

PLATO AND COMMON MORALITY

In the *Republic*, Socrates undertakes to defend justice as being in itself a benefit to its possessor. Does he do this, or does he change the subject? In a well-known article, David Sachs¹ pointed out that there seems to be a shift in what Plato is defending. The challenge to Socrates is put by Thrasymachus, who admires the successful unjust man, and by Glaucon and Adeimantus, who do not, but are worried that justice has no adequate defence against Thrasymachus. In all these passages justice is discussed in terms of the non-performance of actions which are regarded as unjust according to common morality;² Sachs calls this common concept of ordinary justice 'vulgar justice'.³ However, what Plato discusses and defends is justice as a right ordering of the parts of the soul, called by Sachs 'Platonic justice'. Book 4 gives us an account of what justice is, which is meant to show us how it benefits its possessor, and this is done by appeal to Plato's psychology. The just man is the man who has a soul all of whose parts are functioning in the appropriate way; this condition, called 'psychic harmony' by Vlastos,⁴ has been well compared to the notion of mental health,⁵ and the comparison with health in the body, which is made at 444 c – 445 b, is almost inevitable. Once you know what health is, it does not remain to be proved that health is a good thing to have; once you see the difference between the kind of life that does and the kind that does not give proper scope to all the elements in a person's makeup, the value of justice to its possessor cannot remain in doubt.

Justice, however, in what sense — Platonic justice or common justice? Sachs accuses Plato bluntly of committing a fallacy of irrelevance — of proving something different from what he was asked to prove. The task was to justify refraining from unjust actions — i.e. from the performance of actions which benefit oneself at others' expense. Surely Plato is changing the subject in justifying the possession of that state of one's soul which is psychic harmony. Why should having a rightly ordered soul make you keep your hands off other people's property? As Sachs puts it, unless Plato can show that vulgar justice entails Platonic justice and vice versa, his whole argument falls apart. But Plato does not even seem to believe that vulgar justice entails Platonic justice: Cephalus, for example, in book 1 is presented as just by common standards, since he has managed always to stick to the rules, but he lacks even rudimentary intellectual awareness, still more the

¹ 'A Fallacy in Plato's *Republic*', *Philosophical Review* 1963; reprinted in Vlastos (ed.), *Plato*, ii.

² Vlastos, in 'Justice and Happiness in Plato's *Republic*', in *Plato* ii ed. Vlastos, pp. 67–8, points out that Plato never commits himself to the impossible task of proving 'that any just act, or arbitrarily selected set of just acts, must "pay"'; what is to be shown to pay is the condition of being a person

who dependably does such acts. But the emphasis is still on the *actions*; it is by them that we identify the state which is beneficial. I shall stress this point heavily later on.

³ Cf. 344 b–c, 348 d, 360 a–c.

⁴ Vlastos, op. cit., esp. pp. 68–9.

⁵ Cf. Kenny, 'Mental Health in Plato's *Republic*', British Academy lecture 1969, reprinted in *The Anatomy of the Soul*.

degree of developed articulate reason required for Platonic justice. Plato does claim that Platonic justice entails vulgar justice, in a passage at 442 d 7–443 b 6: the man whose soul is rightly ordered, he claims, will be far less likely than any other to embezzle, steal, betray, commit sacrilege, break oaths or promises, commit adultery, or neglect his parents or the gods; and he will refrain from doing these things *because* he is Platonically just. But assertion is not argument; in default of a proof that ‘justice’ has not shifted in sense between challenge and response, the *Republic*’s main line of argument collapses.

Since Sachs’s article a great deal has been written on the topic, some of it in great depth.⁶ I do not think, however, that the questions opened up by Sachs’s paper have been properly solved. In this paper I try to show that the most plausible way of bridging the gap in the argument, one which has been worked out with increasing sophistication, in fact commits Plato to a fallacy of irrelevance at least as bad as the original one. To understand Plato’s procedure we need a new approach; we need to examine more closely the type of ethical theory he is presenting. If we do this carefully, we can see that he is not just revising the common concept of justice, but introducing a whole new ethical framework.⁷

Sachs’s charge of fallacy has been forcefully resisted. The main line of response is that there is no fallacy because, while there is no explicit argument in the *Republic* that Platonic justice entails vulgar or common justice, still the materials are at hand to bridge this gap. (I leave for later the question of whether common justice entails Platonic justice, a matter on which the replies to Sachs interestingly differ.)

The most obvious tack is to claim that, as Sachs poses the question, Platonic justice has simply been underdescribed.⁸ Talk of mental health and psychic harmony suggests that Platonic justice is something like a state of being well adjusted, and no doubt Plato’s analogy with bodily health helps this; but Platonic justice is more than this, and in particular has implications for *action*. If you are Platonically just, your soul is in a state where reason rules; but properly understood this implies that you will in fact act in a just way. As Weingartner insists, ‘Reason is the name of a type of desire and the only way in which a desire can be effective is in terms of its object.’ (p.250) The object of reason is truth, in particular the truths about justice and other moral notions when these are understood in the light of the Form of the Good. But to do this is already to go beyond thinking that what is just can be my own private good; I must grasp the Form of Justice in all its instantiations, and thus recognize cases of giving each

⁶ Cf. Demos, ‘A Fallacy in Plato’s *Republic*?’, *Philosophical Review* (1964), Weingartner, ‘Vulgar Justice and Platonic Justice’, *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research* (1964–5), Schiller, ‘Just Men and Just Acts in Plato’s *Republic*’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (1968), Vlastos, *op. cit.*, Kraut, ‘Reason and Justice in the *Republic*’ in *Exegesis and Argument, Phronesis Suppl.* 1, Sartorius, ‘Fallacy and Political Radicalism in Plato’s *Republic*’, *Canadian*

Journal of Philosophy (1974).

