a) the influences must arise from two distinct sources, or parts of the source, or (b) that the influences affect two different aspects of the object being influenced (Stalley, op. cit.). Socrates’ examples of the man standing still while shaking his head (436c) and the spinning top (436d-e) are presented as examples of (a) and (b), respectively (Stalley, op. cit. 116).

This is followed by a long discussion (437b–439d) intended to show that desires are simple, unqualified appetites for external things, and that their suppression by reason thereby falls into category (a), thus indicating the presence of two distinct ‘ parts’ of the soul acting in opposition to one another, rather than two influences acting upon different aspects of the subject. Figure 1: the three elements of the soul, with arrows indicating the rule of one part over another in the just individual through the virtue of self-discipline, or ‘ temperance’

Many objections have been raised to this line of reasoning. Some (e. g. Kenny 1974: 18) relate to the apparent ambiguity of the phrase ‘ with regard to same’ in 436b, and may be resolved by taking this to mean ‘ in the same respect’, thus clarifying the difference between Socrates’ two examples (Stalley, op. cit. 113). Others question Plato’s treatment of pro- and anti-

attitudes as opposites on the grounds that not being for something and being against something are not logically equivalent (Crombie 1962).

Although Plato explicitly states in 437b that he does consider such attitudes to be opposites, he would in any case have found the idea of conflicting impulses originating from the same part of the psyche to be highly implausible on the basis of their still being opposed to one another, even if they are not strictly opposite (Stalley, *op. cit.* 123). A similar argument applies to conflicts between appetites or desires. The fact that a man who is both thirsty and tired cannot satisfy both urges at once does not indicate that thirst and tiredness necessarily arise from different parts of the soul.

Such impulses, although potentially at odds in certain situations, do not oppose each other by their very nature, as is the case with reason and desire, thus indicating that they originate from different sources (Annas 1981: 138–9). Figure 2: the parts of the soul as homunculi A more fundamental problem with Plato's division of the soul becomes apparent when we consider the nature of the three elements: reason (the seat of knowledge and wisdom), spirit (anger and the self-related emotions) and appetite (the desire for external things).

Far from being mindless automata, each part is described as having its own motivation, reasoning ability and goals. In 581b, for example, we are told that it is the aim of our faculty of reason to seek knowledge. Similarly, spirit desires honour, and all three elements possess sufficient awareness to achieve their goals whilst respecting the dominance of reason (442d). It is as if each part is itself another soul, or homunculus, 2 possessing its own set of

reasoning, spirited and desiring elements (Annas, op. cit. 142), as illustrated in Figure 2.

This interpretation is problematic as it would make Plato's definition of the soul infinitely regressive, with each part containing an image of the whole that it was supposed to explain, thus merely deferring the explanation to a subsequent level. This difficulty is compounded by Plato's depiction of reason as having human form in his metaphor of the lion, man and many-headed beast at 588d, which, if interpreted literally, leads to a similar logical absurdity. However, Plato's definition of the soul would only be infinitely regressive if the individual parts were exact replicas of the whole.

In fact, there is no reason to think that this must be the case. Plato merely states that each part has an ability to function in accordance with its own nature, but its structure may be much simpler than that of the entire soul (Annas, op. cit. 144). If we were to subdivide each part into its reasoning, spirited and appetitive components we would find that they in turn were simpler entities than the part which we were seeking to explain, and so on down to the most basic elements or 'atoms' of the soul (presumably, in modern scientific terms, the individual neurons or synapses within the brain).

In this way, Plato not only avoids the infinite regress but also outlines a powerful model for the emergence of complex behaviour from simpler logical components that foreshadows recent developments in the fields of neuroscience and artificial intelligence (ibid. 143).

III. The Relationship Between Soul and State

The analogy of the city or state (polis) is introduced by Socrates as a means of locating the nature of justice 'on some larger

surface' (368d). When he returns to his consideration of the soul in 434d, he explicitly states that in terms of his justice (435b), the just man will resemble the just city (Annas, *op. it.* 148), as illustrated in Figure 3. By limiting the scope of his analogy to only those aspects of the state and soul that relate to justice, Plato makes it clear that he does not intend for his account to be taken as a comprehensive and literal account of both entities. It should therefore not be surprising if some features of one do not have a logical counterpart in the other, or are omitted from the account altogether on the grounds that they are extraneous to the definition of justice. Although the discussion proceeds from the level of the state down to that of the individual, Plato makes it clear that the properties and structure of the state arise out of characteristics of the individuals souls from which it is comprised (435e; 544d). 4 The virtues of wisdom, courage and temperance in the state are said to depend upon the virtues of individual citizens (429d; 429b; 431e), suggesting that the justice of the state is in fact secondary to that of the soul.

One interpretation of Plato's argument for the correspondence of the parts of the soul and the parts of the state is therefore that the structure of the former determines the latter. Figure 3: the analogy between the just state and soul If the structure of the state is indeed a consequence of the nature of the souls of its citizens, then we must consider how its three distinct classes (the rulers, auxiliaries and productive or merchant class) are related to the tripartite nature of the soul.

