

24.200: Ancient Philosophy  
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### Plato on Happiness: The *Republic's* answer to Thrasymachus

As we have seen, Plato believes that justice is in the interest of those who are just. We have also seen, however, that Plato does not think that justice is good solely for its consequences; it is also good in itself, an intrinsic good. He shows this by arguing that justice is a component of the happy life. If the virtues were only an instrumental means to happiness, then they might fail to lead to happiness in other circumstances, and one might be able to achieve happiness with simply the appearance of virtue. But if virtue is the supreme constituent of happiness, then one could not be happy without being (genuinely) virtuous, and one could not be virtuous without being happy.

We have also seen that in the *Republic*, Plato divides the soul into three parts (reason, spirit, and appetite). He defines the just individual as one in whom each of the three parts performs the function or task naturally suited to it. A *psychically* just person is one whose soul is in this psychological state of proper functioning. One is *psychically* unjust to the extent that the parts of one's soul fail to perform their proper functions, e.g., if appetite overrules reason. Plato argues that the just person with an orderly soul has a better, happier life than anyone whose soul is not in order; and one with a thoroughly unjust soul, a soul in disorder and conflict, is thoroughly miserable.

Although this indicates Plato's connection between psychic justice and happiness, how are we to connect social justice with happiness? Even if we allow that one is happier insofar as one's soul is in order, and unhappy insofar as one's soul is in conflict, should we conclude that one who acts in accordance with the public demands of morality will be guaranteed both psychic justice and happiness? Is acting in accord with social justice an essential component of the happy life? How should we look for an answer to this question?

Plato is not completely clear on the connections between social justice, psychic justice, and happiness. However, we might propose on his behalf that we can only speak of an action being just (or unjust) if we consider it in the broader context of a just city, i.e., we should hesitate to view just actions as simply those which traditional morality enjoins, or those which some authority deems just; instead we should view just actions as those which contribute to the justice of a just city. Plato gives us an example of an ideally just city in the construction of his "Republic"; and he argues that the justice of the city consists in all citizens "doing their own proper work". So the question whether social justice is a constituent of happiness can now be rephrased: is "doing one's own proper work" in the context of a just city, a component of happiness? To answer this question we should ask: would "doing one's own work" in such a city constitute a happy life? Could one achieve a happier life some other way?

Plato, of course, would answer these questions by showing that it is the city modeled on his "Republic" in which the citizens are happiest; in this city not only are they best able to achieve what they value, but they will also be best able to achieve psychic harmony. He clearly thinks that true happiness would consist in behaving justly in a just city.

We should note, however, that Plato would distinguish different sorts of happiness, and would rank them on a scale from better to worse. Each of us is capable of a kind of happiness corresponding to our psychological type; the greatest happiness (and likewise the greatest virtue) is available only to the philosopher. For example, the appetitive person sets her sights on the acquisition of material things; her happiness will derive from her ability to function productively in the city and to reap the material rewards this offers; flourishing in this role will require that she curb her lawless and unnecessary desires for luxury, etc. The order in her soul and her productive participation in the city (i.e., her psychic and social justice), will constitute for her the happy life. However, her life will be less happy than the philosophers' or the guardians' because some parts of her soul will not flourish.

The underlying idea here is that although a kind of happy life is possible if each part of the soul performs its function, the happiest life is one in which each part of the soul performs its function with complete excellence, or to the highest degree. In the just appetitive person, the rational part of the soul guides and orders the other parts towards the goal of acquiring material goods, and to that extent it performs its function. But the rational part will only function with its own real excellence if it is allowed to set the goals for the individual. Insofar as the appetitive part of the soul takes over this task of setting goals, it usurps some part of the role of the rational part. Consequently, it is only if the rational part rules the soul, (i.e., the individual not only allows the rational part to moderate the other parts, but also to define the individual's goals and her good), that each part of the soul can perform its function completely and excellently. Since it is the philosopher, and only the philosopher, in whom the rational part rules in this strong sense, it is the philosopher who achieves supreme happiness. Because the rational part of the philosopher's soul will lead her to view her own good as requiring the good of the whole city, the philosopher will agree to rule for the sake of the whole, and this combination of ruling and philosophizing will constitute the very happiest life, i.e., the life of complete excellence. But we should note, that not everyone in the city will want this sort of life, and not everyone will have the talents and abilities to flourish in this sort of life. Thus the city affords other kinds of lives better suited to the appetitive and spirited types.