

“True Justice” in the *Republic*¹

GABRIEL DANZIG

Roughly speaking, there are two schools of thought concerning Socrates’² defense of justice in the *Republic*: those who acknowledge, following David Sachs’ influential discussion of the question,³ that Socrates’ arguments fail successfully to defend the form of justice which he was asked to defend, and those who claim that in some way they do defend it successfully. These two groups share the conviction that Socrates intends to defend this “vulgar” conception of justice, and that if he fails to do so successfully then he has not done a good job.

In fact, as I will argue, Socrates constructs an argument which, despite his occasional protests to the contrary, does *not* seriously aim to defend “vulgar” justice, and he does so deliberately, out of conviction. Socrates’ own concept of justice emphasizes the overriding principle of improving the soul, and does not demand obeying the social rules which underlie vulgar justice. But this does not represent a “failure” on Socrates’ part, for his goal is not “to do a good job” in defending any notion at all—he was not a Sophist—but rather to illuminate the truth as he saw it.

This study thus aims to suggest a new paradigm for understanding Socratic arguments. The defense of justice is only one case in which Socrates’ apparent conclusions do not follow from his arguments. While it is surely not reasonable to expect anyone, even a philosopher, to consistently construct perfect arguments, Plato’s arguments are frequently so unconvincing that it is difficult to see how anyone who could set forth the problems as clearly as he does could be satisfied with the solutions he offers. But if Plato’s arguments do not prove what they claim to prove,

¹ This research was supported by THE ISRAEL SCIENCE FOUNDATION founded by the Israel Academy of Science and Humanities. Earlier versions of this paper were read at Seminars of the Classics and Philosophy departments at Bar Ilan University. I wish to thank John Glucker, Ranon Katzoff, David Schaps and Ephraim Meir for their useful comments on these occasions.

² I have tried to be consistent in using the term “Socrates” to refer to the character in the dialogue, and “Plato” to refer to the author. When I wish to refer to the historical Socrates I make this explicit.

³ D. Sachs, “A Fallacy in Plato’s *Republic*,” *The Philosophical Review* 72 (1963) 141–58, reprinted in G. Vlastos (ed.), *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays II* (Garden City, NY 1971) 35–51.

there might be some value in clarifying what, if anything, they do prove. Such an investigation would provide a better guide to the thoughts of the author than any attempts to correct, revise or improve upon his arguments so that they fit better to their presumed object. My suspicion is that the apparent defense of a thesis often serves in Plato's hands as a convenient method of revising or clarifying the meaning of that thesis, and hence that one cannot understand properly what Plato is *claiming* unless one follows the arguments in detail.

This paper aims to contribute in another way as well. The field of Platonic scholarship remains divided between those who, however appreciative of Plato's artistry, view the dialogues as philosophic discourses with artistic trappings, and those who view the dialogues as essentially artistic, with the philosophic content taking a secondary role. Attempts to see how literary analysis can help solve the philosophic problems are still rare.⁴ This paper attempts to show how attention to literary features can help place the philosophic problems in a context in which they are no longer so troublesome.

Finally, the paper aims to shed some light on the teachings of the historical Socrates, with respect to justice. Despite the apologetic purposes of both Plato and Xenophon, neither of them is so bold as to completely whitewash Socrates' ambiguous attitude towards justice, and towards the property rights of others in particular. It seems to me that their revealing admissions about Socrates' attitude on these points would be incomprehensible if they did not reflect the attitudes of the historical Socrates.

I

A major crux in the argument of Plato's *Republic* occurs when, after having described his "city in speech," Socrates returns to the original question or challenge which had been posed and offers an answer. Socrates had been asked to prove, against Thrasymachus, that "justice pays," that the just man who suffers materially is nevertheless happier than the wicked man who prospers materially. It has long been recognized that, in his answer, Socrates relies on a different understanding of justice than that implied in the question, and as a result, it has been claimed, he fails to answer the question he was asked.

The original question concerned a popular notion of justice which is not easily defined, and may be finally incoherent. The "Cephalean" formulation was perhaps the most straightforward: Justice means not lying or stealing

⁴ Charles Kahn is a notable exception. See in particular his "Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1983) 75-121.

(331c).⁵ Longer lists of prohibited misdeeds are offered later (344b–c; 348d; 360a–c; 442e–43a). This concept of justice is more than merely observing the law but it is tied up essentially with the observance of some general rules of behavior, which Socrates describes later as the observance of vulgar standards of justice (*ta phortika* 442e1).⁶ Still, the subject is *dikaiosune*, and this means, as has been noticed, that we are concerned with the *character trait* which leads to this observance.⁷

It is often said that this vulgar *dikaiosune* is "other-regarding," but there is no indication of such concern in the discussions with Cephalus or his son Polemarchus. The motives for observing vulgar justice are left vague, and Adeimantus later argues that they may be purely selfish (362d ff.). Although difficult to define, this form of justice is characterized by the observance of general rules of behavior with respect to the outside world.⁸ Socrates attacks this concept in the first book on the grounds that very important goals, such as the preservation of life, surely take precedence over the strict observance of rules (331c).⁹ His own concept of justice will correct this weakness through emphasizing the *goals* of just action. To this degree his conception of justice has close affinities with utilitarianism, with all its problems.¹⁰

⁵ I refer to this as the Cephalean formulation only for the sake of convenience. In fact, Socrates extracts this formulation from Cephalus' speech while Cephalus himself makes no attempt to say what justice is.

