Justice and Individual;

On the motivation for Socrates' analogous argument in *The Republic*

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As is well known, the greater part of Plato's *Republic* consists in Socrates' famous analogy between the just city and the just soul. Accordingly, understanding the background for this argumentative procedure becomes crucial for understanding what Plato is trying to do in this his *magnus opus*. The present essay, therefore, asks a fundamental question about the analogous argument introduced by Socrates; a question concerning the very motivation for it, namely: Why does Socrates hold his analogy to be necessary, or at least preferable, in an investigation of justice?

Despite its fundamental nature, the leading commentators seem either to have ignored this question or to have answered it only in a questionable way. Through an examination of the challenge of Glaucon and Adeimantus, which precedes the introduction of the analogy in *The Republic*, I shall here suggest an alternative interpretation; an interpretation which sees the apparently fundamental incompability between the advantages of justice on one side and the individual soul on the other as the main motivation for Socrates' choice of strategy. When the problem he faces is understood in this way, his proposal for a preliminary study of justice in the city appears a most reasonable one.

I *The question of the motivation for Socrates' analogous procedure*

Plato's famous analogy between city and soul, the backbone of his central argument in *The Republic*, is illustrated by Socrates in 368c7-69a10 with the aid of yet another analogy:

> The inquiry we are undertaking is no easy one but calls for keen vision, as it seems to me. So, since we are not clever persons, I think we should employ the method of search that we should use if we, with not very keen vision, were bidden to read small letters from a distance, and then someone had observed that these same letters exist elsewhere larger and on a larger surface. We should have accounted it a godsend, I fancy, to be allowed to read those letters first, and then examine the smaller, if they are the same. (368c7-d7).[1]

Ordered to read a text written in small letters and placed far away, we would be helping ourselves a great deal if we started out by first reading the same text in a larger size of type. The investigative principle thus introduced is immediately applied to the subject-matter of the dialogue as a whole: Justice. Both individual and city are called "just", and since the city is larger (μεῖζον) than the individual, we, having located and determined justice in the former, will subsequently be able to find it in the latter as well (369a2). In this argumentative strategy suggested by Socrates, we can distinguish two aspects:

Firstly, the *formal purpose* of the strategy. It is not difficult to see, what Socrates in general wishes to achieve with his analogous procedure. By turning to the larger letters, we will be able to read the text easier and, analogously, by determining justice in the city, we will obtain the investigative means to find it in the individual as well. Socrates' procedure is thus *hereutic*; we find what we are looking for by seeking it in an analogous way.

Secondly, we can ask for the *specific motivation* for his strategy which will, however, prove to be considerably less evident. The question can be put in this way: Why do we need Socrates' analogy between city and individual? What investigative obstacle is it intended to help us overcome? The traditional answer and its limits can be observed, when we turn to the commentators' treatment of this question of motivation and note an interesting tendency. For instance, A.E.Taylor writes, in agreement with the traditional reading of the passage, that "the reason for studying the public life of classes and communities is simply that we see the principles of right and wrong "writ large" in them; we study the "larger letters" in order to make out the smaller by their aid" (Taylor 1929, 265; cf 273). To be sure, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with what Taylor writes but something might strike us as odd about his formulation: *it does not tell us anything new*. In his explanation, the motivation for introducing the analogy between city and soul is formulated *in exactly the same language* as the metaphor of the letters by which it is illustrated. Although we are allegedly being told "the reason for studying the public life of classes and communities", we still hear about large and small "letters" and their different degrees of readability. Thus, the reason for studying the city before the individual remains formulated in the language of the metaphor, i.e. in terms of "seeing" and "reading", and such formulation is apparently suppossed by most commentators to be adequate. [2]

