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Introduction

In this essay, I shall explore a reading of the Republic which does not buy into, but rather specifically brackets out and excludes, the institutional structure of the ideal state — and by ‘institutional structure’ here I mean such things as the way the guardians live, the place and ownership of private property, the way the family is demoted, the fact that philosophers as such are the rulers, and the hierarchical (or apparently hierarchical) social order as this is exemplified in, for example, the distinction between guardians, auxiliaries and ordinary citizens. Much of the commentary on Plato’s Republic focuses on just these elements. Many recent and contemporary commentators on the Republic are given to asking questions like, Is the ideal state totalitarian? Interesting as these issues and questions about the ideal state and its explicit institutions may be, they are for my purposes the least useful. To focus too much on these is to obscure other important elements in the Republic.

Among the ideas in the Republic that I would wish to bring into the foreground are: the threefold division of the psyche, especially the intermediate element τὸ θυμοειδὲς, the ‘spirited part’ as it is usually translated; the four cardinal virtues; the one ideal and four unregenerate forms of the psyche and the polis; and the divisions and distinctions of the sun, line and cave similes. (Whilst the epistemological distinctions and dispositions implicit in the sun, line and cave similes are central to my overall project, they will feature only minimally in this essay). And among the questions that are central to my reading are: How can the spirited and intellectual parts of the psyche be brought together? How can wisdom and political power be brought together?

I also draw attention to the following points about the overall structure of the Republic. First, there is progressive development of particular themes. The one I shall focus on here is the way that the relatively simple discussion of how to
educate the guardians to be like good watchdogs (book two, 375-6) develops into the rich and perennial theme of how intellect (λογιστικόν) and spirit (θυμοειδές) are to be brought together and harmonised — and this, in turn, develops into the theme of how philosophical wisdom and political power are to be brought together. Second, there is a kind of echo of earlier ideas in later ones, particularly when we consider the definitions of justice. I deal explicitly with this aspect of the definitions of justice in what follows.

‘Putting out of play’ the explicit institutional structures will enable me to pursue the two central aims of this essay. These are: (a) to take a fresh look, from the different perspective which my reading of the tripartite psyche will hopefully provide, at the definitions of justice to be found in the Republic, with particular reference to the spirited part of the psyche (τὸ θυμοειδές) and also to the notion of ‘the stronger’ (τὸ κρείττων) which features in Thrasymachus’ definition of justice, and (b) to explore some ways in which the tripartite psyche can enrich our philosophical conceptions of the nature of the self, character and ‘the will’.

Δικαιοσύνη and its Definitions

Let us remind ourselves how the explicit discussion of justice is introduced in the Republic. Cephalus answers a question from Socrates about the benefits of wealth, to the effect that it has enabled him to pay his debts, make sacrifices to the gods, and removed from him the temptation of cheating anyone — and he is taken by Socrates as having offered a definition of justice. When Socrates takes issue with this, Polemarchus springs to his defence and offers a definition, namely τὸ τὸ ὀφειλόμενα ἐκάστῳ ἀποδίδοναι, ‘giving to each what is due to him’. Socrates manages easily to produce a refutation of this. In essence, he refutes first the thesis itself, and then refutes the special construal of the thesis, namely: that to act justly is to benefit one’s friends and harm one’s enemies. Briefly, once Polemarchus allows Socrates to ask questions like ‘Who gives to each what is due to him in the matter of health? The just man, or the doctor?’, once he accepts the ridiculous distinction implied in such questions, then he has lost the game to Socrates, who produces ever more ridiculous outcomes from the fact that Polemarchus has not questioned this distinction. Socrates then steers Polemarchus to the conclusion that it can never be just to harm anyone. And it is at this point that Thrasymachus makes his dramatic entry. (We should not be surprised at the ferocity of Thrasymachus’ entry here, for we hardly have the Socratic question-and-answer method at its best, with Socrates behaving more like a caricature of himself.)

This earlier discussion is not as important to the course of the Republic as the exchange between Socrates and Thrasymachus; nonetheless it is of some relevance to the final definition of justice in book four. Thrasymachus’ account of justice is, by contrast, vastly superior, and poses the central challenge to Socrates to give an account of justice that exalts it not for the prestige, popularity and