

How Should I Be? A Defense of Platonic Rational Egoism

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Abstract: There has been a long tradition of interpreting Plato as a rational egoist. Over the past few decades, however, some scholars have challenged this reading. While Rational Egoism appeals to many ordinary folk, in sophisticated philosophical circles it has fallen out of favor as a general and complete account of the nature of reasons for action. I argue that while the theory of practical rationality that is often equated with rational egoism—a view that I call ‘Simple-Minded Rational Egoism’—is neither plausible nor endorsed by Plato in his *Republic*, there is a more complex version of Rational Egoism to which Plato is indeed committed. Moreover, such a conception of practical rationality is not vulnerable to the standard set of objections that contemporary philosophers have made against Rational Egoism.

Plato’s *Republic*, like many of his dialogues, opens with a practical problem. After attending a festival at the Piraeus, Socrates and Glaucon are returning home, when their friend Polemarchus urges them to come to his house, threatening to use force if they refuse. In the end, force is unnecessary because with promises of spectacles, young men, and philosophical conversation, Polemarchus persuades Socrates that he ought to join him (*R.* 328a). Polemarchus’ promises, though, are not all immediately fulfilled. When he arrives, Socrates is approached by Polemarchus’ father, Cephalus who, like his son, tells Socrates what he ought to do. In order to avoid the miseries of old age, Socrates should now cultivate in himself (1) self-discipline (*sophrosunê*) with regard to the bodily pleasures of food, drink and sex and (2) justice (*dikaïosunê*). Socrates is eager to talk to Cephalus about his advice, because like most humans, he is eager to understand how he ought to live his life (352d).

Following Hume, many contemporary philosophers would maintain that Socrates ought to follow Polemarchus’ and Cephalus’ advice just in case doing so satisfied his actual or suitably informed and coherent intrinsic desires.¹ This advice seems reliable if we have the right desires, but what if, like tyrants, we desire the wrong things (572e–575b)? It seems that we have reason not to cause other people pain,² even if we are single-mindedly sadistic by nature and even if we happen to have no actual or ideally informed desires that would be satisfied by refraining from hurting others.³ To continue with the example that Plato offers us: even if Polemarchus would maximally satisfy his actual or ideally informed and coherent intrinsic desires were he to force Socrates to go home

with him, we might think that, even so, he ought not to push Socrates around in this way. Even the persuasion that Socrates advocates can be used improperly. Misrepresentation of the facts, fallacious reasoning, threats, and the exploitation of emotional insecurities may all be efficient and effective tools of persuasion, but we might think that nonetheless, no matter what we desire or would desire, we have reason not to use such tools of persuasion.⁴

In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates appears to share these anti-Humean intuitions. In the *Apology*, Socrates says that the intrinsic desires of many of his fellow Athenians are simply mistaken: rather than pursuing ‘as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible,’ they ought instead to pursue wisdom and virtue (*Ap.* 29d–30b). In the *Crito*, Socrates claims that considerations of justice (*dikaïosunê*) override any competing considerations when deciding what to do. When faced with a question about whether he should escape from jail, he responds that, at least in this context, the only consideration to weigh is whether the proposed action would be just or unjust (*Cr.* 48c–d). Further, he suggests, his views about the priority of justice apply not only to people like him who have a deep commitment to justice, but to everyone, including, presumably, those who do not happen to share his goals (*Cr.* 49a). But if Socrates’ fellow Athenians do not themselves care about wisdom and virtue, and if wisdom and virtue are not necessary for anything they do care about, then why *should* they pursue these ends? And, if I don’t care at all about justice, and if doing injustice allows me to satisfy my actual or ideally informed coherent desires, why shouldn’t I, if I can get away with it, act unjustly?

One answer to this question is suggested by the way in which Cephalus defends his claim that Socrates should be self-disciplined and just. While we don’t know whether we are to assume that Cephalus would appeal solely to considerations of self-interest in all contexts in which he is deciding or advising what to do,⁵ in this context he mentions only considerations of self-interest in support of his advice. Most old men, Cephalus observes, bemoan the fact that they cannot easily experience the pleasures of sex, drink, and food around which they had organized their lives. In fact, in the absence of these pleasures, they now regard themselves as ‘hardly living at all’ (329a). Further, they constantly fear death, because they anticipate punishment for the injustices they have done (330d–e). Because Cephalus, in contrast, has always exercised self-discipline over his bodily appetites and has cultivated the pleasures of the mind, he can experience his physical decline without any significant loss of pleasure (329a). He doesn’t fear death because his wealth has made it possible for him to be just throughout his life—money has saved him ‘from having to cheat or deceive someone’ and ‘from having to depart for that other place in fear’ because he owed a ‘sacrifice to a god or money to a person’ (331b). In short, according to Cephalus, people should be self-disciplined and just simply because it is to their advantage to be so.

