

Plato's political community and human nature

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In what way do Plato's views on a desirable political community rest on a particular conception of human nature?

In *Republic*, Plato's Socrates¹ avers that "each person must practice one of the pursuits in the city, the one for which he is naturally best suited."² It is thus not without substantiation that one may attribute a certain *essentialism* to Socrates. This essentialism consists in the idea that each individual has an essential and immutable nature in accordance with which he must find his role in the city, do *his own work*.³ As Hall notes, "[t]his declaration of a fundamental difference in natural aptitude has been taken to signify a difference in human nature and value."⁴ In this paper, I will consider Socrates arguments for the division of labour and political authority, and will examine the conception of human nature that underpins his thesis. I will argue that the relationship between Socrates theory and human nature is significantly more complex (and more plausible) than the aforementioned essentialism would suggest.

The extent and plausibility of essentialism in *Republic*

I will call *essentialism* in this context the view which holds that a person has an immutable nature which constitutes his essence. As mentioned, several passages within *Republic* lend credence to the claim that this is the view of human nature held by Socrates, upon which his political theory is premised. Socrates suggests that "we are not all born alike. On the contrary, each of us differs somewhat in nature from the others, one being suited to one job,

¹ I will not attribute the views expressed in *Republic* to Plato, but rather to Plato's Socrates. It is unclear whether Socrates is entirely Plato's mouthpiece, and thus I think it ill-advised to collapse the author/protagonist distinction. While such reduction might be plausible in certain circumstances, it is not the subject of this paper.

² (Plato 2004, 433a)

³ Socrates suggests that "this power – which consists in everyone's doing his own work – rivals wisdom, temperance, and courage in its contribution to the city's virtue" (Plato 2004, 433d).

⁴ (Hall 2004, 54)

another to another.”⁵ In such passages we see the suggestion, firstly, that one’s essential nature is determined at birth, and secondly that one’s role in society is (or should be) commensurate with this essential nature. This is likely to sit uneasily with those who suppose that, at least at birth, we are equal and are not naturally predisposed to any role. Even those who assent to societal stratification along the lines of *Republic* may take umbrage with the suggestion that the stratification should follow *innate* attributes. Certainly, there is something intuitively implausible (and empirically dubious) about the idea that someone’s aptitude either to rule or to till the soil is determined innately. However, this is, I suggest, not a view fairly to attribute to Socrates, since (i) the same apparently essentialist passage admits of more moderate interpretation, and (ii) the essentialist doctrine is inconsistent with a host of views presented elsewhere in *Republic*.

Firstly, attending to the proposition “each of us differs *somewhat* in nature from the others”⁶ reveals a more moderate reading of Socrates’ claim. There are certainly a host of attributes which we have from birth which *somewhat* determine our aptitude for various roles. A child born with poorly formed lungs is (uncontroversially) less apt to be a good swimmer, and one with impaired vision is less apt to be a good pilot. On this interpretation, if Socrates is guilty of essentialism, it is of a benign and perfectly sensible sort, involving only those attributes which are really demonstrable at birth, and which really do point towards the degree of aptitude for a particular task.

Secondly, this moderate reading is far more consistent with Socrates’ other contentions in *Republic*, and thus ought to be the view to attribute to Socrates, if we are to be charitable to his argument as a whole. In Book IV, Socrates deliberates extensively about the kind of education that each member of the Kallipolis ought to receive. He concludes that “good education and upbringing, if they are kept up, produce good natures.”⁷ Such a claim is at odds with the essentialist position, according to which education plays a limited role since one’s real nature is innately determined. Socrates clearly suggests quite the contrary, alleging that “the start of someone’s education determines what follows... And the final outcome of education, I imagine we would say, is a

⁵ (Plato 2004, 370a-b)

⁶ (Plato 2004, 370a-b), emphasis mine

⁷ (Plato 2004, 424a)

single, complete, and fresh product that is either good or the opposite.”⁸ The emphasis placed on education reveals that Socrates is not an essentialist, at least not in any significant or troublesome way. Nevertheless, the ardour with which Socrates explicates the role of education in the Kallipolis begins to betray a certain conception of human nature. As Pappas notes, “educational reform as [Plato] conceives it is no small matter of tinkering with reading lists or overhauling systems of formal schooling. Plato’s educational reform will transform the entire society.”⁹ Plato’s ideal state – the goal of this societal transformation – is not beyond reproach, and it is to this I wish now to turn.