⁶ The translation "common standards" does not reflect the pejorative sense of *ta phortika*, and has contributed to the mistaken belief that Socrates seriously defends the observance of these standards.

⁷ R. H. Weingartner, "Vulgar Justice and Platonic Justice," *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research* 25 (1964) 248–62, at p. 251. This is emphasized also in Book 2 when Adeimantus asks to see what justice does in the soul (366c).

⁸ This is the Platonic distinction, as appears in his description of "true" justice: "not with respect to the external minding of one's business, but with respect to the internal, since it truly concerns him and his own" (443c). This and all other translations cited here are my own.

⁹ Joseph has argued that one of the main purposes of the discussion in Book I is to show that justice is not conforming to rules of behavior. See H. W. B. Joseph, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (Oxford 1935) p. 2 and Chapter 2, cited by J. Schiller, "Just Men and Just Acts in the *Republic*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 6 (1968) 1–14.

¹⁰ There has been in this century a persistent minority voice attributing some form of utilitarianism to Plato. See H. Prichard's inaugural lecture of 1928, "Duty and Interest," reprinted in *Moral Obligation and Duty and Interest: Lectures by H. A. Prichard* (Oxford 1968) 203 ff.; J. D. Mabbott, "Is Plato's *Republic* Utilitarian?" *Mind* 46 (1937) 386–93, revised and reprinted in Vlastos (above, note 3) 57–65; R. Barrow, *Plato, Utilitarianism and Education* (London 1975); and J. L. Creed, "Is It Wrong to Call Plato a Utilitarian?" *CQ* 28 (1978) 349–65. J. H. Muirhead, *Rule and End in Morals* (London 1932; repr. Freeport, NY 1969) 3, classified Plato's as a teleological theory of obligation. J. Annas also notes the similarity; see "Plato and Common Morality," *CQ* 27 (1978) 437–51, at p. 448.

Plato is obviously not a modern utilitarian, of either a Benthamite or a Millian persuasion, but the term "utilitarian" is appropriate both as a reflection of Plato's own terms (*ophelimon*, *lusiteloun*, *kerdaleon*, *sumpheron*, 336d; see also *Cratylus* 416e–17a and *Hippias Major* 295b–96e) and because it helps make the point that Plato is not concerned with universal rules of behavior, but with actions that lead to good results. By using the term "utilitarian," I do not mean to suggest that he held a worked-out theory of utilitarian ethics; nor is it my intention to provide one for him. I merely mean that for Plato the justification of any action is its contribution to spiritual health (and hence to happiness).

Socrates defends justice on the grounds of self-interest. In Book 2 he is asked to explain why it is against my interest to act unjustly, even supposing that I should not get caught, and that through my success I gain many good things, such as wealth, honors and even a reputation as a generous and just man. Socrates must show that justice is beneficial in itself, even without the success, good reputation and other "non-natural" effects it might produce, but he is not committed to showing that it is worth while to be just and miserable.¹¹ He will not attempt to show that justice is better than happiness, but that it produces more happiness despite material misfortune than material fortune would produce in the absence of justice.¹² He will argue that justice is more choiceworthy than anything one could acquire through injustice precisely because it contributes more to happiness than anything else possibly could, whereas injustice destroys all possibility of happiness.¹³

The terms of this defense already tell us something about Socrates' conception of justice: He will defend it as something beneficial. Only if Socrates can define benefit in such a way that it will never be dependent on anything obtainable through vulgar injustice will he be able to offer a good defense of vulgar justice. In fact, in the later part of the *Republic* Socrates spends a good deal of effort in revising ordinary conceptions of benefit, and he thereby reduces the possibility of conflict between vulgar justice and benefit. But he does not eliminate it.

Moreover, Socrates spends at least as much effort revising ordinary conceptions of *justice*. The fact that he begins his defense with a lengthy investigation of the true nature of justice shows this clearly enough. After constructing a "city in speech" in which justice can be seen more clearly than in an individual, Socrates comes to a clear formulation of his new conception of justice. According to Socrates, "true justice"¹⁴ (443c) is a kind of psychic harmony, in which the mind rules the *thumos* or spirit, which in turn aids it in ruling the passions. Once the question is framed in this way, Glaucon readily agrees that the just man, the psychically healthy man, is happier than the unjust or sick man, and that no amount of material prosperity could compensate for a lack of psychic health.¹⁵ Socrates has not significantly revised ordinary conceptions of benefit at this point, as Glaucon's emphatic response clearly shows, but he has revised ordinary

¹¹ C. Kirwan, "Glaucon's Challenge," *Phronesis* 10 (1965) 162-73. See also Schiller (above, note 9) 5.