⁷ My approach is closest to Schiller’s. Schiller’s own analysis is more flawed than he seems to recognize as an answer to Sachs’s challenge, since he admits (p.12) that on his account Plato’s defence of justice covers different senses of ‘justice’, thereby still leaving Plato with a fallacy of equivocation as bad as the original.

⁸ This is the type of answer provided by Demos and Weingartner.

person his (her) due as just. Moreover, if reason rules in my soul, I will *do* what reason commands, and so I will do what is just; so I will never perform commonly unjust actions.

This approach is, I think, open to some objections which hold against the more sophisticated account which I shall consider next;⁹ but it is also open to one of its own. Let us grant the point, which is surely right, that reason for Plato does have motivational force (though whether it is right to describe it as simply *being* a desire is another matter, since at 580 d 7–8 it *has* its own desires.) To that extent Plato's own analogy with health in the body is limited and misleading on any interpretation. However, does Platonic justice entail common justice when we take seriously the motivational force of reason and its objects? I do not see that the problem is really solved. Even if we recognize that reason will motivate us to act in accordance with the good of others as well as our own, and that psychic harmony has no egoistic implications, this does not show us why Platonic justice should lead to our performing the commonly just acts cited by Plato. On this interpretation, the Platonically just man will always recognize and do what is *rational*. But there is still a gap; why should the rational thing to do correspond with *common* morality? It is true that the rule of reason will involve recognition of, and action in accordance with, the good of others as well as that of oneself, and that the examples cited by Plato are all examples of what we might call duty to others; but this is far from showing that the rule of reason will require one to do and refrain from doing precisely the acts of common morality which Plato presents as a touchstone.

An approach which does something to meet this problem is presented by Vlastos¹⁰ and developed in most detail by Kraut.¹¹ Kraut too lays emphasis on the *objects* of reason to explain its controlling force in the soul; reason is to be defined in terms of its characteristic goals and aims and not merely in Humean fashion by its ability to co-ordinate in the individual desires whose existence is taken for granted.¹² So someone in whose soul reason rules will live a life dominated by its aims. So far there is nothing new; but Kraut adds the important point, 'Plato adopts the view (485 d 6–e 1) that strong inclinations in one direction weaken inclinations in other directions. In particular, philosophers are enormously interested in intellectual goals and therefore have little regard for the values and pleasures associated with spirit and appetite' (p.214).

Therefore a man in whom reason rules will not just be someone who recognizes and acts on his rational appreciation of the good of all. He will be someone who

⁹ In particular, if the rule of reason requires the highest knowledge, of the Forms, only a few will be Platonically just and there will be no road from common to Platonic justice. This difficulty can be met in different ways (see Demos, p.396, and Weingartner, p.252), but it lessens the appeal of this approach as a means of closing the gap between Platonic and common justice.

¹⁰ pp. 91–5.

¹¹ pp. 214–24.

¹² To simplify exposition I shall omit Kraut's terminology of normative and non-normative rule of parts of the soul. The

normative sense, in which reason rules if a man's aims and values are those of reason, is prominent in books 8 and 9. Kraut admits that the main argument in book 4 to distinguish reason from desire establishes only the non-normative sense: reason wins the battle, but in a way compatible with the agent's having many kinds of values. Kraut does not remark that since the important conclusions about justice come at the end of book 4, Plato cannot be distinguishing the two senses as clearly as Kraut does; conclusions appropriate to one are built on the other.

has no desire to act otherwise, for his spirited and desiring parts will have been weakened, so as to offer no opposition. 'So Plato would argue that no philosopher entrusted with gold would unjustly seek to embezzle it, since no philosopher is interested in increasing his wealth . . . Nor is the philosopher concerned with political office or any form of domination over others, so he will not be tempted to perform any of the immoral acts that those who pursue these goals are led to' (pp. 214–15). The Platonically just man will be commonly just because he has *no motive* not to be, and this, while not spelt out for us, is implicit in Plato's psychology.

There are two drawbacks to this otherwise attractive solution.

Firstly, have we really shown that the man whose sources of motivation are rightly organized will never commit *any* unjust act? We have shown that he will never commit an unjust act out of spirit or desire. But could reason itself prompt the agent to an unjust act? If so, then there *could* be an unjust act whose performance did not subvert the agent's psychic harmony; and the agent could be happily Platonically just whilst remaining commonly unjust. The most obvious example is that of a philosopher-king refusing to go down into the Cave, unjustly (520 a–e). Kraut notices this possibility (fn. 12 on p.216), and it is spelt out forcibly by Gosling:¹³

. . . Suppose a philosopher with an impediment of speech which does not interfere with his philosophizing, but does render him unfit for any public office, suppose also, that he knows it to be curable. All he has to do to retain his academic privileges is to keep this knowledge to himself. No lie is required . . . so his own soul will not be damaged . . . So what possible reason could there be for him to reveal his knowledge and accept his responsibilities?

This does not seem to be ruled out by Kraut's point about Platonic justice being the rule of reason. Psychic harmony would not be damaged by such an act; yet we have a counterpart example to Kraut's thesis, and it is, after all, fairly central; if the results of the Guardians' education are compatible with their letting the city be run worse than it need be, then something has gone very wrong somewhere.

