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Plato's Republic: The analogy of city and soul

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I. Introduction

“What is justice?” This question lies at the heart of the first few books of Plato’s *Republic*. After pursuing an answer to this question in various ways, namely by asking his interlocutors for their opinion on the matter, but not having arrived at a satisfying solution, Socrates proceeds to seek a possible definition of justice via creating the framework of an hypothetical city, which is meant to be a completely good or ideal city. Naturally, this city would also be completely virtuous and just. Having construed this ground for justice to emerge, he then moves on to locating justice in each of the inhabitants of the ideal city. This proceeding is commonly called the “city-soul-analogy” – after having found a general basis for justice in the city, Socrates tries to employ the same pattern of investigation to look for the individual’s being just, ultimately locating justice in the soul, too. Since the same thing can be found in both the city and the soul through similar methods of inquiry, he can feel secure that what he has identified is indeed justice. Why this analogy is needed for an accurate definition of justice, what the methods of drawing parallel lines between the city and the soul are, and what degree of certainty they are able to provide to arrive at a satisfying account of justice via employing an analogy between the macrocosm of the city and the microcosm of the soul, will be the subject of the present inquiry. We will therefore try to reconstruct the line of argumentation, so the reasoning that is undertaken will be clear to see, as will be its level of philosophical justification.

II. The analogy of the city and the soul

A. Reasons for the need of the concept of the hypothetical city

The idea of the ideal city is first introduced in Book II. After leaving a lengthy discussion about how justice can be located in an individual's attitude, trying to elaborate certain standards for action and deed, through which a just way of living can be obtained, the debate shifts its focus from the individual's being just to a more social, political idea of justice. This development takes place for several reasons, since there seem to be problems with defining justice with regard to an individual's state of being, for example:

- Injustice can be more profitable for the individual's well-being than justice; "... injustice is naturally good ..." ¹, in the sense that human nature has an inherent tendency towards solely seeking its own advantage, which results in "... the desire to outdo others and get more and more. This is what anyone's nature naturally pursues as good ..." ². Therefore, justice interferes with a strong driving force of human nature, namely the furthering of its own good, whereas injustice coincides with it.
- Justice is primarily practiced unwillingly. This is a direct result of the argument above – if injustice is able to provide more good to the individual than its opposite, then justice must in some way be imposed on the individual.

¹ Plato *Republic*, G.M.A. Grube, C.D.C. Reeve, Hackett Publishing Company 1992¹³ (from now on abbreviated as "Republic"), 358e.

² Republic, 359c.

- Injustice may be disguised as justice – an unjust person might be believed to be just. The “... unjust person’s successful attempts at injustice must remain undetected, if he is to be fully unjust”³. Theoretically, a completely unjust person may be attributed the power of disguising unjust attitude and deeds as just ones, since this deception furthers one’s own interests, which again refers to the nature of injustice as described above.

For these reasons, the notion of justice proves to be problematic, when its conception is established only on the basis of an individual’s motivations, interests and beliefs. It seems fairly clear that one person’s attitude alone may not be able to provide sufficient reasons for justice to even occur, since injustice can be considered the more efficient and profitable way of living for an individual. It is important to notice, that not all of the reasons listed here have to be completely true for the account of justice as a general good (what the common notion and Socrates’ conception require it to be) to break down. Even the mere possibility of injustice to be more advantageous than justice in some situations is sufficient to reveal the weakness of the individualized notion of justice. Therefore, a larger picture has to be employed to prove justice to be a necessary good and a virtue. This is where the idea of creating an ideal city as a tool of investigation is first brought up by Socrates; since “... there is justice of a single man and also justice of a whole city”⁴, it might be easier to “find out what sort of thing justice is in a city and afterwards look for it in the individual”⁵. At this point, the question can be posed why the construction of an hypothetical city should work as

³ Republic, 361a.

⁴ Republic, 368e.

⁵ Republic, 368e, 369a.

some kind of a magnifying glass and throw more light on the nature of justice, as it is apparently proposed by Socrates. It is not a priori clear, why or even how the line could be drawn between these two instances of justice. In response it might be stated, that this would be a valid objection, if justice in the individual and justice in the city were thought of as exactly the same thing – however, for the start, Socrates merely wants to observe “the ways in which the smaller is similar to the larger”⁶, therefore not ruling out the possibility of differences between the individualized and socialized notion of justice. Hence it must be carefully examined, how any ways of correlating the two instances of justice can be construed, and to what extent they are analogous.

⁶ Republic, 369a.

