

Plato and Personhood

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From all that has been written about Plato, both pro and con, it would seem odd to attribute to him a concept of personhood. His enemies think of his ideal state as reducing the ordinary person to being a mere cog in the efficiently run machinery of the state. His friends usually regard the *Republic* as a state governed by benevolent philosopher kings who provide an orderly and stable environment whose inhabitants can gain some measure of happiness, if not enlightenment by unquestioningly following their commands.

Contrary to both points of view, I wish to show here that Plato has a concept of personhood that indeed applies to the inhabitants of the ideal state of the *Republic* and to the practical state of the Laws. Before I present such an analysis, it would be appropriate to present an account of the characteristics of personhood.⁴⁰ First, persons should be sharply distinguished from things. This difference can be expressed in various ways in persons, as beings having reason, or in the Heideggerian concept of Dasein's Being-in-the-World, or in other ways which would show the distinctive nature of human beings. Allied with the concept of the distinctiveness of the person is the concept popularized by Kant of the individual as an end in himself or herself in contrast to the thinghood of nonhuman beings. Persons are beings who should be treated not merely as means, but also as ends. A third feature of personhood is that persons are characterized by having attached to them legal rights and duties. Finally, persons have a distinctive role or function to play in society. I want to show that these characteristics or something fairly close to them can be found in Plato's dialogues notably the *Republic* and the Laws.

⁴⁰This account of criteria for a popular understanding of personhood is taken from A. C. Danto's account in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

The Distinctive Character of Personhood

For Plato the distinctive characteristics that separates human beings from things is their rational nature. It is this rational nature that enables persons to attain their arete or distinctive human excellence, justice. What has to be justified is that justice of the person applies to all individuals in Plato's society and not, as is usually thought, to the rulers alone. Plato's spokesman, Socrates, approaches the problem of personhood by asking what is the unique human function, what is it that human beings as a class can do alone or better than any thing else. What in the *Republic* Socrates calls the unique function (ergon) of human beings is not simply living, but living in the sense of "management, rule, deliberation, and the like" (353d). As Socrates' previous examples show, ergon or function in the sense under consideration amounts to being an instrumental definition of a class of objects in terms of what its members can do uniquely or better than any other kind of object. As a definition the unique function applies equally to all members of the class. All human beings have the same distinctive function. If that function is done well, then the appropriate human excellence or virtue, justice, is attained, if not then injustice. Although biologically a human being as much as the just person, the unjust individual is a failed person. He lacks personhood because he has not attained the self actualization that is brought about by doing well the distinctive human function.⁴¹

⁴¹A contemporary writer on democratic individualism shares with Plato a view of the person that emphasizes the importance of reason equally shared by all human beings in attaining personhood. R. B. Perry, *Puritanism and Democracy* (New York, 1944) 576, 451:

Men are equal as men, each having both interests which deserve recognition and . . . ruling faculties of reason and conscience. . . .

An individual in whom the faculty of reason has been allowed to atrophy or remain undeveloped . . . is not only an incomplete individual, cut off from the peculiar satisfactions of reason, but a debased individual, in whom the distinctively human part is frustrated. He has not only been cut off, but has been cut off at the top, where nature designed him to bear his own characteristic human fruit.

Book IV of the *Republic* provides a final definition of justice of the person. Distinguishing justice of the person from justice of the state, doing one's own social function for which one is naturally suited, without interfering with the social functioning of others, Socrates affirms that although justice of the person is something like that of the state it is not

in regard to the doing of one's own business externally, but with regard to that which is within and in the true sense concerns oneself, and the things of oneself—it means that a man must not suffer the principles of his soul to each the work of some other and interfere and meddle with one another, but that he should dispose well of what in the true sense is properly his own. (443b-d)

When the three aspects of the soul, the rational, spirited, and appetitive, which all individuals possess, are doing their own job, the individual person is just. Justice applies to the ordinary individual as well as the philosopher ruler. The referent of the just person in the text is anyone or everyman.⁴² The just man, according to Socrates does not embezzle, commit adultery or neglect his parents (442-43b). Obviously these characteristics could not apply to the rulers, living as they do with all things in common. They have no parents in the ordinary sense that they could neglect, nor have they wives to whom they could be unfaithful. Not allowed to possess money or valuables of any kind, the rulers could not be guilty of embezzlement. Consequently, those who would refrain from these actions could only be the ordinary individuals of the just state.

