Justice and the Individual in the Republic

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The interpretations of the Republic which limit justice to the philosopher rulers seriously challenge Plato’s renown as the first great ethical thinker. If he does, in fact, contend that only a philosophically gifted few can be just, he has surely violated the elementary principle of a universal extension among men of the two fundamental ethical concepts of the right and the good. Ethical theories as diverse as those of Kant and Hume agree on the universal or well-nigh universal extension of these two concepts. Since justice, the right, is both the necessary and sufficient condition for happiness (the good), Plato firmly believes no person can ever be happy without it. The vast numbers of mankind, therefore, cannot be happy in their lack of justice or, indeed, in their wickedness.

Yet we need not plead that Plato must have intended a universal extension of the right and good or else he would not be the great philosopher that he supposedly is. As several scholars have recently called to our attention, Plato in the Republic has distinguished between the justice and the other virtues of the individual (which I shall refer to as “personal” justice and “personal” virtues) and the virtues of the polis. After presenting a broader perspective for this interesting reading of the Republic, I shall consider what kind of knowledge “personal” justice requires and how the citizens may attain such knowledge. Adequate justification of the “personal” virtues requires some consideration of their epistemological ground, for the necessary entailment of virtue and knowledge is as well established in the traditional interpretation of Plato as the fact that the citizens of the ideal polis are incapable of rational deliberation.

Early in the Republic, Socrates lays down almost as a rudimentary law of nature the principle of a natural equality among all men:

The soul, has it a work (συγγυρή) which you couldn’t accomplish with anything else in the world, as for example, management, rule, deliberation, and the like (τὸ ἐπιμελεῖσθαι καὶ ἐρχεῖν καὶ ἀναμελεῖσθαι),

1 N.R. Murphy in The Interpretation of Plato’s Republic (Oxford, 1952) and, more recently, Professor Raphael Demos in his article “Paradoxes in Plato’s Doctrine of the Ideal State,” Classical Quarterly, July-October 1957 have taken such a view. Professor Demos attributes a similar view to H.W.B. Joseph in his Essays in Ancient and Modern Philosophy, particularly chapters iv and vi.
is there anything else than soul to which you could rightly assign these and say that these were its peculiar work (ἰδία ἐκείνης ἐκινήσεως)? Nothing else. And again life? Shall we say that it too is the function of the soul?... And do we not also say that there is an excellence (ἀρετή) or virtue of the soul?... And did we not agree that the excellence or virtue of the soul is justice...¹

Socrates establishes here a natural equality in the capacity of all men to acquire justice. Since “management, deliberation, rule, and the like,” are class defining characteristics of man, it necessarily follows that all men have at least the potentiality for performing their distinctive function of living well and so for winning justice. To restrict the extension of these class defining characteristics to those with philosophic insight is to make them valueless as an adequate definition of man’s distinctive and unique nature.

Nor does this principle of a fundamental human equality clash with Socrates’ penetrating statement of the underlying basis of the division of labor principle:

our several natures are not all alike, but different... One man is naturally fitted for one task (ἕργων) and another for another.²

Human inequalities of natural talents and abilities are quite compatible with the basic, functional equality of men. Such inequalities result in citizens being assigned different social tasks commensurate with their abilities. But these same citizens in different stations of life exhibit the same potentiality for performing well their unique function as men.

The inward character of “personal” justice is well brought out in Socrates’ distinction between the justice of the state and the justice of the individual:

justice (of the individual) is indeed something of this kind (justice of the state), yet not in regard to the doing of one’s business externally, but with regard to that which is within and in the true sense concerns oneself and the things of oneself.³

The analogy drawn by Socrates between justice as the proper ordering of the parts of the soul, and health as the proper arrangement of the parts of the body serves to emphasize further the extension of the potentiality of justice to all men. Justice is the natural state of the soul as

¹ R. 353 D-E. All translations are from the Loeb Library editions.
² R. 370 B.
³ R. 434 D.