

“VICE IS IGNORANCE”:
THE INTERPRETATION OF SOPHIST 226A–231B

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IT IS OFTEN HELD by Plato's commentators that the famous Socratic paradox "Virtue is Knowledge" has as its complement the doctrine that vice is ignorance.¹ While Plato's readers never find such an aphorism as "Vice is Ignorance" stated categorically in the texts, it is interpreted to mean that in Plato's view moral evil is the result of ignorance. And from this it is an easy step to the "intellectualist" Plato, who thought that knowledge of the right thing to do was a sufficient condition of virtue.²

In fact some textual justification for the Platonic linking of vice and ignorance can be discovered in *Republic* 4: at 444a 1 stupidity (*ἀμαθία*) is said to be the opinion presiding in the soul in a state of disharmony and disorder, the state of vice. So on the basis of this it is hard to see how an ignorant soul could fail to be a morally evil soul. Nevertheless, if this is Plato's view we seem faced with a problem at *Soph.* 226a–231b. For instead of treating ignorance and vice as causally related, this passage makes a clear-cut division between wickedness (*πονηρία*, 228b 8) and ignorance (*ἄγνοια*, 228d 10) as evils within the soul; and it sets out two distinct purificatory arts to deal with them, correction (*κολαστική*, 229a 4) and instruction (*διδασκαλική*, 229a 9). This suggests that Plato must have changed his mind about the relation between ignorance and vice, thinking by the time of the *Sophist* that they could be separate conditions requiring separate remedies. While there may be nothing unusual or reprehensible about this change of mind, commentators

¹A sample of remarks by commentators who have written on this passage in the *Sophist*: E. R. Dodds says that Plato "no longer makes ignorance the sole cause of wrongdoing, or increased knowledge its sole cure" ("Plato and the Irrational," *JHS* 65 [1945] 18); G. M. A. Grube thinks that he emphasizes that "what does most harm in the world is not sinfulness but ignorance," which is "remedied ultimately not by punishment, but by knowledge and education" (*Plato's Thought* [Beacon Press 1958] 229); R. Hackforth claims that for Plato all moral evil involves ignorance ("Moral Evil and Ignorance in Plato's Ethics," *CQ* 40 [1946] 118); and M. J. O'Brien puts it succinctly, "If virtue is knowledge, then vice is ignorance, and at times Plato clearly says as much" (*The Socratic Paradoxes and the Greek Mind* [Chapel Hill 1967] 186).

²For comments on Greek "intellectualism" and Plato, see the Dodds article referred to in note 1, and his *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951) 16 f.; John Gould, *The Development of Plato's Ethics* (Cambridge 1955) ch. 1. See also the Additional Note below.

have usually supposed it a reasonable change and have therefore sought to explain it.³

But they have explained the matter in a variety of ways. The mildest solution to the problem is Hackforth's: he suggests that Plato had previously assigned reason an infallible role, so that wickedness resulted not from reason's own failing but from its domination by the irrational parts of the soul. By the time of the *Sophist*, however, Plato had come to understand that reason could err, that a man could be stupid even if passion did not overpower him—and consequently our passage overcompensates for the earlier view by isolating completely moral ignorance from vice, the conflict among the soul's parts. "In other words, his anxiety to recognize the fact that reason errs *per se* leads him to obscure his real belief, namely that wrongdoing always involves ignorance, whatever that ignorance be due to."⁴ But solutions stronger than this have also been offered. E. R. Dodds and G. B. Kerferd think that the evil classed as ignorance is only intellectual, not moral, failure, so that what is termed "wickedness" here covers the range of the vices. Dodds then presents this as evidence that the later Plato shifted away from an intellectualist position to view moral evil as the result of "psychological conflict," a diseased state of soul seemingly "distinct from ignorance or intellectual failure."⁵ Kerferd leaves that question aside because he

³The literature on the passage which I have considered here includes the references in note 1 and the following: N. B. Booth, "Plato, *Sophist* 231a, Etc.," *CQ* 50 (1956) 89–90; F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge* (London 1935); G. B. Kerferd, "Plato's Noble Art of Sophistry," *CQ* 48 (1954) 84–90; and A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Sophist and the Statesman* (London 1961). In the notes below references to these works will be by author and page only.

