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Platonian Justices¹

In the contemporary debate about justice, one outstanding landmark in the history of philosophy does not seem to have received proper attention, Plato.² This is remarkable, since the question asked by Plato in *The Republic*, 'What is justice?', certainly is also fundamental to the contemporary debate. Moreover, as we will see *The Republic* has exercised a distinct influence, directly and indirectly, on some 'classical' texts from the seventeenth and eighteenth century that have contributed to the definition of the contemporary universe of discourse. Accordingly, a closer look at *The Republic* may not only reveal

the origin of many contemporary ideas about justice, but also shed some light in the contemporary debate. In this essay, I will therefore track the origin of some modern ideas about justice from the discourse of *The Republic* and also contemplate somewhat on Plato's own position.

The method is intertextual. Although running the risk of displaying a modern insensibility before an ancient context, I will nevertheless use the spectacles of the contemporary (Western, academic) discourse in order to understand the (ancient, Greek) discourse of *The Republic*.³ The reason for focusing on *The Republic* is not only because it has been named 'the principal work of Plato', 'the height of platonism', 'the

most important work in Greek prose' and 'Plato's most brilliant dialogue'.⁴ *The Republic* is written in the form of a dialogue where Plato's own teacher, Socrates, is assumed to present the position of Plato, and the other participants in the dialogue represent different philosophical positions.⁵ *The Republic* therefore exhibits an ancient discourse on justice, reflecting not only one justice but several 'justices', which I think are traceable down to contesting positions in the contemporary debate.

At first glance, it may seem unlikely that an 'archetype of totalitarianism' like Plato could have anything interesting to say about justice.⁶ Indeed, for modern democrats Plato's 'ideal' republic in many respects looks like the incarnation of injustice. If we sum up the totalitarian elements in Plato's philosophy, it can be claimed that Plato desires a republic where the state has the right to lie to its citizens and he indeed thinks it must use that right. His ideal state secretly controls the marriages and reproduction of its citizens on the basis of eugenic considerations. The state has abolished the family, at least among the ruling 'guardians' and it has forbidden parents to take care of their own children. It has placed 'superior' children in state reformatories, while it has seen to that 'inferior' children are 'disposed of'. It is a state of strict censorship that has extensive powers to control the lives of its citizens. The state pursues strict discipline. The leaders live under scarcity in radical communism and some sort of regimentation. Presented in this way, it indeed seems tempting to join the 'stigmatization choir' of many studies of Plato. Nevertheless, I will now go on with other aspects of Plato's political philosophy that I think will show that there is much of interest for students of justice in his thinking.

Four notions of justice

Now, which conceptions of justice does *The Republic* exhibit? Well, to begin with it can be established that the idea of justice occupies a central position in *The Republic*.⁷ It is worth noting that the (modern, English) subtitle of the book is 'on justice'.⁸ The very reason why Plato deline-

ates his vision of the ideal state is that participants in a discussion about justice force him to make a definition of the concept. Since the discussion of the ideal state begins here, it seems likely that Plato—just as Rawls today—considers justice to be a 'cardinal virtue of society'.

The discussion brings forth four perspectives on justice: (1) justice is to give every man his due, (2) justice is what is in the interest of the strongest party, (3) justice is a mutually beneficial agreement between rational egoists, (4) justice is minding your own business and not interfering with other people. The last definition is delivered by Plato himself and turns up lodging a radical understanding of equal opportunities as well as a conceptualization of justice as opposite to tyranny.

The first definition, however, is initially formulated by Plato as "... truthfulness and returning anything we have borrowed".⁹ The definition is immediately developed by Polemarchus into "... to give every man his due".¹⁰ As a distributive principle, Polemarchus' definition could have inspired Aristotle's notion of distributive justice, according to which everyone should receive in accordance with his or her virtue. However, Polemarchus' position is quickly left aside and does not seem to be considered worthy of any deeper inquiry by Plato.

