

## *Justice (in a hurry)*

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### *Introduction*

I don't have much time - only 35 minutes.

We don't have much time - I'm also thinking beyond the time of this seminar to any number of fundamental crises - anthropogenic climate change, accelerating global inequity, increasing social division/conflict across multiple geopolitical scales.

There had once, it seems, been simply time - incremental, measurable time. It is what the Ancient Greeks termed *chronos* - predictable, laborious, ultimately cyclical. But they also conceived another time, *kairos*, which is crisis - 'the right or critical time' in which something must happen or risk not occurring at all. To miss the moment of *kairos* is to lose forever an opportunity.

Within this context, to consider Plato just now - to devote 35 minutes of our shared and rapidly disappearing time to his conception of justice - may seem to do little more than let things slip. Mulling over ideas developed some 2500 years ago, in very different circumstances, we miss the opportunity to do something more relevant and effective.

Of course, it may be that the thought of doing something - of effectively intervening within our situation - is integral to the nature of our crisis. It may be that the very thinking of human agency and our human need always - and above all - to act aligns very closely with all of our problems, however this may not be quite the right moment to make this point.

It should also be noted that Plato's time was not entirely distant from our own. It was also conceived in terms of *kairos*. Plato wrote with the sense that a traditional order was dissolving - Athens had been defeated by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War, reducing its wider authority, while regimes of tyranny and chaotic democracy threatened domestic political order. Certainly there was nothing resembling our existential threat of climate change (the cycle of the

seasons remained intact) but there was still the sense that Greek society faced profound challenges and was balanced above a frightening precipice.

But I must make haste. If we really must hear about Plato's conception of justice, let us immediately address this topic. I should describe it as briefly as possible and swiftly move on to explain its relevance to our current circumstances.

### *Dilemmas of Fairness*

Sorry, but a slight digression is necessary at the outset. Before describing Plato's conception of justice it is worth saying a word or two about our own - and about how the shortcomings of our conception suggests the potential value of considering Plato.

American philosopher John Rawls (1971) employs a useful shorthand definition. Justice, he explains, is about fairness (and its social elaboration). On the basis of this definition, standard accounts specify a number of particular contexts of justice.<sup>1</sup> There is the fairness of how social goods are divided up (economic or distributive justice), the fairness of how various systemic institutional processes are made available and applied (procedural justice) and the fairness of punishment for any wrong done to another party (retributive justice). Despite the apparent simplicity of the concept of fairness, any effort to assess fairness can quickly become complex. For instance, how should the distribution of social wealth be calculated? An equal share to every person? According to people's particular needs? On the basis of each person's particular contribution to the sum of wealth? And what if this contribution involves no particular labour whatsoever but simply the usury and exploitation that we can recognise as the systemic condition for capitalist accumulation? More generally,

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the *Beyond Intractability* website: <https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/twosidesofjustice#:~:text=This%20article%20points%20out%20that,Al%20four%20of%20these%20are>

how can economic justice within modern liberal democracies be restricted to 'fairness of opportunity' (procedural justice), but altogether suspended at the level of 'fairness of outcome'? How is it that the thinking of equality is so easily bracketed in our considerations of social justice, so that any more basic of evaluation of fairness appears naive and is replaced by elaborate alibis for social inequity?

Two more basic problems. Firstly, the notion of justice as fairness seems to obscure fundamental features of injustice. Any calculation, for instance, of economic fairness depends upon recognising not only a particular whole that is susceptible to fair division, but also a determined set of parties who have a right to a specific share. Here two issues are apparent. Firstly, how is any particular whole given to a community for fairly or unfairly divided benefit? On what basis can individuals and communities lay claim to whatever they possess? How are resources, products and property justified as such? Surely they have their basis in instances of violence linked to relations of unequal power more than any fundamental context of justice? Secondly, how are the parties to any given share calculated? The calculation of social parts as a finite multiplicity necessarily involves both inclusion and exclusion. In this sense, the fair division of the whole constitutively disregards all manner of others who fall outside the equation - whether they be disenfranchised figures within a community (slaves, for instance, within Ancient Greece), other people altogether (barbarians, foreigners, refugees), other living things or disregarded features of the wider field of material relations (the inanimate 'commons').