⁴Hackforth 119. O'Brien summarizes Hackforth's view as being that Plato first "stressed the role of ignorance in wrongdoing too much, then he stressed it too little" (196, n. 18). This should not be construed as meaning that Hackforth assigns a *causal* role to ignorance, for his reading of *Republic* 4 is that the domination of the rational by the irrational parts causes *ἀμαθία*, not the other way round. The only way in which Hackforth thinks that Plato later stressed ignorance too little is in the sense that he either forgot or neglected to say that the state of "wickedness" is also a state of "ignorance." O'Brien himself apparently agrees, for he explains the passage as follows: "For the defect that instruction remedies there is no more natural term than ignorance. It would be true but irrelevant in the context to point out that chastisement is also meant to remove ignorance in another, purely Platonic, sense of that word and that it ultimately improves the mind, though it acts directly upon the lower parts" (195).

⁵Dodds 19. F. M. Cornford has a different explanation, but one which again separates ignorance from moral evil. He writes, "... in the *Statesman* Weaving symbolizes the art of the Statesman, whose function is to combine in harmony the various elements of society. It is perhaps to prepare the way for this conception of statesmanship that Plato in our passage regards vice, not as ignorance, but as political sedition in the soul" (182 f.). But, if this is true, the "preparation" must have begun as far back as *Republic* 4,

thinks on the basis of two sentences that Plato is not developing his own classification so much as making use of a popular view which distinguishes wrongdoing from ignorance.⁶ He consequently argues that the passage is of less significance for Plato's ethics than most commentators think.

My own reading of this section is that Plato, not popular opinion, is responsible for the division of evils into two branches, and that the division therefore cannot be considered unimportant for his ethics. Yet I cannot feel as sure as Dodds that the classification places ignorance and vice into two watertight compartments; there are indications that at least one kind of ignorance is a vice, and that its treatment cannot leave the irrational parts of the soul untouched. This in turn means that while Hackforth is probably right to say that Plato's real belief was that wrongdoing always involves ignorance, I hope to provide some evidence that this belief is not as obscured by the *Sophist* passage as Hackforth seems to think.

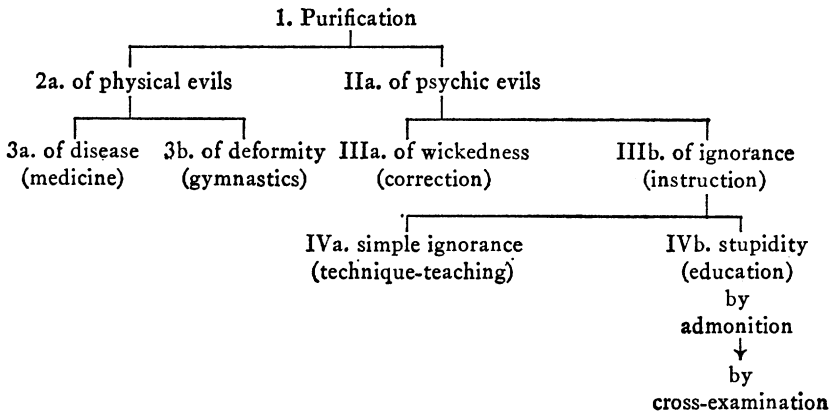
With these claims in mind we may now turn to an analysis of the passage. After purification has been introduced as a negative art whose function is to throw out the evil and undesirable, the discussion develops various divisions within the art until the following schema becomes evident.

If the interlocutors were interested only in the detailed classification of purifications on the left hand side of the schema, they would develop distinctions between internal and external purgings, lifeless and living bodies, and so on. But their interest is in the soul, not the body. So they consider the kinds of evils which are opposed to virtue in the soul, and conclude that there are two: IIIa and IIIb above. These correspond to 3a and 3b on the left hand side, which can in turn be superimposed on the right hand side, for Plato is making use of his familiar analogy between body and soul in this discussion.

The distinctions drawn between 3a and 3b are of special interest. Disease is said to be faction, which is defined as a condition in which some things akin by nature are at variance with one another because of

where it is clearly stated that injustice is a kind of civil war (*στάσις*, 444b 1) in the soul. So this view of vice hardly seems to be a development of the "later" Plato.

