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The Many-Headed Beast and the Defense of Justice

For the Ancient Greeks, the soul was responsible for human functions ranging from metabolism to rational assessment. It is, broadly speaking, the principle and driving force of life. In Plato's *Republic*, the ideal city is divided into craftsmen, auxiliaries, and guardians. Likewise, according to Plato, the structure of the soul consists of the appetitive, spirited (*thumos*), and rational parts. To understand why the soul is indispensable to Plato in understanding justice and what it means to be human, I will examine the many-headed beast section from 588b-592b in Book IX. But, I will first contextualize Plato's defense of justice within the dialectic and subsequently address the modern accusation of irrelevance as argued in David Sachs' "A Fallacy in Plato's Republic". Then, I will analyze the original passage while also using its underlying ideas to respond to the characterization of the just person made by John M. Cooper in his article "The Psychology of Justice in Plato". Based on the internal struggle between the many-headed beast, lion, and inner human in the soul, Plato successfully defends justice by providing valuable insight into the unique dialectical method in his dialogue, the nature of the soul in relation to reason, and the powerful Socratic message on living in the best way possible.

Plato's *Republic* must be viewed as a dialectical whole formed by a vast web of interconnected arguments and imagery. In the *Phaedrus*, one of Plato's middle-period dialogues written around the same time as the *Republic*, Socrates states, "'someone who thinks that he can set down an art in writing, and equally someone who accepts something from writing as though

it were going to be clear and reliable, must be very simple-minded'" (275c). Indeed, Plato is constantly putting forth preliminary definitions, such as the iterations of the model city in the *Republic,* and revising them substantially as interlocutors interject and new ideas are introduced. This form of conversational dialogue allows Plato to be strikingly reflective. In many ways, potential objections are anticipated and met with refutations by the character Socrates. For instance, in the many-headed beast section, Socrates mentions a point that Thrasymachus made hundreds of pages ago (590d). Consequently, one must consider each part of Plato's argument in a cumulative, non-isolated way. Just like the interlocutors in the conversation, we must imagine this complex philosophical project and its arguments as occurring in one relatively continuous session, spanning a very short time.

Throughout Plato, arguments are developed through the crucial participation of interlocutors, displaying the thought process behind reaching a view and encouraging others to do the same. In *Republic*, Socrates labels the educational journey of the philosopher as "'dialectical'" (532b). In the *Phaedrus*, the art of the dialectic sows seeds of discourse and is pivotal for understanding Plato's method, being concisely what Bernard Williams calls, "argument in speech, teaching in conversation" (Williams 6). A written record of people conversing is quite different from a record of speech, for the Platonic dialogue embodies philosophy in active practice. There is something vital in the dialectical process of seeing people change their minds, asking probative questions, and arguing with each other on the weightiest of subjects concerning moral virtues. Many times after Book I, Socrates is urged by his main interlocutors Glaucon and Adeimantus, the brothers of Plato, and even Thrasymachus to flesh out his arguments and address important inadequacies (419a, 449c-450b, 543a). Thus, these dialectical discussions do not have "the aim of [reaching] edifying moral conclusions, but the

aim of getting it right" (Williams 44). The attempt of correcting wrongs and clarifying previous obscurities is why Socrates rarely engages in monologue. The interlocutor constantly either affirms proposed statements or negates ones that Socrates asks rhetorically with responses such as 'absolutely' or 'clearly', both which happen at the end of Book IX. This process gives power and intellectual autonomy to the interlocutors and, by extension, the readers, who are actively and critically engaging with textual arguments.

Through the dialectic, it becomes clear that Plato does not provide a full picture of his arguments, and that should make us wary of Sachs' literal, isolated reading. In relation to justice, Sachs is correct that underlying tension and dissonance exist between the communication of ideas relating to justice in the text. On the one hand, there is a conventional, vulgar conception of justice–the refraining from ordinarily unjust acts such as theft (Sachs 143). On the other hand, the Platonic conception of justice maintains that there is an ideal ordered structure in the soul which when corrupted, leads to injustice, an evil in the soul. However, Sachs neglects the role of the dialectic in Plato's *Republic* regarding the tripartite soul and its implications on justice. He makes two charges of interest made against Plato: 1) the failure to connect the two types of justice renders it irrelevant as a response to Thrasymachus, and 2) Plato has only provided support for justice for its effects and not explicitly for its own sake (Sachs 145). This claim that justice is both a reward in itself and for its effects is a crucial point Socrates sets to demonstrate in Book II. The fact that this may not be directly stated does not impede the argument, and goes back to the idea of the dialectical art–the whole answer or picture is intentionally never provided by Socrates. As developed in later books, one can identify justice as its own reward when considering the idea that it is an internal, immaterial state of order in the individual soul. After all, one of the educative goals of the *Republic* is to catalyze actual conversations between

students on important metaphysical and political issues while making readers discern what Plato wanted to say and the connections between similar arguments.