There are no other examples suggested by the text of the *Republic* itself, but one can, as indeed Kraut does (p.215), easily invent some, though no doubt they will appear somewhat far fetched. Suppose the Guardians' studies required some very expensive equipment, the ancient equivalent of a nuclear reactor; might they not be tempted to allocate money for this which it would be more just to spend on resources for the other citizens or the city as a whole, e.g. roads and hospitals? The question is, in fact, general: Why should the pursuit of intellectual goals lead to the individual to behave justly? This may sound an obvious difficulty when asked of an ordinary society, but even in Plato's *Republic*, where there are many more constraints on the behaviour of those pursuing intellectual goals, it does not lose its force.

There seem to be two possible lines of defence at this point. One is presented by Kraut, though this defence brings out the other drawback in his position. The other is suggested by remarks of Gosling's in his book *Plato*.

Kraut¹⁴ claims that Plato's proposals rest on certain presuppositions: that there are resources sufficient for everyone to develop their different talents without competition and that no class needs, in order to 'do its own', resources which

¹³ *Plato*, p.39. Gosling takes this to be a 'misinterpretation' once we really understand the nature of Platonic justice; I shall comment on this below.

¹⁴ p.215 n.11; pp. 223–4.

are in such short supply that others will have to do without. In the ideal state, 'the natural distribution of various talents within the polis meets the basic economic needs of the polis . . . One person's pursuit of the goal does not interfere with another's, so there is no temptation to deprive another of what is his.'

These presuppositions *are* necessary if we are to exclude the case of a Platonically just man being motivated by reason's goals to a commonly unjust act. However, the necessity for them surely shows up the whole exercise in defining Platonic justice to have been a waste of time. Thrasymachus would clearly be justified in intervening to protest that he is not interested in this ideal state. Socrates was asked to justify being just in ordinary conditions in the real world, not being just in ideal conditions in an impossibly Utopian society. Thrasymachus himself in book 1 stressed two facts about the world: the things that people want are in limited supply, and people are always in competition for them.¹⁵ It is because of these basic facts that, according to him, justice is a mug's game and injustice pays. No doubt he overstates the element of conflict and aggression in people's interactions. However, by the time we have stipulated that conditions are such that there is no competition in the way people attain their differing goals, we have got rid of what was worrying Thrasymachus even without any doctrine of Platonic justice. Thus we have simply ruled out any answer to Thrasymachus' actual problem; by the time Kraut has ensured that Platonic justice entails common justice, Thrasymachus could complain that the subject has been entirely shifted. This defence therefore ends up attributing to Plato a fallacy of irrelevance quite as bad as the original one. Although there is no longer strictly a *fallacy*, since there is no longer a shift in the sense of one word, the result is just as destructive to the *Republic's* main argument.

Gosling in his book *Plato* makes some points which are of obvious relevance to the question of the fallacy Sachs finds.¹⁶ Gosling's own solution is to deny that there really is the conflict that has so far been assumed to exist between the intellectual aims of reason and the attainment of justice. While at first it may seem as though the development of reason demands that preference be given to academic aims, there are three factors which according to Gosling show this impression to be wrong. Firstly, the *Republic* gives great prominence to political interests; the good of others enters into the notion of what it is that is best. But, as we have seen, this will not solve Sachs's problem.¹⁷ Two other factors are more important: the training of the thumoeidic part of the soul, and the scope of reason. Gosling emphasises in his chapter 3 the fact that in the *Republic* the training of the thumoeidic part of the soul ensures that the Guardians are motivated to act in accordance with the ideal of 'real manhood' which Plato takes over from common morality and improves. Not just the rational part of the soul, but the entire personality is such as to respond to an ideal, and so find the very thought of certain actions repulsive and so refrain from doing them. While this is true,

¹⁵ Cf. Sparshott, 'Socrates and Thrasymachus', *Monist* (1964), 427-32.

¹⁶ There is actually some difficulty in seeing what exactly Plato's attitude to traditional morality is, according to Gosling. In his ch.5 he stresses the revisionary character of what Plato is doing, but ch.14 puts more stress on Plato's continuity with the ordinary

moral consciousness (p.227, pp. 237-8.)

¹⁷ Also Gosling seems somewhat oddly to go back on this on p.62: 'In fact Plato insists on talking of human excellence, including 'justice', in individual-related rather than species- or community-related terms, with the result that only a few achieve unqualified excellence.'

Gosling is relying very much on the effects of education on the thumoeidic part; the person he describes as incapable of doing certain actions is the product of a long training.¹⁸ This part of his discussion is thus as exposed as Kraut's to the charge that it is irrelevant as an answer to Sachs's problem: it is useless to justify being just not in the actual world but in a world where everyone has been trained to be totally different.

Gosling also stresses the connection of reason with goodness in order to reject the picture of reason's rule as academic obsession. Reason for Plato essentially has the good, in one or other form, as its aim, a point made vivid by the dominance (at least in the *Republic*) of the Form of Good over the structure of knowledge. Gosling examines this idea in illuminating detail. However, although it is a useful corrective to the picture of the philosopher as naturally engaged in self-centred academic research, this expanded view of reason's objects cannot on its own (as we have already seen) show why the rational thing to do should be the commonly moral thing to do. In any case, the philosophers will only produce these deliverances of reason after a long process of education which puts enormous stress on what look like purely intellectual disciplines like mathematics;¹⁹ it is not at all obvious from what Plato tells us about them that they will have any connection with morality, still less common morality.

Thus I do not think that any attempt so far made to close the gap pointed out by Sachs has succeeded. The most plausible way to do this is to insist that by the time we fully grasp what the rule of reason in the soul is, we shall see that someone who has it will not act in unjust ways. But this fails to exclude the possibility of reason's prompting to an unjust act without subverting psychic harmony; and by the time we have stipulated enough conditions to exclude this, we have sidestepped Thrasymachus' position after all.

