

# **Social Justice and Individual Happiness: the Philosophers in Plato's *Republic***

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## **1. Introduction**

Since G. E. M. Anscombe deplored the lack of philosophical psychology in the field of ethics, growing attention has been paid to virtue ethics. Today virtue ethics has become an influential alternative to deontology, which originates in Immanuel Kant, and utilitarianism, which originates in Jeremy Bentham, J. S. Mill and Henry Sidgwick, and many fields of applied ethics, especially environmental ethics, are positively introducing this new approach.

To put it briefly, virtue ethics is a branch of ethics which puts its main focus on our states of mind to assess the rightness or wrongness of our behaviour. According to deontology, in contrast, the only element to decide whether our act is right or wrong is rules or codes prescribed by the law or culture. As far as utilitarianism is concerned, we judge our behaviour by calculating its consequences based on the total amount of pleasure and pain among a community, a country or the world.

When we try to consider environmental ethics based on these two traditional theories, difficult problems crop up<sup>1</sup>. First, deontologists think that we must do a right thing to other people because they themselves have intrinsic value, not because they are useful as a means to some end. This basic principle, however, seems difficult to apply to non-human animals, plants, organisms and the environment as a whole because the attribution of intrinsic value to non-humans can be arbitrary. Although viruses have their

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Brennan and Lo (pp. 26-34, PDF version).

lives, we cannot infer just from this fact that they have intrinsic value and must be protected. To what and to what extent this intrinsic value is given is one of the issues environmental ethicists are hotly debating. Second, utilitarianism presupposes that we have to perform right acts because pleasure, not those themselves who feel it, is the only intrinsic value, and it is just acts that maximise the total amount of pleasure over pain. This pleasure-pain calculation, however, is apparently unfeasible to apply to non-sentient plants or the environment as well. Some utilitarians consider them to be instrumentally valuable to sentient beings, but the possibility would still remain for the exploitation of natural habitat to be justified based on utilitarianism.

In contrast to these two theories, virtue ethicists exaggerate human characters or dispositions to evaluate our action. We should help a person in trouble because a virtuous, kind or excellent person would do so<sup>2</sup>. It seems that this approach is more easily applied to issues related to the environment because good personality is thought to have the capacity to be friendly to the non-human natural world as well. Among many fields of applied ethics, therefore, the application of virtue ethics to environmental ethics has been regarded as particularly fruitful<sup>3</sup>. However, this new environmental virtue ethics cannot also escape the problems virtue ethics has traditionally carried. Above all, it would be worth taking up especially these two problems: First, virtue ethics has been criticised for the ambiguous criteria for providing action-guidance because the relationship between our states of mind and behaviour seems to be indirect, and, therefore, the reference to our character, disposition or motivation is insufficient for

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<sup>2</sup> Brennan and Lo (pp. 34-35, PDF version).

<sup>3</sup> Hursthouse (p. 19, PDF version). More and more scholars are actually making advancement in the application of virtue ethics to the environment so as to resolve issues deontology and utilitarianism have faced with. Sandler, as his recent paper in 2009 shows, is one of the leading researchers who are actively involved in this approach.

the clarification of the right action we should do in each particular circumstance<sup>4</sup>. Second, since the main focus of virtue ethics is human happiness, virtue ethics might be regarded as anthropocentric<sup>5</sup>, what is worse, egoistic<sup>6</sup>, and after all unhelpful for the preservation of the environment.

Virtue ethics originally derives from ancient Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle's thought. It seems to me, however, that Plato also gave useful consideration for our discussion related to social justice in connection with the inner state of the soul and our happiness. So in this paper I would like to provide these problems above with a different perspective by analysing Plato's argument on justice in the soul and his philosophers' happiness.

## **2. Plato's justice in the soul**

In Book I of the *Republic*, Plato rejected the deontological view of justice because when someone owes another a weapon, returning it to him when he gets mad was thought to be injustice (331c). After the aporetic ending of Book I, the *Republic* gave a fresh start in Book II, where Glaucon asked Socrates to prove that justice is what should be valued both for itself and for its consequences (358a1-3). Then, Socrates' next approach was firstly to show what justice and injustice are, and secondly to show what kind of good things justice in itself brings to the agent of just actions.

Plato's answer to the first question was for each of the three parts of the soul (reason, spirit, appetite) to perform its proper task, that is to say, the order and harmony inside the soul. Injustice was conversely identified as some sort of civil war between

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hursthouse (pp. 11-12, PDF version).

<sup>5</sup> Brennan and Lo (pp. 34-35, PDF version).

<sup>6</sup> Hursthouse (pp. 16-17, PDF version).

these three elements by one part of the soul against the whole. What has to be noticed here is that justice, based on Plato's view, has something to do not with external right acts but with internal right states of mind.