Perhaps the most telling argument for the justice of the ordinary individual in the ideal state is that only if the individual were inwardly just could it be assured that the individual would perform well his social job or function. Otherwise if not really inwardly just, the individual could well seize an opportunity to misuse his skills. Knowledge of a skill or craft could be misused by a craftsman to reach an order of society for which the craftsman is not qualified thus violating the principle of the justice of the state.⁴³ Only inward justice guarantees that craft knowledge will not be misused to create injustice within the state. The Platonically just man

⁴²J. B. Skemp, "Comment on Communal and Individual Justice," *Phronesis* 5/1 (1960): 35-38.

⁴³*Les. Hip.*, 367c; *Rep.*, 333e-34a; J. Moreau, *La Construction de l'idealisme Platonicien* (Paris, 1939) 105-106.

having first attained to self-mastery and beautiful order within himself . . . and made of himself . . . one man instead of many, self controlled . . . should then and then only turn to practice if he find aught to do either in the getting of wealth or the tending of the body or it may be in political action or private business. (443d-e)

Platonic justice, then, constitutes the primary aspect if not the essence of the personality of the individual. Standard interpretations of the *Republic* have denied the extension of this concept of personality to the ordinary individual because of a confusion of the achievement of justice of the state with that of justice of the individual. In employing the famous political analogy between soul and state to arrive at the justice of the soul, Socrates justifies the principle of the division of labor in society on the grounds that human beings are naturally unequal in the sort of jobs they can perform in society, "our several natures are not all alike but different. One man is naturally fitted for one task, and another for another" (370a-b).

This declaration of a fundamental difference in natural aptitude for social functioning has been taken to signify a difference in the nature of the person. The individual with the capacity for philosophical rule was supposedly more of a person than an artisan. This confuses one's social aptitude for societal functioning with one's generic aptitude to attain the excellence that constitutes in large part the realization of the personhood of human beings. Although all individuals are unequal in the first aptitude, they are equal in the latter, for that is the defining characteristic of what it is to be a human being. The aptitude or potentiality to acquire excellence or Platonic justice does not, of course, guarantee that it will be realized. For Plato such realization requires life and education in the right kind of society.

Despite the evidence cited above, especially the passage dealing with the doing of one's own internal business, many critics continue to maintain that only the philosopher rulers can acquire Platonic justice.⁴⁴ This denial of Platonic justice to the ordinary individual of the ideal state is justified on the grounds that only the philosophers have the necessary wisdom required for justice of the person. Because in the *Republic*, wisdom of the state requires knowledge of the idea of the good or of the forms, it is

⁴⁴J. Cooper, "The Psychology of Justice in the *Republic*," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14/91 (1977): 153-54.

claimed wisdom of the individual requires the same kind of knowledge for Platonic justice. Lacking knowledge of the forms, the ordinary individual can not possibly be just.

As it applies to both the state and to the person, wisdom is ambiguous. N. R. Murphy correctly contends that it does not follow that merely because the ordinary member of the ideal state is unable to gain knowledge of the forms, that individual also lacks the wisdom or knowledge for Platonic justice. Rightly Murphy emphasizes that it is a higher knowledge, not a higher morality or justice, that distinguishes the ordinary person from the philosopher.⁴⁵ Wisdom arising from knowledge of the forms may well be a higher kind of virtue possessed only by the philosophers. Anticipating Aristotle's distinction between the intellectual and the moral virtues, however, Plato explicitly distinguishes knowledge of the idea of the good as a higher virtue from the wisdom and other ordinary virtues of Book IV.