It is obvious in all this discussion that Plato's defenders stress the psychic harmony of the trained and educated Guardians, the product of the *Republic's* long process of education. The duties cited at the end of book 4, however, are such as would be recognized as such by ordinary people in ordinary unregenerate society. This prompts the thought that a different approach might be more productive. Before asking how Platonic morality relates to common morality, we should ask whether Plato is really interested in common morality at all.

Let us take a test case: that of truth-telling. Admittedly this is not a perfect example, because telling the truth is not a case of *justice*, a specification of giving someone his due. Nonetheless, it is a duty owed to others, and as such no worse off, at least, than many of Plato's examples at 442–3 as examples of what the just man would do. (It is also the only case where the *Republic* gives enough unambiguous evidence for my point.)

¹⁸ Gosling has to rely heavily on books 8 and 9, where the *thumoeides* does have a more expansive role. He can do less with the book 4 passages where Plato defines it, esp. 441 a–b, where it is distinguished from reason by the fact that it is found in animals and very young children. Gosling has to explain this away as being merely the raw material whose tendencies can be exploited; but what he needs is something which is essentially the product of education and training.

¹⁹ Gosling tries to avoid this problem by arguing later in the book that these studies are not as value-neutral as they seem to us. However, Plato thinks that there is at least a prima-facie conflict between the Guardians' intellectual desires and what justice demands of them (520 a–e), as Gosling admits pp. 69–71). For a more convincing defence of this point see J. Cooper, 'The Psychology of Justice in Plato', *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1977).

Plato's views on truth are bound to strike most readers of the *Republic* as odd, taken together. On the one hand, he is emphatic that lying is a very bad thing indeed. God hates falsehood and loves truth (382 e), and the philosopher kings are to be fanatical truth-lovers. Two passages stress this at length. At 485 c–d it is said that the philosophical nature will necessarily include ἀψευδεια and unwillingness to receive falsehood; it will hate lies and love truth. Truth is akin to wisdom, so the same nature can by no means be φιλόσοφος and φιλοψευδής (d 1). The real lover of learning will therefore strive for all truth as much as he can, from his earliest years. The same note is struck at 490 a–d; the philosopher's soul will strive tirelessly to attain communion with what is real and beget understanding and truth. Such a man will naturally hate lies, and with truth in charge what follows will be sound – he will be brave, clever, and so on and so on.

It comes as rather a surprise then to find that the Guardians do lie, quite straightforwardly, to the other citizens. For one thing, they teach them a myth about their origins which they themselves cannot possibly believe. However, one might well reply to this that the Guardians are not straightforwardly lying when γενναῖον τι ἐν ψευδομένους (414 c 1); this is to forget the difference between literal and metaphorical truth. Myth and fiction may be regarded as expressing important truths in a generally accessible form, and therefore not deceptive. Quite different is the passage at 389 b–d, which justifies the Guardians in telling particular lies. Their use of lies 'for the city's good' is compared to giving medicine or regimen, while private individuals are to be punished for lying to the Guardians, for this is like lying to a doctor or ship's captain or other expert.

The Guardians, therefore, love truth in that they themselves cannot bear to be deceived, but they sometimes deceive others. The contrast, to put it at its mildest is striking. Plato's detractors have found a vulnerable spot here.²⁰ Even someone who defends him on this point, like Vlastos,²¹ cannot hide the peculiarity of his position. According to Vlastos, the Guardians have to tell some lies because they are conforming to 'a more exacting demand than just to refrain from telling lies'; their obligations are 'more onerous' than ordinary duties, 'more flexible in form only because they are so much more stringent in their substance'. Most people will remain unsatisfied. Is 'flexibility' in telling the truth really admirable?

There is an at first sight odd fact about Plato's position. The passage at 389 justifies the telling of particular lies on occasion, whereas the passages at 485 and 490 stress qualities of the Guardians' *characters*: they are to have natures that are truth-loving. Plato obviously thinks that this is compatible with their not telling the truth on occasion. They can tell lies without being liars.²²

This points us, I think, in the right direction. Plato is prepared to have the Guardians override common morality in the sense of doing actions of a type

²⁰ e.g. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol.1, pp. 121–6, esp. 121: "Whom do you call true philosophers? – Those who love truth" we read in the *Republic*. But Plato himself is not truthful when he makes this statement. He does not really believe in it, for he declares in other places rather bluntly that it is one of the royal privileges of the sovereign to make full use of lies and deceit.'

²¹ p. 78.

²² Cf. the interesting though confused passage at 382, where Plato distinguishes the 'lie in the soul' from its mere image in words. This reads as though *mere* words could form a lie, without the benefit of any intention, whereas what he really needs is a distinction between lies told with good intent and lies told with bad intent. It is significant all the same that we find an attempt to distinguish an *act of lying* from the *act of a liar*.

which are commonly taken to be wrong. What concerns him is their characters. This suggests that the relation between telling lies and having a nature which is not *φιλοψευδής* may not be as straightforward as has been thought, for reasons which concern not justice as such but rather Plato's thought about virtue and action in general.

Very roughly, (these remarks are crude and provisional) there are two places where the centre of gravity of an ethical theory may fall: on the notion of the *good man* or on that of the *right act*. There are correspondingly two major types of ethical theory. What I shall call *act-centred* theories begin from, and focus on, the question, 'What is the right thing to do?' Typically this will be answered by giving a list of duties, obligations, etc. . If we then ask what a good man is like, we are told that a good man is the man who does what he ought, that is, a man with the disposition to perform the right action on every (or most) occasions. Thus the good man is identified as being the man who always or mostly does the right thing, the man who can be relied upon to do his duty.