'the truth is that although justice apparently was something of this kind, it was not concerned with the external performance of a man's own function, but with the internal performance of it, with his true self and his own true function, forbidding each of the elements within him to perform tasks other than its own, and not allowing the classes of thing within his soul to interfere with one another. [...] Only then (in harmony with himself) does he act, whether it is a question of making money, or taking care of his body, or some political action, or contractual agreements with private individuals. In all these situations he believes and declares that a just and good action is one which preserves or brings about this state of mind – wisdom (*sopian*) being the knowledge (*epistemen*) which directs the action. An unjust action, by contrast, is any action which tends to destroy this state of mind – ignorance (*amathian*), in its turn, being the opinion (*doxan*) which directs the unjust action.' (443c9-444a1) (trans. by Griffith)

Since David Sachs judged this argument of Plato's on justice to be fallacy, there has been much scholarly work on the relationship between one's states of mind and his actions. Although this important question cannot be answered here, what can be said at least from the passage above is that Plato never refers to someone's character, disposition or motivation in order to explain whether his action is right or wrong. But what he is aiming at is to redefine a just act based on its good effect on the preservation or the creation of the right state of mind. One of the difficult problems virtue ethicists had to answer was the ambiguous criteria of the state of mind for behaviour. However, a state of mind, according to Plato's remark here, is not what is consulted to evaluate the moral value of an action, but the effect an action has on the soul is the only factor of ethical judgement. In the light of the analogy with our bodies

and health just after this passage, moreover, Plato's meaning would be made clearer. He says that what is healthy produces health and what is unhealthy produces disease. It is obvious that when we assess whether a thing is healthy or not, it is healthy not because a healthy man eats it but because it contributes to his health. Likewise, an action is just not because a man in the right state of mind does it but because it contributes to his right state of mind. The ethical value of an action is reduced to its effect on the performer's state of mind. Therefore, the criticism that human disposition is ambiguous criteria for providing action-guidance cannot be applied to Plato's argument because what directs actions is not one's disposition but another element which recognises good effects on his states of mind on his view. In addition, compared to deontology and utilitarianism, neither the intrinsic value of the object of an action nor the amount of the pleasure an action causes is essential to Plato's argument on justice.

Next, we might reasonably ask what can identify the good action which makes the agent's mind healthier then. Since the ethical value of an action is judged by its effect on the soul, there has to be something else which can evaluate the relationship between an action and its effect on the soul. From the same passage, what conducts a man to the right behaviour, which makes his mind in order, is said to be the knowledge (wisdom). Given that Socrates makes this remark just after elucidating the tripartition of the soul, the function of knowing what to do on each circumstance can be thought to belong to the faculty of the upper part of his soul (reason). As some influential scholars are in disagreement with the idea that Plato's main moral argument depends on his metaphysical discussion in Book V-VII<sup>7</sup>, careful studies are

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<sup>7</sup> E.g. Burnyeat.

required to consider whether or not the contrast here between knowledge and ignorance implies that the knowledge which directs the actions is set over Forms, especially the Form of the Good, put forward in central books. However, the principle of action-guidance in Plato's virtue ethics can be at least said to be based not on elusive concepts like feeling, character or motivation, but on the knowledge which is infallible and invariable. It follows from this that a man with knowledge would be guaranteed to be happy as long as he does not fail to recognise the action which has a good effect on his soul and continues to do it.

However, one may say here that Plato's justice could be egoistic because it aims mainly at the agent's harmonious state of mind and his happiness. To consider this objection, it is worth while examining the problem of Plato's philosophers' happiness.

### **3. The philosophers' happiness**

As I have said thus far, Plato, in *Republic*, aimed to show what justice and injustice are, and that we should do a just action for our own happiness. However, there is one passage which seems to be inconsistent with this argument of his. In Book VII Socrates requires the rulers of the ideal city to hold political office in turns for a while after they have completed their philosophical education. Immediately after Socrates lays down this requirement, Glaucon asks whether it treats the philosopher unjustly (*adikesomen*) and is contrary to their interest. Socrates responds to him as follows:

‘Now it is your turn to forget, my friend, that the law does not exist for the exclusive benefit of one class in the city. Its aim is to engineer the benefit of the city as a whole, using persuasion and compulsion to bring the citizens into harmony, and making each

class share with the other classes the contribution it is able to bring to the community. The law is what puts people like this in the city, and it does so not with the intention of allowing each of them to go his own way, but so that it can make use of them for its own purposes, to bind the city together.' (519e1-520a4)

He goes on to argue that this treatment of philosophers is just because they owe the city the best education they received so as to be more qualified to rule than any other people, and hearing this story they will recognise the justice of this arrangement and be willing to go back down to the cave to rule the city there and give up the philosophical life for a while.

This passage clearly shows that Plato takes into consideration others' happiness as well as the happiness of the agent of just acts. In this sense, one may say that his argument is not vulnerable to the criticism from the egoistic point of view. Just as his concept of justice as harmonious state in one's soul was closely connected with his external just actions to others, the happiness of just people cannot be detached from others' happiness. At the same time, however, this remark apparently undermines Plato's attempt to show that justice is always in one's best interest because the philosophers have to sacrifice their better life of contemplation to make others happier. This problem, therefore, has been traditionally a frequent topic of discussion. Although it would be common for us living in modern societies like interlocutors with Socrates to assume that some sacrifice is required to achieve justice, can this altruistic notion of justice in a sense be consistent with Plato's argument on justice in the *Republic* as a whole?

