

Plato
The Philosopher & The Forms

Sections 327 to 374e of Republic deal with the nature of morality and justice relating both to the foundations of the state and how the state might reflect the nature of justice.

Broadly speaking, these can be divided in relation to the participating characters. – Firstly, Socrates discusses the nature of morality and justice with Cephalus (justice is returning what one owes). The following discussion with Polymarchus considers a modified definition of justice that was the product of Socrates' discussion with Cephalus (justice is doing good to one's friends and harm to one's enemies). The subsequent discussion with Thrasymachus takes a slightly different path, claiming that justice is what is good for the stronger. This section culminates in Glaucon's challenge - a modified version of Thrasymachus' definition in which Glaucon challenges Socrates to demonstrate that justice is in the interests of the just man and injustice to the disadvantage of the unjust man (367b). In short, Glaucon's challenge is: why should I be moral? Within this discussion Socrates, Glaucon and Adiemantus agree that the way to tackle the problem of finding the precise nature of justice is to examine how it works collectively – i.e. in a complex social construct (namely a city or state).

It is now time to address sections (474 – 521b). Arguably, these sections contain some of the most important aspects of Plato's philosophy; not just in the *Republic*, but in the dialogues as a whole. I will occasionally cross-reference the themes as presented in the *Republic* with similar ideas in other dialogues - particularly the *Meno* and *Gorgias*. The main aspects of this section concern the nature of philosophy (and the philosopher), the difference between knowledge and belief (its metaphysical, epistemological and ethical implications), the *Forms* and the tripartite nature of the soul. The *Forms* (often referred to as Plato's *Theory of Forms* or *Theory of Ideas*¹) provides the

central plank of much of Plato's middle and later work. They are, perhaps, what Plato is most famous for and are still hotly contested within contemporary metaphysics (metaphysics is the study of the underlying principles of reality). Plato also spends much time considering the tension between the idea and the actual; what is theoretically ideal and what would be possible in practice. This tension is something that can still be observed in contemporary political thought (consider, for instance the tension between communism (or socialism) in theory and its practical applications). 474-521b is also famous for the simile of the sun, the theory of the divided line and the allegory of the cave. It is important to remember that each aspect of this section is related to every other. The overall point of the passage from 474 -521b is to show that it has to be run by philosophers (philosopher kings/rulers)

I am actually going to begin at 472b, as this provides a better starting point from which to address this section.

After a good deal of relevant but tangential discussion in Books III, IV and V, it is demanded that Socrates returns to the issue at hand – *viz.* finding out what the nature of justice and injustice are (472b). Following this, Socrates asks a question that encapsulates many of the themes that are expanded during this section: “*If a painter paints a picture of an ideally beautiful man, complete to the last detail, is he any the worse painter because he cannot show that such a man could really exist?*” (472d). Here we have, in a single question, the uncertainty of whether pure theory, rather than something that actually exists, is constructive in terms of thinking about actual possibility. Moreover, it raises the idea of something that is ideal – the ideally beautiful man. This is directly related to Plato's *Forms*.

Before continuing I will explain the *Theory of Forms*, as it will make things easier later on. Basically, the idea is that the concepts we have, such as virtue, beauty and geometry, have perfect transcendent ‘forms’ which exist independent of any examples of those things. One way to imagine

¹ Roughly speaking, the Greek word *Eidos* translates as “idea”. It has become synonymous with the Theory of Forms/Theory of Ideas. A related way to think of it is as

referring to the thing in common between different objects referred to by the same word.