The problem is that such qualities as "large" and "small" *per se* render a sufficient motivation for an analogous procedure only in so far as (the metaphor of) "seeing" or "reading" is concerned. In trying to read a text from far away, the size of the letters have an immediate importance, and the greatness of the large letters constitute an intelligible and sufficient motivation for studying them first. When it comes to the reason for studying justice in the city, however, we cannot as a matter of course assume (or have Plato assuming) that greatness or readability similarly constitute an immediate motivation. In a philosophical investigation, the mere *size* of the subject-matter is not *prima facie* ground to prefer one argumentative procedure to another. A claim like that would strike us as counter-intuitive. We consequently need to explain *why* Plato could in this case consider the larger city an easier object of philosophical study; for without such an explanation we cannot immediately see how the same question of size could play the role of motivation for an analogous procedure both in a search for justice *and* in an attempt to read a text from far away. All the same, the majority of commentators has failed to explain this.

Hence, as interpreters of *The Republic*, we need to remedy this lack of explanation. Avoiding an appeal to the metaphor of the letters, we need to show *for which reason* Socrates could hold the larger city a better place to start our search for justice. We must undertake to expose an intelligble reason why studying the city qua larger than the individual could be helpful in our investigation of individual justice; a reason formulated *independently*, *yet analogously* to the advantages of "reading the larger letters".

The inaccessability of the soul. A critique.

Attempting to provide such an explanation, it has been suggested that we are to locate the problem motivating Socrates' analogy in a particular feature of the individual soul: its inaccessible nature.[5] This amounts to the assumption *that we cannot see directly into the soul*, and so, in our

search for justice, we would do better if we first took a look at the larger, and therefore more visible city. Hence, on this reading, the metaphor of seeing is being understood quite literally: greatness furthers sight and readability. It is simply easier to see larger objects, and by initially studying the city the analogy should, accordingly, help us see the otherwise invisible soul. Although this interpretation, on the face of it, might seem a reasonable one, two objections can be put forward against it:

(α) Firstly, we notice the lack of textual evidence for this interpretation. In the preceding book of *The Republic* and first pages of the present, neither Socrates nor any of his interlocutors have claimed or asserted that the soul *per se*, due to its invisible nature, should pose any particular problem as object of study. Yet, if Socrates were taking this feature of the soul to be the primary motivation for introducing the analogy which is going to take up the rest of the dialogue, we would expect him to state this more explicitly and not just tacitly assume a premise so vital to his entire argument.

(β) Secondly, the examination of the soul *per se* does not seem to need the analogy at all. When it is actually carried out in the fourth book of *The Republic* (436b5-441c7), Socrates takes as his point of departure a principle[6] through which, combined with empirical observations, the nature of the soul is exposed and analysed.[7] This principle he holds to be evidently true and universally acknowledged (Δῆλον ὅτι, 436b8), and therefore, we note, he could just as well have introduced it *before* the procedure by analogy was begun. So even if the inaccessible nature of the soul demands extraordinary investigative means (as it certainly does), the need for these means cannot act the role of primary motivation for Socrates' great analogy. The reason for taking on the preliminary investigation of the city cannot simply be to find a way to "see" into the soul, since this, as we have seen, can also be achieved *without such an investigation*.

As a consequence of these considerations, we should hesitate to accept the above-mentioned interpretation of Socrates' motivation for introducing his analogy. But then, of course, we need to face the problem ourselves and by approaching it alternatively provide an answer to the following question: if not a fundamental inaccessibility of the soul, then what *does* Socrates hold the primary motivation for adopting his analogous procedure to be? Which feature of the investigation of individual justice poses a problem so great that we would do better if we started out by looking for justice in something larger, i.e. in the city? In the third part of this essay, I shall attempt an answer to this question; an answer which will be formulated through an appeal to the speeches of Glaucon and Adeimantus immediately prior to Socrates' introduction of his famous analogy. Firstly, therefore, these speeches and the challenge they present must be clearly conceived.

