

# Plato and Justice

A recurring theme in the dialogues of Plato is the profound relationship between the human self and justice: all ten books of the *Republic* are dedicated to the examination of this relationship, and although the speakers often turn aside to explore other issues, the central theme is never far away. Towards the end of the dialogue, Socrates has this to say:

“. . . this of all things is most to be studied, in what manner every one of us, omitting other disciplines, shall become an inquirer and learner in this study, if, by any means, he be able to learn and find out who will make him expert and intelligent to discern a good life, and a bad; and to choose everywhere, and at all times, the best of what is possible, considering all the things now mentioned [in the course of the dialogue], . . . so as to be able from all these things to estimate, and, having an eye to the nature of the soul, to comprehend both the worse and the better life, pronouncing that to be the worse which shall lead the soul to become more unjust, and that to be the better life which shall lead it to become more just, and to dismiss every other consideration.”

We notice that the point of focus here is the soul (psyche) – that invisible something that is understood to be the unific seat of selfhood, which gives life to the body, and which has the power to know and to make choices. It is on this understanding that all the important ethical principles of Platonic philosophy are based. What part does justice play in the life of the soul?

At the beginning of the *Republic's* extensive exploration Plato offers us a threefold division of things:

Some things are simply good and we wish to possess them for no other reason than our participation in them is judged to be worthwhile: happiness and well-being are examples of this class – we don't strive to be happy because of some further benefit it would bring, but being happy is an end in itself.

Some things are good only because of some benefit it brings, and if we could obtain the benefit without getting involved in the instrumental thing, generally we would choose to avoid it. Digging down into the earth and shifting vast quantities of stone and earth in dark and dangerous conditions is not something anyone would chose to do for its own sake, but the consequent accumulation of precious metals or stones is deemed to make it worthwhile.

Some things are good from both points of view: the possession or participation in them is its own reward, and they also bring about useful consequences. Socrates argues that justice is one of these things – being just is intrinsically good, and worth pursuing for its own sake, but it is also productive of good consequences, bringing about power, strength and balance to the soul, just as exercising brings about bodily benefits.

This good is directly concerned with the good of the soul, not that of the body or of combination of body and soul – although the benefit gained may often indirectly help that combination. This is important, and the consequences of a soul-centred understanding of the self emerges in the *Gorgias* where Socrates argues that it is better to be the recipient of an unjust act than to be the performer of such an act; he further argues that to get away with an act of injustice is worse than to be suitably corrected through punishment (of the right kind, of course).

The *Gorgias* has Socrates arguing in turn with three characters of some repute, each of whom present different challenges to the Platonic view of justice. Here is a section of the dialogue when the second of these three, Polus, claims that all human beings reject Socrates' two strange sounding affirmations about justice and correction.

474a SOCRATES: My method is to call in support of my statements the evidence of a single witness, the man I am arguing with, and to take his vote alone; the rest of the world are nothing to me; I am not talking to them. See now if you are prepared to submit  
 b yourself in your turn to examination by answering my questions. I maintain that you and the world in general, as well as I, consider doing wrong worse than suffering wrong, and not being punished worse than being punished.

POLUS: And I say that neither I nor anyone else believes such a thing. Would *you* rather suffer wrong than do wrong?

SOCRATES: Yes, and so would you and so would everybody.

POLUS: On the contrary, neither you nor I nor anybody would make that choice.

c SOCRATES: Well, will you answer my questions?

POLUS: Certainly, I am eager to know what on earth you will say.

SOCRATES: If you want to know, answer as if we were beginning again at the beginning. Which do you think is worse, Polus, doing wrong or suffering wrong?

POLUS: I think suffering wrong.

SOCRATES: And which do you think the more shameful thing, doing wrong or suffering wrong? Answer.

POLUS: Doing wrong.

SOCRATES: If it is more shameful, isn't it also worse?

POLUS: Not at all.

d SOCRATES: I see. Then you don't consider good identical with fine, or bad with shameful?

POLUS: No, I don't.