Justice and the division of labour

In conceiving of the ideal city, it becomes plain to Socrates and his interlocutors that the city has certain requirements, and, corresponding to these requirements, certain *kinds of people* best suited to provide them. It is averred that labour ought to be divided if it is to be done best. This doctrine – what Reeve calls ‘strong specialization’,¹⁰ – is a normative principle requiring everyone in Kallipolis to practise exclusively the unique craft to which he is naturally best suited, on the grounds that better products will be produced in greater abundance, ensuring greater well-being for the city overall.¹¹ Acceptance of this, Socrates realises, will expand the city substantially, since a very fine degree of specialization is required for the production of fine artefacts. While there will be any number of specialised professions, Socrates proposes the necessity of three broader classes into which all the citizens of the Kallipolis fall. These three tiers correspond to the ruling guardians (the ‘philosopher kings’), the soldier guardians (the ‘auxiliaries’), and the producers or craftsmen (elsewhere called ‘moneymakers’).¹² The rulers will govern by adjudicating disputes and creating laws; the soldiers will protect the citizens and attack their enemies; and the craftsmen will supply the goods and services required by the citizens. However, Socrates does not merely *identify* these

⁸ (Plato 2004, 425b-c)

⁹ (Pappas 2003, 48)

¹⁰ C.D.C. Reeve in (Plato 2004, xix)

¹¹ Cf. (Plato 2004, 370c): “more plentiful and better-quality goods are more easily produced, if each person does one thing for which he is naturally suited and does it at the opportune moment, because his time is freed from all the others.”

¹² Cf. (Plato 2004, 434a-c)

distinct categories, but he advances the normative view that citizens ought to be prohibited from breaking the confines of their ranks or minding the business of others: “meddling and exchange among these three classes is the greatest harm that can happen to the city and would rightly be called the worst evil one could do to it.”¹³ It might be objected that Socrates by his definition must condemn the guardians, since they appear quite clearly to mind the businesses of others – they sit in judgment over the affairs of others, and they create laws which bind others. The soldiers likewise mind the businesses of others as they protect and punish the citizens and do the bidding of the rulers. However, Socrates would not consider this interaction between classes to be meddling, provided it amounts to performing tasks beneficial to the performance of each distinct class.

Nevertheless, what could justify such stringent regulation and partition? Socrates’ argument for this crucial point is unfortunately slender at this point, and he suggests simply that “having and doing of one’s own, of what belongs to one, would be agreed to be justice.”¹⁴ Since Socrates’ dispensation apportions roles according to the nature of each citizen, it is therefore just. Now, this line of argument – the argument from justice – appears defective in at least two respects. First, we might agree that justice does consist (at least in some necessary part) in the protection of one’s property rights, and the ‘*having* of one’s own.’ However, it is quite different to say that justice consists necessarily in ‘*doing* of one’s own.’ We might lament the case of the excellent warrior who lays down his sword to become a mediocre blacksmith, but we simply do not think that this amounts to *injustice*. The second defect in the argument from justice is that it is inconsistent with Socrates’ other contentions presented directly after the argument. Socrates suggests that the greatest offence to the good of the city occurs when there is a breach of rank, where someone who properly belongs in one tier of society attempts to operate in one of the other two tiers (e.g., “when one of the soldiers who is unworthy to do so tries to enter that of judge and guardian”).¹⁵ However, Socrates suggests that there is nothing wrong with movement within a tier – for example, there would be nothing detrimental or impermissible “if a carpenter attempts to do the work of a

¹³ (Plato 2004, 434a-c)

¹⁴ (Plato 2004, 433e-434a)

¹⁵ (Plato 2004, 434b)

shoemaker.”¹⁶ However, if justice consists in having and doing of one’s own, then Socrates cannot draw the normative distinction between intra- and inter-tier movement as he wishes; both would be similarly unjust as both would involve the doing of what is not one’s own. In virtue of these problems for the argument from justice, we ought to turn our attention to alternative explanations for the division of roles in the Kallipolis. I wish to argue for the suggestion that it is Socrates’ conception of human nature – the ideal of harmony in the soul – that motivates his ‘balanced’ configuration of society.