I will refer to any theory of practical rationality as ‘egoist’ if it implies that ultimately, all facts about what a particular agent has reason to do are grounded in facts about what is in that agent’s self-interest. Of course, since there are an

indefinite number of different ways in which facts about what a particular agent has reason to do could be 'grounded' in facts about what is in that agent's self-interest, there are an indefinite number of possible theories of practical rationality, some more plausible than others, that would count as 'egoist' on this understanding.⁶ While there has been a long tradition of interpreting Plato as a rational egoist, a tradition extending at least from Henry Sidgwick to Terence Irwin,⁷ over the past few decades, however, some scholars have challenged this reading.⁸

One of the difficulties of attributing to Plato a commitment to Rational Egoism is that, despite many valiant efforts to prove otherwise, it's just not obvious how an egoist defense of justice can get off the ground.⁹ A second difficulty is that it seems to many that a defense of justice in terms of personal self-interest is simply wrong-headed. While it might make sense to defend a pursuit of intellectual as opposed to bodily pleasures by appeal to considerations of long-term self-interest, it seems inappropriate and somewhat vulgar to defend a commitment to justice in these terms.¹⁰ Justice seems to have normative weight independently of whether just actions happen to contribute to our self-interest.¹¹ If we can avoid attributing to Plato such an implausible view, it might seem, principles of charity would dictate that we do so. And indeed, as many scholars have noted, Plato seems to share our sense that considerations of justice have normative significance independently of considerations of self-interest.

I will argue, nonetheless, that Plato is indeed a rational egoist in the sense that I articulated above: he believes that all facts about what a particular agent has reason to do are ultimately grounded in facts about what is in that agent's self-interest. But Plato is a sophisticated rational egoist. He shows how it is possible to reconcile the common thought that considerations of justice have independent normative significance with the equally common thought that, in order to establish that considerations of justice do indeed have normative significance for us, we must show that it is in our self-interest to be just. In so doing, he shows us why Rational Egoism has a great deal more theoretical virtues than most contemporary philosophers are inclined to suppose.¹²

1. Simple-Minded Rational Egoism

Before we are in a position to assess the evidence in support of this claim, however, it is useful to get a clearer sense of the simple-minded theories that most philosophers have in mind when they speak of Rational Egoism. For only then can we understand the basis for their objections to Rational Egoism, and their reasons for concluding that Plato was not an egoist.

Consider, for example, the definition of the rational egoist offered by Robert Shaver:

A rational egoist claims that it is necessary and sufficient, for an action to be rational, that it contribute to the well-being of an agent. (Shaver 1998: 2; 2010)

According to this account, the rationality of an action is to be judged simply in terms of its actual effect on the welfare of the agent. But such a formulation, though not impossible as an account of the *correctness conditions* for action, seems a non-starter as an account of the *rationality* of an action. Primitive non-human animals can surely behave in such a way to benefit themselves, but lacking reason, they can't behave rationally. Rational agents plan ahead and weigh in their minds various considerations, sometimes quite sophisticated considerations, when deciding what to do. The deliberative weighing of such considerations, considerations that we call 'reasons for action,' results in a normative judgment, a judgment that, in English, is expressed in sentences that use the modal verbs 'should' or 'ought,' as in the judgment, 'I really ought not to play Russian Roulette'. When human beings behave rationally, they act on their judgment about what they ought to do that is itself the result of correct practical deliberation.