¹² The emphasis on a quantitative comparison is reflected later in the attempt to calculate arithmetically the superiority of the philosopher over the tyrant in Book 9 (586b-88a).

¹³ At 427d, Socrates restates the challenge in a simple form. They are seeking justice, which he refers to as "what the man who's going to be happy must possess, whether it escapes the notice of all gods and humans or not."

¹⁴ Or: "justice as it is in truth."

¹⁵ Book 4, 445a-b.

conceptions of justice.¹⁶ The justice which is beneficial is not ordinary justice at all. How are we to judge this?¹⁷

II

There have been a variety of responses. David Sachs argued that we have a fallacy in Plato's argument:¹⁸ "Attempts to show that Platonic justice (= true justice) entails ordinary morality are strikingly absent from the *Republic*. Plato merely assumes that having the one involves having the other."¹⁹ Although Socrates never argues that possessing vulgar justice is better than not possessing it, Sachs, being charitable, considers the possibility that the defense of Platonic justice is intended as a covert defense of vulgar justice. In order for this to work, Socrates would have to show mutual entailment: both (1) that those who possess Platonic justice necessarily obey the rules of ordinary justice, and (2) that those who obey those rules necessarily possess Platonic justice. Once we assume, with Sachs, that Socrates' argument is designed to prove these implausible theses, it will not be difficult to accept Sachs' conclusion that the argument is fallacious or nonexistent.

Terence Irwin comes to similar conclusions.²⁰ In his view, Socrates "wants to show that p-justice [psychic justice = Platonic justice] is justice, that it is the virtue we normally refer to; that is why his argument is meant to answer Thrasymachus."²¹ Yet he also argues that "Plato's argument for the definition of p-justice does not try to show that p-justice is justice; he

¹⁶ See Vlastos' comment that the Socratic definition has "no discernible link with ordinary usage": "Justice and Happiness in Plato's *Republic*," in Vlastos (above, note 3) 66–95, at p. 70.

¹⁷ One may argue that in Plato's mind the original questions were poorly formulated, and as a result cannot be properly answered. Plato's strategy, then, is to show the incoherence of popular conceptions of justice, and then to move on to a more coherent conception in which the question can be reformulated and answered. On this reading, there would be no point in any attempt to extract from Plato an answer to the original question. (I am grateful to John Rist for suggesting this line of interpretation.)

To this argument I would reply that it is Plato who formulated the original question, and that he did not formulate it merely in order to demonstrate its incoherence. For after arguably doing so in the first book, he reinstates the original question in Book 2 without making any essential reformulation of the underlying conception of justice, and he refers back to the original vulgar standards when, in Book 4, he gets around to answering the question. Plato thinks the original question is important, and he is right to think so: The original question remains important for all people who are incapable of becoming truly just, and even for those who are, as we shall see below.

¹⁸ The point was noticed earlier by G. Grote, *Plato and other Companions of Sokrates* (London 1888) 99–110 and A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford 1960) 289. See also N. White, *A Companion to Plato's Republic* (Indianapolis 1979), who points out (131) that if Plato equivocates then he cannot be properly said to have actually denied what Thrasymachus was asserting.

¹⁹ Sachs in Vlastos (above, note 3) 47.

²⁰ I make use here of his earlier treatment of the problem in *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford 1977). His later treatment in *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford 1995) is also valuable for the innovative analysis and solutions it proposes.

²¹ Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (previous note) 205, italics added.

assumes over-confidently that 'justice' must refer to exactly the same condition of state and soul."²² This last is an overstatement, but not a serious one. Socrates does elicit from Glaucon the agreement that the man of p-justice is *least likely* to perform the sort of action ordinarily called unjust (442e-43a). But Irwin's conclusion still stands:

[H]e has not shown why a p-just man's rational plan of life would not include some c-unjust actions needed to fulfil it. And if the p-just man avoids c-unjust actions only for his soul's good, his desire for moral exercise will not obviously prescribe regular c-justice [common justice = vulgar justice] in other people's interests. If Plato cannot defend a virtue which benefits other people, he has not defended the virtue of justice challenged by Thrasymachus and Glaucon. But so far he has offered no good reason to a p-just man to benefit others; either we must agree that no sound moral theory can offer a better reason, or we must find Plato's theory altogether inadequate to explain a primary aspect of virtue.²³

Some have attempted to defend Socrates by arguing that there is no fallacy but merely a lacuna. For Raphael Demos, the missing step is not too far-fetched: He points out that being truly just means being ruled by reason, and that reason aims at grasping and instantiating the forms of the good and the just.²⁴ But the lacuna is still there, for Demos acknowledges that he has not shown that the form of the just is instantiated by the observance of *vulgar* standards of justice. This problem haunts most of the attempts to "defend" Socrates.

