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Plato on the Universality of the Intellectual and Moral Virtues

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Introduction

When we think of the distinction between the intellectual and moral virtues in ancient philosophy, we usually think of Aristotle who made the distinction famous in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1103a14-1103b25). There Aristotle argues that the intellectual virtues come by way of teaching, whereas the moral virtues come by way of habit. While Aristotle made the distinction famous, it is Plato who first articulated it. In the *Republic*, Plato argues that the intellectual virtue of *phronesis*[1] is always present in the soul, whereas the moral virtues (like justice, moderation, and courage) come only by way of "habit and practice" (518c-519b). Because *phronesis* is always present in the soul, Plato suggests that humans can develop it through dialogue alone, whereas, Plato claims—again like Aristotle—that the moral virtues can only come into existence through habituation.

The fact that Plato is rarely acknowledged as first making the distinction between the intellectual and moral virtues (and the ways human beings acquire them) is no doubt partially because Aristotle makes the distinction clearly and emphatically, and, most importantly, makes it central to his ethical system. Plato, by contrast, mentions it but then buries it in the grand political and ethical myth of the *kallipolis*, which serves to distract the reader. Another reason, however, that Plato is rarely credited for the distinction is because certain aspects of his philosophy obscure it. In particular, his thesis concerning the *sufficiency of knowledge for virtue* and the allied *theory of recollection* appear to be inconsistent with the view that the moral virtues require habit and practice in order to come into existence.

According to the *sufficiency of knowledge for virtue* thesis, vicious action is a result of ignorance, and all that is necessary for people to act virtuously is to help them acquire knowledge of virtue. Once they have knowledge they will always act virtuously. This view is first articulated in the *Protagoras*, but it is Plato's expression of it in the *Meno* that causes special interpretive difficulties for the question of how one acquires the moral virtues. It is in the *Meno* that Plato connects this thesis with the *theory of recollection*.

According to the *theory of recollection*, all individuals, by virtue of their souls' immortality, already have access to the entirety of knowledge (*Meno*, 68d), and all that is necessary for them to recollect that

[1] Importantly, unlike Aristotle, Plato does not make a sharp distinction between practical wisdom (Aristotle's *phronesis*) and theoretical wisdom (Aristotle's *sophia*). Plato uses the terms interchangeably. Sometimes he uses *phronesis* to suggest something like practical intelligence; at other times, he uses the same word to suggest a more theoretical wisdom. It is the same with *sophia*—sometimes it connotes theoretical wisdom, and sometimes it connotes practical wisdom.

knowledge is to lead them to it through dialogue. In the *Meno*, Socrates demonstrates the truth of this theory by leading Meno's slave boy to geometric knowledge purely by asking him questions, despite the boy having had no previous training in mathematics. Socrates claims that the boy must have always had this knowledge in his soul since he had never been taught mathematics. The implication that follows is that since knowledge of virtue is all that is necessary to act virtuously, and since all knowledge exists in the human soul, then people can become virtuous simply by being led through dialogue to recollect the knowledge they already have.

But if this is the correct interpretation of the *Meno*, then it is inconsistent with the passages quoted from the *Republic* above, which claims that the moral virtues only come by way of habit and practice. What are we to make of this inconsistency? One solution has been to claim, as certain "developmentalist" interpreters have done, that the views expressed in the *Meno* are not genuinely Platonic but are rather Socratic. On this view, when Plato claims in the *Republic* that the moral virtues do not exist eternally in the soul but come by way of habit and practice, his ideas reflect Plato's mature views; whereas the sufficiency of knowledge for virtue thesis reflect Plato's immature views, which are largely Socratic in origin. However, it is not necessary (or ultimately helpful) to solve the interpretive puzzle in this way; trying to do so will only lead to further difficulties since the ideas found in the *Meno* don't fit neatly into the developmentalist picture.[2] Moreover, a careful examination of the *Meno* is sufficient to undermine the apparent inconsistency between the *Meno* and the *Republic*.[3] Rather than contradicting Plato's claims in the *Republic* concerning the distinction between the intellectual and moral virtues and the need for habit and practice to acquire the latter, the *Meno* supports the distinction and the need for habit and practice in the cultivation of the moral virtues. According to the *Meno*, only the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* is capable of being recollected through dialogue.