By contrast, an agent-centred theory begins in a different place. It starts by asking, 'What is the good man like?', 'What sort of person ought I to be?', 'What is a good way of conducting one's life?' Once we know this, we then find out what sort of thing is the right thing to do, by asking what is the sort of thing that the good man would do in these circumstances. The right act, that is, is identified as the kind of thing done by the good man.

Modern moral philosophy (largely because of influence from a basically Kantian tradition) tends to give prominence to act-centred theories. The notions that are prominent in moral philosophy tend to be those of *duty*, *obligation*, *ought*. Little attention is paid to the notion of the good life, or the end which an agent ought to be seeking, or the related notion of virtue and vice, though this situation is changing somewhat.²³ By contrast, Plato's theory of justice is agent-centred. In fact, I think that the *Republic* is best read as an attempt to shift the centre of gravity of Greek ethics from an act-centred to an agent-centred type of theory. I shall leave aside for now the interesting substantive point of whether an agent-centred view provides an adequate perspective, and whether, even if it does provide a good viewpoint, it can provide an adequate account of justice. Certainly Aristotle's agent-centred ethical theory gives a rather odd account of justice, and we have already seen reason to doubt that an agent-centred approach can account for truth-telling.²⁴ My concern in this paper is with the narrower issue of seeing whether this different approach helps us with Sachs's problem.²⁵

²³ Cf. Dent, 'Virtues and Actions', *Philosophical Quarterly* (1975), von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness*, Burnyeat, 'Virtues in Action', in *Socrates*, ed. Vlastos.

²⁴ It is interesting to note the dominance of the agent-centred concept in Stoic ethics; rules can be given, in the main, for *καθήκοντα* or appropriate actions which are not peculiar to the good man, whereas *κατορθώματα* or morally good actions proceeding from a virtuous disposition cannot be listed by their content. Stoicism takes to an extreme the notion that the range of right actions is given by the notion of the good agent and what he thinks fit to do; according to some Stoics at least, even cannibalism and incest

may in appropriate circumstances be right, as performed by the good man. On the test case of truth-telling the Stoics hold unequivocally that the good man may say, with good intent, a statement which is false and yet still be in possession of 'the truth', because he has knowledge of the truth as a whole. (See Plutarch, *Stoic. rep.* 1057 a-c, Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Math.* vii. 38-45 (and *PH.* 80-3); A. A. Long, pp. 98-102 in *Problems in Stoicism*, ed. Long, and 'The Stoic Distinction between truth and the true' in Brunschwig (ed.), *Les Stoïciens et leur logique*.)

²⁵ Dent claims that the agent-centred approach fails for a virtue like justice which

Normally, I think, we as well as the Greeks would if asked to say what justice is, reply by sketching a list of duties: don't take what is another's, don't violate other people's rights, and so on. But Plato approaches the question in an entirely different way. He gives us a picture of what the just *agent* is like, and focuses his treatment on this.

Now to explain what justice is by describing the just man rather than by saying what actions are just has two important corollaries:

Firstly, we have to have some *independent* way of saying what the good man is like. It is obviously no good saying that just acts are what the just man would do, if all you can then say about the just man is that he is the kind of person who would be likely to do just acts. You have to be able to say independently what kind of person the just man is. But this is precisely what Plato aims to do with his theory of the parts of the soul. The just man is the man who is integrated and morally healthy: this account makes no appeal at all to just *acts*. It tells us, in detail, what a just man is without reference to the way he acts and what he does. So for Plato the just agent does come first and give us an independent way of identifying certain types of action as just.

Secondly, and more importantly for the present problem: If just acts are picked out by reference to what the just agent would do, then we cannot lay down *in advance* what acts will be just acts. We cannot draw up lists of rules which will settle the question of which acts are the just ones, for that will now depend to a great extent on the circumstances. If you are just, that is, have a rightly ordered soul, then you will do the right thing; but clearly we cannot lay down once and for all what this will be, because so much depends on circumstances. Since in fact we can predict with a fair degree of accuracy what kinds of cases will occur, we can lay down rules as useful guidelines; we cannot, however, *begin* by citing various duties and lay it down that whatever the just man is like, he will do these.

Plato gives prominence to the agent-centred approach very vividly at 443 when he says that the sphere of justice is not external actions but a man's own inward self. It is the just *agent* which is primary for him, and in so doing he is consciously going against the ordinary Greek understanding of justice, which we can see clearly in Cephalus and Polemarchus as well as in Thrasymachus and in Glaucon and Adeimantus, and which takes justice to be essentially a matter of doing or refraining from certain *actions*.

Now the original problem as set up by Sachs was this: Socrates was asked to justify common justice, i.e. doing just acts and refraining from unjust ones, but he justified Platonic justice, i.e. having a just soul; but this misses the point unless the two are connected. From what has been said it is clear that there can be no entailment from ordinary justice to Platonic justice. Somebody may quite well perform the actions required by common justice and yet lack the mental health necessary for a state of soul which will constitute Platonic justice — Cephalus, for example. Plato is not undertaking to defend common morality by showing that if you behave in accordance with society's rules, you will be a Platonically just man, or come up to the standards of one. However, is this a fault? Surely not. People like Cephalus are just because they see that, on the whole and for

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gives an adequate account of a self-regarding

people like them, justice pays. But, as other people are quick to point out, this does not justify being just rather than seeming to be: where conventional morality is merely a matter of sticking to the rules, then it does seem to have value only for its consequences. So it is hardly amazing that one consequence of Plato's approach is that not everyone who merely sticks to the rules is really just; what matters is not this, but what kind of person the agent is.

