Plato’s Republic, Virtue Theory

Plato’s Republic

Preliminaries:
Plato was a Greek philosopher (428/427 or 424/423 BC - 348/347 BC) who founded the Academy in Athens. He was a student of Socrates, one of the group of young men that would follow Socrates around Athens to learn from him and see his debates with prominent Athenians.

Plato's works are dialogs featuring Socrates’ debates. These dialogs typically consist of Socrates asking a prominent Athenian philosophical questions, and Socrates criticising the answers. Socrates was eventually executed for this.

Plato's Republic is another example of this, however, much of the content is believed to be from Plato himself, and not Socrates.

I. Book I: Socrates versus Thrasymachus
   A. Thrasymachus, the *sophist* (professional “wise guy”): Justice is the advantage of the stronger
      1. What is legal is what is just (legal positivism)
      2. The stronger make the laws.
      3. They do so for their own benefit
   B. Socrates defeats Thrasymachus, but not legitimately

II. Book II: Socrates versus Glaucon
   A. Glaucon (another student of Socrates, Plato's brother) is unsatisfied with Socrates’ answer to Thrasymachus; wants to be “devil’s advocate” to get a better answer from Socrates. He asks two questions:
      1. What is justice?
      2. Why be just?
      a) Three kinds of good:
         (1) good in itself (intrinsic): the taste of Snickers
         (2) good for results (extrinsic): some jobs, pushups, medicine, some classes you might take
         (3) both i and ii:
            (a) Examples, learning, sight, **health**
      3. Socrates needs to show that justice is (1) or (3), that it’s an intrinsic good
B. Glaucon’s answers:

1. Justice is just a social contract to respect others property and person, a compromise made by selfish people who cannot be unjust to others without receiving injustice back: the agreement is to have no injustice
   a) But this is the lesser of two evils, for people would rather have the power to be unjust and not receive it back
2. People only act justly because they don’t have the power to be unjust: the Ring of Gyges (ring of invisibility) story
3. They are right to do so, for the life of an unjust person is more desirable than the life of a just person: the lives of perfect justice/injustice

III. Socrates’ Response (Books II-IV):

A. Ignores Glaucon’s definition, sees justice as a virtue, that is, a personality trait, a property of the soul

B. Uses a process of elimination to clarify what the virtue of justice is by eliminating the other three Greek cardinal virtues (wisdom, courage, self-control)

C. City-Soul analogy: Souls are hard to examine, but cities are like souls, so examine a city first to find justice, then find it in the soul by analogy
   1. The city:
      a) The city has three parts: rulers, guardians, and craftspeople
      b) Each has its set of virtues {rulers: [wisdom], guardians: [courage, self-control], craftspeople: [self-control]}
         (1) Wisdom: can advise regarding the interests of the whole city
         (2) Courage: fearing only what the rulers say to fear
         (3) Self-control: obeying your superiors
      c) What is left over? Each part fulfilling its proper function

   2. The soul:
      a) The soul has three parts: reason, spirit, and appetites
      b) Each has its set of virtues {reason: [wisdom], spirit: [courage, self-control], appetites: [self-control]}
         (1) Wisdom: can advise regarding the interests of the soul
         (2) Courage: fearing only what the reason say to fear
(3) Self-control: spirit submits to reason, appetites submit to both spirit and reason

c) What is left over? Each part fulfilling its proper function

D. The answer: Justice is each part of the soul working properly, which is the same as psychological health, which is both good in itself and for its results.

1. Proper function is a key concept in virtue theory