Although it is clear that the actions of the ruling guardians are directed by reason, are we also to take it that those of the auxiliaries are directed by

spirit and the merchants by desire, as might be suggested by Socrates' use of the word 'dominant' in 581c? This would, by definition, make them unjust and, by implication, the state could no longer be said to be just due to the injustice of the majority of its citizens. Conversely, Plato's examples regarding the value of justice in money making and contractual agreements (443e) make it clear that he intends for all citizens to possess the virtue of justice (Kenny, *op. cit.* 8). We must therefore conclude that all three classes are directed by reason, but that the proportion of reason, spirit and desire possessed by members of each class may vary, as illustrated in Figure 4. In order to maintain the requirements of justice, the internal 'chain of command' or 'temperance' remains the same in each case, even though the spirited or desiring elements play a larger role in the everyday lives of the auxiliary and merchant classes. In this way, Plato balances the natural abilities of each individual with their position in society so that the two are mutually complementary (e. . the weakness of reason in the merchant class is offset by the wise rule of the guardians, and vice versa with respect to desire). Figure 4: variations between the souls of the three different classes of citizen Plato also envisages the justice of the state as playing an important role in shaping the individual. In 496d-e we are told how even the true philosopher may be led astray by living in an unjust state, and Book XIII of The Republic contains many examples of how the various degenerate forms of state shape the souls of those unfortunate enough to live in them.

From this, we can infer that a kind of 'virtuous circle' exists between the just state and the soul, with the virtues of each positively reinforcing those of the other. Thus the state shapes the souls of its citizens whilst itself being a

product of the individual souls from which it is comprised (Figure 3). Any disruption of this structure will create the inner conflict or discord that is characteristic of injustice (444b), which, if left unchecked, may spiral out of control and threaten to bring down the whole edifice (545d–547c). However, this interpretation gives rise to another problem.

If there is to be a single definition (i. e. a Platonic ‘Form’) of justice that applies equally to the state and the soul (435a) then the justice of the city can only be the result of the justice of its citizens (the agents of the state) if their justice is in turn derived from the justice of their parts (the agents of the soul), and so on ad infinitum (Williams 1999: 256). Thus the premise that (i) there is a single definition of justice is incompatible with the thesis that (ii) the justice of the state is a result of the justice of its citizens, as appeared to be the case for the other virtues (Annas, *op. cit.* 149). Moreover, such an interpretation threatens to make Plato’s definition of justice circular, as the justice of each entity (i. e. the soul or state) would be at least partly derived from the justice of the other. In order to avoid this criticism (which is, in fact, another form of the homunculus problem) whilst retaining (i), we must reject (ii) and conclude that it is the structure of the state and the soul that makes them just, and not the justice of their component parts (*ibid.*).

This argument applies equally to the other virtues, which must also arise from the correct arrangement of the various parts of the soul or state for the same reasons. However, this reopens the question of whether the virtues of the state are in fact derived from those of its citizens, as was previously suggested. Without such a link between the two, a state could be

theoretically just by virtue of its structure even if all of its citizens were unjust, due to the structure of their souls, which is clearly absurd.

The answer to this paradox is hinted at in 434d–435a. Here, Plato makes it clear that he aims to ‘harmonize’ the two accounts of justice in order to arrive at a single universal definition: one where the parts not only reinforce the whole, but the whole also reinforces the parts. Seen in this way, the structure of justice is that of a mutually reinforcing continuum of elements, all sharing the same tripartite structure, with each level governed by the rule of reason.

There is no infinite regress because the elements in subsequent levels of the continuum are not identical, thus avoiding the problem of homunculi, and no circularity because the virtues derive from the structure of the parts at each individual level, and not the virtues of subsequent levels. The harmonious and self-consistent structure of the whole and its constituent parts thus ‘resonates’ with or reinforces itself, creating the virtuous circle from which the just individual is said to emerge as ‘a perfect unity of diverse elements, self-disciplined and in armony with himself’ (443e). 5 IV. Conclusion Far from being a weakness in Plato’s argument, it is the reflexive nature of the state and soul analogy that makes it so powerful. From this, along with a similar virtuous circle that exists between just character and just action, Plato is able to derive a conception of justice that not only promotes the performance of just acts for their own sake or consequences, but as a means of preserving and enhancing the agent’s ability to act justly (443e–444a), thus enhancing the character and virtue of the individual and state alike.

This crucial aspect of Plato's account supports Socrates' argument that justice is not merely a self-serving ideology of the ruling faction, 6 but is instead based upon naturally emerging principals and, as such, has intrinsic value over and above its external consequences. ————— 1 All references to the text are given in Stephanus numbering; quotes are from the Cambridge University Press edition (Plato 2000). 2 Literally: ' little man' 3 Socrates acknowledges the incomplete nature of his enquiries in 435d, and his conclusions in 443e with the phrase ' and if there turn out to be any intervening elements'. Indeed, it is possible that Plato first constructed his theory of the soul and then derived the political philosophy of The Republic from it, but presents the argument the other way round to make the discussion more plausible and dramatic for his audience. 5 It is perhaps no coincidence then that The Republic is littered with musical analogies. Plato may be seeking to illustrate his point about the nature of justice, soul and state as being naturally harmonious and complementary to one another. 6 The charge levelled by Thrasymachus in Book I, 338c. Bibliography Annas, J. 1981: An Introduction to Plato's Republic.

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