Perhaps these dilemmas are easily addressed? Perhaps all that is needed is to conceive a more general principle of fair justice - one, for instance, that aims to exercise its awkward injustice in the least damaging ways and that can also flexibly and ethically respond to emerging circumstances. We may envisage a sustainable, ecologically negotiated societal sum that involves less any work of the Hegelian *aufhebung* than some neutral, collaborative and symbiotic field of benefit. We may also envisage something like an

infinite call to justice, which is oriented beyond any fixed determination and is constantly seeking to acknowledge other parties - a fairness, if you like, without any defined quantity or any definite calculation. But this is to move away from the thinking of equality as such. This suggests the need to think fairness differently, beyond any ordinary notion of symmetrical equivalence. This is where, perversely perhaps, Plato's conception of justice may prove useful.

### *Guitars and Souls*

Two examples will assist in explaining what Plato means by justice: the justice of a well-tuned guitar; and the justice of a well-composed soul.

Before considering these examples, it is worth observing that Plato does not conceive justice as we conceive it - or even as his contemporaries conceived it. His notion of justice has a strangeness, which is an important part of its continuing value. In this respect, his conception aligns with a significant, although often neglected, feature of Ancient Greek philosophy - its distance from common understanding, which indicates not only any calmly wise superiority but also an experience of exile. The philosopher is not simply and unequivocally authoritative but is also a liminal figure, living and thinking at the margins of society.

Turning to our examples...

Think of a guitar. How do we know that it is functioning properly? Is it because it plays any particular note properly or any particular chord? Must we play every note and chord to check that it is playing properly? Of course not. No such discrete process is required. Instead we check for the overall tuning of the guitar. If each string is well chosen so that its gauge is suited to playing its assigned share of the pitch spectrum and each string is tuned appropriately relative to the other strings, we can attest, in overall and systemic terms, that the guitar is tuned. For Plato, justice represents a form of tuning. It becomes manifest when each part plays its appropriate role in contributing to an integral and harmonious whole. This propriety of parts and whole is not only

relative - it is not only internally given - but is conceived as having a natural basis. The thickness of the low E string makes it naturally suited for playing bass notes, just as the thinness of the high E string makes it suitable for playing treble and alto notes. In these terms, the justice of a well-tuned instrument is not only internally coherent but provides an instance of external and extensive coherence. Its musical integrity demonstrates the harmony of the wider cosmos.<sup>2</sup>

The justice of the soul may appear, in the manner of guitar tuning, as a metaphor, but actually corresponds very closely to the model of political society. The just soul is conceived in terms of a proper arrangement of appetitive, emotional and rational aspects. The soul's appetitive, emotional and reasonable components can be likened to the strings on a guitar, with each playing an appropriate role in contributing to the overall harmony of our being. The appetites attend to our physical needs, the emotions lend us courage and fortitude, while reason tempers and coordinates the overall ensemble. However, the justice of the soul adds an additional element. Unlike the relation between guitar strings, each part of the soul does not have equivalent standing. Most importantly, the justice of the soul is conceived in terms of a hierarchy. The rational component of the soul presides over both the appetitive and emotional components. Justice involves not only each component fulfilling its naturally given role but also a natural ordering of the parts so that some justly preside over others.

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<sup>2</sup> In this context, it is worth noting the difference between so-called 'just' intonation and equal temperament intonation. The former attends most closely to the external justice of the harmonic series and to aspects of harmony within a particular scale, while the latter - in dividing each octave up into twelve strictly equal increments - veers from dimensions of natural order to manifest a more musically flexible internal order. Just intonation emphasises a cosmic and contextual justice of pure intervals, while equal temperament stresses the practical and impure justice of the specific instrument.

It is worth noting that Plato has a general conception of the soul. In the same manner that Aristotle refers to a range of souls (the souls of plants, animals and human beings) - and even Thales' magnet can be conceived in terms of having a soul, in that it literally makes things move - Plato also acknowledges a general and inclusive notion of the soul.<sup>3</sup> The mention of rationality may seem to instantly exclude anything but human souls, but this is to neglect that Socrates also argues, for example, that dogs are philosophical. Apparently, their capacity to make the logical distinction between friends and enemies demonstrates essential features of philosophical intelligence (376a). This is partly a joke but not altogether one. Despite whatever lends reason and philosophy superiority, it also, strangely, provides a point of return to the wider living and non-living field. This will become clearer when we consider how philosophy, as the self-consciousness of justice, evolves from and responds to an inevitable dimension of injustice.

### *The Justice of the City*

Plato's actual title for the *Republic* was *Politeia*, which signals not any particular mode of governance but rather the systemic character of any given arrangement. The justice of the city relates to a particular ordering of parts and whole. More specifically, it resides in each person diligently performing the role that they are suited to play. The justice of the city (*polis*) is conceived in terms that closely correspond to the justice of the soul. One large group of people should focus on the sphere of appetite - on attending to any number of physical needs (and possibly excessive desires). Farmers should provide food. Builders should construct shelters.