Human nature: the tripartite soul and its analogy to the city

Socrates proposes that the soul is divided into three parts in order to explain how it is that it appears to undergo opposite sentiments at once. Owing to his formulation of the law of non-contradiction (nothing “can—at the same time, in the same respect, and in relation to the same thing—undergo, be, or do opposite things”)¹⁷ he supposes that when we appear to be both inclined and disinclined towards performing an action, in fact there is a part of our soul which is inclined and a *distinct part* which is disinclined. We can well imagine a circumstance in which there is some onerous task we are reason-bound to perform, and we might say ‘a part of me wants to do it, but another part of me doesn’t.’ According to Socrates, there is a rational part to the soul which is “learning loving and philosophic”¹⁸ since it exercises sober judgment, and guides our actions wisely. There is also an appetitive part of the soul, one which attends to the impulsive urges of the body and craves money in order to satisfy them. Now, there must be at least two parts to the soul in order not to run afoul of the law of non-contradiction when the soul apparently undergoes opposite inclinations. However, Socrates introduces a third element to the soul, which he suggests has motivations distinct from wisdom and pleasure; the *spirited* part of the soul is concerned with social standing, valour, and honour.

¹⁶ (Plato 2004, 434a)

¹⁷ (Plato 2004, 436e-437a). Note that though this is exceedingly similar to the traditional law of non-contradiction presented by Aristotle, Socrates uses it most often to distinguish *contrary* rather than *contradictory* propositions. Contradictory propositions may never both have the same truth-value, while contrary propositions may never both be true, though may both be false. Inclinations and aversions (e.g. liking and disliking) are best cast as contraries.

¹⁸ (Plato 2004, 581b)

Socrates' account of the soul, as in most other areas of his philosophy, incorporates the idea that harmony is achieved when each thing fulfils its function. According to Socrates, "the function of each thing is what it alone can do or what it can do better than anything else."¹⁹ In this respect, it is the function of the spirit to be spirited, the appetite to be appetitive, and reason to be rational. However, it is plain that each of these components is apt to overpower one of the others in certain individuals; someone we might describe as suffering from weakness of will would, in Socrates' terms, be one whose appetite has overbalanced his reason, and we could similarly imagine an over-competitive person as one who could not keep his 'spiritedness' in check. However, within the tripartite soul, reason is peculiar, since it "is really wise and exercises foresight on behalf of the whole soul."²⁰ The capacity of reason to consider the overall wellbeing of the soul makes it uniquely equipped both to reign, and yet to preserve harmony among the soul's parts. Furthermore, since Socrates conceives of justice as the doing of one's own work (the fulfilment of one's function), a soul in which reason ensures harmony throughout its parts is a just soul.

We might object to Socrates' conception of the soul that it makes a mystery of forensic investigation: how could we say that a person is responsible for a reckless action if there are *literally* three distinct agent-like parts to his soul, only one of which is really reckless? It would presumably be better not to postulate such a divided soul, but divided inclinations; that is, we could suggest that a single, unified individual has opposing inclinations since the inclinations are held in different respects (rather than different parts). Furthermore, we might object that Socrates is too hasty in supposing that there are three *and only three* parts to the soul. We might complain first that the introduction of the third part, the spirit, is motivated merely by theoretical expedience: Socrates wishes his tripartite soul/state analogy to succeed, and thus introduces a third, theoretically impotent component. Alternatively, as Smith argues, since the tripartite division is premised upon capturing opposing inclinations, Socrates runs the logical risk that the soul must have an indefinitely large number of parts.²¹ Consider Jones, who is reluctant to receive an injection containing anaesthetic, administered so that his broken leg may be operated

¹⁹ (Plato 2004, 420e - 421a)

²⁰ (Plato 2004, 441e)

²¹ (Smith 1999, 34-37)

upon. In such a case, let us suppose that (i) he has rational medical reasons to accept the injection, and (ii) he knows that the injection will benefit him physically, and (iii) Jones believes that refusing the injection in this case would count as an example of disgraceful cowardice. Here, Jones' aversion to the injection would stand in opposition to *all three* of Socrates' psychic parts, and would require the postulation of a fourth part in order to explain it. Since this counterexample procedure could in principle be iterated *ad infinitum*, Socrates must amend his argument for the division of the soul if he wishes to maintain that it is strictly tripartite. Nevertheless, these metaphysical concerns do not disrupt Socrates' claims to the extent that his account could not be suitably revised and retain the core of his thesis. His claim appears to have merit insofar as he recognises that we may have complex and competing inclinations, and that reason is best equipped to oversee the wellbeing of the person overall.