Correspondingly, most definitions of Rational Egoism focus on the correctness conditions for the rational deliberation that results in rational action. Consider, for example, Lesley Brown's account of Rational Egoism:

Rational egoism (also known as *rational eudaimonism*) is the thesis that the *practically rational* person always acts or chooses with a view, ultimately, to their own happiness. That is, it is a view about what it is *rational* to choose . . . (L. Brown 2007: 47)¹³

On this conception of Rational Egoism, the rational agent is always and only moved to action by considerations of self-interest. Whatever any given agent might believe is a reason to \emptyset , considerations of self-interest are the only considerations that have any genuine and independent normative weight in practical deliberation: they are the only genuine, ultimate reasons for action. Of course, when engaging in practical deliberation, the rational agent will also need to take into account information about the likelihood that various courses of actions will in fact further his own good, and these considerations will also count as reasons for or against a given action. But such information about instrumental means gains practical significance for the agent only in light of the single end at which the rational agent always aims—namely, the agent's own good.¹⁴ I'll refer to this standard account of Rational Egoism as 'Simple-Minded Rational Egoism':

Simple-Minded Rational Egoism: Ultimately, the rational agent is always and only moved to action by considerations of self-interest. Only considerations of self-interest have independent normative weight. Only considerations of self-interest count as genuine and fundamental reasons for action.

Such a view is simple-minded in two senses. First, it simplifies the mind of a rational agent to one that pursues only one ultimate end in action. And, second, as we'll see later, it greatly over-simplifies the relationship between rational agency and reasons for action.

Simple-minded though it is, such a conception of Rational Egoism is the version of practical rationality that scholars of ancient philosophy attribute to Plato. In fact, Henry Sidgwick declares that it was assumed by *all* ancients 'that a rational individual would make the pursuit of his own good his supreme aim'.¹⁵ Arthur Adkins follows Sidgwick and declares that all ancient Greeks accepted this view:

The *agathon* [good] which the Greek pursues is not 'something which is good for the majority, even if it harms me, and therefore I will put up with it'. It is no use to tell him, even in a military context, where a certain self-sacrifice might be expected, that he must stay and fight because it is to the advantage of *all* for him to do so, even if he is killed. One must also point out that he is much more likely to be killed if he runs away; or that even if he runs away and escapes, his city will be ruined, and hence that he himself will lose his livelihood. *Agathon* to be pursued, must be '*agathon for me*' . . . (Adkins 1962: 251)

And, concerning Socrates and Plato, T. H. Irwin follows suit:

Although Plato rejects several Socratic assumptions, he still follows Socrates in accepting rational eudaemonism; he assumes that we have been given a good reason for being just if and only if we have been shown how justice promotes our happiness. (Irwin 1995: 201)

There is no doubt that such a view is well-represented in Plato's *Republic*. Consider, for example, Glaucon. Glaucon asks us to consider how we would think that we ought to act if we found ourselves in the position of Gyges who had a magical ring that made him invisible. When Gyges discovered his power to avoid detection, he seduced his queen, killed his king, and took over the kingdom (360a–b). And so, too, Glaucon suggests, would any sane person in the same position:

No one, it seems, would have such integrity (*oudeis an genoito . . . houtôs admanantinos*) that he would stay on the path of justice or stay away from other people's property, when he could take whatever he wanted (*hoti bouloito*) from the marketplace with impunity, go into people's houses and have sex with anyone he wished (*hotô bouloito*), kill or release from prison anyone he wished (*houstinos bouloito*), and do all the other things that would make him like a god among humans. (360b–c)¹⁶

Anyone would act as Gyges did, Glaucon suggests, unless he was irrational: 'for someone who didn't want to do injustice, given this sort of opportunity, and who didn't touch other people's property would be thought most miserable (*athliôtatos*) and stupid (*anoêtotos*) by everyone aware of the situation' (360d). On Glaucon's view, while it is always in one's interest to live in a society in which *other* people conform their actions to the norms of justice, it is not necessarily in one's own self-interest always to govern one's *own* actions by these norms. To be sure, if others discovered that you violated these norms, they could make you

suffer: they might cause you physical pain, humiliate you, kill you, or exile you from a well-ordered society. However, if your violations of the norms of justice remain undetected, you can gain the benefits of an unrestrained pursuit of your own self-interest and the benefits of living in a society in which others restrain their own pursuit of self-interest, without suffering the harms of punishment. As Glaucon comments, in such circumstances, it would be 'madness' (*mainesthai gar an*) to restrain your pursuit of self-interest simply because of considerations of justice (359a–b). It would be madness to constrain one's actions in this way because, on Glaucon's view, rationality requires that one aims in one's actions and choices to achieve one's own good, and in the absence of any threat of punishment, one's own good is best promoted by acting unjustly.

