Do Plato's philosopher-rulers sacrifice self-interest to justice?

TIMOTHY A. MAHONEY

I shall argue that the answer to the title question is no, the philosopher-rulers do not sacrifice self-interest to justice. In one sense of "justice", this is an uncontroversial claim. Virtually all interpreters of the Republic agree that the conclusion of the main argument of Books II-IV is that psychic justice is the foundation of one's happiness and thus psychic justice is also an integral part of one's self-interest. But in another sense of "justice", this is an extremely controversial claim. Many interpreters believe that philosophers sacrifice their self-interest by governing the model polis in accordance with the demands of social justice. However, I shall argue that social justice is as much an integral part of one's happiness and so of one's self-interest as psychic justice.

In the first section of this paper I examine the key arguments of the aforementioned interpreters. In the second section I demonstrate that, contrary to the claims of these interpreters, the philosophers do not sacrifice any of their happiness by ruling the ideal polis. In the third and final section I elucidate the conception of self-interest at work in the Republic and demonstrate that Socrates' defense does not rely on any equivocation of the term "justice". Rather, his argument is that being just is essential to one's own self-interest, whether one conceives of justice as a psychic virtue, i.e., each part of the soul fulfilling its proper function for the good of the soul as a whole, or as a social virtue, i.e., each person in a society fulfilling his or her proper function for the good of society as a whole.*

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A summary of the position of many recent interpreters runs roughly as follows. The bulk of the Republic is taken up by Socrates' response to the

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challenge by Glaucon and Adeimantus to defend justice by demonstrating that being just is worthwhile even if one who is just were to suffer all the usual penalties for being unjust, and the one who is unjust were to reap all the usual benefits of being just. Socrates’ response to this exceptionally rigorous challenge is a failure, for on one decisive point he undermines his own position in the course of the description of the model polis which he uses to illustrate what justice is. Philosophers must accede to the demands of justice and become rulers if this polis is to exist. However, the best life lies in contemplating rather than ruling, so philosophers sacrifice their own interest if they are just and rule the polis, instead of being unjust and contemplating. This example subverts Socrates’ defense of justice because it demonstrates that under certain conditions a wise man or woman would be better off if he or she were unjust. Furthermore, this example illustrates a much broader problem. Socrates is oblivious to this counter-example because he is taken in by an equivocation on the term “justice”. On the one hand, “justice” refers to the healthy state of the psyché. This justice is obviously good for the one who possesses it. On the other hand, “justice” refers to the virtue concerned with the proper treatment of others. Clearly it is this justice that Glaucon and Adeimantus want Socrates to defend. Socrates assumes that demonstrating that being just in the first sense – i.e., psychically just – is always worthwhile for a person, entails that being just in the second sense – i.e., socially just – is always worthwhile for a person. But this assumption is wholly unwarranted. I will consider the problem of the happiness of the philosopher-rulers before turning to the conception of self-interest which provides the vital link between psychic justice and social justice.

The interpreters1 of the Republic who claim that the philosophers must


There are a few philosophers who agree with me in denying this claim. T. Irwin claims that the philosophers do not sacrifice their happiness by ruling; but to support this he imports the practical ideal which he finds in the Symposium into the Republic, where he himself finds the contemplative ideal (Plato’s Moral Theory [Oxford, 1979], 236-43). C.D. Reeve contends that the philosopher-rulers do not sacrifice their long-term happiness by foregoing contemplation to take their turn ruling because the ideal state in which philosophers rule maximizes the contemplation time available to the philosophers in the

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