The second perspective on justice is developed by the sophist Thrasymachus.¹¹ As a harbinger to Nietzsche Thrasymachus ascertains that "... justice or right is simply what is in the interest of the stronger party."¹² Might becomes right! In a world of contesting powers, the powerful takes his own right and the strongest self-interest more or less arbitrarily defines what is right. In fact, Thrasymachus position seems to be the first formulation of the nihilist tradition, wholly or partially inspiring the thinking of Machiavelli, Nietzsche and contemporary post-modernism, and indirectly inspiring Hobbes and contemporary theories of rational choice.

Plato, however, quickly moves into opposition of this definition. His counterargument is that even the stronger party can sometimes be mistaken about his real interest. In such case it would be wrong for the subjects to obey their rulers. Plato thereupon defines the real interest of the

ruler as identical with the interest of his clients or subjects. As a professional doctor, a truly professional ruler should not act in his own interest.

”‘And therefore, my dear Thrasymachus’, I concluded, ‘no ruler of any kind, *qua* ruler, exercises his authority, whatever its sphere, with his own interest in view, but that of the subjects of his skill.’”¹³

The basis of Plato’s argument seems to be a distinction between the concrete ruler in real life, who may act in his own interest, and an abstract notion of a ruler, the ruler *qua* ruler, who obviously is conceived as an unselfish professional and therefore acts in the interest of those subject to his skill, the public. This argument seems to be consistent with Platos doctrine of ideas, where every distorted phenomenon emanates from an ideal, a pure idea. In real life governments may be tyrannical and act in their own interests. But that is a distorted phenomena which should not be confused with the pure idea of government, which is to act in the interest of those subject to the skill of the ruler, to act in the interest of the citizens. Even though Plato fails to express it literally, he implicitly seems to redefine an ancient Greek darling, the idea of *the common good*. The innovation here seems to be that Plato defines its relation to justice. A just government, goes the argument, acts in the interest of the public, *i e* for the sake of the common good.

The sign of equality between justice and the common good implicitly or explicitly reappears in many modern theories about justice.¹⁴ Of course, Plato certainly does not mean the same thing as modern theorists when he speaks about the common good. However, the important here is that he conceives justice as formally equivalent with the public interest. This is formative to the future discourse, it defines the parameters of contemplation which have both enabled and limited future thinking. If counteracting tyranny was a preoccupation of ancient Greek thinkers, it became an obsession for early modern liberals. The guilt of Plato here seems to define tyranny as the ultimate injustice. As in early liberal political theory, tyranny in ancient Greek political vocabulary meant ruling in your own interest.

Pressed by Platos argumentation, Thrasymachus retreats into a new position, where he claims that the pursuit of unrestricted self-interest or injustice pays better than that of justice and right.¹⁵ An unjust person who steals and robs becomes rich and has a much more comfortable life. By orchestrating this retreat, Plato makes Thrasymachus abandon his first nihilist position and implicitly accept the fact that justice exists, which not surprisingly also happens to be the position pursued by Plato. Plato rejects Thrasymachus’ second argument with the claim that unrestricted pursuit of self-interest and injustice corrupts the character, while justice and pursuit of the common good will ennoble the character. Plato also claims that a just person will be more happy than an unjust person, since in a just community he will be able to perform his ‘function’, the things he’s most suited for.¹⁶

‘Justice as mutual advantage’: Glaucon v:s Hobbes

The third perspective on justice is developed by Glaucon, who in real life was Plato’s brother. Proceeding from the same radical egoistic presumptions as Thrasymachus, Glaucon questions Plato’s ‘romantic’ view on justice. He claims that people accept justice merely out of necessity, not because of their goodness.