One could not fail to see Socrates intended analogy between city and soul coming into focus: Socrates' ostensible *modus operandi* is to examine the city as an enlargement of the soul, supposing that the nuances of the soul will be clearer when examined on the grand scale of the city. On scrutiny, this suggestion gains traction only insofar as we consider the soul as *material* entity having roughly the size of a human, and the city as a material entity having the collective size of the buildings, land and people which constitute the city. However, since Socrates believes that neither soul nor city are physical, and sight is sight of what is physical, his motivation to view the city in order to instruct us about the nature of the soul must be taken as strictly metaphorical. Yet, if taken metaphorically, there is nothing to commend examination of the city to understand the soul rather than the soul to understand the city, since, strictly, neither is 'larger' than the other. In addition, Socrates moves liberally (some might say schizophrenically) between focussing on the city and focussing on the individual, further obfuscating the direction in which the analogy is intended to be drawn. Nevertheless, Socrates' views on soul and state appear mutually illuminating,²² and his fluid treatment of the two reveals the ways in which his conception of human nature underpins and informs his political ideology. Indeed, notwithstanding the confusion about the direction of the analogy and Socrates' original suggestion that we ought to look to the city in order to clarify our understanding of the soul, I suggest that the very

²² Pappas suggests that "the argument's divided loyalties [to soul and state] are in fact one of the Republic's virtues, proof that Plato takes both subjects seriously" (Pappas 2003, 60).

terms in which the investigation is cast demonstrate that Socrates' takes individual virtue to be prior to the virtue of the city.

Firstly, the *structure* of the city is derived from Socrates' beliefs about human nature. Since there are three psychic parts, each of which vies for control of the soul, there are correspondingly three types of people – those who are mastered by reason, those who are mastered by spirit, and those who are given over to their appetites. *It is primarily in virtue of this distribution in the soul that Socrates advances the tripartite political order.* Socrates believes that the soul is best governed by reason, as it alone tempers the inclinations of the spirit and appetite with knowledge of what is most beneficial for the soul overall. And if we cast this in more general terms, we see that Socrates holds that a rational governing agent is required to maintain the wellbeing of the unity. It is with this assumption in mind that he conceives of the nature and political power of the guardian rulers. This point is established further by considering, counterfactually, that if Socrates assumed a different view of human nature, his proposed ideal city would presumably differ too. If he had held, say, that the soul is best governed when it succumbs wholly to its appetites, then we would expect a political administration commensurate with this view, and greater political authority in the hands of the appetitive class. Socrates' conception of the ideal human nature (the tripartite, reason-governed view of the harmonious soul) is, I contend, the best explanation for his proposed ideal configuration of the Kallipolis, and is thus conceptually prior to it.

Secondly, the ostensible virtues of the city are best explained by the contention that Socrates' political order is founded upon a certain conception of human nature. Socrates suggests that the city may have virtues and vices; it may be described as an unjust city, or a courageous city, for example. However, it is proper only to speak of *agents* as having virtues – virtues are attributes that accrue to persons who exercise autonomy and perform actions. Owing to this, it is plain that in the absence of those individuals which *comprise* or *constitute* the city, it would be absurd to predicate any virtues of it. And it is precisely this that Socrates affirms; courage (or any other of its virtues) is correctly predicated of the city only insofar as it may be truly predicated of the people who populate it. In this way, it is clear that his model for the virtuous city is based on his model for the virtuous soul. Indeed, it is my suggestion that this interpretation is the only way to make intelligible the analogy between soul and state. The notion of the 'virtue of the state' gains intelligibility only insofar as we understand what it is for an individual to be virtuous, and agree that the

individuals constitute the state, thereby conferring virtue upon it. It is appropriate to conclude, therefore, that the notion of a virtuous state (from the extent of its virtue, to which properties count as virtuous in the first instance) depends upon Socrates' prior conception of virtue in the individual.

Rosen argues that Socrates in *Republic* is "attempting to transform human nature for the sake of justice."²³ This suggestion gains purchase when we recognise that Socrates' account of justice in the city depends crucially for him upon justice in the soul. Indeed, since justice is a virtue, and virtues are the province of agents, it is proper to recognise that Socrates' account of the just city depends on his views of the nature of agents. In this robust sense, Socrates' conception of human nature is necessarily antecedent to his political theory.

²³ (Rosen 2005, 97)

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