

POL200 (Political Theory: Visions of the Just/Good Society)

Plato's *Republic*: Governance Through the Lens of Personal and Communal Justice

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Many of the theorists or traditions we've examined this term explore questions of the relationship between individual morality or virtuous action and the collective politics of a larger political community. Please choose one of the theorists, texts or traditions and show how they connect the governance of self to the governance of a community, city or kingdom.

Plato's renowned *Republic* devotes much attention to questions of individual versus community ethics, morality, decisions, and value. I submit that in pursuing a theory for ideal governance in a polis, while Plato doesn't doubt a relationship between the state and the individual, he draws two somewhat opposing connections: the state as analogous to the individual, and the individual as subordinate to the state. An important opening clarification is the strong relation between governance and justice in the *Republic*. Early on in the first book, Plato establishes with Thrasymachus that the soul rules – a bad soul will do so badly, but a good soul will do so well. By extension, they agree that “justice is a soul's virtue, and injustice its vice”.¹ I use this logic as a demonstration that governance is inherently related to justice, thus determining that this essay will scrutinize justice as it relates to the individual as well as to the wider political community. I devote separate sections to each sub-argument of the thesis before coming to a discerning conclusion.

I.

Plato analogously relates the just state to the just individual through comparing their inner anatomies. Political justice, he says, can be understood as harmony in a structured political body. This structure is made up of three classes² in his ideal society; the producers (craftsmen, farmers, artisans; the general peasantry), the auxiliaries (warriors, enforcers), and the guardians (the rulers, the ‘philosopher kings’³). In a just (desirable) society, relations between the three classes are ideal:

¹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. GME Grube, ed., CDC Reeve, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 353e.

² Plato, *Republic*, 441a.

³ Plato, *Republic*, 590d.

each group performs its function and only that function while obeying a fixed power hierarchy. Primary are the rulers for they are the only ones to grasp the Form of the Good, the source of all other forms in the intelligible world. Only they understand what is truly good and are thus tasked with governing the entire political community (the polis, the state). Secondary are the auxiliaries who unconditionally uphold rulers' convictions. Tertiary are the producers who limit themselves to exercising their innate skills, their natural capacities for production. Political justice is hence a principle of specialization where each individual fulfils their societal role to which nature fitted them and does not interfere with others' functions. The tripartite structure of the city emerges as a result of men's mutual dependence and the need for the division of labour. Plato insists that the city must by nature exist as one whole – there needs to persist an equilibrium between classes, between the rich and poor⁴, and the philosophers must uphold this using good education and correct upbringings.⁵

Plato contends that a “just man won't differ at all from a just city”.⁶ An individual's soul has a three-part structure just like the political community.⁷ The rational part seeks truth and is responsible for philosophical inclinations. The spiritual part seeks honour and is responsible for anger and indignation. The appetitive part seeks unnecessary desires; things and pleasures, often “bestly and savage”.⁸ When community mingles with the individual, each class is dominated by a part of the soul. Producers are dominated by appetites; urges for money, luxury, and pleasure.⁹ Warriors are dominated by spirits which make them courageous. Rulers are dominated by rational faculties which motivate their search for wisdom and truth. Justice for Plato is an inclusive virtue;

⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 423b.

⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 423d.

⁶ Plato, *Republic*, 435b.

⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 441c.

⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 571c.

⁹ Plato, *Republic*, 581a.

it does not belong to any particular class. Instead, it is a quality that defines a society or individual whose parts exist in harmony¹⁰:

“one who is just (...) regulates well what is really his own and rules himself. He puts himself in order, is his own friend, and harmonizes the three parts of himself like three limiting notes in a musical scale (...) only then does he act”.¹¹

Evidently, the relationship between individual and communal justice concerns both parties' internal justice, i.e. harmony within the soul and harmony within the state's classes. Though this is the case, it can be plausibly argued that an individual with a just soul will also achieve external justness, i.e. his actions will be just – because justice brings “friendship and a common sense of purpose.”¹² This is important because in order for individuals to respect the duties of their class and other classes, their actions must be just. The *Republic* calls such actions “doing one's own work,”¹³ or refraining from overreaching one's ambition or responsibilities. The polis only grows or attains the Form of the Good because ‘each individual is seeking a better result for themselves.’¹⁴

II.