⁶Kerferd reads 228d 10–11 as implying that the common man, not Plato, classifies ignorance by itself, and 229a 6–7 as giving only Theaetetus' report of the popular opinion which makes *κολαστική* the cure for wickedness. But M. J. O'Brien answers both points. In the first case the ordinary man's opinion is not that ignorance is to be classed by itself but that it is not an evil, while in the second case Theaetetus *agrees* that *κολαστική* is required for wickedness, the meaning of the phrase being not that that is what other people think but that "it is likely at any rate, as far as human opinion allows one to say" (190, n. 14). Note 8 below will point out additional evidence to demonstrate that the passage is not a summary of popular opinion.



some corruption,⁷ whereas deformity is a lack of proportion or measure (228ab). This latter seems a state where constituents not yet harmonized need to move towards that goal, while the former is more a case of movement away from that situation: the constituents are at war with one another though by nature they belong to the same unity. With such definitions, then, Plato can readily treat the soul's evils in an analogous way. In some souls elements like opinions and desires, spirit and pleasures, reason and pains, are at war with one another, although they should be functioning as a unity. Thus IIIa above becomes a case of psychic disease and faction. But at other times the soul is in a bad condition because of disproportion between its constituents: like a clumsy schoolboy failing through lack of co-ordination to hit the target in a game, the soul strives to attain truth but misses. This condition is as involuntary as the schoolboy's failure, but it is still an evil—in spite of the fact that most people would not want to call it that.⁸

⁷This paraphrase follows Burnet's choice (from Galen) of *διαφθορὰς διαφορὰν* over *διαφθορὰς διαφθορὰν* at 228a 8. Taylor "dubiously" follows this because the latter reading would give the sense "corruption due to some variance," whereas, says Taylor, "the seeds of 'corruption' I take it are there already before it leads to open 'variance' " (110).

⁸This comment at 228d 10-11 gives rise to two considerations mentioned earlier. The first is G. B. Kerferd's view that the distinction between wickedness and ignorance was only popularly understood and here only recorded by Plato for his own purposes. But surely the fact that "they" do not want to call ignorance an evil is very sound evidence for holding just the opposite view. That is the Stranger's point: the classification is his own development in the face of popular opinion. And as though that were not enough, in the very next line (at 228e) Theaetetus himself admits that he doubted at first the twofold division of psychic evils—so the distinction could hardly have been commonly accepted. These points added to O'Brien's alternate explanations of the two sentences Kerferd adduces as evidence for his contention (above, n. 6) seem sufficient justification for rejecting the "division based on popular opinion" interpretation.

If wickedness is disease and ignorance deformity, then there will be a parallel between the arts required for bodily purification and those required for psychic purification. Those arts appear in parentheses in the schema above: medicine cures bodily disease, and correction will deal with the internal disorders and factions of the soul, listed here as intemperance, insolence, injustice, and cowardice.⁹ Bodily deformity, on the other hand, is rectified by gymnastics, the training which leads to the co-ordination of the parts of the body. Likewise, purification of the soul's deformity will be accomplished by teaching or instruction, so that the ignorant soul will learn to hit the truth.

So far, so good. We have seen the parallel between the right and left hand sides of our classification of the processes of purification. But Plato cannot have the Eleatic leave the matter here. Ignorance cannot be purged out by any sort of teaching whatever, administered by any sort of teacher, for it is a complex condition. The suggestion is therefore made that it has two sorts (229b 8), seen above as IVa and IVb. Although IVa is not specifically named, it would appear to be a mere lack of knowledge which can be remedied in a fairly straightforward way, for example, by showing someone how to do something, giving him basic information when he already has enough co-ordination to accomplish

But there is a second and thornier consideration arising from the comment about ignorance as an evil. We made reference earlier to the opinion that this passage's division leaves ignorance outside the sphere of *moral* evil; it would then be only an intellectual failing. Now it is true that the word *κακία* may include non-moral evil, but, if ignorance is bad in a non-moral sense, why does the Stranger say that people do *not* want to call it "bad" when it exists by itself in the soul? Presumably we can only explain this hesitancy if we take "bad" to mean in this context "morally evil," so that the common-sense objection comes to be that it is not right to call a man *morally* bad if he is *merely* ignorant. Ignorance is an involuntary "miss," and involuntary misses are not blamed. That Plato openly persists in calling ignorance an evil thus strongly suggests that he means *moral* evil here.