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<sup>3</sup> In the final section of the dialogue, Plato describes the scene in which souls must choose their next life: 'There were far more than there were people present, and they were of every conceivable variety, including all the different forms of animal life and, of course, all human lives' (618a).

Craftspeople should make useful (and most likely luxurious) things. Merchants and retailers should establish markets so various goods can be distributed through the community. Another group of people - the so-called guardians - are associated with the emotions, but not quite as we may expect; they are not given to laughter or tears or any species of immoderate emotion, but rather demonstrate a fierce and spirited determination to protect the city from both internal and external threats. The guardians are primarily soldiers and a considerable portion of the *Republic* is devoted to considering how this class of citizens should be educated and trained. A final very select group of citizens is drawn from the guardians. They represent the best of the guardians - not so much the strongest or bravest, but the most wise. Plato conceives these people as the proper rulers of the well-composed city. He provocatively argues that they should be philosophers. As the most reasonable citizens, philosophers should preside over how things are arranged. Indeed, their authority is the very index of societal justice.

Before considering a particular aspect of Plato's scheme more closely it is worth highlighting at least one immediate point of positive value - relevant not only within the crisis of the Athenian city state but also now. This is the insistence upon the need to attend to issues integrally and systemically rather than in piecemeal fashion. Thinking justice in terms of the beneficial arrangement of parts and whole is worthwhile, despite all manner of relevant objections, inasmuch as it encourages holistic, broadly ecological reflection upon fundamental features of arrangement both within society and in terms of our relation to the wider field of living and non-living systems.

Nonetheless, anything positive about Plato's notion of justice must instantly be qualified by all manner of doubts. For a start, we may wonder, for instance, how reason is identified and neatly separated from the emotional and appetitive aspects of the city and soul? What is this reasonable component subsisting entirely on its own? And how can it desire anything in particular since it is cut off and removed from the appetites? Or is it? What, after all, does the

love of wisdom (philosophy) imply? What kind of love is this? We may also ask, quite sensibly, on what basis the regime of reasonable authority is preferred? Is it preferred only on the basis of fear, compromise and envy? Is it a means of constraining any temptation towards excess in ourselves and others? Is it the means by which we each take hold of as much as we can without yet quite offending others - without tempting them to take back what we have already stolen (property and the liberal social contract)? Or, more deviously, is it the subterfuge by which an overall ecology of excess is enabled (global capitalism)?

However, a more standard line of criticism focuses on the socially inequitable character of Plato's conception. Philosopher of science, Karl Popper (2011), rejects Plato's vision of the just city as totalitarian. With greater historical precision, political philosopher Ellen Meiksins Wood (2022) provides a scathing portrait of the anti-democratic features of Plato's justice, arguing that Plato defends the interests of oligarchy against efforts to allow any political role for the *demos* in Ancient Greek society. Similarly, French philosopher Jacques Ranciere (2004, p.13; 1999, p.22) argues that Plato's political philosophy provides an elaborate rationale for social inequity. Plato naturalises social hierarchy, denying all but the philosopher-guardians any scope for legitimate political participation and agency.

The justice of the city has a double identity for Plato. At the level of ordinary citizens, it is blind and atomic. It involves myopic absorption in expertise. However, for the philosopher-rulers it has a very different character. Their withdrawal from ordinary practical exigencies (labour, commerce, family life) and their education, which fosters broad understanding and skills in gymnastics, mathematics, music and dialectics, enables a recognition of the holistic justice of society. In these terms, Plato's conception appears elitist. Furthermore, it mystifies justice, rendering it a remote and rarefied thing. Unlike Aristotle, who portrays justice as a common, socially grounded human capacity (1972 pp.28-29), or the sophist Protagoras (1997), who insists upon the popular negotiation of justice as a rationale for inclusive



political participation (democracy), Plato reserves politics and the comprehension of justice only for the select few.

While these are pertinent criticisms they also lend the *Republic* a more strongly authoritarian air than the dialogue itself suggests. Plato's proposal is best regarded not as any practical scheme for the transformation of society, but rather as a provocation to consider the issues at stake. At one level it seriously considers the value of strictly specialised and hierarchical social order - in which, for instance, poets are banished and soldiers are permitted no literal families - but at another level, it comically and excessively poses these as options in order to interrogate mimetic art and the family. The value of Plato's philosophy is inextricably tied to its capacity for irony and, most especially, its seamless combination of the serious and the playful. Contemporary critics often imagine that they are picking apart a severe and inflexible social vision (and overall philosophical garment), when actually many apparently loose threads - obvious paradoxes and the like - are inherent features of Plato's philosophy.