The first thesis of this paper, therefore, is to argue that the *Meno* is actually consistent with the distinction Plato makes in the *Republic* between the intellectual and moral virtues, and that, in fact, the moral virtues are *not* recollectable through dialogue alone. The second thesis is that even though the moral virtues come by way of habit and practice, the virtues are still universal for Plato. It might be tempting to think that if the moral virtues come by way of habit and are not innate to the human soul, then Plato must believe that virtues like courage, moderation, justice are merely conventions of a

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[2] In the developmental theory of interpretation, the *Meno* is hard to place. It is usually considered a middle dialogue, but many commentators have argued that it should be considered a transition dialogue since it bears certain resemblances to the early dialogues and certain resemblances to the middle dialogues. While both D. S. Mackay (1928) and Holger Thesleff (1989) do place Meno in the category of "early dialogues" they do so, not for the typical chronological reasons, but rather because their reinterpretation of the order of Plato's dialogues lends itself to an atypical division. Debra Nails (1994), building on Jacob Howland's (1991) rejection of the standard view of the chronology of the dialogues, places Meno in a middle cluster due to the development of ideas it contains. A. Boyce Gibson (1957) summarizes this conversation by indicating that fitting in the *Meno* with the rest of Plato's dialogue is a systematizer's nightmare.

[3] As I have argued elsewhere (Jonas, 2018), it is the same for the so-called "early" dialogues. The early dialogues affirm the need for habit and practice for virtue, just like the *Republic* and other "middle" and "late" dialogues do. *The sufficiency of knowledge for virtue* thesis found in the early dialogues requires habit and practice to obtain *full* knowledge. *Full* knowledge goes beyond propositional assent and includes an affective dimension where the agent *wants* to engage in virtuous activity. According to Plato, the affective dimension is produced through a habituation process and is not established by reasoning or dialogue alone.

particular time and place and not universal. I will argue, though, that they are universal for Plato and the fact that students must be habituated into them does not mean that they are not the same for all human beings.

***The Learner's Paradox and Recollection in the* Meno**

In the *Meno*, Socrates depicts a metaphysical theory by which human beings purportedly arrive at knowledge. Socrates describes the learner's paradox, which supposedly demonstrates that humans are incapable of learning anything at all. The paradox goes like this: If a person lacks knowledge of *x*, then they have no idea of what *x* is; but if they have no idea of what *x* is then they will never know if they have knowledge of it. Since they do not know what *x* is, even if they believed they had learned *x*, they could never be certain that they actually learned *x* because they have no standard by which to judge whether what they think is *x* is really *x.* Thus, a person is incapable of learning anything if they do not have knowledge of that thing. On the other hand, if they have a standard by which to judge that *x* is really *x*, then they must necessarily have knowledge of *x*, and they cannot be said to have learned *x*. Therefore, according to the paradox, if they do not know what *x* is, then they are not capable of learning *x*, but if they already know what *x* is, then they are incapable of learning *x*, because learning is defined as moving from lack of knowledge to knowledge. Since there is no lack of knowledge, there is no learning.

The upshot of the learner's paradox is that no one can technically learn anything. But if no one can learn anything how is it that individuals go from having no knowledge of *x* to having knowledge of *x*? The answer lies in the theory of recollection. According to the theory of recollection, as expressed in the *Meno*, individuals do not learn anything; they merely recollect what they already know but have forgotten. Socrates claims that "the truth about reality is always in our soul" (86b), which means that all human beings have complete knowledge of all ideas within their souls, but they do not have direct access to the entirety of that knowledge. Because they only have limited access, they think, act and speak out of ignorance. Fortunately, people can improve their access to the knowledge buried in the recesses of their souls, thereby becoming less ignorant as they do so.

In order to demonstrate that his theory is correct, Socrates uses dialogue to draw geometrical knowledge out of Meno's slave boy who had never been taught geometry. Employing the same question and answer style that he uses in the early dialogues, Socrates poses questions to the slave boy that are supposed to draw out knowledge that the slave boy did not previously know he had. The slave boy, like Socrates' other interlocutors, makes many false starts, but simply through questioning Socrates is able to draw out the knowledge that is already present in him.[4]

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[4] Naturally, the question arises as to how souls originally come to contain knowledge. Socrates claims that it is because souls are immortal and have always existed, and because they have always existed they must have always had that knowledge, or learned it at some other time (*Meno*, 86a). Of course, this is not an entirely satisfactory answer because the learner's paradox would apply even for the soul. If a soul cannot learn in a human body, then it cannot learn apart from the human body. Thus, either the soul has always existed and has always contained the knowledge, or it must have recollected it. But this leads to an infinite regress. Fortunately, this paradox will be partially reconciled in subsequent dialogues through the metaphor of the Realm of the Forms, in which souls supposedly interact with perfect Forms and gain knowledge of them through that interaction. There is much dispute about whether Plato actually believes that the Realm of the Forms exists as a separable, heaven-like realm.