Richard Kraut's attempts to fill in the missing link are illuminating but no more successful.²⁵ He argues that the harmonized individual, or philosopher, will be just because he has no desire to be unjust. For the philosopher, the desires of reason are far stronger than the desires of *thumos* and appetite, and his life of reason cannot be improved by anything which injustice can provide. This is certainly one of the main thrusts of Socrates' argument: Socrates' just man will have very little interest in material possessions. But will he have no material needs at all? And if he does have some, how should he satisfy them?

Socrates has not really said anything against ordinary injustice, theft and the like, and the arguments Kraut uses to shore up Socrates' failure to do so are surely, as Julia Annas has pointed out,²⁶ overly optimistic. They rest explicitly on the improbable assumption that the philosopher will

²² Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (above, note 20) 205-06, italics added.

²³ Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (above, note 20) 211-12.

²⁴ R. Demos, "A Fallacy in Plato's *Republic*?" *The Philosophical Review* 73 (1964) 395-98, reprinted in Vlastos (above, note 3) 52-56.

²⁵ R. Kraut, "Reason and Justice in Plato's *Republic*," in E. N. Lee, A. P. D. Mourelatos and R. M. Rorty (eds.), *Exegesis and Argument, Phronesis Suppl.* 1 (Assen 1973) 207-24.

²⁶ As she points out, such a reading makes Socrates' arguments irrelevant: "By the time we have stipulated that conditions are such that there is no competition in the way people obtain their differing goals, we have got rid of what was worrying Thrasymachus even without any doctrine of Platonic justice" (Annas [above, note 10] 441).

already possess or have access to everything he needs for his life of leisure:²⁷ And yet Socrates himself felt the need to ask for guaranteed meals at the public expense. It is hard to resist pointing out that Kraut's argument implies that if the philosopher did lack some of these things, he would have no reason not to obtain them through acts of vulgar injustice.²⁸

All of these problems are the result of the misguided attempt to make Socrates prove things he was never trying to prove. As both Vlastos and Annas seem to recognize, Plato is concerned with developing his own rival concept of justice, and has no real interest in defending the behavior of ordinary "just" citizens.²⁹ His referring to this form of justice as "vulgar" is one hint that it is just not his main concern.

In Annas' reading, the *Republic* makes an attempt "to shift the centre of gravity of Greek ethics from an act-centered to an agent-centered type of theory."³⁰ But this can be understood in two ways. Annas appears to mean that Plato is concerned with defending a character trait which directly encourages the observance of vulgar standards of justice, something like the *dikaosune* which is discussed in Book 1. On this reading, while the concern is with character, the character-trait in question is one recognizably associated with the observance of vulgar justice. In fact, however, Socrates is concerned with a different character-trait and a different conception of justice. The shift which Plato envisions is more than a shift between an act-centered and an agent-centered theory of ordinary or vulgar justice. It is a shift from the observance of the proper rules of behavior to an imperative to achieve personal psychic harmony, a shift from a "rules-centered" to a (spiritual) "goals-oriented" conception of justice. But in any society where ordinary rules of justice hold sway, a "goals-oriented" approach will generate conflicts with the ordinary rules of behavior. Any new morality which differs practically from the old morality will inevitably include *some* elements of the old *immorality*, and all the more so when the new morality is not based on rules.³¹

²⁷ See also the pseudo-Platonic *Eryxias*, where this problem is raised explicitly (394a5–b5).

²⁸ There have been other attempts as well. Schiller (above, note 9) 6 argues that "the value of just action is that it alone can . . . guarantee the continuance of [a person's] balanced soul." But for this argument to work, Plato would have to be thinking of vulgarly just action. On Vlastos, see the extensive and perceptive critique by R. Sartorius, "Fallacy and Political Radicalism in Plato's *Republic*," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 3 (1974) 349–63.

²⁹ Vlastos (above, note 16) 95 comments that Plato "thinks the masses, if they lack the requisite *paideia*, capable of nothing better than a degenerate morality . . ." Schiller (above, note 9) raises the possibility that Plato does not intend to defend common morality (3) but later dismisses it (4–5).

³⁰ Annas (above, note 10) 444.

³¹ Vlastos (above, note 16) 78 argues that the new morality is more onerous, but acknowledges that it is "more flexible in form."

III

Socrates tries to minimize the conflict between the vulgar and Platonic forms of justice, but he never argues or claims that the two are simply compatible. When he compares true justice with the vulgar standards his interlocutors have in mind (442d7–43b6), he only claims, at most, that a truly just man will *tend to* conform to vulgar standards. But it is difficult to extract his own, or Plato's, opinion with any certainty from the exchange between Socrates and Glaucon.

After concluding his account of the truly just man, Socrates returns to the question of vulgar standards of justice, and convinces Glaucon that a truly just man would not violate such standards (442e–43a):

If it should be necessary for us to agree about that city, and about a man born and raised like it, whether it seems that such a one would steal a deposit of gold or silver which he had accepted, do you think that anyone would think he would do this rather than those who are not such?