Sachs in his original article claimed that Plato 'nowhere so much as assumes' that ordinary justice leads to Platonic justice. It is interesting to compare the different responses to this on the part of Sachs's critics. One line is simply to accept Sachs's claim on this point;²⁶ this is an important concession, since from it flows the admission that most people, who lack the requisite character and training, are not really just, however impeccably they may behave; and this is an odd way of defending common morality. Another line is to claim that Plato *did* defend a two-way connection between common and Platonic justice, and while it is clear by now that this cannot be correct as it stands, the defenders of this view²⁷ do point to something rather important in what Plato says. They all stress the fact that the condition of having a just soul is created, fostered, and maintained by the doing of just actions. In support of this one can cite not only the passage at 485 d ff. to the effect that encouraging one kind of inclination weakens other kinds, but also parts of the crucial book 4 passage itself, 443 d–444 e. The just man, it is said, will deem and call just only the action which preserves and helps produce this state of psychic harmony (444 e). As healthy actions (*τὰ ὑγιεινὰ*) produce health, so doing just actions produces justice, and doing unjust actions, injustice. (*Οὐκοῦν καὶ τὸ μὲν δίκαια πράττειν δικαιοσύνην ἐμποιεῖ, τὸ δ' ἄδικα ἀδικίαν;*) (444 c 10–d 1). The same comparison recurs in the passage 588 e–591 e, where it is repeated that it cannot pay you to do unjust acts, for this will subvert your internal harmony by letting loose the beasts in you.

However, surely there are two issues here, which have become confused both by Plato and by his commentators. One is a point of moral psychology: it is by doing just actions that one becomes just, a point stressed by Aristotle.²⁸ who in this respect is probably developing Platonic ideas more than is generally realized. But this is distinct from the other point, namely moral justification: will doing commonly just actions guarantee that you are a Platonically just agent? And here the connection claimed just does not hold up, because the matter of what actions are commonly just is decided by society's moral consensus quite independently of any considerations about the Platonically just agent. There is thus no guarantee that someone brought up in an unideal society, with a disposition to do commonly just actions, will have a Platonically just soul. When Plato brings in common moral opinions in book 4 it is not as a support or guarantee for his theory, but as a kind of check.²⁹ For he does seem to believe (without giving any reasons) that there *are* some actions which should never be done, and that in cases like robbery and sacrilege, which are not (for a Greek) subtle or controversial, our intuitions can be trusted. And this does give us an unargued constraint on any agent-centred theory; interestingly, we find the same in Aristotle, who also holds an agent-centred theory but supplements it with the point that certain

²⁶ This is the line taken by Demos (p.396) and Weingartner (pp. 251–2.)

²⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics* 2, 1103a31–b25.

²⁷ Schiller (pp. 8–10), Vlastos (pp. 89–92), Kraut (pp. 215–16).

²⁹ I am indebted to Myles Burnyeat for making me aware of this point.

actions are (independently) ruled out.³⁰ In neither case is this backed up by argument; the only rationale we can recover is that society's prohibitions, being right in clear cases, will be useful in tending to produce the sort of character suitable for acquiring Platonic justice.

But the most we can say on this basis about the just *agent* is that anyone disposed to steal, perjure himself, and so on is not likely to become a Platonically just man. Even this point does not take us very far. It seems possible both for someone brought up to do commonly just actions to have a disposition actually *hindering* his capacity for developing a Platonically just soul, and for someone brought up to do commonly *unjust* actions to have the right capacities. The first case would be that of someone brought up to do right actions, e.g. never to lie, but from a rigid attitude (fear of hell-fire, say) which would render him incapable of the rational development enabling the Guardians to adapt to circumstances: it is clear from Plato's views on truth-telling that no one would be a suitable Guardian who had been brought up in such a way that he felt strongly that one should never, *never* tell a lie. The second case would be the (more unlikely) one of someone wrongly brought up but with a noble and generous-minded spirit enabling him to strive towards the good when properly taught. Of course Plato thinks most people are not like this; hence the intensive early training of all the citizens. But the possibility of both types of case makes it clear that common morality can be for Plato no kind of guarantee at all for Platonic justice.

What of the other and more significant entailment, from Platonic to common justice? Will the agent with the healthy soul behave always and only in ways that common morality would sanction? In at least one important case we have seen that he would not; he will lie, on occasion, without compunction, and rightly so. (Perhaps common morality does not include the idea that one should *never* lie, but it certainly does not include the idea that it is expertise which makes the difference between a lie's being, and its not being, justifiable.) Since the good man has a genuinely truth-loving soul and therefore knows the right thing to do, it will be *right* to lie on the occasions on which he does so. There is every reason to think that Plato sees the same pattern in justice and the other virtues. Since virtuous acts are those that the good man would do in such circumstances, what matters to him is to ensure that people have just souls, and he can afford to be 'flexible', as Vlastos puts it, rather than scrupulous, in following the dictates of common morality.

For us, this type of agent-centred morality is most familiar in religious versions, notions such as that to the pure in heart all things are permitted, or that if you love God you may do as you like. These make very obvious the assumption that nothing could be wrong which those who are really pure in heart, or God-loving, want to do. They also make very clear the dangers of self-deception, of feeling convinced that one is pure in heart and going ahead anyway. But we should not accuse Plato of doing anything to encourage this kind of self-righteousness and self-deception. Getting yourself into the state of Platonic psychic harmony is not an easy task; it calls for both talent and training as well as time, and the

³⁰ *Nic. Ethics* 1107^a9–17. Complications are added by the fact that according to Aristotle there are also some *πάθη* which it is always wrong to have, and this brings in

the agent's character. However, the wrongness of these is as unexplained by the doctrine of the mean itself as the wrongness of the actions which should never be done.

constraints on thinking that one has achieved it are many. We should not be misled by Plato's shift from actions to agent into thinking that he conceives of psychic harmony as a self-announcing state to be achieved prior to letting rip.