II *The challenge of Glaucon & Adeimantus; Justice and Individual*

As the second book of The Republic opens, we witness the two brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, expressing a certain dissatisfaction with the manner in which Socrates dealt with Thrasymachus in the preceding discussion. In their two speeches, they therefore, as Glaucon himself puts it (358c1), take up Thrasymachus' argument once again, but refine it and take pains to state unambiguously which kind of answer they expect from Socrates concerning justice

and injustice (358d3-6; 367b1-2). The challenge consists in the demand for a reconciliation of what to the brothers appears a *fundamental incompatibility*, namely that of justice along with its advantages on the one side and the individual soul on the other. To understand this incompability, let us briefly sum up the nature of each of these two sides, according to the brothers:[8]

(1) *Justice*. According to Glaucon (358e-359b5), justice is the result of a mutual agreement among people whose abilities are by nature limited and who therefore find themselves in a precarious situation being both unable to act injustly unhindered and to shield themselves from the injustice of others; therefore, although they actually hold injustice to be the most advantagous, out of fear for revenge and acts of injustice done to them by others they accept an universal obligation to justice as a bearable compromise (358e3-359a2). In this understanding, when I choose to act justly, I do so not because I value this thing, justice, for itself, but because I, due to my limited powers, appreciate the security against others which it guarentees (359a7-b1). Hence, Plato, through Glaucon, has presented us with a view of justice according to which this virtue is essentially of a *social* nature; it comes into being and exists only due to certain relations between individuals with needs yet limited means. This conception is subsequently substantiated further by the two following arguments. *Gyges' Ring* (359b6-360d7) demonstrates that just behaviour essentially presupposes being in a society which sanctions just and punishes unjust acts; using Gyges' ring of invisibility, i.e. stepping out of the social realm of precepts, prohibitions and punishments, the just and the unjust person would be completely indistinguishable, since they would commit exactly the same unjust acts. In such a situation, no one would be just at all. Finally, *The Judgement of Lives* (360e1-362c8) shows how we are consequently to value justice. If only he has a reputation for justice, the unjust man might lead a perfectly happy and fullfilling life; a just man, on the other hand, who despite his unshakable dedication to justice appears unjust in the eyes of his fellow citizens, will suffer all kinds of punishment, torture and in the end even death by crucifixion (361e3-362a2). Therefore, when we evaluate the two lives, there can be little doubt, so Glaucon concludes, that the one of the unjust is by far the most preferable despite the fact that it is unjust (362c6-8). This third argument thus accentuates the nature of the advantages of justice: The just person draws no advantages at all for his justice *per se*[9]; the only way justice can benefit the just person is in a secondary manner, i.e. by resulting in *a reputation for justice*. Accordingly, justice is not valued by people in itself but merely for its consequences in terms of social benefits. Advantages of justice, like justice itself, are dependent on a social context.[10]

(2) *The soul*. In the brothers' argument, the soul is introduced to play a crucial role. The word ψυχή, which occurs three times in the two speeches[11], is every time intended to denote something *opposed* to the category to which justice and the benefits it conveys belong (as described above). Concerning the manner in which injustice and justice have been praised by poets and other persons of autority, Adeimantus thus complains that

> what each one of them [injustice and justice] is in itself, by its own inherent force, when it is within the soul of the possessor and escapes the eyes of both gods and men, no one has ever adequately set forth in poetry or prose – the proof that the one is the

> greatest of all evils that the soul contains within itself, while justice is the greatest good. (366e5-9)

What he and his brother desire from Socrates is a defence of just behaviour which shows that benefits of justice can be found which are exclusively restricted to the *soul* of the just person, i.e. which are *not* conditioned by a social context rewarding a mere reputation for justice, but can on the contrary render just acts worthwhile even though they are not recognised and praised by society. Accordingly, when stating their challenge to Socrates, what is of importence to the brothers is the fact that the soul is *that part of the person which can be studied independently of any social context* and hence independently from the advantages of justice as these are presented in the two speeches. The essential characteristic of the soul is its isolation.[12]

We now see the above-mentioned incompatibility as conceived by the brothers. Justice and its advantages appear to be naturally based on and conditioned by a social context; the soul on the other hand is the part of man which is fundamentally isolated from such a context. However, if Socrates is really to exorcise the ghost of Thrasymachus - this is the essence of the challenge - he must nevertheless formulate a principle of justice, which allows advantages for the individual in his or her soul alone, independently of reputation and appearence. The brothers for their part cannot see how this could ever be possible. And so they turn to Socrates.