”This we can most easily see if we imagine that a just man and an unjust man have each been given liberty to do what they like, and then follow them and see where their inclinations lead them. We shall catch the just man red-handed in exactly the same pursuits as the unjust, led on by self-interest, the motive which all men naturally follow if they are not forcibly restrained by the law and made to respect each other’s claims.”¹⁷

Glaucon then tells a story about a shepherd who accidentally finds the magic ring of Gyges. The ring makes the bearer invisible when the bezel of the ring is twisted to the inside of the hand. When the shepherd realizes the power of the ring he immediately wheedles into the royal palace, seduces the queen, murders the king and seizes the

throne.¹⁸ Glaucon's conclusion is that at heart all men are radical egoists. In reality, man is so radically self-interested that he/she actually thinks it is:

"... a good thing to inflict wrong or injury, and a bad thing to suffer it, but that the disadvantages of suffering it exceed the advantages of inflicting it; after a taste of both, therefore, men decide that, as they can't evade the one and achieve the other, it will pay to make a compact with each other by which they forgo both. They accordingly proceed to make laws and mutual agreements, and what the law lays down they call lawful and right. This is the origin and nature of justice. It lies between what is most desirable, to do wrong and avoid punishment, and what is most undesirable, to suffer wrong without being able to get redress; justice lies in between these two and is accepted not as being good in itself, but as having a relative value due to our inability to do wrong."¹⁹

Brian Barry makes a distinction between two theoretical traditions on justice.²⁰ According to Barry, the first tradition regards justice as an agreement between self-interested and rational agents. Actually people would like to rob each other, but they are deterred by fear of others doing the same. Hence, they agree to a truce, as a *modus vivendi* in a conflict of self-interests. This tradition Barry calls 'justice as mutual advantage' and he primarily associates it with Hobbes.²¹ According to Barry, the other theoretical tradition regards justice as impartiality. While this tradition indeed makes an assumption about moderate selfishness, it ends up in a quite different position on justice. While ultimately striving for the removal of distorting influence of asymmetrical power in their design of the compact, distributive justice here is conceived in more egalitarian terms.²²

The position of Glaucon obviously could be seen as representing the first tradition of justice as mutual advantage. Glaucon regards justice as a mutually beneficial equilibrium between self-interested agents, a truce where rational restrictions are laid down preventing people from doing what they really want, to steal, plunder, rape and kill. Glaucon in fact almost literally antici-

pates Hobbes' notion of the social contract in his formulation "... men decide that (...) it will pay to make a compact with each other by which they forgo both. They accordingly proceed to make laws and mutual agreements".²³

While undeniable similarities exist between Glaucon and Hobbes, big differences also seem to exist. Glaucon actually can be considered a better representative of the tradition of justice as mutual advantage than Hobbes. Hobbes agrees with Glaucon on the egoistic reasons for concluding the social contract. A person should restrict his freedom to do whatever pleases him, as Hobbes says; 'for the sake of peace and his own protection'. However, according to Hobbes the restrictions must be symmetrical, so that every member of a political community ends up with the same freedom, or the same rights. Nobody is obliged to a one-sided restriction of his or her freedom, since that would be the same as exposing oneself to the risk of being fleeced.²⁴ Given this logic, Hobbes believes that everybody would realize that a civil society based on equal rights, both 'pays' better and is the only reasonable solution to the insecurity of the state of nature. So just as Glaucon, Hobbes considers rationally restricted self-interest as the foundation for a civil (=peaceful) society, where justice prevails. But while Glaucon is somewhat obscure on the distributive result of the compact (see below), Hobbes thinks that the result would be egalitarian.

Brian Barry raises two substantial objections against Hobbes. The first is that if radical self-interest is the sole reason behind a *modus vivendi*, the contract can only be provisional. As soon as a change in the balance of power makes it profitable for one party to violate the contract, he or she will do it in order to maximize his or her own interest.²⁵ Accordingly, justice as mutual advantage becomes highly unstable. It would only sustain for as long as the circumstances or power that prevailed during the conclusion of the contract sustained. Barry's other objection is that it is unrealistic to believe that a *modus vivendi* contract will be based on equal rights.²⁶ Due to inevitable asymmetries in resources, the stronger self-interested party would always be able to claim privileges, which the other participants

would have to accept if they want peace. Therefore, what is mutually beneficial is more likely to turn out to be an unjust (and unstable) truce than a just peace.