All the same, there are dangers in a revisionary approach like Plato's. It is not for nothing that his views on lying have been thought to be manipulative; and there is a sinister side to his emphasis on the agent's character. Oddly, we do not see this so clearly in the *Republic* itself, because Plato is there mostly talking about the ideal state, where most of the rules are very different from society's anyway. For example, he says in book 4 that a Platonically just man will not commit adultery, an action which is commonly unjust. But we find in the ideal state that sexual *mores* for the Guardians have changed completely; so there is no answer to the question whether a Platonically just man would ever justly commit adultery. (This example is not as silly as it sounds in a society where adultery is thought of not as breaking up a personal relationship, but purely as a matter of property rights.) We get a better glimpse from the *Statesman*, where Plato does bring into juxtaposition the perfectly good ruler and the actual unregenerate state, and so gives us the opportunity of seeing how a Platonically just man would cope with a real society with its own commonly just institutions and practices. And we find that Plato is quite ready to let the good rulers override any and every rule and custom, however commonly just. While the rulers are not characterized as Platonically just in the terms of the *Republic*, it is clear that their justification for ruling is not in principle very different from that of the Guardians: they have just souls. The latitude this gives them is surprising. 'It makes no difference whether their subjects be willing or unwilling', for a doctor aims at his patient's health regardless of his willingness. 'They may purge the city for its better health by putting some of the citizens to death or banishing others' (293 a ff.). And at 296 c ff.:

What then shall we say of citizens of a state who have been forced to do things which are contrary to written laws and ancestral customs but are nevertheless juster, more effective and more noble than the directions of these traditional authorities? How shall we regard censure by these citizens of the force which has applied in these circumstances? Unless they wish to appear ridiculous in the extreme there is one thing they must refrain from saying. They must not assert in any such instance that in being subjected to compulsion they have suffered disgrace, injustice or evil at the hands of those who compelled them. (Skemp translation)

This is a chilling passage; Plato does not blink the fact that force will be required and used to make people go against what they regard as right. But the main point is that Plato is *not* recommending his rulers, with whatever degree of realism or cynicism, to do wrong for the public good. Rather he is saying that in forcing people against their moral beliefs for the public good they will be acting *rightly*, and that the sufferers will have undergone no injustice, even though the rulers will have crashed through all the barriers of written and unwritten law – that is, offended all Greek moral susceptibilities. (Although the *Statesman* is often considered more conservative than the *Republic*, Plato shows *less* respect here for moral intuitions as indicating genuine moral insights which should be respected.) We have the same reaction – and I think it is no accident – to a committed and clear-headed utilitarian who maintained that if in a given situation happiness could only be maximized by killing the innocent, then that would be the right thing to do – not wrong though expedient, but the right thing to do. One corollary of this, which Plato notices and accepts, is that remorse on the

agent's part, or resentment on the victim's, would be unjustified, and can only be seen as an irrational, though understandable, response by someone still imbued with traditional *mores* and insufficiently impressed by the moral correctness of the rulers' reasonings. In both cases a moral theory is overriding our common intuitions about what is just, and we can see as a result how very revisionary the theory is. It is quite wrong to think of Plato, as is sometimes done, as a moral conservative. Plato is often pictured as the arch-conservative, rendered neurotic by the break-up of Athenian moral consensus and dragging Athens desperately back to the archaic, stable moral past. This picture is deeply wrong.³¹ Some of Plato's ideals have an old-fashioned content, but morally he is revolutionary rather than conservative.³² We can see this even more clearly if we compare the genuinely conservative results of Aristotle's similarly structured moral theory.

Since, then, there is no implication in either direction between common and Platonic justice, must we conclude that Sachs was right after all, and that Plato's argument fails because he changes the subject? If we take this line, we must hold either that Plato failed to see what he was doing, or that he did see this, but was content to put forward a wholly revisionary conception of justice. The latter view is defended by Waterlow:³³ Plato, she maintains, does not provide any rational link between agent and action '*on the level where it makes sense to frame a question about the relation of man and actions.*' Justice in the agent is conceptually linked to action only on the purely rational level; so it is not the agent as an individual, but the reason in him, which relates to other agents — again seen in terms of the reason in them. Plato is thus talking about the morality not of people, but of rational beings, and it is relevant to the problems of people only in so far as they are rational beings. This gives us a rather Kantian picture of a rational kingdom of ends, and, as Waterlow points out, 'We might take this as a live illustration of the *Republic*'s own doctrine of the necessarily distinct natures of the objects of rational knowledge and the objects of belief.'

It cannot be proved that Plato did not intend such an *a priori* morality pure of empirical taint; but it seems to me to sort ill with Plato's concern for the correct training of *all* the soul's parts, as well as the fact that the *Republic* does ostensibly set out to answer Thrasymachus' question; on Waterlow's view this would be a bad (and inexplicable) mistake, for Thrasymachus' problems are explicitly excluded from solution in Platonic terms. Nor would someone like Thrasymachus have any reason to be, rather than to seem, just *even in the ideal state*. Nobody would, except to the extent that they approximated to the condition of being a purely rational being, and the difficult question simply

³¹ It is often thought that Plato wanted moral Forms in order to provide stability and objectivity for moral judgements. Cf. Cherniss, 'The Philosophical Economy of the Theory of Ideas', in *Plato* i. ed. Vlastos pp. 17-19. But there is no real evidence for this; clearly moral Forms are important for Plato, and do provide practical as well as theoretical reason with stable and unchanging objects; but there are no arguments directed against the insufficiency of alternative accounts of moral reasoning as such. Cf. Moravcsik, 'Recollecting the Theory of Forms', in *Facets of Plato's Philosophy, Phronesis*

Suppl. 2, pp. 5-6.

