

## PLEONEXIA

In the first book of the *Republic* Socrates argues against Thrasymachus, by reference to *pleonexia*, that the just are good and clever and the unjust are ignorant and bad. (350c) I will examine his argument and attempt to show that it falls short. I will also discuss the way the notion of *pleonexia* contributes to Socrates' larger defense of Justice throughout the rest of the *Republic*, particularly in his definition of Justice and the explication of the just city, as opposed to the unjust city.

Thrasymachus holds that unjust people are clever and good, and that virtue and wisdom are included with injustice. Justice is not a vice for him, just "very high-minded simplicity". (348c) Socrates attempts to refute this view by considering the kinds of people others try to outdo. His strategy is to prove that the clever and good are like the just and that the bad and ignorant are like the unjust, because of the types of people they try to outdo. Let us sketch the argument, beginning with the just person. He will try to outdo only unjust people, not just people or those who perform just actions; that is, he will try to outdo only those unlike himself. The unjust person, on the other hand, will try to outdo unjust and just alike; that is, those who are like and unlike himself.

Turning now to the clever and good person, we are helped to understand by way of example. A musical person is clever in music and tries to outdo only non-musicians (those unlike himself). Generalizing from this, we get that all knowledgeable people try to outdo only those unlike themselves. Since the

knowledgeable are clever, and the clever are good, the clever and good person wants to outdo only those unlike himself. The ignorant person, as the opposed to the knowledgeable person, tries to outdo both those like and unlike himself (both the ignorant and the knowledgeable).

We can now see that the just are like the clever and good, in that they both try to outdo only those unlike themselves. The unjust are like the ignorant, because they try to outdo those who are like and unlike themselves. Both the just and the unjust have the qualities of the kinds of people they resemble. Therefore, the just person really is good and clever, and the unjust person really is bad and ignorant.

Now, it seems plausible enough that Socrates is correct about the attempted outdoing that goes on, but a few assumptions of his argument seem suspect. I am not at all sure why the clever are necessarily good, for are not the bad clever as well? We think thieves are bad, but they often pull off very clever robberies, and the same can be said for murderers, especially serial killers. Novels, movies, and television series all deal with elaborate thefts and murders. Think of *Ten Little Indians*, *Ocean's 11*, and *CSI*. Cleverness is not itself good or bad, and those who possess it are neither good nor bad because of it. Socrates could instead argue that the knowledgeable are good, but it does not seem that that is true, either. The musician is knowledgeable, but why should that make him good? He needs a way to show that the clever and good really are the knowledgeable, that they really do try to outdo only those unlike themselves.

Another problematic assumption is that one truly does have the qualities of those he resembles. Perhaps the just, like the clever and good, try to outdo only those unlike themselves. But why should this make the just clever and good? Say the good spend very little money, and the miserly spend very little money as well. This does not make the miserly good, or even *like* the good, at least not in any meaningful way. They are, of course, like the good in this one respect, but that similarity is not an indicator of the miser's goodness, which is what we care to discern. Likewise, why should the just person's resemblance to the good person with respect to *pleonexia* mean that the just person really is good?

The last problem I would like to discuss is the lumping together of the ignorant and the bad. Socrates has only argued that the unjust are like the ignorant, because they both try to outdo those like and unlike themselves. Although he has said that the bad and ignorant try to outdo everyone, he has not given a reason why that is so for the bad person, like he has for the ignorant person. He has said nothing to support the unjust being bad, or the ignorant being bad. Yet, he concludes that the unjust are like the ignorant *and* the bad. Ignorance in itself is not bad, for children are ignorant of many things, and we do not call them bad (not because they are ignorant, anyway). Without justification of why the ignorant are bad, I do not see how we can satisfactorily conclude what Socrates does.

Let us leave these considerations now, and turn to the matter of how the idea of *pleonexia* serves Socrates' interests throughout the rest of the *Republic*. In

Book IV, Socrates gives a definition of justice in which *pleonexia* figures centrally:

“It turns out that this doing one’s own work—provided that it comes to be in a certain way—is justice.” (433b) Justice is not attempting to outdo everyone, it is not attempting to get as much as one can for himself; it is doing what is appropriate for oneself. Outdoing, I take it, consists not just in trying to best one’s colleagues and others, but also in trying to get as much as one can for himself, whether it be (for example) money or honor. This, at least, is what is suggested by what Glaucon says: “The reason for this [the just and the unjust behaving in the same way] is the desire to outdo others and get more and more.” (359c)

Doing one’s own work is doing what is appropriate for oneself. The musician tunes his lyre; the doctor prescribes a certain course of treatment for his patients. Neither the musician nor the doctor tries to outdo his colleagues; that would not be appropriate. They would, in a sense, not be doing their own work if they were to try to outdo their colleagues. The musician, in his quest to make his lyre more perfectly in tune, will probably make it out of tune instead, because he is so focused on besting the other musicians that he cannot concentrate fully on the task of tuning (perhaps). In the same way, the doctor may not heal his patient, because he will be so caught up in trying to outdo the other doctors that he will not treat the patient as best he can. It seems reasonable that the wrong sort of outdoing (trying to outdo everyone, i.e. *pleonexia*) is harmful, because it gets in the way of performing the task at hand. The right sort of outdoing (trying to outdo

only those unlike yourself) is natural and not harmful. Of course the musician will tune his lyre better than the non-musician; it comes with doing one's own work.

*Pleonexia* is the root of the problem of the "city with a fever". (373a)

Unnecessary desires lead the citizens to want more and more, to indulge in more luxuries, to procure more land for the city. These desires lead to unrest within the city and war with its neighbors. Socrates contrasts this city with the healthy city of bare necessity. If the unnecessary desires are left unchecked, the city will quickly fall into injustice, so philosophers are needed to keep the desires at bay, to keep them from destroying the city. This is analogous to the way reason checks the appetitive desires of the soul, so they do not destroy the soul.

We have seen that Socrates' argument that the just are clever and good and the unjust are ignorant and bad falls short, because its assumptions about the clever being good, the ignorant being bad, and people having the qualities of those they resemble do not appear to hold true. Further justification needs to be given in order to satisfactorily show that the just are indeed clever and good and the unjust ignorant and bad. The idea of *pleonexia* is later used to explain the unjust, feverish city, and its analogous state of the soul. Socrates' argument against Thrasymachus also figures into the way he defines Justice later on in the *Republic*. Each doing his own work is similar to the way the musician and the doctor do their work, without trying to overreach or trying to outdo anyone.