Because they do not realize this ambiguity of wisdom as it is used in the *Republic*, many critics deny that the ordinary citizen of the ideal state can be Platonically just. They seem to miss this ambiguity because they accept as final the well known distinction in Book V between empirical opinion and knowledge of the forms. Even when right, such opinion is totally inadequate for Platonic justice since it differs in its nature and objects from the nature and objects of knowledge (478a). Therefore, the ordinary individual has no way of knowing Platonic justice and how to attain it. Only the philosophers have the necessary knowledge of the forms to attain Platonic justice. But the *Republic* does display right opinion of another sort that would allow its possessor to have Platonic justice and the wisdom that is associated with it.

In the *Republic*, Socrates unveiled a non empirical right opinion produced by education which produced courage in the state by imparting to the auxiliaries, those whose social function was to defend the state, an "unfailing conservation of right and lawful belief" about what would be feared and what should not be feared (430B). Extrapolated from this context, educated right opinion is a way of awareness for the ordinary citizen. It is more than right opinion in a pejorative sense, but less than knowledge of the forms. Socrates' scornful rejection of right opinion

⁴⁵N. R. Murphy, "The Comparison of Lives in Plato's *Philebus*," *Classical Quarterly* 32 (1938): 123-24.

without knowledge as an “ugly thing” implies a right opinion with knowledge or awareness (585c). Finally Socrates assimilates true or right opinion to knowledge and reason because they all belong to “things that are more excellent” and partake of “true essence” (585c).

Surely this sort of right opinion is radically different from right opinion as it is usually discussed in the *Republic* as being concerned only with things and concepts of this world. Kin to reason and knowledge, such educated right opinion can bring about within the ordinary individual the awareness necessary for Platonic justice. Taken as both phronesis and sophia, such wisdom has aptly been described as compatible with “a very ordinary level of intelligence.”⁴⁶ Unlike empirical right opinion, educated right opinion has some understanding of truth for “to opine the things that are is to have the truth” (413a).

With its acceptance of assumptions and awareness of the same objects as knowledge, educated right opinion seems like the stage of thinking (dianoia) of the divided line. Instead of being concerned with the assumptions and objects of mathematics as thinking is, educated right opinion deals with the assumptions and objects of morality and politics. But just as a person at the stage of dianoia uses assumptions to infer in a series of logical steps a conclusion so the person of educated right opinion knows how to be just (442c). As Vlastos put it, “One does not need to be a philosopher to run through practical syllogisms whose major premises are true beliefs.”⁴⁷

Two problems arise from this discussion of personhood in Plato’s thought, the status of women and the existence of slavery in the practical state of the Laws if not the ideal state of the *Republic*. Much contemporary scholarship in Plato’s thought has, favorably or unfavorably, centered on Plato’s acknowledgement that women as well as men can function as rulers.⁴⁸ There is, however, little discussion of those women who do not have such social capabilities as the philosopher queens. They seem relegated to the chores of family life. The concern with the role of philoso-

⁴⁶Ibid., 123.

⁴⁷G. Vlastos, “Justice and Happiness in the *Republic*,” *Ethics, Politics and Philosophy of Art and Religion*, vol. 2 of *Plato*, ed. G. Vlastos (New York, 1971).

⁴⁸For a careful and judicious assessment of past and present accounts of Plato’s feminism, see Natalie H. Bluestone, *Women and the Ideal Society* (Amherst, 1987).

pher queens as an indication of an incipient feminism or misogyny has obscured the larger issue of whether there *is* any sense in which all men and women are equal. The passage I have referred to above, 353, certainly suggests a fundamental generic equality which logically should extend to all women as well as men. As rational human beings, women have as their generic function taking charge of themselves, deliberating etc. which can be done well or badly. Recognition that all women have the same generic function as men also implies that they, too, display the most essential features of personhood.