Now, from what we know so far, it indeed seems justified to direct these ‘accusations’ against Glaucon. Glaucon excludes any other personal motives than radical egoism for concluding the compact. He also seems to mean that the result of the compact could be unequal shares. Glaucon says that justice merely has ... “a relative value due to our inability to do wrong.”²⁷ Does this mean that the distributive outcome of the negotiation is relative, depending on ‘our inability to do wrong’, on our negotiative strength? If so, this would imply that greater ability to do wrong, *i.e.* more power, would prove useful in the negotiation. The powerful party indeed would be in a position to demand a greater share. In that case Barry obviously is right both concerning the instability of the compact and about its inequalitarian results. However, it seems like he’s attacking the wrong guy.

Because, Hobbes actually could be ‘innocent’! Let’s ponder somewhat over the following passage, where Hobbes tries to justify the absolute power of the sovereign:

“The final Cause, End, or Design of men ... is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby; that is to say, of getting themselves out from the miserable conditions of Warre, which is necessarily consequent (as hath been shewn) to the natural Passions of men, when there is no visible Power to keep them in awe, and tye them by feare of punishment to ... observation of (the) Lawes of Nature ... For the Lawes of Nature (as *Justice, Equity, Modesty, Mercy*, and (in summe) *doing to others as we would be done to,*) of themselves, without the terrour of some Power, to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural Passions, that carry us to Partiality, Pride, Revenge and the like.”²⁸

So, according to Hobbes, the natural passion of selfishness carry man to partiality and eventually to war, while the terror of an absolute power is necessary if the laws of nature – justice, equity, modesty, mercy and in sum *doing to others as we would be done to* – are to be observed. Hobbes

repeats the reference to the golden rule when he defines the Laws of Nature in more detail. According to Hobbes, the first Law of Nature says that every man “... ought to endeavour peace”, the second Law states:

“*That a man be willing, when others are so too, as farre forth, as for Peace, and for defence of himselfe he shall think it necessary, to lay down his right to all things; and be contended with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himselfe. ... This is the Law of the Gospel; Whatsoever you require that others should do to you, that do ye to them. And the Law of all men, Quod tibi fieri non vis, alteri ne feceris.* (What you don’t want others to do to you, you should not do to them).”²⁹

These passages are of great importance. The references to ‘the golden rule’ actually situates Hobbes closer to the tradition of ‘justice as impartiality’ than to the tradition of ‘justice as mutual advantage’. In many respects Hobbes’ position resembles Glaucon’s. In fact, he seems to copy most of his presumptions about radical selfishness and even – to some extent – his understanding of the social contract. Here he is nothing but what his friends would call a ‘borrower’. However, Hobbes actually adds something to Glaucon’s ideas. Hobbes combines the position of Glaucon with the golden rule, and the result is the birth of modern liberalism. This is a small but crucial nuance that makes the difference between a thief and a genius.

This combination of theoretical elements not only marks the modern liberal conflation of self-interested contractualism with (judeo-christian) golden rule impartiality. Hobbes also strengthens his egalitarian conclusions by adding another reason for concluding the social contract, empathy. Hobbes indeed agrees with Glaucon on man’s ‘true’ nature. In a memorable formulation Hobbes states that there is

“... a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth only in Death.”³⁰

When merely considering the egoistic assumptions of Glaucon’s and Hobbes’ theories, Barry obviously is right. Parties who only strive for

maximization of their self-interest indeed makes an egalitarian solution seem unrealistic. Why would the powerful prefer an egalitarian solution before the state of nature? And further, wouldn't the powerful be strong enough to make life for the weak so 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short', that they finally would come begging for peace, under any circumstances?

But Hobbes' insertion of the golden rule into the contract theory of Glaucon means that a counterbalancing force has appeared in the egoistic theory. The logic of the golden rule means you have to take other interests than your own into consideration. If people are to understand that they shouldn't do to others what they don't want others to do to themselves, they must step into the shoes of the neighbour and ask: What would I agree to from this position? Hence, while still being basically self-interested, the parties would also take the interest of others into consideration. This is also the fundamental theoretical combination of the 'impartiality' strand of liberal contract theory, developed further by Kant and given its latest expression in Rawls' theory of justice.