Judging from this example, it looks as though we have an open and shut case of dialogue being all that is necessary to recollect knowledge of virtue in the *Meno*. After all, rational dialogue was all that was required to draw the knowledge out of the slave boy.[5] Since "the truth about reality is always in our soul" it seems that all one must do to bring that knowledge of virtue into consciousness is to recollect it, which can be achieved through dialogue alone. However, before we declare the case closed, we need to look a little more carefully at Socrates' claims concerning the nature of the virtues. While it is true that certain virtues can be drawn out through dialogue, other virtues cannot be.

Wisdom and the other Virtues in the Meno

In order to understand why certain virtues cannot be drawn out of individuals like the geometric knowledge in the slave boy, we first need to consider a distinction Socrates makes in the *Meno* between wisdom and the other virtues. In some places, Socrates claims that "virtue is wisdom…either the whole or part of it" (89a). When he says this he appears to be claiming that there is only one virtue—namely,

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We follow Iris Murdoch, Julia Annas, John McDowell and others in claiming that he does not believe in such a realm, but rather he invents it as an illustrative metaphor that is supposed to inspire readers and interlocutors to continually search for how best to live. This view is supported by Socrates, when, immediately following his claim that the soul is immortal and must have previously contained that knowledge, states

> I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it. (86b-c)

This is characteristic of all of the famous doctrines of the middle dialogues. After giving what seems like a convincing argument for a particular metaphysical claim, Socrates suggests that his ideas are not to be taken as true in every sense. Another example is the tripartite structure of the soul, as outlined in the *Republic*. At the end of the *Republic* Socrates argues that in spite of his previous claims that the soul has a definite tripartite structure he and his interlocutors have not discovered its true nature. At the very end of the book, Socrates admits that the discussion he and his interlocutors had concerning the soul failed "to discover its true nature," and that they would have to look elsewhere "to see what [the soul's] true nature is and be able to determine whether it has many parts or just one and whether or in what manner it is put together" (612a). Similarly, Plato's supposed doctrine that philosopher-kings could, with a proper education, achieve unmediated access to the Forms through contemplation is shown to be impossible in the *Phaedo*.

> It really has been shown to us that, if we are ever to have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body and observe things in themselves with the soul by itself. It seems likely that we shall, only then, when we are dead, attain that which we desire of which we claim to be lovers, namely, wisdom, as our argument shows, not while we live; for it is impossible to attain any pure knowledge with the body, then one of two things is true: either we can never attain knowledge or we can do so after death. (66e)

[5] For another interpretation of *why* Socrates chooses to put forth the theory of Recollection at this point of the dialogue, see Theodore Ebert's article *Plato's Theory of Recollection Reconsidered An Interpretation of Meno* (1968) in which he demonstrates not only the literary irony taking place as the speech parallels Gorgias' type but also that Socrates uses the slave-boy demonstration to show Meno that he has a misconception about knowledge itself. Namely, Meno believes knowledge to be twofold, either it is attained or not. Ebert (1968), however, submits that Plato wants to demonstrate that knowledge has many more levels than what Meno believes.

wisdom. And yet at other places he distinguishes between “wisdom and virtue” (91a), which includes “moderation, and justice, [and] courage” (88a). Here, by contrast, he appears to be claiming that there are other virtues besides wisdom.[6] What are we to do with this ambiguity in the *Meno*? The answer lies in the dual quality of virtuous action.[7]

In the *Meno*, Socrates claims that two distinct elements are necessary for virtues like moderation, courage and justice to be exercised. The first is wisdom and the second is what he calls “qualities of the soul” (88a). The qualities of the soul are the raw desires to act courageously, moderately, and justly. Socrates says these qualities are neither beneficial nor harmful in themselves and only become so when they are directed by the correct or incorrect use of wisdom (88b-e). Because they are inherently neither good nor bad, they are not virtues *per se*. They are just the raw desire to act in a certain way. Therefore, one cannot be courageous, moderate or just if one does not have wisdom. Put differently, one may have the raw desire to face one’s fears, or the raw desire to abstain from certain foods, or the raw desire to treat others fairly, but these desires in themselves are not virtuous unless they are employed in ways that are beneficial. At the same time, if one has wisdom alone, but not the raw desire to act courageously, moderately or justly, then, by definition, one cannot be courageous, moderate or just. The person would know what the courageous thing to do is, but be afraid to do it because he or she lacks the raw desire to face his or her fears. Or again a person may know that having too much dessert is not beneficial and yet not have the raw desire to abstain from overindulgence, and so on.