The mistaken conviction that one's social function determines personhood underlies the granting of personhood to philosopher queens and its denial to other women. One recent study defines personhood in terms of social function:

every person is defined by his or her function: the education and working life of each citizen are to be dedicated to the optimal performance of a single craft.⁴⁹

Because the philosopher queens have all things in common and consequently have no husbands or children that interfere with their social function as rulers, Plato, according to this study, "has no alternative but to consider them as persons in their own right."⁵⁰ In contrast, married women are apparently non persons because as "privately owned appendages" of men they are defined in relation to particular men, children and households. But Okin's conclusion here is a result of the ignoring of the Platonic statement of a fundamental generic human equality. This particular study opened on a promising note in rightly claiming because the soul has intrinsic value that moral goodness is the key to Plato's political philosophy. Obviously Okin threw away that key in identifying personhood not with what constituted the inherent value of the soul but with one's social function.

I should stress that although social function may be an aspect of personhood, it is not by any means from Plato's point of view the most important. The primary locus of personhood is the soul and the realization

⁴⁹Susan Moller Okin, "Philosopher Queens and Private Wives: Plato on Women and the Family," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (Spring 1977): 356. The substance of this article has been included in Okin's *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, 1979).

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 357.

of its distinctive function that results in Platonic justice, a soul which all human beings, both men and women, philosophers and nonphilosophers possess. To equate personhood with one's social function rather than with one's distinctive human function is to ignore Plato's concern with the soul and its intrinsic value as just.

A second problem in assessing Plato's theory of the person is that of slavery. The problem exists in the practical state of the *Laws* rather than the ideal state of the *Republic*. There seems no place for the functioning of slaves in the *Republic* since all of the necessary social tasks are performed by the citizens.⁵¹ Slavery, however, does play an important role in the practical state of the *Laws*. Unlike Aristotle, Plato does not believe that some human beings by nature are slaves. Being a slave by nature would suggest an innate mental deficiency, a lack of rationality which from Plato's view would run counter to the predication of the three aspects of the soul. In the *Meno* Plato showed how a slave boy could be taught to have right opinions that would eventually turn into knowledge.⁵² Like many of his contemporaries, Plato accepted slavery as a necessary institution that was not unjust and required no special defense. But that did not mean that human beings were naturally slaves because they lacked reason. Some human beings were slaves by convention, not by nature. Plato suggests that a slave may be troublesome at times because it would be difficult to convince him that there are the two categories of masters and slaves which are necessary for practical purposes.⁵³ If slaves have been "the salvation of their masters' persons and property and homes" it would be improbable that these slaves were lacking reason.⁵⁴ Finally, if some human beings were naturally slaves it would be unnatural for them to be emancipated as freedmen by their masters or the state.⁵⁵ For Plato, then, that slaves are at least potentially persons although they may not be recognized as such by law and convention.

⁵¹This is a minority position.

⁵²*Meno* 82a-86d.

⁵³*Laws* 777b.

⁵⁴*Laws* 776d.

⁵⁵*Laws* 915a-c.

Intrinsic Value of Personhood

The second primary feature of personhood is the concept of the individual as an end in himself or herself. Plato does not use this Kantian terminology, but he does emphasize the soul as, next to the gods the most important concern of persons.⁵⁶ Plato agrees with the historical Socrates that justice or morality is valuable for itself and its consequences, but adds that it is valuable much more for itself. Hypothetically, if morality were divested of its beneficial consequences, for Plato it would still be intrinsically worthwhile, a possibility not envisaged by what we know of the historical Socrates.⁵⁷ In the *Republic* Adeimantus succinctly presents a challenge to Socrates to show the intrinsic value of justice apart from external consequences:

you have admitted that justice belongs to the class of highest goods which are desirable both for their consequences and still more for their own sake . . . this is what I would have you praise about justice- -the benefit which it and the harm which injustice inherently works upon its possessor. But the rewards and the honors . . . leave to others to praise. . . . Do not . . . merely prove to us in argument the superiority of justice to injustice, but show us what it is that each inherently does to its possessor . . . whereby the one is good and the other evil. (*Rep.* 367c-e)

The intrinsic value of justice is grounded on the person's realization of the unique generic human function. This realization assumes all the more value as the closest possible approximation of the form of justice. Repeatedly Plato emphasizes that the purpose of his ideal state is to bring justice to the souls of the citizens.⁵⁸ For the choice of justice over injustice is the supreme or best choice for a person to make in this life and the afterlife.⁵⁹ Although Plato believes in personal immortality, the value of Platonic justice does not depend on the afterlife. The justification of the inherent

⁵⁶*Laws* 726e.