2. Plato's Complexity

While it is thus clear that at least one of Socrates' interlocutors is a simple-minded rational egoist, some scholars have disputed the common suggestion that Plato was any sort of egoist. The main passage that presents difficulties for a rational egoist interpretation of Plato's own commitments in the *Republic*¹⁷ is where Socrates describes a choice made by the eminently rational philosophers who were raised in the ideal state (*polis*). After they have studied philosophy, they are the best suited to rule the state (473c–d), but they are far from excited about the prospect of ruling. Nonetheless, Socrates notes, the founders of the *polis* would reasonably attempt to persuade them to rule by the following line of reasoning:

When people like you come to be in other cities, they're justified in not sharing in their city's labors, for they've grown there spontaneously, against the will of the constitution. And what grows of its own accord and owes no debt for its upbringing has justice on its side when it isn't eager (*prothumeisthai*) to pay anyone for that upbringing. But both for yourselves and for the rest of the *polis*, we've made you kings in our *polis* and leaders of the swarm, as it were. You're better and more completely educated than the others and are better able to share in both [philosophy and ruling]. Therefore each of you must take turns and go down (*katabateon*) to live in the common dwelling place of the others and grow accustomed to seeing in the dark. (520a–c)

As Socrates and Glaucon both agree, philosophers brought up in the ideal *polis* will agree that they ought to share in the burdens of ruling the *polis*:

Then do you think that those we've nurtured will disobey us and refuse to toil together (*sumponein*) in the *polis*, each in turn, while living the greater part of their time with one another in the pure realm [of studying philosophy]?

It isn't possible, for we'll be giving just orders to just people (*dikaia gar dê dikaios epitaxomen*). (520d–e)

While the founders remind the philosophers that they were made kings 'both for [themselves] and for the rest of the *polis*', and so can expect to be benefitted by this arrangement, at the end of the day, the philosophers seem to be moved primarily and directly not by considerations of self-interest, but by considerations of justice: (1) justice demands that they rule; and (2) they are just people committed to justice. Socrates does not represent them as reflecting on the long-term instrumental prudential value of ruling¹⁸ or as regarding ruling as something that is of intrinsic value for them (540c). To the contrary, philosophers will regard ruling as something 'compulsory' (*ep'anangkaion*) (520e)¹⁹ because they are no lovers of ruling (*mê erastas tou archein*) (521b). In fact, Socrates comments, true philosophers 'despise' (*kataphronounta*) ruling (521b),²⁰ and it is this attitude that philosophers have toward ruling that accounts at least in part for their aptitude at ruling:

If you can find a life (*bios*) that's better than ruling for the prospective rulers, your well-governed *polis* will become a possibility, for only in it will the truly rich rule—not those who are rich in gold but in that which is necessary to be rich in happiness (*hou dein eudaimona ploutein*), namely, a good and rational life (*zôês agathês te kai emphronos*). But if beggars hungry for private goods go into public life, thinking that the good is there for the seizing, then the well-governed *polis* is impossible, for then ruling is something fought over, and this civil and domestic war destroys these people and the rest of the *polis* as well. (520e–521a)

Since philosophers are the paragons of rationality, then, it would appear that Socrates himself believes that practical reason sometimes demands that we act contrary to what we believe would most contribute to our happiness.²¹ If so, then, it seems that Socrates at least implicitly believes that Rational Egoism is false.²²

The problem is that there seems to be equally good evidence that Socrates *is* committed to Rational Egoism in the *Republic*. Consider, for example, the way that he responds to Thrasymachus' arguments against the rationality of justice in Book I:

For my own part, I'll tell you that I am not persuaded. I don't believe that injustice is more advantageous (*kerdaleôteron*) than justice, not even if you give it full scope and put no obstacles in its way. Suppose that there is an unjust person, and suppose he does have the power to do injustice, whether by trickery or open warfare; nonetheless, he doesn't persuade me that injustice is more advantageous than justice. Perhaps someone here, besides myself, feels the same as I do. So come now, and persuade us adequately, you blessed man, that we don't deliberate correctly (*ouk orthôs bouleuomai*) when we have a higher regard for (*peri pleinonos poioumenoi*) justice than injustice. (345a–b)

In this passage, Socrates suggests that, in order to convince him that it is irrational to be just and to have a higher regard for justice than injustice, Thrasymachus

must convince him that injustice is more advantageous to the agent than justice. A little while later, Socrates makes a similar point when he urges Thrasymachus to continue with their investigation into the rationality of justice:

We must examine, as we proposed before, whether just people (*hoi dikaioi*) also live better (*ameinon zôsin*) and are happier (*eudaimonesteroi*) than unjust ones. I think it's clear already that this is so, but we must look into it further, since the argument concerns no ordinary topic but the way that one ought to live (*chrê zên*). (352d)

Here again Socrates grants Thrasymachus' assumption that the answer to the question 'how we ought to live' hangs on whether justice is more beneficial to the agent than injustice.