SOCRATES: What about this, then? Have you no standard to which you refer when you apply the word fine to any fine thing, whether it is a body or a colour or a shape or a voice or a mode of behaviour? Take physical beauty first. When you call a body fine are you not referring either to its usefulness for some particular purpose or to some feeling of pleasure which makes glad the eyes of its beholders? Is there any reason other than these for calling a body fine?

e POLUS: No.

SOCRATES: And similarly with the other things, shapes and colours. You call them fine, don't you, because they are either pleasant or useful or both?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And is the same true of voices and musical sounds in general?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Now, with regard to laws and modes of behaviour; their fineness also presumably depends on their being either useful or pleasant or both.

POLUS: I agree.

475a SOCRATES: And shall we say the same about the fineness of various branches of knowledge?

POLUS: Certainly; your use of pleasure and good as criteria of fineness is now excellent, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then we must define what is shameful by the opposites of these, that is to say by pain and evil.

POLUS: Unquestionably.

SOCRATES: So whenever we call one of two fine things the finer, we mean that it surpasses the other either in one or both of these qualities; it is either more pleasant or more useful or both.

POLUS: Certainly.

b SOCRATES: And whenever one of two shameful things is the more shameful, it must be because it is either more painful or more evil or both. Do you agree?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Now then: what did we say a moment ago about doing and suffering wrong? You said, I think, that suffering wrong was the greater evil, but doing wrong more shameful.

POLUS: I did.

SOCRATES: Then if doing wrong is more shameful than suffering wrong, its greater shamefulness must inevitably consist in its being either more painful or more evil or both? Isn't that inevitable?

POLUS: Certainly.

c SOCRATES: First, then, let us consider whether doing wrong exceeds suffering wrong in pain. Do those who do wrong feel more pain than those who suffer wrong?

POLUS: Most certainly not.

SOCRATES: Then doing wrong does not exceed in pain?

POLUS: No.

SOCRATES: And if it is not more painful, it cannot exceed in both.

POLUS: Of course not.

SOCRATES: Then only the third possibility is left.

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: That is, that it is more evil.

POLUS: So it seems.

SOCRATES: Then since it involves greater evil, doing wrong will be worse than suffering wrong.

POLUS: Obviously.

d SOCRATES: Didn't you and I agree before with the opinion of most people that doing wrong is a more shameful thing than suffering wrong?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And now it turns out to be a greater evil as well.

POLUS: Apparently.

e SOCRATES: Would you then prefer a greater degree of evil and shamefulness to a lesser? Don't be afraid to answer, Polus; it won't hurt you. Be a man and submit to the argument as you would to a doctor, and answer 'yes' or 'no' to my question.

POLUS: My answer is 'no' then, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Would anybody prefer it?

POLUS: I don't think so, according to this argument anyway.

SOCRATES: I was right then when I said that neither you nor I nor anyone would prefer doing wrong to suffering wrong, since the former turns out to be the greater evil.

POLUS: So it appears.

SOCRATES: You see then, Polus, that when our two methods of proving our points are compared, they bear no resemblance to each other. Whereas you have everybody in agreement with you except me, I am content if I can get just your agreement and testimony; if I can get your one vote I care nothing for those of the rest of the world. . .

476a So much then for that; now let us consider the second point on which we were at issue, whether being punished for one's wrongdoing is the greatest of evils, as you thought, or whether not being punished is a greater evil, which was my opinion. Let's look at it like this. Would you say that paying the penalty for wrongdoing is the same thing as being justly punished?

POLUS: Yes.

b SOCRATES: So can you maintain that which is just is not always fine in so far as it is just? Think well before you answer.

POLUS: I think it is, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Next take this question. If someone does something, must there be something which is the object of the action?

POLUS: I think so.

SOCRATES: Does what the object has done to it correspond in nature and quality to the act of the agent? For example, if someone strikes, something must be struck, mustn't it?

POLUS: Inevitably.

SOCRATES: And if the agent strikes violently or quickly the object must be struck in the same way?

c POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: The effect on the object of the stroke is qualified in the same way as the act of the striker?

POLUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: Again, if someone causes burning, must there be something being burnt?

POLUS: Naturally.

SOCRATES: And if the burning is violent or painful, what is burnt must be burnt in the corresponding way?

POLUS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And does the same hold good if a cut is made? Something is cut?

POLUS: Yes.

d SOCRATES: And if the cut is big or deep or painful, the object which is cut receives a cut corresponding in kind to what the agent inflicts?

POLUS: It seems so.

SOCRATES: To sum up, do you agree with what I said a moment ago, that what the object has done to it is qualified in the same way as what the agent does?"

POLUS: I agree.

SOCRATES: Then, if that is granted, is being punished active or passive?

POLUS: Passive, Socrates, of course.

SOCRATES: Then there must be a corresponding agent?

POLUS: Obviously; the man who inflicts the punishment.

e SOCRATES: Does a man who punishes rightly punish justly?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And is his action just or unjust?

POLUS: Just.

SOCRATES: Then the man who is punished, paying the penalty, suffers justly?

POLUS: It seems so.

SOCRATES S: Then the man who punishes does a fine thing, and the man who is punished has a fine thing done to him.

POLUS: Yes.

477a SOCRATES: And if fine, good, since it must be either pleasant or useful.

POLUS: Inevitably.

SOCRATES: Then the treatment received by the man who is punished is good?

POLUS: Apparently.

SOCRATES: Then it must be useful, a benefit, to him?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And is the benefit what I take it to be, that if he is justly punished his soul is improved?

POLUS: Probably.

SOCRATES: Then the man who is punished is freed from evil in the soul?

POLUS: Yes.

- b SOCRATES: In that case, is he not freed from the greatest of all evils? Look at it this way: where a man's material fortune is concerned, can you name any evil except poverty?

POLUS: No.

SOCRATES: And what of his physical constitution? Wouldn't you say that evil here means weakness and disease and deformity and the like?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Now, do you recognize the existence of such a thing as an evil state of the soul?

POLUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: Do you mean by this wickedness and ignorance and cowardice and so on?

POLUS: Certainly.

- c SOCRATES: Then in these three things, possessions, body and soul, you recognize three corresponding bad states, poverty, disease and wickedness?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Now, which of these three bad states is the most shameful? Is it not wrongdoing and badness of soul in general?

POLUS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And if it is the most shameful, is it not the worst?

POLUS: What do you mean, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Simply this. We agreed before that in any comparison of shamefulness the first place must be assigned to what produces either the greatest pain or the greatest harm or both.

POLUS: Agreed.

SOCRATES: And we have now agreed on the supreme shamefulness of wrongdoing and all badness of soul?

- d POLUS: Yes, it has been agreed.

SOCRATES: Then its supreme shamefulness must be due to its being either surpassingly painful or surpassingly harmful, or both?

POLUS: It must.

SOCRATES: Now, are wickedness and excess and cowardice and ignorance more painful than poverty and sickness?

POLUS: Nothing in our discussion leads me to think so, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then since by your own admission badness of soul is not supremely painful, it must owe its superiority in shamefulness over other kinds of badness to the fact that it produces an amazing degree of harm and evil.

e POLUS: It would seem so.

SOCRATES: I suppose that what produces the greatest harm must be the greatest evil in the world?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then wrongdoing and excess and other kinds of wickedness of soul are the greatest evil that exists?

POLUS: Apparently.

SOCRATES: Now, what is the art which relieves a man from poverty? Isn't it the art of making money?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And what cures disease? Isn't it the art of medicine?

POLUS: Of course.

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SOCRATES: Then what is the art which cures wickedness and wrongdoing? If you are at a loss for an answer when it is put like that, look at it in this way. Where do we take sufferers from physical ailments?

POLUS: To the doctor, Socrates.

SOCRATES: And those who are wicked and licentious?

POLUS: To the judges, do you mean?

SOCRATES: To be punished?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Do not those who punish rightly employ some kind of justice in doing so?