No one, he replied.

Glaucon's admission here may well be a reflection of his own imperfect, thumotic character. Glaucon protested earlier that Socrates' ideal city did not contain enough relishes, and was willing to go to war for the sake of superfluous material goods (372c). Theft for him is motivated solely by the desire for excess wealth, and he cannot imagine why the truly just and moderate man would have a motive to violate vulgar standards of justice. Glaucon's admission here is as much a commentary on his own character as a reflection of Socrates' or Plato's opinion.

But even if we take Glaucon's assent as a genuine expression of Plato's opinion, it does not amount to a principled rejection of ordinary injustice. Glaucon does not imagine that the character-trait of justice would eliminate theft altogether: It would only make the just man less likely than anyone else to steal, for it would drastically reduce the motive of theft. Here Socrates draws a link between psychic and vulgar justice, but he does it in a manner which is designed to show the link precisely as it is: The truly just man tends, but only tends, to observe the laws of vulgar justice.

But there is a further difficulty with the argument. Although Glaucon agrees that a Platonically *just man*, like a just city, would be unlikely to commit acts of vulgar injustice, this does not amount to the claim that the observance of Platonic *justice* entails the observance of vulgar justice as well. Such a conclusion would be warranted only if we could assume that the Platonically just man, who tends to observe vulgar justice, also observes Platonic justice as well. In that case, his observance of both standards would imply the compatibility of the two standards. But unlike Aristotle, who defines just acts as the acts of a just man,³² Socrates does not argue that

³² *NE* 5. 1. 3, 1129a6 ff. See also White (above, note 18) 135 note f.

the acts of the Platonically just man are Platonically just acts, and the Aristotelian model may have misled some commentators.³³

Socrates clearly distinguishes between justice, the harmony of the soul, and just action. Just action is defined not as that which *flows from* a just disposition, but as that which *leads to or preserves* justice in the soul (443e–44a):³⁴

In all these actions he judges and names a just and fine action one that preserves and helps to produce this condition, and wisdom the knowledge that supervises this action, and injustice an action which would undo this condition, and ignorance the opinion which supervises this action.

According to this definition, all acts which produce and preserve the harmony of the soul are just.³⁵ It is a “utilitarian”³⁶ conception of justice, defining justice by its consequences. Anyone can perform such acts, whether already just (harmonized) or not.

It is easy to understand why it would be worth while to be just and to act justly on Socrates’ definition. But there is nothing in this definition which implies either that the observance of Platonic justice would entail the observance of vulgar justice as well, or that the Platonically just or harmonized individual would necessarily observe Platonic justice. Being already spiritually harmonized, the Platonically just man has no need to act to instill a harmonized soul, but only to preserve it. Because he is not pursuing Platonic justice, it may be easier for him to observe vulgar justice than it would be for someone still on the upward path. Although Socrates argues that the Platonically just man would tend to act in accordance with *vulgar* justice, since he does not argue that he would act in accordance with *Platonic* justice, he is not offering any argument for the compatibility of the two standards of action.

It is notorious that Socrates never shows that Platonically unjust people, those who still lack a harmonized soul, should conform to vulgar standards of justice. But we may add that he does not even show that those among them who pursue Platonic justice would conform to vulgar standards. As

³³ Annas (above, note 10) 447 assumes that for Plato as for Aristotle, “virtuous acts are those that the good man would do in such circumstances.”

³⁴ See also 444c–d. Teaching is for Socrates the prime example of doing justice: Socrates agrees to Glaucon’s request to describe moderation “so as not to do an injustice” (430e; see also 337d).

³⁵ In Book 9, Socrates explains that the intelligent man will subordinate all of his activities to the goal of acquiring and maintaining a healthy soul (591c–92a). See White (above, note 18) 135 note d. For Maimonides, this principle is so important that it justifies a transgression of the Law. See Maimonides’ *Eight Chapters*, Chapter 5 in R. L. Weiss and C. E. Butterworth (eds.), *Ethical Writings of Maimonides* (New York 1975).

³⁶ See above, note 10. The “utilitarian” character of Socratic justice is indicated clearly in the present context: Acts of justice are “supervised” by wisdom, and as we have learned only a few lines earlier, wisdom in the city “possesses within it the knowledge of that which is beneficial (*sumpheron*) for each part and for the whole composed of the community of these three parts” (442c). By connecting justice with wisdom, Socrates is also connecting it with utility.

we have seen, Platonic justice permits, even obligates, all acts which lead to the harmony of the soul, but Socrates does not even attempt to show that such acts of Platonic justice would always conform with vulgar standards. Socrates argues only that the Platonically just man tends to conform to vulgar standards of justice, nothing more.³⁷

In another passage which might seem relevant, Socrates argues that the performance of just acts engenders Platonic justice, while the performance of unjust acts engenders injustice (444c–d). This passage could appear to imply that the observance of vulgar justice leads to the harmonization of the soul, and this in turn would imply that it is justified on Platonic grounds. On such an interpretation, the argument would be highly implausible: Socrates presents no argument to show that such observance is always the best way to reach the desired results, and it is hard to imagine that either he or anyone else could do so. In fact, he does not speak of vulgar justice at all in the passage, and is presumably thinking of acts of Platonic justice which, as he has said, are precisely those which lead to the harmonization of the soul.