The balance between the two principles of self interest and common interest in Hobbes' theory can even be seen as tipping to the favour of the latter. Hobbes claims that the result of the contract can only be equal rights, in spite of mans 'restlesse desire of Power after power'. If not, one-member-would-be more-insecure-than-another and that would be contrary to the logic of the golden rule. If the two motives were equally strong there would be an apparent risk for a stalemate at the negotiating table. Out of self-interest, the powerful could block every agreement that wouldn't give them maximal privileges (relative to their bargaining strength), and due to the logic of the golden rule the powerless wouldn't agree to a discriminating solution. But Hobbes obviously believes that even the powerful will primarily obey the more altruist rationale of the golden rule, rather than their naked self-interest.

Accordingly, contemporary theories of rational choice ought to consider Glaucon as their intellectual father rather than Hobbes, who somewhat mistakenly often is given the 'honour' of constituting their tradition.

Totalitarian justice?

Now, back in the discussion of *The Republic* Plato/Socrates avoids giving a direct reply to Glaucon's argument. He only states that "... you must indeed have something divine about you, if you can put the case for injustice so strongly".³¹ He thereupon proceeds by describing the ideal state, because "... if we look at a society coming into existence, we might be able to see how justice and injustice originate in it."³²

Plato finally defines his own understanding of justice as "... minding your own business and not interfering with other people", which is also the fourth and final perspective elaborated in the discussion.³³ According to one translator, the Greek phrase is more exactly translated as 'doing your own thing'. The phrase has a positive connotation – getting on with and doing your own job – as well as a negative meaning – not interfering with other people. But sometimes the phrase is translated as 'performing ones proper function'.³⁴ Indeed, here Plato reveals a trait of fatalistic functionalism. People are seen as naturally suited for different tasks and the state is just only when everybody sticks to what he does best. Those suited for manual labour should work and those suited for ruling should rule. Bertrand Russel associates this functionalism with a determinist trait in Greek philosophy. According to Russel, the Greeks thought that every person and thing had its proper place and function, in accordance with a universal law of nature.³⁵

The functionalist interpretation of Plato's definition of justice suits nicely into the totalitarian interpretation of his political philosophy. A state that desires control over its subjects of course will be interested in an ideology that underlines that everybody has his proper place. However, the previous discussion could justify a more liberal interpretation. As a matter of fact, Plato immediately develops his definition in a direction that supports a less rigid reading:

"Suppose a builder and a shoemaker tried to exchange jobs, or to take on the tools and the prestige of each other's trade, or suppose alternatively that the same man tried to do both jobs, would this and other exchanges of the kind do great harm to the state?' 'Not Much.'"³⁶

The strict prohibition turns out to apply only to the change of class-based work.

”But if someone who belongs by nature to the class of artisans and businessmen is puffed up by wealth or popular support or physical strength or any similar quality, and tries to enter our military class; or if one of our military Auxiliaries tries to get into the class of administering Guardians for which he is unfit ..., well, I’ll think you’ll agree sort of mutual interchange and interference spells destruction to our state. ‘Certainly’”³⁷

So you can change your work rather freely within your class, but you must never change class-based work. But why would it be such a disaster if somebody changed his class-based job? Well, as the quoted passage displays, Plato wants the republic to be divided into three classes, the guardians (the ruling philosopher kings), the auxiliaries (the warriors) and the third estate (workers, business people, artisans etc.). The reason for the prohibition against the change of class seems to be that Plato wants to ensure that the guardian class will only embrace those who are most suited for ruling. According to Plato, the most suited are the most wise citizens who consider government to be a duty. The rulers should not strive for power, if they do they are unfitting for the job. Instead they should be the most unpretentious persons, who consider government to be a necessary obligation. Only virtuous and dutiful altruists who will act in the interest of the ruled are worthy of the responsibility of government.