The question then becomes: how does one cultivate the two necessary parts of virtue, the “wisdom” and the “quality of soul?” Socrates gives two separate answers. In the case of wisdom, it comes through recollection because wisdom is a type of knowledge (88d). But, in the case of the qualities of the soul—like the raw desire to act courageously, moderately, or justly—they are not knowledge and therefore cannot come by way of recollection. This is why Socrates claims earlier that “if virtue is of one kind it can be taught [recollected], but if it is of a different kind, it cannot” (87c). He goes on to use “courage” as an example of something that “is not knowledge but different from it” (88b). Plato claims that the virtues that cannot be recollected are not knowledge because knowledge is always beneficial and yet these non-recollectable qualities of the soul that form the basis of the moral virtues are neither harmful nor beneficial in themselves, but become beneficial if properly directed by wisdom. This means that the only virtue that can be recollected is wisdom, since it alone is knowledge. Unfortunately, however, as we saw before, a person who has recollected wisdom but does not have the raw desire to act courageously, moderately, or justly will never be a virtuous person. They will know what the right thing to do is, but they will not have the raw desire to act courageously, moderately, or justly. Thus, wisdom alone is worth very little in the moral sphere since it can never, on its own, produce the other virtues.

But if the raw desire for courage, moderation and justice does not come by way of recollection, how do individuals develop it? Plato does not give a direct answer to this question in the Meno, but he does so in both the *Republic* and the *Laws* (which are assumed by nearly all scholars to be written *after* the

[6] Of course, this same ambiguity occurs throughout the Platonic corpus, whether early, middle or late. In some places, Socrates or other interlocutors suggest that wisdom is the only virtue (*Protagoras* 360d-e, *Laches* 194d), but in other places he claims that there are other virtues (*Crito*, 47c; *Republic*, 428a; *Phaedo*, 115a).

[7] George Rudebusch (1978) makes the bold conclusion that “In none of these dialogues (*Laches, Meno, and Euthyphro*) is there even one argument driving us towards a part/whole account of virtue (p.168).”.

Meno) and the *Crito* and *Gorgias* (which are assumed by nearly all scholars to be written *before* the *Meno*). As I have argued elsewhere (Jonas, 2017a, 2017b, 2018) these dialogues claim that for a person to gain the moral virtues they must be habituated into them. The habituation process is meant to produce the "qualities of soul" necessary for moral virtue—the desire to perform the virtues. In these dialogues, if individuals know *what* the right action is but do not have the desires to act in light of that knowledge, then they do not *fully* know what virtue is and therefore cannot be counted on to act virtuously on every occasion. In order to develop these desires, they must practice them over and over again through a habituation process. Doing so will create the raw desire to act courageously, moderately and justly. Propositional knowledge can be gained by *phronesis* through question and answering, but the desire to act virtuously can be gained only by practicing the virtue over and over again.

That habituation must be the way to develop the moral virtues is supported by the fact that it makes sense of Socrates' otherwise completely confusing claim at the end of the *Meno* that "because it cannot be taught [recollected], virtue no longer seems to be knowledge" (99a). This about-face from Socrates' earlier suggestions that "virtue is a kind of knowledge" (87c) would be perplexing, rendering the whole dialogue incoherent. Half of the dialogue proceeds under the assumption that virtue is knowledge and therefore can be taught or recollected, and the second half proceeds under the assumption that virtue is *not* knowledge and cannot be taught or recollected. However, if we understand the dual nature of virtue—that certain virtues are recollectable (wisdom) while other virtues are not recollectable (courage, moderation, justice)—then the incoherence is mitigated. Virtue *as a whole* cannot be recollected or taught, but neither can it be merely habituated. Virtue *as a whole* is both knowledge and desire, and therefore it requires a complex training process that uses a variety of methods to produce virtue, which is exactly why Plato ends the *Meno* by describing how difficult it is to create virtue—claiming that anyone who is virtuous has received a gift from the gods.

The Universality of the Intellectual and Moral Virtues

Now that we have seen the division of the intellectual and moral virtues, we are in a position to consider the question of whether Plato believes the virtues to be universal, transcending time and place, or local, socially constructed conventions that are contingent on the culture in which they are found.

In the case of the intellectual virtue of *phronesis*, it seems clear that the answer to the above question is that they are universal. *Phronesis* is universal because it is always present in all human beings and all that is necessary to access *phronesis* is to discover it through dialogue. Since it exists in all human beings at the ontological level, it is, by definition, universal.

It seems different for the moral virtues. The moral virtues do not exist in the soul prior to habituation but are created through practice and habit under the guidance of a mentor or teacher. These mentors and teachers themselves were necessarily guided by their own mentors and teachers and so on. But this means that the moral virtues are developed from *without* as part of a culture of practice that is imposed by fallible human beings. As such, the moral virtues appear to be conventions of a particular time and place, and they therefore could be different in a different social and historical context.