Later in our analysis (in the discussion of cross-examination) we shall see other reasons for listing ignorance as a moral evil, but one other detail might be mentioned now. It is the apparent equation of *πονηρία* and *κακία* at 227d before the discussion of evils enters its detailed division. At d 4 the opposite of virtue in the soul is "vice," *πονηρία*, an unmistakably moral term. The object of purification is to leave the good, in this case virtue, and cast out the bad which would be "vice"; but at d 9 what is taken away from the soul is *κακία*, of which ignorance is one branch. In its next occurrence at 228b 8 *πονηρία* is clearly restricted to evils apart from ignorance, but it looks as if the word has here become a technical term; its earlier non-technical occurrence sets the tone of the whole division as being concerned with moral evils in general.

⁹See 228e 2,3 and 229a 3. The close connection between correction and justice cannot help but be suggestive of *Resp.* 444, for there justice is a state of concord and unity among the soul's parts—and indeed is said explicitly to be produced as health is produced.

his desire once he learns the steps.¹⁰ However, it is the other aspect of ignorance, IVb, which is of immediate concern to the Eleatic. This is the source of all the mind's failings: it is intellectual conceit, the thinking that one knows when one does not, and is termed stupidity or folly (*ἀμαθία*, 229c 9).¹¹ This cannot be purged out by mere telling, and Theaetetus suggests that it requires a more rigorous program of "education" which will encompass the art of living as well as technical skills. The Eleatic agrees, but makes one further distinction which is represented under IVb above. This is the distinction between admonition (*νουθετητική*, 230a 3) and cross-examination (*ἐλεγχος*, 230d 7); and while it may appear that these are two separate branches of education, the Eleatic's remarks at 230ab suggest rather that cross-examination *transcends* admonition. It is a superior method of education because it deals, as admonition does not, with the problem of involuntary conceited ignorance.

The conclusion is, then, that stupidity can only be purified when cross-examination reveals inconsistencies and contradictions in a man's opinions and he is brought to the place where, recognizing the limitations of his knowledge, he can go on to learn the truth. Cross-examination is the greatest of all purifications, and without it every man, regardless of his social status, will be impure, uncultured, and deformed.

Here the discussion ends, apart from some comments on the identity of these practitioners of the art of cross-examination. And here we can claim to have summarized the discussion, *if* one additional point not mentioned in the literature on the passage is included. It concerns the Eleatic's remark at 230c 3 ff., that those who purify the soul through cross-examination are like *doctors* who consider that the body will not benefit from food taken in until internal obstructions have been purged out. In this small remark, Plato twists out of place the neat parallelism he has drawn throughout his classification of the processes of purification. For until this sentence he has led us to view ignorance as a deformity, clearly distinguishable from disease. But now he reverses his analogy, and the purification of stupidity becomes the work not of psychic gymnastics but of soul healing. Stupidity, it appears, must be a diseased as well as a deformed state of soul.

This may be an unexpected conclusion, but it has a theoretical basis

¹⁰I take this from the suggestion at 229d 1,2 that one branch of instruction is the teaching of techniques. See also *Leg.* 863c, where ignorance is divided into ignorance pure and simple, and the ignorance which is stupidity.

¹¹We might, though Plato does not, develop our own analogy in the bodily realm, and illustrate stupidity by the example of the clumsy schoolboy who makes his own rules about what constitutes a "hit" in order to get round his lack of skill and co-ordination without involvement in strenuous gymnastic training.

which goes beyond the fact that Plato has used the medical analogy in connection with cross-examination. If we had only this reversal of analogies it might be attributed to a lapse on Plato's part, but that explanation will not do if we can discover within the text justification for calling stupidity both deformity and disease. And reflection on the description of cross-examination provides such justification. Cross-examination is carefully distinguished from technique-teaching and even admonition because it deals, as they do not, with the *irrational* aspects of the soul. When a man is shown the internal contradictions in his opinions he becomes angry with himself and gentle towards others (230b 9) and gets rid of notions which are not only high but stubborn (σκληρῶν, 230c 1); the resulting emotional state is modesty (αἰσχύνῃ, 230d 1) which may be considered the opposite of the diseased state of insolence (ὑβρις) mentioned at 229a 3. Cross-examination and correction, then, are not as far apart as they at first appeared. It may be that the latter works directly upon the irrational elements to put down their insurrection, while the former's method is indirect, bringing the irrational parts into a right relationship by pointing out inconsistencies to the rational part. In any case, it is clear from the description of cross-examination that a state of stupidity is also a state of insolence, of faction in the soul.¹²