For example, in the discussion of the training of the guardians, Socrates proposes the value of establishing an autochthonous myth that justifies the hierarchical organisation of society (414d-417b). Promoting the notion that some souls are cast from base iron, others from silver and other again from gold will assist in separating citizens into the fields of appetite, emotion and intellect. This is hardly an entirely serious proposition, particularly as Plato devotes a good part of the dialogue towards criticising myth and advocating for the greater wisdom and truth of philosophy. This playful recommendation of an artificial basis for social difference throws into doubt the whole effort to absolutely divide people - to categorise them according to their natural attributes. While it scarcely does this sufficiently to undermine Plato's social differential scheme, it certainly introduces the thought that it might involve an aspect of artifice.

Additional, less strictly socially differentiated examples include the unconventional recommendation that women train as soldiers

(452a) and perform any number of typically male roles within society. There is also the suggestion that a person's place within the social categories is not entirely fixed - that they can shift up or down depending on their talents (415c, 543a). In the midst then of strictly naturalised hierarchy, there is also the sense of meritocracy. More radically, late in the dialogue, Socrates entertains the possibility that all children should receive similar training to the guardians - they should be removed from their families (the field of customary practices and knowledge) and from any interaction with the corruption of the market (541a). But for what purpose? In order to train as what? As soldiers? As philosophers. Or just possibly to become citizens of a new Athenian city state in which people can genuinely recognise and reflect upon issues of justice - as well as, perhaps, politically participate in the arrangement of that justice? Socrates certainly never says such a thing. The notion of the general training of the children appears as a curiously inclusive passing recommendation - but one that nonetheless loosens any sense of an entirely inegalitarian social vision.

Finally, it is worth keeping in mind that Plato writes his philosophy. Although he can scarcely have anticipated his writing spreading so widely, the mere fact of writing summons a community of readers that necessarily extends beyond the Academy (his immediate circle and group of students). Indeed it reaches us now within the context of our own *kairos*. For the modern reader, the *Republic* encourages us less to stick to restricted field of expertise than to broaden our understanding and seek out the whole. In this sense, his conception discovers a more progressive potential. Above all, it suggests the value of a deeply reflective, yet socially engaged relation to the world. Indeed, this is consistent with the final portion of the dialogue, which highlight the soul's capacity to choose wisely and well between different modes of life. This wisdom is nothing reserved for any specialised and elite minority. It is positioned instead as available to all.

## *Getting Cosmic*

As a means of conceiving Plato's conception of justice in different, less instantly objectionable and more integrally Ancient Greek terms, it is worth recalling the earliest written fragment of Western philosophy - the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander's conception of the justice of the *apeiron* (infinite):

*Whence things have their origin, there they must also pass away according to necessity; for they must pay penalty and be judged for their injustice, according to the ordinance of time.<sup>4</sup>*

Anaximander speaks of 'things', not of human beings. He conceives a cosmic justice linked to 'necessity', which hinges on relations of manifestation and disappearance. Things emerge from the protean chaos of the infinite to take definite, coherent shape. It is in this process of obtaining distinct identity that they demonstrate an injustice. This injustice has nothing to do with doing anything unjust specifically. It involves no moral agency. Injustice has an ontological character - it is linked to existence as such. In consequence of this injustice, manifest things are then subject to the justice of the *apeiron*, which involves their dissolution, their collapse back down into the field of inchoate non-existence. Justice and injustice are less essentially opposed than placed in necessary relation.

From one perspective Anaximander's conception can be regarded as an anthropomorphism - a metaphor for explaining natural processes in humanly understandable terms. However, perhaps it is the other way around? Arguably, Anaximander proposes a conception of justice that natively exceeds the human - resembling something for us, in modern scientific terms, like the thermodynamic cycle. Nietzsche's translation of Anaximander's fragment - the one that I employ - certainly highlights a human

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<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche's translation of Simplicius (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*): <https://www.beyng.com/grk/anax1.html>:

context of justice, but the actual ancient term is *reck*, which has a broader meaning, indicating something like 'right', in the sense of how things are appropriately 'are' - how they are properly constituted. This potentially aligns with how Plato conceives justice - not as anything strictly humanly moral - but as a matter of appropriate arrangement that exceeds any particularly human frame.