This impression is reinforced by the fact that Plato himself appears to indicate that the virtues are relative to different groups. In the *Republic*, for example, he famously suggests that the different castes in the *kallipolis* have their own virtues, and he says something similar in the *Phaedo* where he compares the "imperfect" virtues of the non-philosophers to the "perfect" virtues of the philosophers. Since Plato seems to claim that these castes are permanent and must remain separate, it appears that virtue is relative to the caste of citizen. What are we to make of these claims? Does Plato think that differing classes of people have different virtues? If so, then it would appear that the moral virtues are, at least to some degree, local for Plato.

The fact is, however, that Plato does not think that the virtues are local; he believes they are universal. While he does acknowledge that not all people will attain *full* virtue, this is not because they are ontologically incapable of doing so. Rather, he thinks all people should aspire to full virtue, even if they never attain it. However, if they do not attain it and continue in the "imperfect" or "*demotic*" virtues, these virtues still share in a universal principle—they are based on the same *quality* of virtue, just not the same quantity.

At first glance, this claim might seem to be inconsistent with what Plato says in several places in the dialogues. Bobonich (2002), for example claims that the *Phaedo* states that

only philosophers possess real virtue, while non-philosophers have only a "shadow-painting of virtue that is really slavish and contains nothing healthy or true"…There seems to be very little that a city can do to improve significantly the lives of the vast majority of its citizens; no non-philosopher can have a life that is really worth living for a human being. (p. 322)

Obviously, if Bobonich is correct then the *Phaedo* stands in sharp contrast with my claim that Plato thinks that the difference in virtues between the philosophers and non-philosophers is a matter of degree and not kind. According to Bobonich's interpretation, the non-philosophers' virtues are not really virtues at all, but a kind of socially-affirmed form of vice. The fact that he quotes Socrates as saying that the non-philosopher's virtue "contains nothing healthy or true" seems straightforwardly damning.

Importantly, however, when Plato explicitly distinguishes between philosophers and non-philosophers in the *Phaedo*, he does not do so at the level of innate qualities, but rather does so at the level of how individuals were brought up. Those individuals who are brought up poorly will live unhappy lives and have unhappy afterlives, while those who were brought up well will live happy lives and have happy afterlives. Describing those who were poorly brought up, Socrates explains the state of the vicious who "are not the souls of the good but of inferior men [who] are paying the penalty for their previous bad upbringing" (81d). The reason the individuals are inferior is not because they are innately inferior, but because they were poorly raised; they were not educated in the proper habits and practices. By contrast, Socrates describes the experiences of individuals who had a different upbringing. "The happiest of these, who will also have the best destination, are those who have practiced popular and social virtue, which they call moderation and justice and which was developed by habit and practice" (82a). While it is true that even these individuals could be happier if they coupled philosophical reflection with habit and practice, they are far from the "slavish" lives that Bobonich (2002) describes. Now, Bobonich is correct that Socrates claims that "all" individuals who do not practice philosophy will live lives that are less fulfilling than those who do practice philosophy, but we should not conclude, as Bobonich does, that "there is very little that a city can do to improve significantly the lives of the vast majority of its citizens." On the contrary, Socrates suggest that the city can do a great deal in the

improvement of its citizens, namely to habituate them in virtuous practices and encourage them to think critically about those practices. When we carefully examine the passage that Bobonich pulls from to substantiate his interpretation, as well as the context immediately surrounding it, we discover that the distinction between the virtues of philosophers and non-philosophers is not as sharp as Bobonich suggests.

In the passage that Bobonich cites we find Socrates making a distinction between the virtues of philosophers and non-philosophers. Socrates claims that both have the virtue of courage and moderation, for example, but only in the case of the philosophers is that virtue *true* virtue. Why is the courage and moderation of the philosophers true while the courage and moderation of non-philosophers false? The answer is based on the desires that motivate their courage or moderation. For the philosophers, their desires are rooted in their "love of wisdom"; for the non-philosophers, their desires are rooted in their "love of the body" and "the love of wealth or of honors, either or both" (68c). Socrates goes on to claim that when the philosophers act with courage or moderation they do so out of a love for wisdom and a desire to live virtuously. On the other hand, when the non-philosophers act with courage it is, paradoxically, because of "fear and terror" (68d); or when they act with moderation, it is, again paradoxically, because of their "licentiousness." He claims that these lovers of pleasure, money, and honors only act courageously or moderately so that they can avoid further pain and acquire further pleasure.