None of this needs to mean that Plato has destroyed the division between ignorance and wickedness set out so clearly in the passage. There is still some ignorance (ἄγνοια) which may be dealt with as psychic deformity, by mere instruction—and it is important to mark off this purificatory art from correction. But when the division reaches stupidity (ἄμαθια) the situation becomes more complicated and demands special treatment. The marks of deformity become very much like symptoms of disease, so that cross-examination is at once a superior method of instruction and a superior kind of medicine.

We are now in a position to see that ignorance (in the form of stupidity)

¹²Perhaps this is an additional reason to help explain Hackforth's perplexity that ignorance itself "appears to involve a wrong relation between the parts of the soul which on the face of it seems very similar to *στάσις*" (120). He ends up with the reasonable suggestion that the disproportion (ἄμετρία) which is ignorance (ἄγνοια) is a *partial* inability of reason to function, rather than the complete subjugation of reason by the irrational elements (which would be *στάσις*). But the problem is compounded by the involvement, in *ἄμαθια*, of the irrational parts, and these Hackforth does not take into consideration. Perhaps the ultimate difference between disproportion and strife in the soul comes in the treatment required. The soul's state may be the same in two cases, but, if a man does have the ability to be persuaded of his disease-deformity, emphasis will be laid on cross-examination to cure his stupidity; if he is intractable and even unwilling to be examined, then for his own good and the good of society correction will be required to heal what is most appropriately labelled *στάσις* (though it may be *ἄμαθια* as well).

and vice are *not* placed in watertight compartments in this section of the *Sophist*. Stupidity, because it affects the soul's irrational parts, is clearly a moral evil and cannot be confined to mere intellectual failure. This interpretation (along with the additional points mentioned in notes 6 and 8) is our ground for rejecting the opposite view propounded by Dodds and Kerferd. Furthermore, we need not read the passage with Hackforth as an "overcompensation" on Plato's part, simply because stupidity at least is not isolated completely from psychic conflict. The "real belief" that wrongdoing always involves ignorance is not obscured by the passage, but is consistent with it and even supported by its mingling of metaphors.

More generally, this interpretation allows us to see a higher degree of consistency in Plato's thought than many have been willing (or even thought themselves able) to afford him. The teaching of *Republic* 4 on stupidity and vice sees *both* conditions as possible descriptions of strife within the soul, and this is in harmony with my reading of these lines in the *Sophist*. At the same time, our conclusions will give commentators such as Dodds problems with their "intellectualist" Plato. The Plato who wrote the *Sophist* is, as has often been pointed out,¹³ no intellectualist. But if that Plato is to be consistent with the "earlier Plato," then the earlier Plato must never have decided in favour of intellectualism. That, of course, I have made no attempt to discuss or prove; all I have done in this paper is to propose a reading of the *Sophist* which will be compatible with *Republic* 4. But that done, it may strike Plato's readers that in both dialogues virtue is described in metaphors of health and harmony, and then perhaps that the same imagery runs through discussions of vice and virtue from the *Gorgias* to the *Laws*. So I do not count a non-intellectualist interpretation of the *Sophist* as even *prima facie* evidence for a change of mind on Plato's part. Instead I offer in conclusion the proposal that the pervasive imagery in Plato's talk about

¹³G. M. A. Grube seems to be an exception here. In his comments on this passage he keeps referring to the evil of ignorance as "far more fundamental" than discord and disease; he remarks that it is "generally the lack of philosophic knowledge, and like ugliness this is an evil that most men cannot mend; though it also includes that worse ignorance of those who think they know what they do not know, of those, that is, who have *wrong* moral beliefs. Both kinds of ignorance are to be cured by teaching and Plato is asserting that education is a far more powerful fighter against evil than mere corrective justice" (227).