However, it’s not only the prohibition against change of class-based labour that is motivated by concern for (what Plato assumes to be) the common good. The totalitarian laws and institutions seems to be motivated on similar grounds. The purpose of the strict censorship in culture and education seems to be to shape the characters of the guardians morally. Indeed, the sceptic might say that Plato has an exaggerated belief in education and social engineering, but this is an optimism that he shares with modern socialism. Other institutions of the ideal state seems to have the same purpose. One reason for the state to take care of all the children is that it wants to select the

best leaders on the basis of a radical understanding of equal opportunities (see more below). Another reason is that it wants to promote a feeling of the common good in the whole society. When the parents don’t know who their children are, and the children don’t know who their parents are, Plato hopes they will both treat all persons similarly, as their own parents, children, grandparents or grandchildren.³⁸

Even the strict communism and the abolishing of the family among the guardians, seems to be motivated by the same concern. Plato believes that once private property and family relations disappears among the rulers

”... litigation (will) virtually disappear ... There won’t in fact be any of the quarrels which are caused by having money, or children, or family.”³⁹

Plato obviously considers this environment necessary for the promotion of an altruist outlook. Popper seems to want us to believe that the guardians will have a lot of privileges, which indeed would imply a tyrannical government. Obviously this is not fair to Plato. The guardians are conceived merely as tools. They protect the perfect society and will definitely have more obligations than privileges, more duties than rights. The guardians must fulfil a lot of remarkable obligations, at the same time as they must withdraw entirely from distribution. They obviously will not have any benefit from their own rule. The only pleasure these communist idealists/philosophy-junkies will gain from governing is the unselfish satisfaction of their own infallible righteousness and supreme knowledge. Perhaps the reason is that even a fair share could jeopardize their altruism. Plato seems to fear that even a small taste of luxury would corrupt the guardians and transform them from tools of the common good, to agents of their own self-interest, which of course would undermine the foundations of the just society. Such communist ideas certainly have inspired thinkers like Rousseau and Marx theoretically, and would indeed have strengthened the moral case of real-socialism if realized in practice. In contrast to Platos imagined republic, really existing socialist states have all displayed the same inconsistent combination of a

communist ideology (for the subjects) and tyrannical rule (to the benefit of the elite).

Radical meritocracy

The ideal state is conceived by Plato as a theoretical alternative to democracy. In liberal democratic theory, the aim of democracy is often envisaged in a similar way as Plato conceives the aim of guardianship, as the safeguard for justice and the common good. The ultimate aim of guardianship certainly is to make the state identical with the 'idea of the state'. However, the virtues of justice and the common good obviously occupy a central positions within the 'idea of the state'. According to Plato, guardianship will control the government and safeguard the common good even better than democracy, which he at this particular time of his 'theoretical career' considered to be a perverted government. The institutions of the ideal state are there to assure that the state is run by those who are most suited for the task, the virtuous who have the most unpretentious, wise, righteous etc. characters. The selection of guardians in fact is a meritocratic alternative to the democratic procedure. Just like the democratic process, this selection is a fair procedure. The intention is to select the most talented children in a lengthy procedure of education, training and various tests, running from their birth and forward. Every child, boy or girl, high or low, has the same chance and is seen as a potential guardian.

Indeed, Plato considers it likely that the offspring of the guardians are the most talented and therefore most suited for becoming rulers. However, children to parents of the third estate may also become rulers if they have the right talent, just as children to rulers may become workers if they turn out to be unfitting. In a notorious 'royal lie' Plato wants people to be told that if a silver (or bronze, or iron) child is born of golden (guardian) parents, the parents must "... harden their hearts and assign it its proper value, and degrade it to the industrial and agricultural class where it properly belongs."⁴⁰ Similarly, if a child of bronze or silver parents has gold or silver in its nature, it should be promoted to become a guard-

ian or a warrior. The reason Plato adds, is "... because there is a prophecy that the state will be ruined when it has guardians of silver or bronze."⁴¹ The purpose obviously is to secure the rule of the virtuous. But Plato's pragmatic and indeterministic understanding about who is the fitting reveals an egalitarian trait in his philosophy. The progressivity of Plato in the question of gender and power, should be interpreted in light of this ideology of equal opportunities. Plato in fact rejects every type of discrimination or privileges.⁴² Today we could call him an advocate of radical (meritocratic) proceduralism.