III *The motivation for Socrates' analogous procedure, reconsidered*

Having heard the speeches of Glaucon and Adeimantus, Socrates praises the brothers for still believing in the value of justice in itself despite the apparently insuperable incompability they themselves have just exposed (368a5-7). And Socrates, allegedly, finds himself in the same aporetic state seeing no way out but feeling nevertheless compelled to come to the aid of justice. Urged by all those present, he therefore takes on the challenge and, despite his initial difficulties, comes up with a solution by introducing the analogy between city and soul through the analogy of the letters (368c7-d7). Since no alternative problems have been brought forward prior to this introduction, the proposal for an investigation by analogy must be intended to deal with or overcome the particular problem facing Cephalus' guests at this point in the dialogue. In other words, Socrates holds his analogy as a means to help him meet the challenge to which he has been put in the speeches of the brothers.

When the background of Socrates' proposal is thus understood, we, having already examined and determined the problem at the core of the preceding challenge of Glaucon and Adeimantus, should now find ourselves in a position to provide an answer to our initial question regarding the motivation for the analogy between city and soul. To see how, let us briefly recapitulate Socrates' situation immediately prior to his introduction of the analogy: In their speeches, the brothers have challenged him to give an account of justice, which allows advantages in the soul of the agent. This, however, appears impossible due to the social nature of justice and its benefits; they both seem to be essentially dependent on *interpersonal relations*;

the individual soul, on the other hand, is conceived as *isolated* from such a social context.

Then, as we know, Socrates suggests that the party should start their investigation somewhere else, namely in the city. Since this proposal is illustrated by Socrates with the analogy of the letters, we should be able to reformulate the problem presently facing the investigation, i.e. the brothers' challenge to Socrates, in the language of this analogy: Rephrased in this manner, the assertion that we are **οὐ δεινοί** (368d1) would amount to the fact that we cannot grasp how justice can benefit the soul of the just man. Further, trying to see how this could after all be possible is like trying to read small letters from far away: extremely difficult. Socrates' answer, as we already know, is to initially search for justice in the city, since it is larger than the individual, but, as shall immediately be shown, we can now, in addition, see *why* such a question of magnitude can show us a way to make our investigation of justice easier.

Let us read the text carefully. What Socrates says is not simply that a city is larger than a man. He says that a city is larger than *one* man (**μεῖζον πόλις ἑνὸς ἀνδρός**, 368e5). When talking of the largeness of the city as opposed to the smallness of the individual, what is relevant is thus not primarily the dissimilar *size* of the two in terms of, say, area or volume, but rather a difference in their respective constitutions: the individual is *one* person, the city *many* and, consequently, *larger* than the individual. In other words, the city is *a plurality of individuals* opposed to *the single individual*. Thus conceived, the city presents us with a *social context*, i.e. a *society*, in which we are initially to study justice. And this is the reason why Socrates holds the city an easier place to search for justice: *if a satisfactory principle of justice cannot immediately be found in the individual soul, we should initially look for it in a place where it can more easily be found, and, as became clear in the speeches of the brothers, such a place would be a context of social relations, i.e. a city*. What we really seek is individual justice and its advantages, but by initially granting the brothers that justice is primarily to be found in a social context we should, analogously to reading the large and therefore more readable letters, lighten our search for an understanding of what justice is and how it really benefits the agent. Accordingly, such an analogous procedure would help us accomplish our original task. Hence, on this reading, the analogy between city and soul is directly motivated by the view on the relation between justice and individual held by Socrates' interlocutors, Glaucon, Adeimantus and, indirectly, Thrasymachus.