In a later passage (589d–90a), Socrates seems to say that acts of vulgar justice lead to justice in the soul. But here the claim is hypothetical: It would be worth abstaining from theft, Socrates argues, if such theft causes harm to the soul. He does not present any argument that it does, far less that it always does. There are, then, no arguments which make the implausible assertion that vulgar justice and Platonic justice are mutually entailing or even consistently compatible.

IV

The important point, however, is not simply that Socrates never successfully defends vulgar justice, but rather that Plato himself is clearly aware of this failure, and even presents Socrates as being aware of it. For this reason we can draw the conclusion that the arguments in the *Republic* do not represent a serious attempt to defend vulgar justice.

To my mind, it is inconceivable that Plato should not be aware of the divergence between the vulgar and the “true” concept of justice: He after all is the one who discusses them in detail and offers the terms by which we distinguish them. As Rolf Sartorius has pointed out,³⁸ Plato’s Callicles in the *Gorgias* accuses Socrates of equivocating between natural and conventional notions of justice (482e–83a), and it is hard to imagine that

³⁷ An individual performing only Platonically just acts would violate *any* ideal code of behavior, unless one could be devised which systematically allows for every possible act which aims at the harmony of the soul. This helps explain why Plato regards the rule of wisdom as in principle superior to the rule of the law. See White (above, note 18) 132 and J. Macy, “The Rule of Law and the Rule of Wisdom in Plato, al-Farabi, and Maimonides,” in W. M. Brinner and S. D. Ricks (eds.), *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions* (Atlanta 1986) 205–32.

³⁸ Sartorius (above, note 28) 351–52.

Plato would unknowingly commit a mistake which he himself has pointed out in a previous dialogue. In fact equivocation in the use of the term "justice" is still very much on his mind in the *Republic*. At the end of the discussion in Book I, Socrates comments that he regrets not having defined the term before they considered whether or not it is a vice, and whether or not it is profitable (354b–c).

There are many indications that Plato is aware of the distinction, and that he intends Socrates to defend only Platonic justice.³⁹ When Adeimantus suggests that he will add something to Glaucon's speech against vulgar justice, Socrates responds (362d), "So you too, if he leaves out anything, come to his defense. And yet, what he said was already enough to bring me to my knees and make it impossible to help out [vulgar] justice." After hearing Adeimantus' speech he returns to the problem (368b):

I'm at a loss what to do. On the one hand, I can't help out. For in my opinion I'm not capable of it; my proof is that when I thought I showed in what I said to Thrasymachus that justice is better than injustice, you didn't accept it from me. On the other hand, I can't not help out. For I'm afraid it might be impious to be here when justice is being spoken badly of and give up and not bring help while I am still breathing and able to make a sound.⁴⁰

Socrates agrees to defend (vulgar) justice out of a sense of responsibility rather than philosophic conviction. He does not state why he is unable to persuade his friends of the value of justice—perhaps it is a result of his personal state of ignorance, as Thrasymachus has previously charged (337a–38b), and as he has himself acknowledged. But he is surely able to mount an impressive defense of the Platonic conception of justice. Socrates' hesitation is more likely attributable to his inability to defend the vulgar conception of justice he was asked to defend, but which he never does defend.⁴¹ It is not a coincidence, then, that a weak or nonexistent defense follows this announcement; on the contrary the announcement serves as a warning to look for problems in the argument. Not only is the argument "weak" but Plato wishes us to notice its weakness. Only then will we see the troublesome implications of the doctrine of Platonic justice.

As Socrates develops his argument he makes the contrast between the two conceptions of justice perfectly clear. He has chosen to illuminate

³⁹ Contrast Annas (above, note 10) 438, Sachs in Vlastos (above, note 3) 47.

⁴⁰ This is not the only passage in the *Republic* where Socrates indicates his inability or unwillingness to refute Thrasymachus' argument. See also 357b2, 427c–d. In other places he says that he does not know what justice is (337e–38b): Does he not mean vulgar justice?

⁴¹ We note that Socrates speaks here of offering a *defense* of justice, motivated by piety, and not an impartial investigation. He uses military language (repeated use of *boethein*), and places more emphasis on the use of his voice than his reason in making this defense. The later image of the cave, and especially the inability of the philosopher to understand the dark images on the wall of the cave, is surely intended in part to explain Socrates' inability to offer explanations for common conceptions such as that underlying vulgar justice.

justice by creating a city in speech in which justice will be more visible. The just city as a whole is treated as parallel to the just individual. The behavior of the just city should therefore tell us something about the behavior of the just individual Socrates has in mind. Justice in the city consists in everyone “doing his own business” (*to heautou pratein*) and, in particular, in each class sticking to its own task (433a ff.). This definition parallels justice in the soul of the individual, which is said to be the harmony of the three parts of the soul, resulting from each part of the soul doing its own business. But the harmony between the parts of the soul does not imply that the whole person would “do his own business,” and nothing implies that doing one’s own business means observing vulgar standards of justice.