³² Sartorius stresses the *political* radicalism implicit in Plato's conclusion that Platonic justice can only be attained by a few unless existing social conditions are completely changed. This is an important side to the *Republic*'s argument, one which I have neglected in this paper in order to concentrate on the change in *moral* ways of thinking.

³³ 'The Good of Others in Plato's *Republic*', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1972-3).

shifts from, 'Why should I be just?' to 'Why should I be rational?', something even harder to defend, if anything.³⁴

I would prefer to think that there is a more complicated relation between common and Platonic morality. He does not seek to defend common morality as it stands, but neither does he want to justify something unrecognizably different from the justice of the ordinary man. He appeals to 'common' duties and actions at the end of book 4 to show that his theory answers to the intuitions he finds genuine in clear-cut cases judged by common standards; but this is not to claim that someone who recognizes or even lives by common rules is Platonically just or even on the way to becoming such. Plato's position is the common philosophical one of wanting to revise our concept whilst keeping in touch with the problems which started people wondering about the concept in the first place; the theory when fully developed turns out to demand rejection of some of the moral intuitions on which it was built.³⁵ It is not surprising that people have been found both to claim and to deny that Plato is changing the subject; there is evidence for both sides, and we should conclude that Plato wants it both ways: he wants to provide a theory of *justice*, rather than of some other concept, but he also wants to improve and revise our concept of justice quite radically. I have tried to show that this is inherent in the nature of his whole project: he wants to shift the moral emphasis from actions to agent and thus give us an entirely new way of looking at the subject, but he still wants it to be the same subject. (There is a further and crucial question, but one demanding separate treatment, whether he in fact succeeds, or whether he is forced by his change of method into changing the subject.)

It is instructive here to compare another moral theory, utilitarianism. As presented by Mill, for example, in *Utilitarianism*, the theory claims to rest on ordinary moral feelings and the consensus of most moral codes. We are urged to see maximization of happiness as a principle which we implicitly accept and employ in our ordinary moral reasoning, and utilitarianism as merely a coherent and systematic articulation of this, making it clear why we make the moral judgements we do. Yet when we look closely at utilitarianism we see that it has implications sharply at variance with what we think — for example, that one should treat one's own happiness impersonally along with everyone else's, that maximizing happiness may override considerations of justice, and so on. How does this square with the claim that it articulates what we all thought all along?

Mill solves this by generous appeal to the notions of enlightenment and education. Utilitarianism, he implies, may sometimes conflict with the intuitions of some people *now*, but it corresponds to the judgements of the wise and enlightened, and proper education will free people from the limitations imposed by their ignorance and the consequent impoverishment and partiality of their outlook. We would all be utilitarians if we were all enlightened, and even as it is, utilitarianism answers to some of our moral thoughts, or the moral thoughts of some of us. What has been found disturbing about this doctrine, and rightly so, is the implication that in an unutilitarian society a utilitarian will necessarily act, or at least judge, in an unstraightforward and manipulative manner.

Plato in the *Republic* holds, I think, something like the position of a philos-

³⁴ For some criticisms of a similar type, against the unreality of a moral theory, cf. S. Lukes, 'Moral Weakness', *Philosophical*

Quarterly 1965.

³⁵ Cf. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, § 9 on the methodology of moral argument.

opher like Mill who wants to get support from traditional moral views, and at the same time wants radically to revise them. As in Mill, the difficulty is hidden to some extent by the emphasis laid on education, the re-education of desires and training of character in the desired mould. The right views, for Plato, are to some extent those that people have already, but mainly they are those that people would have if they were rationally enlightened. This is implicit in his shifting the emphasis from actions to agent and character.

It is also, however, the source of many deep problems in the *Republic*. One major problem is the persistent unclarity as to whether the bulk of the citizens of the ideal state, who are not fully enlightened, will be subject to force and manipulation, or will wholeheartedly co-operate in the new moral order. This is often expressed in the form of the question whether the non-Guardians in the *Republic* will be fully just, or just only in some reduced sense. This is obviously connected to the problem just discussed, namely whether justice in the ideal state will be recognizably like what we can see now in just men, or whether it will be something quite different. But this brings with it a difficulty of its own. If the bulk of the citizens is just only in a derivative sense, then they are commonly just but not Platonically just, and no better off than Cephalus. But since their lives are considerably more restricted than his, we need an even stronger justification than Thrasymachus could reasonably demand for *their* being, rather than seeming, just. Plato, if he has justified justice in his state for only a few, has actually made it *harder* to justify the *others* being just. This is, I think, an inevitable problem for him because of the way he chooses both to claim support from the ordinary moral consciousness and to revise it. This in turn, I have argued, is an inevitable result of the way he shifts the moral emphasis from actions to agent.³⁶ As often with Plato, the trouble lies not in any simple fallacy, but in an inherently ambivalent theory.³⁷

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³⁶ This paper has followed the existing debate in focusing on the *Republic*, where the points at issue are discussed most fully. It is worth while, however, to compare other dialogues, notably *Gorgias* 505–8 where psychic order and harmony are presented as leading to commonly just actions. The 'justification' of common morality offered

at *Laws* 660–4 is interestingly different in structure, but retains the hint (663 d ff.) that manipulation and deceit are regarded as legitimate ways of producing just actions in the state.

³⁷ I am grateful to Myles Burnyeat, Christopher Gill, and Anthony Long for helpful discussion and comments.