So, just as democracy in liberal democratic theory, a (radical) neutral procedure is conceived as the safeguard for justice in Plato's republic. However, Plato certainly takes the idea of equal opportunities more seriously than liberals. It does not only imply formal liberal equality of rights, but strict socialist equality of conditions. Every child is placed in a state nursery and treated in the same way. Hence every child gets exactly the same social preconditions. Only his or her talents and ability to learn will be decisive for his or her success in the procedure. Plato's idea of equal opportunities certainly exceeds the boundaries of democracy and clearly ends up in socialist totalitarianism. But the ironic reason is that he takes a liberal darling seriously, the idea of equal opportunities.

Even though Plato's radical meritocratic procedure may be fair, totalitarianism eventually gets the upper hand in his theory. Paradoxically, the reason is not a lapsus in the theory, but rather that his theory is too consistent. Just as many insane features of totalitarian socialist states, Plato's state nurseries, official lies, censorship and state conducted eugenics yet again mark how easily good intentions may end up in totalitarian absurdity.

The reason for this unfortunate ending obviously is that although Plato in many respects embraced egalitarian ideas, he remained an incorrigible epistemological elitist. Plato not only believed that it was possible for the elite to gain insights about the right, the truth, the beautiful, the good etc, that were unattainable for ordinary people.⁴³ He also thought it was possible to reproduce these insights systematically through

the procedure of selection that we have just described. It was this unfortunate combination of assumptions that pushed his in many other respects sympathetic ideas about equality between the sexes, equal opportunities etc., into the totalitarian abyss. If his thinking – on the other hand – had developed towards the epistemological egalitarianism that in fact peeps out in a few passages, the result would have been quite different. Strong egalitarian assumptions could have turned him an advocate radical democracy, which would be consistent with his – in many other respects – socialist ontology. However, had he only done a few egalitarian concessions the result could just as well have been representative democracy, since this political order indeed allows for meritocratic features.

Images of the contemporary discourse

To sum up, there are elements in *The Republic* which can be seen as a direct origin and an indirect inspiration to the contemporary discourse on justice. The most outstanding examples are the positions of Thrasymachus and Glaucon, which can be seen as formative to the relativist/nihilist tradition of Machiavelli, Nietzsche and Foucault as well as to the selfishness-tradition of rational choice and *modus vivendi* liberalism. Furthermore, Plato elaborates formal ideas about the relationship between justice and the common good, as well as about neutral proceduralism, which have reappeared in modern theories on democracy and justice. However, Plato's own contribution to the contemporary discourse on justice is more elusive and indirect than in the case of Thrasymachus and Glaucon. However, modern socialist theory indeed seems to have derived much inspiration from Plato's radical understanding of equal opportunities as well as from his ideas about guardianship communism.

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Notes

1. I would like to thank Gunnar Falkemark and Bo Lindensjö for fruitful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

2. One exception here is the opening discussion in Brian Barry's *Theories of Justice – A Treatise on Social Justice, Vol 1*, (London: Harvester, Wheatsheaf, 1989), where he observes the heritage from Glaucon and Thrasymachus in the thinking of Hobbes.

3. In contrast to a writer like Paul Veyne, the presumption made here is that political ideas indeed are intelligible between different contexts and – accordingly – that the ancient ideas actually have exercised a direct influence on modern thinking. Veyne's presumption about discursive non-intelligibility (partial or total) seems to end in a position where we have no possibility even to fully understand different contemporary contexts, even in our own culture. Taken seriously, Veyne's presumption implies that interpretation always becomes arbitrary and subjective. At the end of the day, one interpretation cannot be seen as more correct than another, which makes this inquiry unnecessary (as becomes big parts of his own book). See Veyne P, *Kände grekerna till demokratin?* (Stockholm: Symposion, 1991).

4. Platon, *Staten*, (Nora: Nya Doxa, 1993), p. 3-5.

5. These participants are persons and philosophers that actually existed in ancient Greece. The group included Platos own brother, Glaucon, and representatives of other theoretical schools.