What is significant about this point is that any person who desires virtue for its own sake and believes that happiness and wisdom is to be found only in virtue, is a philosopher. Philosophers are not, in other words, a distinct class of people with innately superior souls, but a nebulous class of people with different desires. What distinguishes philosophers and non-philosophers in the *Phaedo* is their desires. Put differently, when Socrates condemns non-philosophers he is not condemning people such as simple-minded but honest farmers, but rather he is condemning pleasure, money and honor-loving hedonists who care nothing for true virtue. It is the same refrain we find in the *Apology* when Socrates says:

For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: Wealth does not bring about excellence (virtue), but excellence (virtue) makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively (30b).

[or]

Are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honor as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best state of your soul? (29e)

From this we see that when Socrates makes the distinction between philosophers and non-philosophers he is not making a distinction between a special and superior class of humans based on innate qualities, but between individuals who have developed the wrong set of values.

The important question then becomes, does Plato believe that we can help young people develop the values of the lovers of learning instead of the lovers of pleasure? The answer is, as was outlined above, an unqualified yes. As we saw above, the desires to perform virtuous actions are not innate to the soul, rather they are cultivated through habituation. This means that all that is necessary to create a different set of desires in individuals is to habituate them into those desires. Plato makes this explicit in the *Laws*:

Similarly if one of *us* aspires to live like a god, this is the state he must try to attain. He must refuse to go looking for pleasure on his own account, aware that this is not a way of avoiding pain; nor must he allow anyone else to behave like that, young or old, male or female—least of all newly-born children, if he can help it, because that's the age when habits, the seeds of the entire character, are most effectively planted. (792d-e)

But is such an education really possible for *all* people and not just people who are born natural philosophers? We see that it is in fact possible later in the *Phaedo* when Plato extends the image given in the allegory of the cave by returning to the theory of recollection that includes the immortality of the soul. In this myth he very clearly states that *every* individual's soul is immortal and has the potential to recollect all knowledge (75d-77e). However, he also clearly states that the passions and desires of the body have a corrosive effect on the soul's ability to apprehend the good (81b).[8] Here there is no distinction made between those individuals who have the ability to attain the knowledge of the good and those who do not. All individuals' souls have equal potential to recollect the good, but the degree to which individuals can achieve recollection depends on the degree to which their souls have been habituated in line with the virtues of justice, temperance, and courage. In the *Republic*, Plato claims that the soul cannot find light in the dark without being "hammered at from childhood and freed from the bonds of kinship with becoming, which have been fastened to it by feasting, greed, and other such pleasures and which like leaden weights, pull its vision downward" (519a-b). Plato is clear that this hammering does not take place in the back and forth of dialogue, but happens "through habit and practice" (518d).

The same refrain about giving all human beings a chance to become virtuous is reinforced in the *Laws* and the *Statesman*, where Plato advocates for the teaching of virtue to all citizens, and he expects all citizens to willingly choose to live the virtuous life. In the *Laws* Plato indicates that older, more distinguished citizens ought to show respect for the younger and try to persuade them to be virtuous rather than force them to do so (729b-c). Connected to this, Plato claims that all children can be persuaded to live virtuously, so long as the entire community helps participate in their education (664a-c). He also believes that the more simple people of the past are actually wiser and more virtuous than contemporary citizens (679e). While Plato makes distinctions between individuals and their respective

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[8] This is echoed in numerous places throughout the dialogues, like, for example in Book X of the *Republic* when Socrates claims that the immortal soul is "altered" by the choices it makes in collaboration with the body (618b), and in the *Crito* when Socrates claims:

> Should a man professionally engaged in physical training pay attention to the praise and blame and opinion of any man, or to those of one man only, namely a doctor or trainer?...
>
> He must then act and exercise, eat and drink in the way the one, the trainer and the one who knows, thinks right, not all the others?...
>
> So with other matters, not to enumerate them all, and certainly with actions just and unjust, shameful and beautiful, good and bad, about which we are now deliberating, should we follow the opinion of the many and fear it, or that of the one, if there is one who has knowledge of these things and before whom we feel fear and shame more than before the others. If we do not follow his directions, we shall harm and corrupt that part of ourselves that is improved by just actions and destroyed by unjust actions. (47c-d)

chances of becoming virtuous, he does not claim that some individuals are innately vicious, but rather that the combination of their natural temperament and upbringing is a matter of fact. As such, not all individuals will achieve the same level of virtue, so both laws and education need to be put in place to ensure a measure of virtue in society. Similarly, in the *Statesman*, the visitor claims that *every* citizen ought to be taught "to share in a disposition that is courageous and moderate, and whatever else belongs to the sphere of virtue" (308e-309a), and only those who act unjustly will be excluded from full citizenship in the city. The same goes for public offices, which have the same criteria for participation—namely, having the capacity to be governed by the proper amount of courage and moderation as the situation requires (310e-311e). The goal of the society in both the *Laws* and the *Statesman* is to achieve, to the highest possible degree, an ethical equality between citizens. Unlike the *Phaedo*, when considering the *Laws* and the *Stateman*, Bobonich (2008) admittedly understands Plato's desires for a shared virtue for all citizens.