⁵⁷*Republic* 366d-67a. At 361b-d, Glaucon confronts Socrates with the problem of proving the intrinsic value of justice in a person whom all think is unjust, whose possessions are confiscated, and whose life is ended by torture and execution.

⁵⁸See, e.g., *Republic* 500.

⁵⁹*Republic* 618e.

value of justice in the soul is independent of belief in the afterlife although its significance may be enhanced by such a belief.

The *Laws* underscores the essence of one's personality as being grounded in justice. The human being's personhood is determined by the soul, "what each one of us his being is nothing else but his soul, whereas my body is just the likeness of myself that I carry around with me" (959a-b). The soul is that which a person can call his/her "own." The soul is the "most intimate possession" of a human being (726a). Virtue is the highest of all the goods of the soul and the condition of all other goods, physical and material (697b). Far from emphasizing the importance of the state's well being over the individual, Plato in a surprisingly ignored passage asserts that citizens of a state which is impeding their efforts to acquire morality have the right to overthrow it or to go into exile (770d-e). As in the *Republic* Plato does stress that virtue and happiness do go together, but still he maintains the inherent value of virtue.

The Platonic concern for the moral well being of the person is apparent in his theory of punishment as it is presented in the dialogues.⁶⁰ Although punishment may involve deterrence where reform fails, its primary purpose is to reform the criminal on "individualistic humanitarian grounds in that it exhibits benevolence toward the individual criminal."⁶¹ Punishment is primarily reformatory because of Plato's conviction that evil is involuntary and based on the corrigible ignorance of the wrong-doer. Because of the inherent value of the soul in its moral disposition, Plato would spare no effort to turn the criminal toward morality. Not only is the purpose of the state and legislation the realization of what appears as the moral personality of individuals as the locus of intrinsic worth, but the sole aim of punishment is the rehabilitation of the criminal so that the wrong-doer's moral personality can be restored or attained. Vital, then, in the Platonic concept of the person is the just soul as having an inherent value.

⁶⁰This is the thesis of Margaret Mackenzie's interesting study, *Plato on Punishment* (Berkeley, 1981).

⁶¹For example, *Laws* 854d. Mackenzie, *Plato*, 216. It should be noted, however, that death is meted out in especial cases for those deemed incurably evil as in *Laws* 909a. But the justification is not in terms of retribution but for the good of the criminal. Death is preferable to life with an incurably diseased soul.

Legal Rights and Duties

Plato's dialogues seem replete with the concept of legal rights and duties. The *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Gorgias* attest to the importance of observing the duties and correlative rights even in existing societies. Even in the *Republic* with its rule of the omniscient philosopher king there is need of law to set out rights and duties.⁶² The emphasis in the *Statesman* on the rule of law in the absence of someone like the philosopher kind is amplified in the *Laws*. The *Laws* present criteria for legislation which provide an appropriate context for specific laws which set out the duties and rights of citizens in the complex web of social interaction. Plato, I think, satisfies the requirements of adequate legislation. Laws are declared and clearly formulated for the benefit of the legal system and for the citizens. A suitable court system exists with courts before which a person can bring an action and receive a fair and equitable hearing with the ability, if desired, to appeal to a higher court. Legislation provides against abuse by all officers of government who are held accountable for their actions during their tenure both while in office and after. Legal remedies exist to enable abuses of official power to be exposed and redressed. No authority is above the law. The entire legal system and the state itself is, as I have indicated dedicated to bringing about both the good citizen and the virtuous person.