6. A highly influential work that has shaped our understanding of Plato is Popper K.R., *The Open Society and Its Enemies – The Spell of Plato*, 5:th rev ed. (London: Routledge, 1977) (for a discussion of Popper's critique of Plato, see Månsson T, *Staten och Individens – Platon v:s Karl Popper*, Internal paper Department of philosophy, Stockholm University). On the whole, I agree with the repudiating conclusions of Popper. However, Popper may be 'guilty' of a too one-sided focus on the totalitarian aspects, while overlooking more egalitarian elements in Plato's philosophy. A more nuanced and fair discussion can be found in Dahl R.A., *Democracy and its Critics*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

7. I will use the term 'justice' although the Greek word, *dikaïosyne*, may be translated as both 'justice', 'the right' and 'righteous(-ness)'. However, in English the common translation traditionally has been 'justice'.

8. Many translators seem to doubt this is an original title.
9. Plato, *The Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1974) second ed., pp. 65.
10. *ibid*, p. 66.
11. Sophism was a philosophical school with relativist inclination. They were teachers in rhetoric and famous for their persuasive powers, they could 'turn black into white and evil into good'. Other famous sophists were Gorgias from Leontini and Protagoras from Abdera. Just as Thrasymachus, the thinking of the other two is primarily known from the writing of Plato.
12. Plato, *The Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1974) second ed., p. 77.
13. Plato, *The Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1974) second ed., p. 83.
14. Rawls, for instance, in his theory of justice, places the participants behind a *veil of ignorance*. In a situation where you don't know who you are, Rawls supposes you will act in the interest of all. Only in that situation we are assured that the choice is truly impartial, free from self-interest. The choice becomes an expression of what is in the interest of 'those subject to his skill'. Rawls, however, seems to develop an idea of impartiality that is already latent in the thinking of Plato, see Rawls J, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).
15. Plato, *The Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1974) second ed., pp. 90.
16. *ibid*, pp. 98.
17. *ibid*, p. 105.
18. *ibid*, pp. 105.
19. *ibid*, p. 104.
20. Barry B, *Justice as impartiality – A treatise on social justice, vol. II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).
21. A contemporary proponent of the same perspective is David Gauthier.
22. Barry B, *Justice as impartiality – A treatise on social justice, vol. II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).
23. Plato, *The Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1974) second ed., p. 104.
24. Hobbes T, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Books, 1985)
25. Barry B, *Justice as impartiality – A treatise on social justice, vol. II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 28-46.
26. *ibid*.
27. Plato, *The Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1974) second ed., p. 104.
28. Hobbes T, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Books, 1985) p. 223.
29. *ibid*, p. 190.
30. Hobbes T, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Books, 1985) p. 161.
31. Plato, *The Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1974) second ed., p. 116.
32. *ibid*, p. 117.
33. *ibid*, p. 204.
34. *ibid*. The English translation is made by Desmond Lee in 1955. In the Swedish translation by Claes Lindskog from 1922 the phrase is translated as 'doing your own job and not work with other things' (swe. 'att sköta sin egen syssla och ej idka mångsyssleri'). This translation obviously stresses functionalism, rather than the negative right to freedom from interference, that is stressed in the English translation.
35. Russell B, *Västerlandets Filosofi*, (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1985). p. 111.
36. Plato, *The Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1974) second ed., pp. 205.
37. *ibid*, p. 206.
38. This obviously can be seen as a version of the *veil of ignorance*, which Rawls deems necessary for the promotion of justice and the common good in his theory.
39. Plato, *The Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1974) second ed., p. 250.
40. Plato, *The Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1974) second ed., p. 182. It is worth noting that Plato is quite inconsistent on this issue. On the previous page we noted that Plato wants every child to be taken away from the parents and placed in a state reformatory. This passage, however, seems to presuppose the opposite, that parents indeed should take care of their children.
41. *ibid*.
42. Although he indeed seems to think that men in most cases are better than women.
43. I would like to thank Peter Strandbrink for directing my attention to this aspect of Plato's theory.