To continue the analysis on Sachs' essay, the most important argument by far is that Plato failed to connect the two kinds of justice in the dialogue, vulgar and Platonic justice. However, there need not be dissonance between vulgar justice and Plato's conception of justice because both resemble the form of justice to varying extents. The two criteria Sachs identifies in order for Plato's argument to succeed is that 1) his conception of the just person "precludes behavior commonly judged immoral" and 2) his conception of justice "applies to every man who is just according to the vulgar conception" (Sachs 152-153). In a sense, Plato has anticipated this objection of irrelevancy in his discussion of forms. When Socrates talks about the just man in relation to the paradigm of justice, he says his aim was to "'use the perfectly just and the perfectly unjust man as reference points'" (472c). Thus, the Platonic conception of justice already takes into account vulgar justice, which is a shadow of Plato's described perfect justice, but nevertheless, a thing that resembles justice and can provide a lesser degree of happiness. There is such a thing as the perfect form of justice, while in the world, there are only imperfect, but identifiable, instances that may come close to it. There is no reason why Plato must plainly state that being vulgarly just entails being Platonically just, or that Platonic justice entails typical morality (Sachs 157). Through the dialectic, we are able to reach our own conclusions using reason, rather than through the authority of Plato.

Although Sachs brings up important questions of supposed weakness in Plato's arguments, these questions are pre-addressed by the dialectic. At the start of the text in Book I, Socrates says that "'never will injustice be a more profitable thing than justice'" (354a). Indeed, no form of injustice is profitable, and Socrates' arguments have a cumulative nature that

constantly feeds into the system of the dialectic. One cannot simply invalidate the entirety of Plato's argument on justice because of a supposed logical fallacy, which arises when one reads the text too literally. I envision the foremost goal of Plato's *Republic* to be educational, whereas the refutation of Thrasymachus is secondary. Therefore, although we are not given everything by Plato, through the dialectic, we are given more than enough for interpreting implications and addressing potentially vague passages. In fact, we are intended to reach our own conclusions on such matters with the arguments of Socrates as the basis of dialectical training–one that provokes reflection on the nature of justice as it occurs in the world.

After establishing the significance of understanding Plato as dialectic, so as to avoid manifold potential misinterpretations, I shall provide a brief overview on the main section pertaining to the many-headed beast. This discussion, from 588b to 592b, is the end of Book IX and continues Socrates' encomium and defense of justice, which began in Book II. Thrasymachus embodies the praisers of injustice, claiming that justice merely serves the self-interest of the stronger and that injustice "'is a stronger, freer, more masterful thing than justice'" (338c, 344c). Meanwhile, Socrates' arguments in Book I, including the discussion of *ergon* (function), seem unconvincing at best. As many scholars like Rachana Kamketar have pointed out, it becomes clear that elenchus, a kind of refutation by contradiction, is inadequate at changing the fundamental beliefs of those like Thrasymachus (Kamketar 13). Thus, in order to properly account for justice and why it brings happiness, Socrates must embark on a novel metaphysical and epistemological project on "'what justice is'" (354c).

In this section, Socrates brings up a remarkable piece of imagery that allows one to envision the tripartite soul in a more concrete, vivid way. The soul is proposed to be a composite made up of three beings that are separate but have become joined together as one (588d). The

many-headed beast, which has the heads of both wild and tame animals, is the largest and corresponds to the lowest part of the soul, operating on appetites such as hunger, thirst, and sexual drive (588c). The lion, the second largest, represents the spirited part which seeks reputation and honor, and the smallest is the inner human being, which represents the rational upper part of the soul. These combined three are then put under a singular outside cover, which looks like a human being (588e). Thus, one may appear to be a human being, but they are not really human if the bestial parts, not the inner human being, are in control. The tyrant, the doer of injustice, allows the many-headed beast and lion to feast, thus causing the soul's animal parts to become stronger and leading to a condition of enslavement to lower desires (589a). This results in the weakening of the inner human being and leads to a perpetual state of combat between the lion and the many-headed beast.