Two conceptions of justice

However, when presenting such an interpretation of the motivation for Socrates' analogy, something needs to be further clarified. Because although Socrates, following Glaucon and Adeimantus, starts out by determining justice in a social context, the principle of justice he finally arrives at proves to be very different from the one held by the two brothers. Summarised in the formula of each part or class of city and soul "doing its own"[14], his conception of justice seems far from the principle of reciprocal obligations expressed in Glaucon's contractarian account of the origin and nature of this virtue. Hence, although Socrates investigates justice in a place, according to the brothers, more familiar and natural to it, he does so in manner distinctively different from theirs and with an entirely different result. This divergence, however, instead of speaking against the reading presented in this essay, provides us with an opportunity to interpret

it in the broader perspective of the argument of *The Republic* as a whole. For as noted by scholars over and over again[15], Socrates' resulting principle of justice is so different from our ordinary moral convictions concerning this virtue that it seems highly implausible that anyone, neither us, Glaucon nor Adeimantus, let alone Thrasymachus, should ever accept it. The interpretation suggested in this essay, however, indicates that Plato might have been acutely aware of the provocative innovativeness of his principle of justice, and that he accordingly tried to make it more passable through his choice of argumentative strategy. For by initially granting a feature of justice of such great importance to the brothers, i.e. its social nature, and by using this feature as a bridge to reach his own principle of justice, he lightens the way to acceptance of this new principle. Had it been presented to them immediately as an answer to their challenge, Glaucon and Adeimantus would presumably never have accepted the idea of justice as "the right order of the parts of the soul according to their function" but by deducing this principle from a preliminary study of justice in the social realm of the city, its "natural" place according to the brothers, Socrates might succeed in rendering the acceptance of his own conception more feasible. At any rate, with interpretive prospects such as these, Socrates' motivation for his analogous procedure is indeed worth of more attention, if we aspire to understand thoroughly the argument of The Republic.

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Notes

1 The translation is A.D. Shorey's from the Loeb Classical Library, 1930. The greek text used in shorter quotations is taken from Burnet's edition in the Oxford Classical Texts, 1972.

2 In addition to Taylor, I consider the following scholars as sharing in this tendency: Annas (1981): "While we are not clear about justice in the individual, he [Socrates] says, we would do well to turn to justice in the city, for there we will find the same thing only written in larger letters, and so easier to make out" (72). Williams (2000 [1973]): "In making the first construction of the city, there is an assumption that it should be able to tell us something about ***δικαιοσύνη*** in the individual: we look to the larger inscription to help us read the smaller one, 368d" (737). Grote (1998 [1865]): "The Republic, or Commonwealth, is introduced by Plato as being the individual man "writ large", and therefore more clearly discernible and legible to an observer" (123).

3 One could also put the point this way: In reading a text, the size of the letters is of immediate importance, because reading is done with the eyes, and size is a quality perceived by sight (among others). Is size and sight in the same way related to the philosophical investigation of a moral concept such as justice? If so, the relation is far less clear and immediate and cannot simply be assumed. Nevertheless, this is what Cross & Woozley (1964) seem to do: "[B]ecause a city is larger than an individual, they [Socrates and the brothers] might find it easier to make out in it what they are looking for, and thereafter identify the corresponding property in the individual" (75).

4 If it were true, we should find ourselves surprised to see that philosophers sometimes use a *smaller* thing to explain or illustrate a *larger*, as for instance political theorists employing, say, the human body or a beehive in order to explain the structures and dynamics of society. Bodies and beehives are, after all, smaller than society. But, of course, we do *not* wonder, for both we and such theorists find that there are other, way more important motivations for taking the way of analogy in a philosophical investigation, such as the need for simplicity, illustrativeness, concreteness etc.

5 Blössner (2007): "Talk of the city as "larger" and of the individual as "smaller" conceals the fundamental distinction between the two, which is that while the city is visible, the soul is invisible" (346). Although it is rarely stated explicitly, I suspect this assumed fact, i.e. a fundamental inaccessibility of the soul, is agreed upon by the majority of commentators to be the motivation for the analogy. Mistakenly, as I think.