POLUS: Obviously.

b SOCRATES: Then money-making cures poverty, medicine disease, and justice excess and wrongdoing.

POLUS: So it seems.

SOCRATES: Now, which of these is the finest?

POLUS: Which of what?

SOCRATES: Money-making, medicine and justice.

POLUS: Justice, Socrates, by a long way.

SOCRATES: If it is the finest, must it not produce either the greatest pleasure or the greatest benefit or both?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Is medical treatment pleasant? Do people like being in the hands of doctors?

POLUS: Not in my opinion.

SOCRATES: But it is beneficial, isn't it?

POLUS: Yes.

- c SOCRATES: It relieves a person from a great evil so that it is worthwhile undergoing the pain to regain one's health.

POLUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: Physically speaking, which is the happier condition, to be cured by a doctor or never to be ill at all?

POLUS: Obviously, never to be ill at all.

SOCRATES: Then happiness, it seems, consists not so much in being relieved of evil as in never acquiring it in the first place.

POLUS: Yes.

- d SOCRATES: Well, how about this? If two people have a disease, whether in body or soul, which is the more miserable: the one who undergoes treatment and is cured of his evil, or the one who has no treatment and continues to suffer?

POLUS: I suppose the person who has no treatment.

SOCRATES: Didn't we agree that to be punished is to be cured of the worst of all evils, wickedness?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Because justice presumably teaches people self-control, makes them better and is the cure for wickedness.

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then the happiest is the person who has no badness in his soul, since this has been shown to be the worst of all bad things.

POLUS: Clearly.

- e SOCRATES: And the next happiest, I suppose, is the person who is cured.

POLUS: Apparently.

SOCRATES: That is to say, the one who undergoes reproof and chastisement and is punished for his faults.

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And the worst is the life of the person who continues in wrongdoing and is not cured.

POLUS: It appears so.

- 479a SOCRATES: But isn't he precisely the one who commits the greatest crimes and indulges in the greatest wrongdoing and yet manages never to suffer reproof and punishment and retribution; the man in fact who behaves just as you say Archelaus has behaved and all the other tyrants and orators and potentates?

POLUS: So it seems.

SOCRATES: Their achievements, it would appear, my good friend, are comparable to those of someone suffering from the most serious illnesses, who manages to avoid giving any account of his physical defects to the doctors and undergoing treatment, because, like a child, he is afraid of the pain involved in cautery and surgery. Don't you agree?

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POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Because he is presumably ignorant of the nature of health and physical well-being. And the agreement which we have now reached, Polus, points to the conclusion that those who flee from justice are in a similar condition; they see the pain which punishment involves but are blind to its benefits and do not realize that to live with an unhealthy body is a far less miserable fate than the companionship of an unhealthy soul, one that is rotten, wicked and impure. So they strain every nerve to escape punishment and to avoid being cured of the worst of all evils; for this purpose they procure wealth and friends and make themselves as persuasive speakers as they can. But if we are right in what we have agreed, Polus, do you see what conclusions follow from the argument? Or would you prefer that we just sum them up?

c

POLUS: If you think so.

SOCRATES: First, it emerges that wickedness and wrongdoing are the greatest evil. Do you agree?

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POLUS: It seems so, at any rate.

SOCRATES: Next, has it not been demonstrated that being punished is a way of deliverance from this evil?

POLUS: It looks like it.

SOCRATES: And that not being punished renders the evil permanent?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then acting wrongly stands only second in the list of evil things. The first and greatest of all is not to be punished for one's wrongdoing.

POLUS: Apparently so.

SOCRATES: And wasn't this exactly the point at issue between us, my friend? You thought Archelaus happy for committing the greatest crimes with impunity, and I was of the contrary opinion and maintained that Archelaus or anyone else who escapes punishment for his wrongdoing must be miserable above all other men, and that as a general rule the man who does wrong is more miserable than the man who is wronged, and the man who escapes punishment more miserable than the man who receives it. Wasn't that what I said?