Of course, one could argue equally that Plato's justice aims to universalise aspects of human morality - to make whatever is humanly good appear as absolutely good and then human justice to appear as an index of that cosmic good. I have no scope to address this very reasonable objection here. For my purposes, within the context of attempting to trace the contemporary value of Plato's perspective for us within the *kairos* of anthropogenic climate change and other inexplicable confrontations, the key point is that Plato's justice has a complex and extensive character.

### *Perils of Equality*

To clarify what is at stake in Plato's strange justice it is worth considering how Ranciere (1999) draws upon Aristotle's more humanly focused conception of justice to explain his principle of equality. Justice, for Aristotle, hinges on shared and inherently human moral understanding. In his *Politics* he argues that human society and politics has its basis in our capacity for language. Whereas an injured beast can only cry out in immediate pain, humans can lucidly express their injuries - and more particularly a sense of having been wronged (1962, p.28). Humans can do so in symbolic and general terms that indicate features of shared value and reciprocal social being. In this respect, the evidence for our distinctly human identity relates closely to the issue of justice - with how language facilitates our communication of wrong. Similarly, it is on the basis of our shared capacity to speak and understand - our common intelligence - that Ranciere discovers the principle of equality. He argues that even within the context of manifestly inequitable societal relations there is a presupposition of equality inasmuch as a slave, for example, is expected to

comprehend and respond appropriately to their master's commands. For this reason, Ranciere argues that equality should not be conceived as a political goal that is endlessly deferred but rather as an underlying assumption that demands constant efforts of realisation. Politics is defined precisely as this effort of realisation. This has nothing to do with our usual understanding of politics as a distinct sphere of social management, with its political parties, policy making and processes of social administration. Ranciere instead conceives politics in terms of unpredictable instances in which unrepresented voices discover the capacity to speak and, by doing so, disrupt, intervene within and redistribute the tissue of sensible social relations.

Ranciere's scheme is valuable in terms of resisting regimes of neoliberalism that deny and suppress the irruptive potential of politics - that replace politics *per se* with dubious processes of 'inclusion' and 'consultative change management'. Yet, it is worth questioning whether this principle of equality (and justice) must necessarily have its basis in human intelligence and speech. If so, how does this affect those who appear less lucid or intelligent - for instance, in mundane terms, very young children, people with mental health issues, or older people suffering from dementia? And what of the wider field of living and non-living things that cannot speak or demonstrate intelligence? How is their political status represented in the measure of equality? Arguably, we need another basis for acknowledging and respecting them - for including them within our conception of justice. Now that justice extends beyond contexts of sensible and lucid human agency, now that it has an ecological character, now that it involves our implication in animate and inanimate relations generally, the principle of equality no longer appears fundamental. Our relations have become immeasurable. They involve no common indices of calculation. It is not as though we should suddenly no longer care about social equity (alongside seeking a more beneficial relationship to the planet), but rather that this care need not depend upon any measure of equality *per se*. It emerges instead from a sense of commonality - of holistic implication and imbrication - that

includes and extends beyond whatever the human represents (and selectively measures and values).

### *Two Cities*

Turning more closely to how Plato develops his conception of justice and injustice, let's see how Plato conceives a particularly human field of justice in terms of the difference between two cities. We discover that the first city he conceives, which is cast as moderate, well-ordered and sustainable, makes human justice insufficiently evident, while the second city of luxurious excess, which incorporate injustice as its foundation, demonstrates the genuine complexity of human justice - as well as a new scene of animality.

Before making a start, it is worth observing that there is almost always the problem in summarising strands of argument in Plato's dialogues with deciding how to name who is speaking - the one who has philosophical agency, the one who is making the argument. Should we refer to Socrates - Plato's teacher, the one who appears to speak, the one who leads the discussions (although regularly claiming that he is doing nothing of the kind) or to Plato, who clearly does far more than simply document and reconstruct scenes of prior speech? At various times, in the midst of some specific dialectical episode, it is tempting to write 'Socrates', but taking a larger view - considering the dialogue as a whole - it often seems more pertinent to write 'Plato'. French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1981) has written extensively about this dilemma, which involves the doubling of Plato's philosophical voice. He emphasises particularly the role of writing in all this; how writing affects the identity ('self-presence') of philosophical speech. This can seem a specifically modern observation, as though Derrida discerns a layer of dissembling that had formerly escaped notice - that may even, to some extent, have escaped Plato himself. We conceive Plato as struggling to downplay and disguise aspects of doubling and paradox, as if there were no gap at all between his words and those he remembers. But this itself is naive. Plato's philosophy is characterised not only by its breadth and clarity but also by its

indirection and irony. These strategies are inextricably combined in his work.