B. The emergence of the ideal city according to the parts of the soul

In the elaboration of the hypothetical city, Socrates and his interlocutors address a multiplicity of issues, which are supposed to make the city as ideal and good as possible. For present purposes, we will restrict ourselves to the ones of central importance to the analogy between the city and the soul, in which the nature of justice is sought for.

No human being is completely self-sufficient. Therefore it is necessary to assign different people different jobs, where the allocation of duties follows the individual's aptitude for a certain craft. Since people are primarily guided by their natural desires, and tend to acquire as much wealth as possible, they may overstep the limit of their necessities and eventually start a war for that reason. To prevent this, the next step is to introduce a class of soldiers or police, the guardians. Even more than the craftsmen, the guardians are highly specialized in their occupation – from their youth on they are trained in a large variety of ways to become strengthened in spirit and courage, to preserve peace and stability in the city and defend it against attacks from the inside as well as the outside through moderating the desires, that are part of any individual's soul but can primarily be located in the working class of the city. Finally, wisdom is attributed to those who rule the city, the “complete guardians”⁷, whose level of being wise and having knowledge exceeds those of the other classes of the city, because theirs is based on judging any matter in favor of “the city as a whole and the maintenance of good relations, both

⁷ Republic, 428c.

internally and with other cities”⁸. Ultimately, Socrates has now identified three virtues in the city: courage, wisdom and moderation.

C. The relationship between the virtues and the occurrence of justice

Before making an approach to the final virtue, justice, the relationship between the other three should be clarified. Although courage and wisdom are attributed to particular classes of the city, the guardians and the rulers, the nature of moderation and its counterpart, the desires, deviate from this simple one-to-one coordination. Clearly, the desires are most present in the inferior class of the city, the working and producing class. But desires can also be found in the superior one (the rulers), only here they are “measured, and directed by calculation in accordance with understanding and correct belief”⁹. In the ideal city, the “desires of the inferior many are controlled by the wisdom and the desires of the superior few”¹⁰. Therefore, the rulers, through governing the city and making up the laws can spread their own ability of moderating the desires into all parts of the city¹¹. However, also the guardians seem to be responsible for some instance of moderation – since their duty is to “preserve through everything the correct ... belief”, courageous enough to hold it up against “pleasure, pain, fear and desire”¹². The notion of spirit or courage and what effect it is supposed to produce here seems surprisingly close to the account of the Greek term *sophrosune*, translated mostly as moderation, implying the ability to keep one’s head under pressure or temptation. It may therefore be justified

⁸ Republic, 428c.

⁹ Republic, 431c.

¹⁰ Republic, 431c, 431d.

¹¹ See Republic, 431e: “... in which of them do you say moderation is located? In the ruler or the ruled? I suppose in both.” and Republic, 431e, 432: “... moderation spreads throughout the whole.”

¹² Republic, 430a.

to claim, that if the accounts of courage and moderation are not intimately correlated somehow here, at least courage is a necessary ingredient for moderation to be stabilized in the city, whereas the moderation of the rulers is the sufficient reason for it to occur.

Finally, when the separation between the three classes is kept up strictly, members of each focusing on what is their own part, the city is just¹³. The inference to this seems quite clear: since everyone does what is naturally appropriate for him, without overlapping or trespassing into other areas not suitable for him, the overall social structure is just. Now, the only remaining part to do for the analogy between the city and the soul to be established is the question, whether the soul actually reflects these parts. At first sight, this might seem an unnecessary thing to do, as the classes of the city were constructed out of the elements of the soul in the first place. However, the difference in inquiry now is, how the three parts can be located in *one* soul at the same time, and not how the many characters and idiosyncratic features of the city's inhabitants give reason for its distinction into classes. Therefore, the way back from the city to the soul (from separation of the city's classes to the unity of an individual's soul) differs from the one that lead from the soul to the city (from the separation of people's abilities, personal features and interests to the unity of the city.) But, since the line is always drawn from separation to unity, and from the inferior to the superior, Socrates approaches the question in an analogous way: The basic desires or appetites, like thirst, lust, hunger, or fear are obviously part of the soul (starting off with the inferior class, like the construction of the city started with the craftsmen). But sometimes, these are overruled by some other element of the soul (for example, situations can be conceived, in which a

¹³ See Republic, 434b to 434c.

person is thirsting but will not drink for another reason, for example when he knows the water given to him is poisoned¹⁴), identified as the rational part, as it may be oriented opposite to the desires (as the guardians and rulers were introduced to prevent people from blindly following their desires). With more examples, Socrates tries to establish a third part, the spirited part. Similar to the guardians helping the rulers to moderate and balance the various desires and appetites of the people throughout the city, the spirited part can be seen as the emotional collaborator of the rational one¹⁵, possibly contrary to the desires, oriented towards the greater good which cannot be seen by shortsighted appetite and therefore delivering the emotional counterpart to the rational element, which is needed for it to be preserved and stabilized. Ultimately, when these three parts are balanced out, meaning the different elements are in an harmonious relationship with each other, while each is doing its own work, justice can be found in the individual's soul.