The Social Function of Persons

I have already discussed the contrast between two sorts of function developed in the *Republic* which are usually not realized by students of Plato. The first kind of function that I have discussed at length is the generic human function whose well performance results in Platonic justice or arete. All persons, I suggested, are equal in having the potentiality for achieving such justice. The actual achievement of justice is not guaranteed. It is possible only in the right kind of society, that of the ideal state of the *Republic* or the practical state of the *Laws*. But all individuals are unequal in the kind of social function for which they are naturally suited. It is this

⁶²On this criterion see Glenn Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City* (1970) 544-73.

inequality or diversity of function that underlies the justice of the state in the *Republic*:

Justice [of the state] is that every individual ought to have some one occupation in the state which should be that to which the individual's natural capacity was best suited. (433a)

Socrates makes it quite clear that every individual must have some social occupation to attain the justice of the state. Plato is suggesting that performance of one's social function also is the realization of one's natural abilities which is important for the realization of all the potentialities of personhood. In the ideal state of the *Republic* what is vital is not so much that a person performs one specific social function, but remains within one of the three orders for which the individual is naturally suited.⁶³

All women, not merely philosopher queens, perform a social function. Socrates emphasizes that for purposes of distinguishing between the kinds of social functions open to both men and women, classification of differences and similarities between the two sexes is not on the basis that the "male begets" and the "female bears," but on the ground of what is "pertinent to the pursuits themselves." According to Socrates, a man and woman both of whom have a doctor's mind are of the same nature.⁶⁴ With this reference to the medical art immediately preceded by Socrates' concern to discover the differences among the sexes, if any, relevant to all social functions, Plato clearly intends women based on their natural abilities to participate in the full range of social activities in the state. There are no sexual differences which bar women from doing the same kind of social task as men.

The additional references to women's differing abilities with regard to war, athletics, and medicine also testify to the openness of all women depending on their natural abilities to differing occupations. Although Plato concedes that the class of men is generally superior to the class of women in various occupations, nonetheless he contends that "many women are better than many men in many things" (455d).⁶⁵ Obviously the "many

⁶³*Republic* 434a.

⁶⁴*Republic* 454b.

⁶⁵In his "Plato and the Equality of Women," *Phoenix* 29/3 (1975): 236-37, Brian Calvert suggests that Plato is generalizing about the class of men and women and that Plato "is not making a distributive claim to the effect that all the

things” in which many women are better than many men and for which they have a natural aptitude include many crafts and skills. Since women do excel many men in different occupations, some women are far better than most men at being guardians. Hence they are to become future philosopher queens. For Plato, then, women are not restricted to the familial life. They also are to perform well that social function for which they are naturally suited to attain the justice of the state. Plato takes it for granted that the performance of a social function for which a person is best suited will contribute to that person’s happiness although the necessary condition for such happiness is the attainment of justice within the soul.

Conclusion

Plato does have a theory of the person which encompasses aspects of his moral, political, and metaphysical thought. Human beings are set off from all other beings by the possession of reason and a distinctive, practical rational function whose realization results in justice, a necessary, if not sufficient condition of personality. For Plato justice of the soul has an intrinsic value. It is this intrinsic value which is the primary end of the state both in its legislation and institutions. The intrinsic value of the just soul is increased by its approximation of the form justice adding a metaphysical self realization to the ethical. Rights and duties as primarily set out in legislation are to provide the proper framework for the attainment of Platonic justice. The final aspect of personhood is evident in Plato’s concern that individuals should perform that social function for which they were naturally suited. In the practical state of the *Laws*, social functioning within a craft context was replaced by an active participation by all citizens in the affairs of the state. Both sorts of functioning add a relatively external dimension to the realization of personhood. Plato’s apotheosis of the personhood of individuals can well be characterized by the saying which is implicitly in his moral thought, “what does it profit a person if the person should gain the whole world and lose his/her soul?”