Plato begins by rejecting two ordinary conceptions of justice: firstly, a complacent and self-interested one that regards justice in largely transactional terms as an accounting of what one is owed and what one is due; secondly a cynical one that insists that justice is a superficial virtue that serves as an alibi for power. Plato insists instead that justice is genuinely and integrally a virtue. Ostensibly, he aims to consider the justice of the soul, but in order to get at that justice - in order to see it more clearly - he recommends approaching it at a greater scale (368d). He proposes considering justice at the scale of human society (the city). While this may seem to introduce additional clutter, Plato argues that tracing the evolution of the city and conceiving the outlines of an ideal city will assist in clarifying whatever it is that justice and injustice entails.

Uncontroversially, Plato begins by insisting that human social organisation has its basis in interdependence ('none of us is self-sufficient') (369b). The city emerges when a group of people come together to collectively fulfil basic human needs - the need for food, shelter, clothing, etc. Of course, one can argue, as Aristotle does, that society has a more fundamental basis - that it is not as though it has any kind of external relationship to the human (as though we simply employ society to fulfil needs, as though we all exist as atomic individuals initially and only subsequently come together) - but rather that we are inherently social and political creatures (1962, p.28). But let's leave this issue aside for now. For our purposes, the key thing is that Plato conceives an initial city that is focused on fulfilling basic needs and within which each person is expected to make an appropriate contribution. Most importantly, they will focus on their area of specific expertise. They will not be distracted. They will not wander from one activity to another. This will ensure a proper and just arrangement.

However, despite how plainly well constituted, Plato does not explicitly acknowledge the justice of this initial city. Why? Because this is a preliminary vision of social justice - one that despite its virtuous aspect - will ultimately appear insufficiently humanly

differentiated. This first city is characterised by its moderation and rural good health. It represents a nostalgic utopia - and for contemporary eyes (those who are critical of capitalist modernity) a rosy vision of what de-growth could potentially accomplish:

*They'll spend their time producing food, wine, cloaks and shoes. They'll build houses, and in summer they'll work away mainly naked and shoeless, while in winter they'll wear whatever clothes and shoes they need to protect them. They'll feed themselves by preparing barley-meal and wheat-meal, now kneading, now baking it, and serving up noble cakes and loaves on mats and reeds or freshly washed leaves, reclining on paliaes strewn with yew and myrtle; and they'll feast themselves and their beloveds, drinking their wine with garlands on their heads and hymns to the gods, enjoying the pleasure of each other's company, and taking care not to produce offspring out of proportion to their wealth, in order to protect themselves against poverty or war (372b-c).*

The idyllic character of this conception is emphasised, even to the extent of suggesting an aspect of irony, hinting fairly evidently that this is a fond fantasy - not anything that can be viably returned to or resurrected. Nonetheless, the initial city is certainly not condemned by Socrates. For all its impossibility, it retains its force as an alternative model of human society. However, his interlocutors are far less convinced. Glaucon complains that the bucolic scene of feasting lacks 'sauce' (372c). When Socrates responds by offering even more rural produce - ('salt and olives and cheese', 'onions and greens', 'desserts of figs, chickpeas and beans') and by arguing that people can expect to live 'peacefully and in good health, dying of old age and handing on a similar lifestyle to their descendants', Glaucon expresses even more forceful contempt for this prospect of modest comfort and continuity. Drawing upon the very gap that separates the *demos* from the *polis*, he mocks this rural idyll as a 'city of pigs' (372d). Here, rather than further defending his conception, Socrates acknowledges Glaucon's point. He accepts that people desire more



than simply achieving a basic (animal) level of well-being. They have a desire also for excess:

*Evidently we're not just looking into how a city comes into being, but how a luxurious city does so (372e).*

Crucially, the nature of justice and injustice, both their individual meaning and their closely entwined relationship, will discover its basis in an aspect of human excess that separates us from animals (and that quite literally leads us to eat them rather than to subsist on a largely vegetarian diet). This excess establishes the need for a considerably more nuanced division of social expertise. There is a need not only for all sorts of makers of luxurious stuff, but also a mercantile class to manage a much more elaborate market of exchange, soldiers to defend borders, wage aggressive war, expand territory and take other people into slavery, as well as political rulers to manage this otherwise unbridled, expanding complex. In his list of new professions, Socrates specifically mentions:

*we'll need swineherds too; we didn't have them in our previous city, because they weren't needed, but the new one will need them on top of everything else - as it will need a whole lot of other domestic animals for people to eat (373e).*

The mention of 'swineherds' slyly references Glaucon's notion of the 'city of pigs' but since none of the other interlocutors register the joke, it reads as a piece of subtle commentary, conveying Plato's ironic distance from the dialogic action. But what does the joke imply? It is plainly not referring simply to actual pigs - pigs that in their feeding and slaughter will further affirm the specifically human character of the luxurious city. Rather it suggests the emergence of a new pig, no longer quite a farm animal but nonetheless thoroughly animalistic. It suggests another level of excessive appetite. The new pigs are quite evidently the ordinary people of the new city and the swineherds are the political class that must rule over this new city of pigs. While the aim of the

second city (*poliá*) is to leave behind any common relation to animals, it accomplishes quite the opposite.

Most importantly, the transition to the city of luxury provides the basis for comprehending justice. Socrates argues that 'perhaps by looking at this kind of city (...) we'll be able to observe how justice and injustice take root in cities' (372e). In this respect, it is plain that justice emerges from injustice. This injustice has a double aspect, involving both the inner disequilibrium of appetitive excess and the outer violence of slaughtering other creatures, fostering divisive social conditions and conquering other peoples, as well as stealing their lands. It is not only that justice stems from a contradictory effort to guarantee human autonomy, the very identity of the human depends upon an injustice that we can scarcely recognise.

In this case, how is justice specifically apparent? Rather than being directly manifest in any immediate context of good order (the initial city), it appears at a mediate level in response to injustice. It takes shape firstly in Socrates proposal for a particular group within society that are removed from society generally to lead very different lives. Plato conceives the so-called 'guardians' as protectors of society that, in the manner of dogs, are fierce towards strangers but loyal and friendly to their owners. Unlike ordinary people, the guardians lead spartan lives without material possessions or even the comfort of family life. In their separation from the context of luxurious appetite, which centres around the cauldron of mercantile life, they discover the capacity to temper and reduce excessive tendencies within society. This aligns them with a notion of justice that is chiefly concerned with aspects of moderation, preservation and proper order. The philosopher guardians represent a final layer of justice. They were nowhere to be seen in the initial city - the inhabitants revealing only customary, inarticulate and unreflective wisdom. Only in the second city does wisdom proper, in the form of philosophy, emerge - separating itself out and cohering precisely in response to inherent dimensions of societal injustice. The justice that they and the lesser guardians demonstrate emerges in consequence of an

injustice that establishes the need for an internal differentiation and order.

But recall that philosophers also recognise their relation to dogs and, in this sense, that nothing absolutely separates them from the wider sphere of living and non-living relations. The philosophers are not simply the summit of whatever the humans represents but manifest a curious, maybe not altogether convincing, return to conditions that have no inherently human basis. They make any number of returns - to Anaximander's *apeiron*, the Parmenidean one, Heraclitean fire or even Plato's ultimate reality of pure forms - in order to indicate, perhaps, a limit of thought that is coincident with its annihilation.

In considering the gap between the first and the second city, I have argued that Plato's conception of justice is far from simple. It involves inherent paradoxes. It plays upon the boundaries of the human and emphasises a complex relation between justice and injustice, order and violence. Ultimately, the 'good' order incorporates an aspect of injustice as that effort of division that makes any order possible.

### *Conclusion*

I realise I have run out of time long ago, but what is valuable in Plato's conception of justice? What remains valuable for us? How can his conception assist us in making sense of our contemporary circumstances?

In general terms, Plato's conception offers the following:

1. It encourages an ecological mode of thinking that is concerned with aspects of arrangement;
2. Linked to the above, it insists upon our relation to everything else in the world. It charts a complex justice, which also includes injustice, and that conceives our overall relations beyond any conventionally human frame;

3. It renders justice as having an incalculable basis. This enables an ethical and political engagement with things that has no necessary recourse to any notion of equality;
4. It demonstrates an alternative model of being that is less oriented towards labour and instrumental manipulation than reflection, ceremony and convivial interaction. While at one level this model is complicit with social differentiation and inequity, it also indicates a worthwhile change of emphasis within the context of the Anthropocene;
5. It exemplifies the value of an attitude of playful seriousness.