¹⁴ This is a derivative Socrates' own example, stated in Republic 439.

¹⁵ See Republic, 441a: " ... the spirited part [is] a third thing in the soul that is by nature the helper of the rational part ...".

III. Reflections on the analogy

A. The limits of the analogy

By now, the construction of the analogy has become clear. Mainly three different elements can be found in the city as well as in the soul. Justice occurs, when these parts are kept separated in what they are doing, but work together synergistically. However, there are still relevant questions, which remained yet unanswered. As it was shown in part II.C, the distinction between the virtues and the attribution of desires to one group cannot be completely rigorous. The guardians seem to be responsible for moderation as well as the rulers. In an analogous way, the spirited part of the soul works together with the rational one. So different parts seem to be correlated, even intermingled here, which contradicts the strict separation required for justice to occur. The next question now is why justice is needed at all, since moderation already provides the city as well as the soul with a certain level of balance. Furthermore, the analogy does not completely work for the appetitive part: the rulers also possess desires, so the first part and the third part of the city are intermingled, whereas in the soul they are kept strictly apart from each other. Therefore a certain limit to the explanatory power of the analogy must be conceded, because justice is in both the city and the soul defined as the firm distinction of them. Another questionable point is the inference from the city's being just to the individual possessing justice in general. Since the city was first explicitly construed to be ideal, the conception of the soul deduced from it must also be seen as an idealized one. Therefore it may be conceded for a ruler or a guardian to be just in accordance with this theoretically perfect framework, but it is hard to imagine how a farmer, for example, since the appetitive part of his soul is apparently the dominant one, could possess the required

spiritual and rational elements needed for him to be just. This reasoning leads to an important point which reveals the difference between the notion of justice in the city and in the individual: it may be considered just, if the different classes of the city do and only do what is appropriate for them. But this radical distinction does not make too much sense in the soul, since an individual generally is in *one* state of mind at a certain time, meaning the difference cannot be kept up strictly. This is, however, what Socrates tries to conclude several times¹⁶. Whereas the firm distinction of the three classes in the city seems fairly justified as the primary reason justice to occur, in the soul the element of harmony of all parts must be emphasized rather than the difference between them for the respective notion of justice to be plausible. It is just the ways of interaction and exchange between the elements of the soul that are important for harmony (and hence justice) to be established, and not their distinction, since the emphasis on the difference would lead to a hierarchic model of the soul, where desires are suppressed, which again would only make sense with the soul of a guardian or a ruler, but not a craftsman, whereas in the city the distinction is of central importance, since a craftsman cannot be allowed to rule.

¹⁶ For example, see Republic, 443d: "One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow to the various classes within him to meddle with each other".

B. The dialectics of the analogy

In response to all the objections made above, it must not be omitted to state that the analogy should be reflected on from a more general point of view. It is safe to say that the analogy is limited in some ways. But through construing the ideal city, Socrates has substantially transformed things, most importantly the notion of the soul, leaving behind the individualized conception, where injustice proves to be more profitable for a single person's interests, and hence an unjust way of living results to be predominant, finally arriving at point where a person's soul is no longer independent, since it has been embedded in a larger context, namely the ideal and completely just city. Here, the often implicitly presumed equivalence of the modern term "state of mind" with the account of the word "soul" is misleading, at least to some extent. Since an individual's state of mind is assumed to be something private, intimate, and only available to the person who is currently in it, it differs crucially from the notion of the soul which has been derived from the framework of the ideal city. Here, the soul cannot be represented as personal estate, but must be expatiated as the general emotional and rational state of being of an individual, who is influenced by political and economical factors as well as by social structures to a non-negligible degree. Of course, this notion of the soul makes perfect sense – nobody can be independent of his environment, one's emotional and rational state of being has to some extent constituted itself through it. Therefore, the soul as well as its being just must partially be determined by its surroundings, which means that all the elaborations made previously, the construction of the city and the deduction of the new notion of the soul thereof must be taken into consideration, when the nature of justice, the analogy between the city and the soul, or the nature of the just soul is examined. Plato's

Republic should therefore be reflected on dialectically, that means including the process of the reasoning and philosophical deduction at the time when the results of it are scrutinized, which transforms the conception of the soul with its three parts as well as the individual's justice into dialectical terms, located in the mutual tension between the city and the soul.