what Plato means by forms is to think about mathematical concepts. The number 2 does not exist in the world: there are two pencils there and two chairs here. There is the inky squiggle “2” and the sound that is “two” but no 2 as such in our experience. Any particular instantiation (example) of 2 does not capture all of these dimensions. Put another way: we may see a beautiful sunset, see beauty in a work of literature, a mathematical equation or another person. In each of these cases, the qualitative experience of beauty is different. The beauty of a sunset is quite distinct from that perceived in a mathematical equation; no single experience of beauty can capture all the different kinds of beauty. Similarly, there are no absolutely perfect circles in the world – yet we call an imperfect circle (such as the Millennium Dome) circular in reference to some ideal we have never seen, but all understand. Put another way: the forms are an attempt to explain the relation between concepts and manifestations of particular examples (particulars). The question that gave rise to it is: how can things that seem dissimilar actually be of the same kind? Think about the concept of “game”. There are many different kinds of game all of which involve very different activities – consider the dissimilarities between cricket and chess for instance, or the differences between playing patience and bouncing a ball against the wall and catching it; compare these with darts and so on. Each activity is a particular (and imperfect) example of a game, the practices of which are so different from each other, that it is difficult to see what unites them. The *Theory of Forms* is an attempt to unite particulars (e.g. each different games) under a general concept (in this case, game).² Each particular partakes in the form of “game”.

A shortened version of the theory looks like this: no (sensible) particular is absolutely F, meaning that it is F now in one sense but not in another sense; or is F now but may not be later today.

Plato believed the forms to be a part of reality; eternal and unchanging no matter how human beings may conceive of reality. Plato thought that beauty and justice exist and always will do,

² The modern version of this thought distinguishes between universals and particulars.

irrespective of whether there is anyone around to experience either.

Let us now turn, once again, to the beginning of the section under consideration. After asking his question about the painter, the discussion turns to the question: what is it that stops a city from achieving what, in theory, seems possible? *Does practice ever square with theory? Is it not in the nature of things that, whatever people think, practice should come less close to truth than theory?* (473a). Following this, Socrates suggests that their theoretical society can be transformed into practice by effecting “a single change...” (473c). The single change is putting philosophers at the centre of government (at this point, Glaucon’s response is one of condescension (474a-b)).³ Thus, in order to make plausible his claim that he can effect (bring about) the transition from theory to practice, Socrates needs to demonstrate the nature of the philosopher. His first move is to describe the philosopher as a lover of knowledge (475c); he follows this by saying: “*But the man who is ready to taste every branch of learning, is glad to learn and never satisfied – he’s the man who deserves to be called the philosopher, isn’t he?*” Glaucon replies: “*That description covers a lot of peculiar people...*” (475c-d). Philosophers still have that reputation today! It is at this point that the forms are first properly introduced. Glaucon asks Socrates what loving truth really amounts to (475e). Socrates’ reply is typically meandering. He distinguishes between beauty and ugliness, justice and injustice, good and evil. Each of these is an opposite and, while related to one another in that sense, each is a distinct entity (476a)⁴. Each of these is a *Form*. Thus we have the form of beauty, ugliness, good, evil, justice, injustice and so on.

Philosophers are to be distinguished from your average citizen. Socrates draws attention to such a kind of citizen. “*Those who love looking and listening are delighted by beautiful sounds, colours and shapes...but their minds are incapable of seeing and delighting in the essential*

³ Glaucon gets the wrong end of the stick. He thinks that Socrates’ comments indicate that the philosopher is a jack of all trades but master of none; someone who likes a taste of everything but knows little about anything in detail.

⁴ “Good” is distinct from “evil” for example.

nature of beauty itself" (476b). He goes on to suggest that those who recognise the existence of beautiful things but do not believe in beauty itself are living as if in a dream (476c)⁵.

If we think back to the beginning of this discussion, it should now be possible to see why practice has not been squared with theory in terms of the formation of a just city. Given that cities and states are not governed by those who aspire to the *Forms*, it follows that such rulers will only ever have an incomplete and, as such, imperfect, understanding of what is good and what is just. That is, in essence, "*what prevents them from being run like ours*" (473b).

⁵ "*Isn't dreaming simply the confusion between resemblance and the reality which it resembles, whether the dreamer be asleep or awake?*"