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Introduction: ‘Turning the Soul Around’

THE OBJECTIVES

The subject-matter of the Republic is the nature of justice (dikaiosyne), and its relation to human well-being (eudaimonia). It is widely recognised that the work belongs to the ‘middle’ period of Plato’s writing career, even though Book I, the concern of this study, bears all the characteristics of an ‘early’ or ‘Socratic’ dialogue. Indeed, some scholars in the past thought it was an early dialogue, the ‘Thrasymachus’, which Plato had tacked on to the rest of the Republic as it has come down to us. Whatever the vicissitudes of the composition of Book I, it cannot be denied that it differs markedly in style from the rest of the Republic. Though the dialogue form is retained throughout, it is only Book I which presents strongly characterised interlocutors and elaborate dramatic setting. From Book II until the end, Socrates, the principal character of the dialogue, presents a positive account of justice, showing why, understood in the way he proposes, justice must benefit the individuals and communities which possess it. By contrast, Book I is fundamentally ‘Socratic’: it contains highly dramatic characterisation of Socrates’ interlocutors as they react to his method of critical examination (the elenchos). It ends on an inconclusive note: Socrates questions certain ways of thinking about justice because they cannot explain why it is a mark of excellence in individuals and communities. An understanding of the ‘true’ or ‘real’ nature of justice is required to show its links with excellence and human well-being. Yet, in Book I Socrates and his interlocutors fail to articulate such an understanding. The Republic, from Book II on, may be seen as making a fresh, positive, start to deal with this issue; resulting in a work which came to play an enormously influential role in the moral and political thinking of the West.

Looked at this way, the relation of Book I to the rest of the Republic is that of an introduction or preamble to the main discussion (it is called so by Socrates at 357 a2). Themes, ideas and sketches of arguments are introduced which receive their full elaboration and explanation later on; the main function of the first Book being to clear the ground of mistaken or inadequate accounts of justice in order to make room for the new theory. This fits in well with standard estimations of Socrates’
contribution in Book I, which, when sympathetic, regard it as containing over-
abstract and compressed arguments whose plausibility depends on too many
unobvious and unargued assumptions. Other commentators, less sympathetic,
find the arguments inadequate and invalid—regarding Socrates' procedure as
verging on the unfair and as dishonest towards his opponents. Yet other scholars
judge Socrates to be playful and ironic; his assertions are not meant to be taken
literally. Alternatively, Socrates' argumentation is taken seriously, as represent-
ing the commitments of Socratic ethics, while its inadequacy is viewed as
signifying Plato's dissatisfaction with some of his master's ideas.

I believe that most treatments of Book I, even when they are illuminating, do it
less than justice in not recognising that it contains its own positive theme. A
theme which not merely anticipates the ideas propounded in the rest of the work,
but which prepares the reader for the unorthodox theory that is to come. Book I
is certainly an introduction—but it is one whose special function is to reshape
thinking about justice in a certain direction. It not only attempts to show that
certain beliefs and attitudes are inadequate or inconsistent, it also suggests how
the inadequacies of traditional Greek views about justice are to be overcome.
Plato does this by exposing to the reflective consciousness of his contemporaries
what it is in the traditional views they hold which he regards as an obstacle to a
true understanding of justice and its value. It is because his contemporaries
systematically mislocate where, and how justice operates that they are unable to
perceive it as an unqualified excellence. Consequently, they have no adequate
reply to the sort of challenge about the benefits of justice which Thrasymachus,
Socrates' main opponent in Book I, vigorously puts up.

The argument of this study is that the central theme of Republic, Book I is the
relation of justice to human power. The underlying aim of much of Socrates'critical examination of his interlocutors is to 'convert' upholders of traditional
ideas away from the notion that justice is 'external' to that which enables
individuals and communities to achieve the best use of their capacities and
talents. Socrates wants to urge that justice cannot be seen as an unqualified good
unless its 'internal' links with human 'powers', with their best and fullest
development, are understood.

Traditionally justice was, of course, regarded as one of the 'cardinal' virtues: to
avoid injustices, and to deal equitably with both equals and inferiors, was seen as
part of what was expected of the good man (the agathos). But it was not clear
how the benefits of justice or, indeed, of any of the other cardinal virtues were to
be understood. The standard view would have been that no quality could be a
virtue, an aretē, if it did not benefit its possessor. But this belief is consistent with
two radically different ways of understanding how virtue confers benefit. It may
be understood 'externally' from the perspective of social norms and expectations
associated with the concept of some particular virtue. Given, for example, a