First, we saw in the *Statesman* Plato suggested a new conception of a good city as an association in which all citizens aim at leading virtuous lives and at fostering virtue in the other citizens. In the *Laws*, Plato is much clearer and more emphatic in building on this conception of a good city and, as we have seen, restructures the citizens' education accordingly. Second, since the citizens are more capable of exercising good ethical and political judgment and engaging in rational discussion, they will be able to hold office and exercise political authority. (p. 331)

Like Aristotle (N.E. 1179b1-1180a1), Plato believes that laws and education must work together to help produce the moral character in the citizens of a state. Laws alone can function as vehicles for ethical education, but they can only accomplish so much; they force individuals into a rudimentary form of ethical habituation, but they are not sufficient to produce full virtue. An educational system is meant to work in concert with the laws and to produce a significant level of virtue in all citizens. It is true that Plato, like Aristotle, recognizes that perfect equality in the development of virtue is unlikely, but he wants to approximate it to the degree that it is possible.

So far, then, there is significant reason to think that Plato believes that virtue is universal insofar as they are the guiding principles for *all* human beings. But there is still the elephant in the philosophical room: the *Republic* and its seemingly clear-cut insistence on a caste system that demands different virtues for different groups. How are we to reconcile the above interpretation with such an unequivocal expression of an institutionalized hierarchy of people and the virtues that go along with them? The answer is found in the often overlooked fact that the caste system in the *Republic* was never intended to serve as a political or social/ethical blueprint for how to structure society.

Framing her analysis in ethical terms, Julia Annas (1999) argues that the goal of the *kallipolis* is to

grasp the *ideal* of virtue, which is presented via the picture of the ideal state. The message, however, is not the simple-minded one that [the individual] should wait for some philosopher-kings to come along, or try to become one himself. Rather, he should internalize the ideal of virtue as a 'city of himself' (592A7)—that is he should internalize in his soul the structure pictured in the ideal city. (p. 81)

And, as I (2012) have argued elsewhere,

The Kallipolis serves an important purpose, but its purpose seems less political than pedagogical: it is primarily to help Glaucon see what justice is, and so too the superiority of the just life to the unjust life.

The Kallipolis is a city that has been purged in order to become just, and thereby is instrumental in educating Socrates' interlocutors. The Kallipolis is not the *true* and *healthy* city, but one that has become a heavenly city in the course of a dialogue that has helped Glaucon find justice in his soul. (p. 357)

It is important to recall that when Socrates, Glaucon and Adeimantus embark on their verbal journey to find a city with justice in it, their goal is not to construct a political philosophy *per se* but to use an image of a just city as a heuristic device to help them "see" justice in the soul. Socrates says "So, if you're willing, let's first find out what sort of thing justice is in a city and afterwards look for it in the individual" (368e). Notice, first, that they are not precisely constructing the perfect city, but rather a city with *justice* in it. Their point is not to create a city, but to create justice *in* a city. This is a significant distinction because it reminds us that they are free to construct any city of their liking so long as it embodies justice in some way. Thus, there may be *many* cities—that might look very different in their set up—that still meet the relevant criterion, namely embodying justice. There is no indication that the one they chose is the best one or even the preferred one *qua* city, but merely that it has one relevant characteristic: that justice is visible in it. In striking confirmation of this little-appreciated fact, Socrates creates two separate cities, both of which embody justice.