Nothing in the text suggests any difference in degree of difficulty in dealing with ugliness and disease, but that is a minor point. My major quarrel with Grube is, it may be guessed, over his easy dismissal of psychic disease and its remedy, correction, in favour of "education." This move (i) does not allow correction its legitimate place as a purificatory art; (ii) neglects the crucial distinction between admonition and cross-examination; and (iii) overlooks the mingling of metaphors and the implications of cross-examination for the whole of the soul discussed above.

virtue provides *prima facie* evidence that he at least did not want to change his mind radically; this should then drive us to a close analysis of texts such as the one I have discussed here.

ADDITIONAL NOTE

THE TERM "intellectualism" is often used in discussions of Plato's ethics. While an attempt to trace the detailed history of the term in the commentators would take us too far afield, it may be helpful to offer some examples of the ways in which the word has been used.

Dodds has pointed out ambiguities in the term "rationalist" as applied to Plato (above, n. 1), and there may be similar ambiguities possible in the term "intellectualist." Nevertheless, there seems to be a common opinion that the Platonic Socrates identified virtue with knowledge in a way appropriately labelled "intellectualist." Though the opinion is seldom clearly articulated, John Gould has discerned what he calls an "official theory" about intellectualism which he characterizes in this way:

Moral virtue, Socrates is supposed to have claimed, is to be achieved only by an understanding of the moral truths of the universe, that is by an intellectual insight into the nature of right and wrong. It is presumed that he believed that knowledge of moral facts involves morally correct behaviour and conversely, that wrongdoing is caused by intellectual ignorance of the same moral facts.¹⁴

Gould wants to criticize this theory in various ways, one of which is to suggest that Socrates did not hold what Gilbert Ryle has called the "intellectualist legend"; this is the view that knowing how to do something depends on antecedent knowledge of facts or theories.¹⁵ Gould's aim, however, is clearly broader than this: it is the denial of the opinion, common since Aristotle, that Plato is an intellectualist in his ethics. The "official theory," Gould suggests, claims that knowledge "involves" morally correct behaviour—but the precise nature of this involvement is not made clear until he refers to Aristotle's statement that Socrates held it to follow that one would be just if one knew what justice was (*Eth. Eud.* 1216b). Knowledge "involves" behaviour because it causes behaviour. So knowledge of the right thing to do is not merely a precondition of doing it (as a believer in the Rylean "intellectualist legend" might hold); it is so powerful a force that no other desire or force within a man can overcome it. Knowing the right thing to do is a causal condition, and a *sufficient* causal condition, of doing the right thing.

Now it is this intellectualism which, descending from Aristotle, has provoked such varied responses from Plato's commentators. Gould seeks to destroy it by destroying the Rylean intellectualism on which

¹⁴*The Development of Plato's Ethics* (Cambridge 1955) 4.

¹⁵*The Concept of Mind* (London 1949) ch. 2.

he thinks it rests. But, though others may regard his remedy as mistaken,¹⁶ there are a great many who see the condition in the same terms. Ritter, for instance, says this about intellectualism:

According to Plato, that is morally good which is based on reason. It would be self-evident and necessary that a person who had complete knowledge could only wish and do the right and the good.¹⁷

Some find this intellectualism incredibly naive, and some (including Ritter) suggest ways to make it more acceptable.¹⁸

The Socratic aphorism "Virtue is Knowledge" is, of course, considered to be the clear and succinct expression of intellectualism. One consequence of reading the aphorism in this way is that its complement, "Vice is Ignorance," must be interpreted as a claim that wrongdoing is always the result of ignorance. (J. J. Mulhern has recently supported this in his suggestion that "No one does wrong *knowingly*" is the best statement in English of that other famous Socratic paradox.¹⁹) But since Plato sets out causes of evil other than ignorance at *Soph.* 226a-231b, the intellectualist interpretation poses the problems that I have discussed above.

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¹⁶See O'Brien 200, n. 2.

¹⁷*The Essence of Plato's Philosophy* (London 1933) 378.

¹⁸See for a helpful discussion M. J. O'Brien, "Modern Philosophy and Platonic Ethics," *JHistIdeas* 19 (1958) 451-472.

¹⁹*JHistIdeas* 29 (1968) 601-604.