Socrates also appears to commit himself to Rational Egoism when he returns to the question of the rationality of justice in Book II. Glaucon and Adeimantus express hope that Socrates will be able to defend justice against its detractors, and they put the conditions for Socrates' success in egoistic terms. In particular, Glaucon suggests to Socrates that an adequate defense of justice would prove that the just person is always happier than the unjust person, even when the just person has a reputation for injustice, is punished harshly for his supposed transgressions, and has lost the affections and admiration of his family and fellow citizens (360d–362c). The very fact that Socrates takes up this challenge suggests that he does not regard its terms as ill-conceived: if he is to convince us that we always ought to be just, he agrees, he must show us that the just person is happier than the unjust person.²³ Not only do Socrates and his interlocutors agree that such an egoist defense of justice is the best possible defense, in the first two books of the *Republic*, they do not even *consider* any alternative type of defense.

Indeed, at the end of Book IV, after Socrates has discovered the conditions under which a person counts as being just, he reaffirms his understanding of the constraints on his defense of justice:

So it now remains, it seems, to enquire whether it is beneficial (*lusitelei*) to do just things, live in a fine way, and be just, whether one is known to be so or not, or to act unjustly and be unjust, when one doesn't pay the penalty and become better as a result of punishment. (444e–445a)

And after Socrates has examined in detail the lives of those who are just and unjust in Books VIII and IX, he declares himself victorious in defending justice in this way:

Shall we, then, hire a herald, or shall I myself announce that the son of Ariston [Glaucon] has given as his verdict that the best, the most just, and the most happy (*eudaimonestaton*) is the most kingly who rules like a king over himself, and that the worst, the most unjust, the most wretched is the most tyrannical, who most tyrannizes himself and the city he rules?

Let it be so announced.

And shall I add to the announcement that it holds, whether these things remain hidden from every god and human being or not?

Add it. (580b–c)

And, finally, in Book X, Socrates adds icing to the cake of justice. In the very last lines of the *Republic*, Socrates assures us, despite what Adeimantus might have suggested, the gods care deeply about our virtue and reward generously those who are just:

if you are persuaded by me . . . we'll always hold to the upward path, practicing justice with reason (*meta phronêseôs*) in every way. That way we'll be friends both to ourselves and the gods while we remain here on earth and afterwards—like victors in the games who go around collecting their prizes—we'll receive our rewards. Hence, both in this life and on the thousand-year journey we've described, we'll do well (*eu prattômen*). (621c–d)

From beginning to end, then, Socrates and his interlocutors appear to believe that there is only one way to defend justice, namely, by showing that a commitment to such a practice is in one's own self-interest. How, then, can we explain the rational philosophers' decision to do what they despise—to take their turns at ruling the *polis*? And if an unjust refusal to share in the burdens of ruling would in fact benefit the philosophers, then how can Socrates reasonably claim to have shown that the most just person is also the happiest? To answer these questions, we must gain a better understanding of Socrates' conception of rational agency.

3. Socrates on Rational Agency

On Socrates' view, human motivation is quite complex. While they are often moved by considerations of self-interest, humans are also moved directly by independent considerations.

For example, human beings often engage in certain expert practices (*technai*), and these practices are themselves defined by ends other than the self-interest of the practitioner. The end that defines the practice of horse-breeding is the well-being of horses (342c), and the end that defines the practice of being a ship-captain is the good of his crew when they are on his ship (342d–e).²⁴ If a ruler is to count as practicing the art of ruling, according to Socrates, he must aim at the advantage of his subjects rather than his own advantage:

no one in any position of rule, insofar as he is a ruler, considers (*skopei*) or orders what is advantageous to himself (*to autô(i) sumpheron*), but he says everything that he says and does everything that he does looking (*blepon*) toward what is advantageous to his subjects, those on whom he

works (*demiourgê(i)*), and what is advantageous and proper to them. (342e)

Here Socrates says explicitly that when a ruler is deliberating about what to do, when he is deliberating as a ruler, his attention is focused on only one end: what is advantageous to his subjects.