When Socrates, Glaucon and Adeimantus first begin to create a city that embodies justice they come up with a very simple city, which is often referred to as the "First City" or the "City of Pigs." It is called the "City of Pigs" because Glaucon dismisses it for its lack of luxuries and conveniences. This city embodies justice, and Socrates actually refers to it as the "true" and "healthy" city. Importantly, it is an egalitarian city where every individual is provided for and is given important work to do. There is no mention of some individuals being superior or any need for a class of rulers to reign with absolute and unchecked power. Again, Socrates says on more than one occasion that this is the "healthy" and "true" city. Based on Socrates' unmitigated and un-recanted praise of this city, it makes far more sense to interpret the First City as Socrates preferred *political* arrangement rather than the *kallipolis,* which he at first negatively refers to as a city with a "fever." Even after the *kallipolis* has been purged of its fever and embodies justice, Socrates never once praises it as true or healthy. Why then does Socrates go on to invent the *kallipolis* if the First City is his preferred political arrangement? The obvious answer is that, as we have already seen, the point of the dialogue is not to create Socrates' *preferred political arrangement* but to create *a city which best illuminates justice in the soul*. The First City fails to meet this criterion for Glaucon, so a different (and inferior in the political sense) city must be created. Socrates explicitly indicates this when he acquiesces to Glaucon's desire to create a city with luxuries in it. He says that creating such a city "may not be a bad idea, for by examining it, we might very well see how justice and injustice grow up in cities" (372e). The point of inventing the *kallipolis* is not to create a preferred political arrangement, but to show how justice and injustice grow up in cities.

The upshot of this brief analysis is that there is no reason to attribute the strong distinction between the philosopher-kings and the producers to Plato's educational and moral theory. On the allegorical reading of the *kallipolis*, the philosopher-kings were never meant to represent an actual class of people that Plato hoped would rule the perfect city; they were intended, instead, to represent the rational aspect of the tripartite soul, which the *kallipolis* is supposed to approximate. All individuals, therefore, have potential philosopher-kings living, as it were, inside of them, if only they had the proper education to develop them. As Socrates claims after outlining the allegory of the cave,

the power to learn is present in everyone's soul and…the instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body. This instrument cannot be turned around…without turning the whole soul until it is able to study that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely, the one we call the good. (518c)

Conclusion

As I have argued, Plato is a universalist when it come virtue, in so far as he wants all human beings to achieve the maximal level of virtue possible. While he does believe that certain people will achieve higher levels of virtue, he does not believe that these people have qualitatively different virtues. Assuming that they are pursuing genuine virtue, the differences between individuals will be differences in degree, not in kind. Moreover, the fact that human beings must be habituated into these virtues does not mean that virtue is relative to the community in which the habituation takes place. Only those communities that are committed to true virtue and therefore habituate their members according to those virtues are genuinely virtuous. The so called "virtues" of communities that habituate their members into vicious behaviors are simply not virtuous, whether or not they believe they are.

It is the same with the intellectual virtue of *phronesis*. While all human beings have access to it by virtue of the immortality of their souls, accessing knowledge of intellectual virtues is extremely difficult. This is especially true if the person trying to access it was raised in a vicious culture and was habituated poorly. While a person's wisdom ["which can never lose its power"] cannot be corrupted at the ontological level it can, for all intents and purposes, be corrupted at the practical level. Just like we saw in the early dialogues, when people regularly engage in vicious behavior, their vision can become so distorted that they begin to regard virtue as something to be avoided and vice as something to be engaged in. When this happens a snowball effect can begin; if they are not encouraged to begin practicing virtuous behaviors again they will increasingly desire to do vice and will therefore further lose their capacity to see correctly.

In the *Republic* Plato refers to the corrupting effects of vicious behaviors as "encrustations" that metaphorically weigh down the soul and block its vision under "the shells, seaweeds, and stones that have attached themselves to him" (611d). Thus, while the capacity for sight is never lost, it is as good as lost when it is buried under the effects of vicious behavior. Plato explains that these encrustations are not present in the soul itself and are not part of the virtue of wisdom in its purest form. Rather, they are developed as accretions through a poor habituation process.

Or have you never noticed this about people who are said to be vicious but clever [*sophos*[9]], how keen the vision of their little souls is and how sharply it distinguishes the things it is turned towards? This shows that its sight isn't inferior but rather forced to serve evil ends, so that the sharper it sees, the more evil it accomplishes. (519a)

The "wisdom" of the vicious person is functioning at its highest degree, and he or she is able to understand very clearly those things to which their vision is turned. The encrustations, however, are

[9] The fact that Plato uses *sophia* rather than *phronesis* in this passage, when he had just previously used *phronesis*, is, yet again, another instance of his tendency to use the terms interchangeably.

preventing the wisdom of these individuals from turning towards virtue. Therefore, anticipating Aristotle, the effectiveness of the person's wisdom makes him or her merely clever and not wise (in the relevant sense), and, unfortunately, with each subsequent evil action the encrustations get heavier and thicker, increasing the downward spiral.

What this means is that, according to Plato, virtue is only possible for people who are properly habituated. If he is right then contemporary moral education must be concerned far more with the habituation of students, rather than the pursuit of the "knowledge" of virtue.

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