In elevating the prerequisites of the just state above all else, Plato paints the individual as subordinate to their political community. The most well-governed city is one in which the rulers don't “aim to make any one group outstandingly happy but to make the whole city so as far as possible.”¹⁵ Here, by saying that the interest of the city is superior to the interest of the individual

¹⁰ Plato, *Republic*, 432a.

¹¹ Plato, *Republic*, 443d-e.

¹² Plato, *Republic*, 351d.

¹³ Plato, *Republic*, 435b.

¹⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 369c.

¹⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 420b.

or class is to say that in a confrontation of interest, public interest is to always be elevated above private interest. In fact, the individual is enabled by the state because the state is the forum that allows interaction, it allows people to become “partners and helpers” in a world where individuals “aren’t self-sufficient and need many things”¹⁶. With this rationale, Plato demotes the common citizen to a degree of moral and political subservience. That this is a Benthamian view of justice is evident; the proper interaction of the classes produces maximized wellbeing as opposed to stratified, exclusive wellbeing and inequality. Although the men of the polis must act and adopt the appropriate characteristic to satisfy the state, they also determine the nature of the state.

"It would be ridiculous for anyone to think that spiritedness didn't come to be in cities from such individuals as the Thracians, Scythians, and others who live to the north of us who are held to possess spirit."¹⁷

Much as a person's biological components enable their being, the individuals of the polis could be interpreted as its inner-workings; the guardians the brain, the auxiliaries the bones, the producers the muscles. Plato says that each city's constitution ought to be observed and discussed, just like the personalities of the men forming it (whether laconian, oligarchic, tyrannical, or democratic). Indeed, there are “as many forms of human characters as there are of constitutions.”¹⁸ Though Plato seems to express the individuals as subordinate, they are imperative to the state's character – its relation or proximity to the Form of the Good.

Plato's, and indeed Aristotle's, unquestionable philosophy is that knowledge is virtue. Only the ones who know what is good; that comprehend the Form of the Good and that complete the full

¹⁶ Plato, *Republic*, 369b-c.

¹⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 435e.

¹⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 544d.

journey set out by the allegory of the cave, can rule. As a result, the philosopher kings practically embody the “mind” of the state, as hinted. In assuming that the good of the state coincides with the good of each individual, Plato subjugates the individual not to the state directly, but to the idea of a real, only truth; to the idea that one wants to unconditionally obtain the Form of the Good and that if he cannot, he really wants to be governed by someone who can¹⁹.

Plato is satisfied with any governance, any decisions by the guardians, granted the political community is just. For it to be just, it must display ideal relationships between its three classes: the philosopher kings must rule, the auxiliaries must uphold and enforce that rule, and producers must divide specialized tasks among themselves and limit their actions to their innate skills. A prerequisite for such layered class harmony, however, is individual justice in the populace whereby the dominance of an element of one's soul (the rational, spirited, and appetitive parts) depends on one's class. In this way the individual is analogous to their political community. Nevertheless, Plato's reasoning also provides an alternate connection between the political community and the individual, where the individual is subordinate. He achieves this by prioritizing the interests of the state, describing the polis as the base condition for life, and forcibly subscribing the individual to the idea of a real truth; of the state pursuing the Form of the Good. Plato's orientation toward ideal governance and his belief in absolute knowledge can be easily interpreted as ethical absolutism under a disguise of a commitment to political stability. A more positive interpretation would be that he is overly optimistic about knowledge possessed even by ‘rational’ leaders and hasn't quite made sense of his utopian destination, the Form of the Good.

¹⁹ Plato, *Republic*, 590c-d.

Bibliography

Plato, *The Republic*. Translated by G.M.A. Grube. Revised by C.D.C. Reeve. 2nd Edition.
Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992.