The internal harmony of the city does not prevent it from making war on other cities, and war is not a marginal activity in the ideal city. The education of the guardian class, from whose ranks will come the philosopher-kings, and which occupies no small part of the *Republic*, is in the first place a training for war. War in this city is not merely defensive war, but is rather offensive, aimed at enlarging the city’s territory (373d–e). War is motivated by the need for territory and not by justice: It is clear that the city’s internal justice does not conflict with its aggressive international relations. If we take this analogy seriously, we will conclude that just as the harmonious city is capable of making war against other cities, so too the harmonious individual is capable of making “war” against other individuals. Such war would be motivated by something analogous to the need to increase territory.⁴²

In accordance with this, Socrates offers an indication of the aggressive nature of the just man after concluding the definition of justice and examining the other virtues in the soul. Although the just man’s reason rules his *thumos*, it does not tell the *thumos* to avoid aggressive behavior. On the contrary (442b),

these two do the finest job of guarding against enemies from without on behalf of all of the soul and the body, the one deliberating, the other making war, following the ruler, and with its courage fulfilling what has been decided.

⁴² One may object that it is improper to view the “inflamed” city as a model of health of the soul. However:

1. Socrates never returns to the model of the so-called healthy city, but rather purges the inflamed city without eliminating the need for war motivated by the need for land.
2. The relishes Glaucon desires, which lead to the construction of the “inflamed” city, are later said to be among the necessary desires (559a–b).
3. Socrates does not indicate in any way that the inflamed city is an inappropriate analogy to the just man; on the contrary, he finds justice in it and explicitly draws a parallel to the just individual.

Gosling’s suggestion that there is no room for justice in the first city, and that Socrates deliberately provoked Glaucon into replacing it with the “inflamed” city, is also worth noting. See J. C. B. Gosling, *Plato* (London 1973) 18–19.

Further, although the subject is a complex one, it is clear that Socrates is willing to use lies for good purposes within the just city.⁴³ This sort of behavior is not justified only in an ideal city: Socrates himself is frequently depicted telling helpful lies in the dialogues of Plato.⁴⁴ Since the avoidance of lying and stealing were the two components of the Cephalean concept of justice, it appears that Plato wishes to indicate to the reader that Socrates condones precisely this vulgar injustice in at least some circumstances.

As Kraut and others have made clear, the Platonically just man is not committed to justice, but merely uninterested in the goods which injustice can obtain, and it is for this reason alone that he tends to abstain from injustice. The author of the *Republic* is fully aware of this fact, and indicates it by the curious literary relationship he establishes between Platonic justice and moderation. After finishing his discussion of wisdom and courage, Socrates suggests skipping moderation and going straight for justice (430d). When Glaucon objects to this, Socrates describes moderation as a kind of "*harmonia*" of the desires, in which the higher elements of the soul dominate the lower (430e–31b; 431e). After describing moderation in this way, Socrates has difficulty finding anything left to call justice (432b–e). Clearly he had intended to describe justice in the terms he uses for moderation, and in the end he does call justice a kind of *harmonia* (443d–e). In the meantime, he defines justice by a formula which was often applied to moderation: "doing one's own business" (433b; compare *Charmides* 161b). The interchangeability of justice and moderation is particularly striking in a passage in which Socrates has chosen to bring justice to light by a process of elimination (427e–28a)! This odd argumentation draws our attention to the fact that Socrates is able to defend justice only by reducing it to moderation. But, precisely for this reason, the justice he is defending is not the justice he was asked to defend.

When Socrates finally comes to define justice for the individual, he remembers the parallel to justice in the city quite clearly (443c–e):

And in truth justice was, it seems, something like this—but not with respect to the external minding of one's business, but with respect to the internal, since it truly concerns him and his own. He doesn't let each part in him do foreign business or the three classes in the soul meddle in the affairs of each other, but truly sets his own things in good order and he himself rules over himself. He organizes himself, becomes a friend to himself, and harmonizes the three parts, exactly like three notes in a harmonic scale, lowest, highest and middle. And if there are some other parts in between, he binds them together and becomes entirely one from many, moderate and harmonized.

⁴³ Book 3, 389b–d; 414b–e. Although the guardians are also said to be truthful (485c–d) Plato clearly means that they love to know the truth, which is quite different from speaking it. See also Book 5, 459c–d; *Laws* 2, 663d ff.

⁴⁴ An unambiguous example of helpful Socratic lying may be found at *Charmides* 155b.