From the opposite perspective, the conception of the just person's soul put forth by Plato from 588b-592b asserts the rational part of the soul, the inner human being, as the most divine part of humanity. In the just, the inner human being is most in control, acting like a farmer who stops the wild heads from sprouting and developing a friendly alliance between the lion and many-headed beast (589b). The rational part is the most divine because it allows for proper order in the soul and the ability to gain profound metaphysical understanding. It is also important to recognize that in classical antiquity, the official Platonic goal of universal consensus was *homoiōsis theōi kata to dunaton*, or "becoming like god so far as is possible" (Sedley 309-310). Thus, it follows that the "'best person, who has the divine element ruling within himself'" should rule over others because it is better for "'everyone to be under divine and wise rule'" (590d). Another implication is that reason is the only thing distinguishing humans from beasts, which makes it fitting that reason characterizes the upper, most divine part of the soul. One can then

conclude that reason is surely the tool which enables humans to become like a god so far as possible, for in the best person, reason rules.

When full human potential is actualized, the just person is not only divine, but also truly human. Justice is a fundamentally internal state of the individual where the inner human has control. In a profound way, Plato recognizes the human potential of animality, what Bernard Williams calls the immense capacity of human "destructiveness as well as creativity" (45). What makes the person just is also what makes a person truly human–the rule of reason over the soul leads to a state of inner dignity. Yet, we are also capable of falling under the temptation and enslavement of the many-headed beast. Here, in an example of the dialectic's effectiveness, Socrates elaborates this view and anticipates the later objection of Sachs, saying:

> But won't we want to say that even the things that are conventionally counted fine and shameful are so for the same sort of reason - fine things being those that put the animal-like aspects of our nature under the human - or maybe it's the divine? - in us, shameful those that put the tame at the mercy of the savage? (589d)

Here, the unique conception of the soul and the metaphysics developed in previous books are connected back to conventional standards. Plato recognizes the immense danger and savagery that the unjust person is capable of, and thus provides the image of the many-headed beast - the complete opposite of the human. It is quite acceptable that in order for a person to be just, one must control the animal-like parts of the soul and ensure they do not dominate the whole–for that leads to a condition that suppresses the truly human. Consequently, the just person is also the truest person who has actualized the rule of the inner human in his soul. Although the inner human is the smallest of the three beings, it is also the most vital to achieving this harmonious, fundamentally human state of the soul.

These images of true humanity and divinity are then used by Plato to support justice through the enumeration of very practical examples of injustice that occur in the real world. For

example, he mentions the myth of Eriphlye, a woman who was bribed with a gold necklace to persuade her husband to go to war, causing his death. In comparison, the person who robs unjustly is worse than Eriphyle because the one is trading "'gold for the ruin of his own soul'" (590a). There cannot "conceivably" be any profit to the unjust who take money in excess because they are subjecting their inner human being, the best part of the soul, to the worst, the most bestial (589d). Thus, Plato develops a remarkable metaphysical analysis of justice, where it never pays anyone to act unjustly since the end result is making themselves less human. The moral motivation to act justly, with reason as the guide, therefore becomes intrinsic. The dignity of the inner human being is priceless, and "'some extra bit of power'" or money simply does not hold equal value, since the many-headed beast is insatiable and the opposite of the best (591a). As Socrates' conversation on justice comes to an end in Book IX, it becomes clear that the form of justice is vastly superior to the form of injustice. In the world, any instance of the just man, no matter how imperfect it may be, will be happier than the unjust man because injustice leads to the unnatural domination of the worse part, the many-headed beast, leading to a lack of restraint (*akolasia*) in the soul. Meanwhile, the just person has the true fulfillment of harmony and dignity–he or she is in tune with their most divine aspect, the inner human being who reigns in the soul. Similar to the guardians in the city, the soul is guided by the beacon of reason and truth, allowing for a beautiful harmonious order and friendship within oneself (589b). As a result, Socrates largely succeeds in his quest to demonstrate that justice is its own reward in Book IX.