Most particularly, a vital current dilemma involves conceiving the relationship between natural and social justice. We think of the former in terms of an ecology of brutal, beautiful and amoral violence. The Sun is a burning sphere. It will eventually explode, obliterating the Earth and all the surrounding planets. We like to think of ourselves (we agents of enlightened human justice) as a small, fragile effort at peaceful continuity within a vast and eternally transforming universe. In human society at least, in principles of equality, as well in practices of sustainable interaction with the environment, we envisage another justice; one that preserves, confirms and affirms; in this manner cutting against the grain of the wider system of material relations. At the same time, we recognise our human participation in aspects of natural violence - in the depredations we have wrought on Earth, in the regular destruction of one another, in accelerating social inequality. How is any of this to be thought? Should we simply give in to our 'natural inclinations' (the apparent state of nature, for instance, of market capitalism) or should we insist upon our better, beneficial and exceptional human identity? Without making any effort to adequately answer this question, Plato's conception of justice can usefully clarify aspects of our dilemma.

Unlike Aristotle, for instance, who links justice to the immediate experience and communication of having been wronged, Plato insists that justice has its basis in the recognition of our own

injustice. More specifically, Plato highlights how injustice is evident in the negotiation of our ecological relations - as we distinguish ourselves, for example, from animals. This negotiation - with its confusion of features of justice and injustice - represents precisely our participation in a wider economy of justice. Our very efforts to impose a human order - to separate ourselves from everything that surrounds us - is tied to inescapable dimensions of ecological justice. While this hardly eliminates our dilemmas, it offers scope to consider our situation in a more nuanced manner and to shift beyond any naive sense of our exceptional identity.

In order to make this shift and to foster new systems of justice that involve a more integral relation to the world there is a need to question the notion that justice involves a calculation of equality - particularly any equality that depends upon some human essence. Instead, the context of the Anthropocene suggests the need to consider immeasurable relations that involve no common standard of identity. Plato's conception of justice, however socially inequitable and however shaped by a skewed notion of natural proportion, has value in terms of recognising the limits of calculation. Linked closely to its emphasis on features of arrangement, Plato's justice enables an ethical valuation that stems from features of common systemic implication without requiring any commonality as such. While I have no scope to argue this here, I can't help wondering whether intractable features of human inequality may be more effectively addressed without the insistence upon any essential calculation of human equality? Perhaps if we focus instead on a commonality that is diverse, situated and practical we may have more success?

One more thing. Plato's *Republic* is set in Piraeus, the major mercantile port just south of Athens. The dialogue begins with Socrates explaining, 'I went down to Piraeus yesterday (...) not just to offer a prayer to the goddess, but also because I wanted to see how they would celebrate the festival, this being the first time

they'd held it' (327a). As many have suggested<sup>5</sup>, the first words ('I went down') are identical to those Ulysses employs in Homer's *The Odyssey* as he travels down to Hades. Piraeus represents an underworld in a number of senses: firstly, as a busy, market focused trading port; secondly as the departure place for the Greece soldiers who lost their lives in the Peloponnesian War; and, thirdly, as the place that the plague had recently entered Greece. Furthermore, Socrates offers a prayer to the Thracian goddess Bendis<sup>6</sup>, who although of foreign origin links closely to the Greek goddess Hecate (goddess of the underworld). Alongside acknowledging the dead, Socrates travels to Piraeus to witness a new festival - optimistically, perhaps, to discover some other possibility for Athens and the world. Yet how is this new world wrought? How does it come about? Hardly through any deliberate, instrumentally grounded effort. Instead Socrates and Glaucon waywardly decide to spend the night in Piraeus. They are amiably convinced to stay in order to attend a horse race and visit the house of Polymarchus for festivities and conversation. The whole conception of justice, the whole proposal for the just city and soul, has its basis in an aleatory decision. It emerges from a context of leisured and convivial freedom. It may be addressing serious themes and the *kairos* of the Athenian city state, but any prospect for a solution emerges from a context of apparent idleness.

I draw hope from this scenario that wasting our time with Plato's conception of justice may not be altogether pointless. It may be that addressing our current circumstances requires strategies of indirection and reflection as much as clearly directed action. Indeed, it may even be that the suspension of action and the thinking of our identity differently might vitally inform relevant new relations between people and beyond the human.

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<sup>5</sup> See. for instance: <https://harvermcalbineblack.blogspot.com/2017/01/socrates-at-piraeus-voegelin-on-plato.html>

<sup>6</sup> See. for instance: <https://thehistorianshut.com/2023/09/06/bendis-a-famous-yet-mysterious-thracian-goddess/>

And this is where I could move on to consider a relation between justice and aesthetics, but I have no time for that.

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