As justice in the city is an internal quality, not directly concerned with international relations, so too justice in the human being is an internal quality, not directly concerned with "external" affairs. Far from describing an "other-directed" quality, Plato is at pains to point out that justice is concerned only with the inner life of the individual. This is a natural result of the way Plato has shaped the entire argument, defending justice by showing how it contributes to one's own happiness.

Socrates does not claim that the just man leads a passive life. On the contrary he is able to act, "either concerning the acquisition of money, or the care of the body, or something political, or concerning private contracts" (443e). His well-balanced soul may make him better equipped to act, all other things being equal, than is the unjust man. This was Socrates' point in Book 1, where he argued that justice makes a city or individual better able to wage war (351a ff.). But there is nothing about his justice which induces him to act for the sake of others, to restrain his actions out of consideration for their good, or even to observe the ordinary conventions of justice.

There is no good reason to believe that acting purely for the sake of a healthy soul would necessarily entail observing vulgar standards of justice. Clearly there are cases where the two standards would conflict:

1. Taking money from—or not returning money to—a rich man whose money leads him to ignore the development of his character and intellect, or those of others, could be a just act by Socrates' definition, as it could lead the rich man to re-evaluate his life, and it would, at least, prevent him from harming himself and others by misusing his money. This is Socrates' point in his discussion with Cephalus and Polemarchus in Book 1. Note how he replaces the "weapon" which should not be returned to its raging owner with a deposit of money, which also should not be returned so long as it would cause damage (332a). But here there is no requirement that the owner be in a rage; the potential for damage is enough.⁴⁵

2. Providing such money to a student or to oneself to enable that person to be free from the lowly pursuit of income in order to spend more time studying philosophy could be an act of true justice since it could lead to the development or preservation of a harmonious soul.⁴⁶

V

The Republic is in part a reply to the various accusations leveled against Socrates, before, during and apparently even after his trial and execution.⁴⁷ Although Socrates was not charged with theft in his trial, Aristophanes does

⁴⁵ See also Xenophon's *Oikonomikos* (1. 13), where Socrates argues that money, when used to obtain a prostitute, is not a form of wealth, since it is not beneficial.

⁴⁶ See 591c. The pseudo-Platonic *Eryxias* raises the possibility that money obtained through wicked practices could lead to the acquisition of virtue (404d2–e7).

⁴⁷ On the question of anti-Socratic polemics after the trial, see A.-H. Chroust, *Socrates, Man and Myth: The Two Socratic Apologies of Xenophon* (London 1957).

make such a charge in the *Clouds* (177–79).⁴⁸ Xenophon indicates that Socrates was blamed in part for the thievish behavior of his one-time associate Critias (he was *kleptistatos*: *Mem.* 1. 2. 12). Xenophon himself has nothing to respond to those who claim that Socrates should not have taught his associates politics before teaching them moderation, and clearly acknowledges that Socratic moderation was the basis of his just behavior (*Mem.* 1. 2. 17; 1. 2. 1–2).

This agrees fully with what we have seen in the *Republic*. Socrates obeys vulgar standards of justice, so far as he does, not on principled grounds, but because he is moderate and needs little. Given his small needs, Socrates would have had little incentive to seek the property of others, or rather he would have had incentive to seek only a little of it. On the other hand, Socrates defends the individual's right to take any action necessary for the pursuit of the psychic harmony of his soul. The uncomfortable parallel in Xenophon strongly suggests that the historical Socrates did teach something along these lines.

I do not wish to suggest that the historical Socrates actually engaged in theft, and I am not sure that Aristophanes meant his charge to be taken altogether seriously. But it appears that his teaching made clear the "justice" of some acts ordinarily considered unjust, and it is to Plato's credit that he was able to defend Socrates' unique conception of justice without giving it a complete whitewash.

In sum, Plato himself, as well as his character Socrates, is clearly aware of the problematic character of the answer offered to Glaucon and Adeimantus. This answer does not actually constitute a defense or an attempted defense of the vulgar justice Socrates was asked to defend. Plato does not regard vulgar justice as defensible or worthy of serious defense. He seems fully aware that the observance of Platonic justice does not necessarily entail the observance of vulgar standards of justice, but, unlike all his recent commentators, he is not bothered by that fact, and he is right not to be bothered by it. In his view, Platonic justice does not need to be justified on vulgar standards; it is of inherent value in its own right, even if it does conflict with vulgar justice at times. There is nothing deeply problematic about this conflict. If Plato has no defense of vulgar justice, if it is in fact indefensible in his view, then it is not obligating. And there is certainly no reason to make a defense of Platonic justice dependent on its conformity with its vulgar relation. Viewed from this perspective, Plato's theory of justice and just action is consistent, plausible and contains no obvious fallacies.

Bar Ilan University

⁴⁸ Charges of Socratic thievery may be found also in Libanius, whose fourth-century A.D. defense of Socrates may reflect earlier literature, contemporary with Socrates. For such charges, see sections 13, 86, 103 and 112. On the possible influence of Polycrates' anti-Socratic polemic on Libanius, see Chroust (previous note).