6 Namely a version of the principle of non-contradiction: *Δῆλον ὅτι ταὐτον τἀναντία ποιεῖν ἢ πὰσχειν κατὰ ταὐτόν γε καὶ πρὸς ταὐτὸν οὐκ εθελήσει ἅμα, ὥστε ἄν που εὑρίσκωμεν ἐν αὐτοῖς ταῦτα γιγνόμενα, εἰσόμεθα ὅτι οὐ ταὐτὸν ἦν ἀλλὰ πλείω.*
Εἶεν. (436b8-c1).

7 In short, the argument goes as follows: a thing cannot hold opposite qualities or characteristics at the same time and in the same respect; the same individual can experience both desire and will-based aversion towards the same thing; therefore the soul must be a duality and not a unity; thereafter, the aversion is divided up in the same way into spirit and reason, and we thus reach a total of three psychic elements, which together constitute the soul.

8 A throrough analysis of the speeches cannot be undertaken within the limits of this essay, but I trust that the interpretation presented here is not a too controversial one.

9 On the contrary, Glaucon would agree with Thrasymachus that justice is essentially an *ἀλλότριον ἀγαθὸν* (343c3), i.e. advantageous for someone else but not the agent.

10 So when on behalf of the Many Glaucon provisionally places justice in the third class of goods, i.e. the one which we appreciate only for the sake of its consequences (*αὐτὰ μὲν ἑαυτῶν ἕνεκα οὐκ ἂν δεξαίμεθα ἔχειν, τῶν δὲ μισθῶν τε χάριν καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ὅσα γίγνεται ἀπ' αὐτῶν*, 357c8-d2), "consequences" are to be understood as "socially conditioned consequences" as opposed to consequences resulting from justice *per se*, i.e. independently of a social context. In taking this interpretation, I agree with Heinaman (2002).

11 358b5; 366e6; 366e9.

12 This also conforms with the pecularity noted by Brown that Glaucon's descriptions of the just person and his acts lack all mention of any *other-regarding advantages*, i.e. consequences which although not advantagous for the agent are nevertheless to the advantage of *someone else* (Brown, 2007, 54). Brown's point, that all members of the discussion are assuming rational egoism to be the proper way of evaluating just behaviour, fits the account of Glaucon's challenge given here. The exclusive focus on the advantages in the isolated soul renders all other-regarding considerations irrelevant.

13 Implicitly, this fact about the the city is assumed in 435e1-6, when Socrates argues that *πολλὴ ἀνάγκη ὅτι γε τὰ αὐτὰ ἐν ἑκάστῳ ἔνεστιν ἡμῶν εἴδη τε καὶ ἤθη ἅπερ ἐν τῇ πόλει; οὐ γάρ που ἄλλοθεν ἐκεῖσε ἀφῖκται. γελοῖον γὰρ ἂν εἴη εἴ τις οἰηθείη τὸ θυμοειδὲς μὴ ἐκ τῶν ἰδιωτῶν ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν ἐγγεγονέναι, οἳ δὴ καὶ ἔχουσι ταύτην τὴν αἰτίαν*. The city cannot have characteristics which are not to be found in its citizens, since it is no more than an aggregate of individuals with individual characteristics. Whether this, however, entails that the good of the individuals is reducible to the *good of the city*, i.e. whether Plato's city can be characterised as *totalitarian*, is a much discussed issue into which I cannot enter here.

14 *τὸ αὐτοῦ πράττειν καὶ μὴ πολυπραγμονεῖν δικαιοσύνη ἐστί* (433a8-9); *ἡ τοῦ οἰκείου τε καὶ ἑαυτοῦ ἕξις τα καὶ πρᾶξις δικαιοσύνη ἂν ὁμολογοῖτο* (433e12-434a1).

15 Notably Grote (1998 [1865], 126; 131ff), Popper (2007 [1945], 94ff) and Sachs (1963, 141ff). Other scholars, although less critical to Plato, nevertheless still concede that we have to do with what seems to be two very different conceptions of justice (e.g. Annas, 1981, 157 and Dahl, 2000 [1991], 695ff).