In reply to Cooper's characterization of the just person, I would argue that Plato makes a more practical characterization of the just which is not rooted in fanatic idealism, but situated in the world. Although I agree that the just person is no egoist or altruist, I disagree with Cooper's assessment that he or she is a sort of "high-minded fanatic" (148). Although he or she is nearest

to the form of the Good, the ultimate object of pursuit, fanaticism implies extremism that does not align with the moderateness associated with justice. The concern for justice is not purely abstract or political. Justice is related to the most significant of human matters, and as Socrates eloquently states, "'what we're looking into is the greatest of all questions–how to live well or badly'" (578c). How to live is the greatest of all human priorities, and is a beautiful, moving expression of Plato's interest in the human condition and how one can actually improve their lives. Also, after analyzing the Allegory of the Cave in its political implications, Cooper rightly suggests that the just man advances a kind of rational order, an "order in the whole world…opt[ing] for the mixed political and intellectual life which Socrates insists on" (Cooper 146). Indeed, this can be concluded as a straightforward imperative. However, at the end of Book IX, Socrates emphasizes the conditional nature of the rule of the just guardians, where he exclaims, "'By the Dog!...He certainly will [rule], in the city that belongs to him, though probably not in the place he was born'" (592a). The city where the just guardians rule is not their birthplace, but rather, the Kallipolis–the 'beautiful' ideal city which Plato devises throughout the previous books. Plato acknowledges that the just person would go into politics in the city they founded– "'one that exists in words, only'", one that is not found in the world (592a). In a sense, it does not matter if the ideal city could be found on earth. Socrates refers to the city he set up as "'in the heavens'", demonstrating the role of ideal justice as a model to be looked up to (592b). The perfectly just man or philosopher-king is also only a paradigm, something which people can reference in order to forge in themselves an ordered regime of the soul–it makes no difference whatsoever if it does or will exist (592b).

Although Plato recognizes that the ideal just person likely cannot exist, this concession does not stop anyone from using the dialectic and his model to develop themselves accordingly

and become closer to the form of justice. Consequently, the just man is not merely a high-minded fanatic as Cooper says, but the most rational and human someone can be. Underlying the moral motivation of the just is the dignity and divinity of the inner human being. It is the desire of the individual to live well that allows one to go beyond egoism and understand a crucial fact of the human condition: human beings are interdependent and interconnected. Thus, the interest of the just individual is also that of the ideal city. The analogy between the individual and the city, which extends to 588b-592b, is quite appropriate and crucial in Plato's understanding of justice. After all, Socrates says at the start that cities "'come into existence, I imagine, because in fact none of us is self-sufficient'" (369b). From start to end, Plato weaves a wondrous, intricate tapestry of ideas which form the dialectic. As stated before, Justice is more than a fanatic pursuit of an external thing, for it is its own reward by being the best, most divine state of the soul. No longer is justice solely a matter of psychological motivation, but a practical matter of internal harmony and beauty of living, through the rule of the inner human being, that comes with the actualization of human potential where one becomes like a god so far as is possible.

Ultimately, I argue that in order to understand Socrates' argument for justice and why it succeeds, one must consider the vital dialectic in Plato's dialogues, the divine power of reason as embodied by the rule of the inner human being in the soul, and the Socratic appeal to living the best life. Perhaps Plato recognized that merely writing down logical arguments was not sufficient in achieving his aim of showing the profound value of justice and encouraging the actualization of the best, most divine life. The dialectic goes beyond the confines of the text and bestows a living spirit to Plato's arguments, allowing his ideas to prosper thousands of years later. The many-headed beast section in particular demonstrates the nature of justice as intrinsically rewarding and serves as a defense of justice while also calling into question the fanaticism of the

just proposed by Cooper and the methodology of Sachs, which fails to consider Plato's *Republic* holistically. However, I do agree with Cooper that Plato's metaphysics are vital to understanding his moral psychology on happiness, and as stipulated previously, Plato's *Republic* must be taken as an interconnected whole. Moreover, I am inclined to extend Plato's analogy of the conflict between the many-headed beast, lion, and inner human with our time on Earth. History has been a reckoning with what it means to be human and what happens when reason goes awry. Yet, Plato stays faithful and hopeful regarding the potential of the true, inner human and the defeat of the many-headed beast within the complex soul, urging for a divine life–with order, dignity, and justice.

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