Some scholars<sup>8</sup> insist that the philosophers who have perceived the Form of the Good will abandon their personal concerns because the Form of the Good, that is the

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<sup>8</sup> Annas (pp. 266-271) and Cooper.

supreme object of knowledge, has nothing to do with their own good; it is the purely impersonal good. On their reading, thus, it is this impersonal good that motivates the philosophers to willingly accept to return to the cave and to rule there. However, even if the Form of the Good is unrelated to anything and impersonal, it seems to me that they have gone to extremes saying that the motivation of the philosophers to rule is also unrelated to benefit for anyone and impersonal. Our particular actions would never fail to be related to goodness or badness in some respect in this world, and so how can the philosophers rule for the sake of no one in order to realise the absolute good, abandoning the happier life of contemplation? Furthermore, what should not be forgot is one reason that Socrates' requirement for the philosophers was just is that the philosophers were given special education by the city, and if they naturally possess outstanding talents and develop them, they do not have to abandon their philosophical lives so as to hold the ruling position in the cave. If the philosophers had to come back down to the cave for impersonal goodness, they would be required to engage in political activity even in the community that had not given them a philosophical education. In addition, they would not have to be required by persuasion and compulsion in the first place because they had known the truth of the Good and would wish to realise the greatest good in this world.

Kraut<sup>9</sup>, in contrast, tried to discover the way in which ruling does after all promote the greatest good of the philosophers over the long run. He paid more careful attention to the word compulsion (*ananke*), and pointed out that compulsion would not mean here threatening the philosophers with punishment but logical necessity the philosophers recognise by persuasion. Therefore, the claim that ruling is necessary is,

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<sup>9</sup> Kraut (pp. 238-239, pp. 247-249).



according to him, ‘entirely compatible with its being in their best interests’. He thinks that the philosophers’ return to the cave is nothing else but the realisation of a certain ideal pattern or harmony of the Forms they have seen, and that if they refused to rule despite of the education they have received, then they would create a disorder in human relationships by their failure to reciprocate. On his interpretation, to put it briefly, the philosophers ruling in the cave is the imitation of the harmonious and orderly world of Forms, which ends in their best interests after all. To be sure, ruling in the cave is not said to be contrary to the philosophers’ good, but, as Brown rightly points out<sup>10</sup>, the philosopher prefer not to rule in spite of knowing they have received the best education, and, moreover, Plato says that they will be the best rulers *because* they would not like to take over the ruling position. Therefore, Kraut’s interpretation does not give the sufficient explanation of the relationship between Plato’s argument on justice as a whole in the *Republic* and his philosophers’ sacrifice.

Although difficult problems still remain, the characteristic of Plato’s concept of justice is, as we have seen so far, that the priority is put on the benefit of the agent of just actions, which never results in the exploitation of others’ benefit. Just and happy people in Plato’s sense are said to fulfil their duty to others and society and to share happiness with others as well. We would not be able to call his concept of justice egoistic in this respect. Finally, let us consider briefly how the points we have considered are related to the environmental ethics.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The concept of justice as harmonious inner state of mind seems to be able to

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<sup>10</sup> Brown (p. 8).

cover a broader range of objects than deontology and utilitarianism does. In order to apply each ethical principle to its object, deontologists had to give an intrinsic value to the object, and utilitarians had to define the object's pleasure or pain. However, it would be difficult to find any intrinsic value or pleasure or pain as they are in non-living things. The virtue ethics on Plato's version, in contrast, could more easily take environmental problems into consideration because human action always has some effect on their state of mind however tiny it is and whatever it is directed to, living things or non-living things. Although this ethics centring on the inner soul would not bring about prompt and direct solutions to pressing environmental problems, turning our eyes to the inner justice could make a contribution to some fundamental solutions to various kinds of environmental problems because many of them have clearly been caused by excessive human desire over rational thought on what the best human life is.

Moreover, Plato's concept of justice has another merit. According to deontology and utilitarianism, the motivation of people to do right acts appears to be very weak because the obligation of some actions or the maximisation of pleasure in a community often conflict with the interests of those who actually act justly. When it comes to Plato's virtue ethics, on the other hand, the reason people should behave in a good manner is that such good behaviour promotes their own healthy state of mind, that is to say, their happiness first of all. And if the relationship between one's happiness and others' is made clearer, his theory will be more worth consulting to consider environmental problems as well.

Given that population growth, environmental pollution, the depletion of natural resources and so on are accelerating these days, it might seem extremely difficult to

sustain our environment to the next generations. Although it is needless to say that each practical approach to its particular problem is indispensable, reconsidering our mind as primary source of values like justice and injustice would be beneficial for resolving these environmental issues at the bottom. Several important problems were left unfinished, but I hope that the discussions in this paper are, to some extent, helpful to address issues about sustainability, and are worth considering in order to throw a new light on the concept of justice.

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