If Socrates does indeed endorse some version of Rational Egoism, it might then seem to follow that, on his view, those who single-mindedly engage in a practice whose end is something other than the agent's self-interest are acting irrationally. However, Socrates recognizes that, in many circumstances, it can be in one's self-interest to be motivated by goals other than self-interest. In Book I, Socrates notes that some people are amply compensated for taking up a practice that demands that they aim at a final goal other than their own self-interest:

That's why I said just now, Thrasymachus, that no one readily (*hekonta*) chooses to rule and to take other people's troubles (*kaka*) in hand and straighten them out, but each asks for compensation; for anyone who intends to engage in his practice well never does or orders what is best for himself (*hautô(i) to beltiston*)—at least not when he orders as his practice mandates—but what is best for what he rules. It is because of this, it seems, that wages must be provided to a person if he's to be willing (*ethelêsein*) to rule, whether in the form of money or honor or a penalty if he refuses. (346e–347a)

Socrates insists that people who are engaged in the practice of ruling aim at final goals that are distinct from their self-interest: rulers who engage in the practice of ruling aim at what is best for those whom they rule rather than themselves (342e, 346d). However, it doesn't follow that rulers lack self-interested reasons to take up the practice of ruling in the first place. If they have reason to believe that they will receive sufficient compensation for their work, then they do have a self-interested reason to take up the practice of ruling, even if taking up this practice entails not giving independent weight to considerations of self-interest when deciding what to do.

The benefits of losing sight of one's own self-interest in practical deliberation are not restricted to those who take up the practice of ruling. On Socrates' view, in order to survive, all human beings must live in political groups whose members take up particular practices:

the *polis* comes to be because none of us is self-sufficient, but we all need many things . . . And because people need many things, and because one person calls on a second out of one need and on a third out of a different need, many people gather in a single place to live together as partners and helpers. And such a settlement is called a *polis*. (369b–c)

While he first imagines a *polis* that consists only of farmers, artisans, merchants, traders and laborers (369d–371e), he eventually concedes that human nature is such that a *polis* will require two additional classes of individuals: a guardian

class of individuals who take up the practice of ruling, and a class of helpers (or, more commonly, 'auxiliaries', *epikourous*) who perform a military and police function (374c). Like the practices that we have already considered, these social practices are defined by the ends at which their practitioners aim, and correspondingly, when engaged in their respective social practices, no one in the *polis* is deliberating and acting with an eye to his own good. The rulers 'deliberate (*bouleuetai*) not about each particular thing, but about the *polis* as a whole, how it is best for each citizen to relate to each other and for it to relate to other *poleis*' (428d), the helpers deliberate and act with the aim of protecting the *polis* against enemies (375e–376b); and the producers and traders deliberate and act with the aim of meeting the citizens' bodily needs for food, shelter and clothing (369b–371e). Yet as we have seen, Socrates would agree that, in a *polis* in which everyone is performing his proper function, it is rational for each of them to do so. For the *polis* that most reliably contributes to the welfare of all of its citizens²⁵ will be one in which all of its citizens are motivated to act directly by considerations other than self-interest.

In general, whether it is in our interest to commit ourselves to a practice, whose very nature entails that we act for the sake of a goal other than our self-interest, or whether it is in our interest to be moved directly by motivational forces, like love, that are for the sake of ends other than our own self-interest, will depend on various facts about our own nature, the practice in question, and the context in which we find ourselves. We human beings can't always calculate effectively and efficiently which particular action is in our own self-interest. Further, we can't always motivate ourselves to pursue certain goals effectively unless we treat them as final. We must plan for the future, and to do so, we must make certain commitments to the ends and norms of certain practices that we will not revise willy-nilly.²⁶ Finally, many of the things that are in our self-interest can be achieved only as a result of cooperation with others, and often this cooperation depends on our mutual confidence that we are not always pursuing our own self-interest as our final end. If human nature were different, or if mutual cooperation were not possible, taking up a practice like ruling or guarding that requires us to lose sight of our own self-interest might not be rational things to do—not rational, that is, if Rational Egoism is true.

Thus far, we have considered beneficial social practices that require us to deliberate and act for the sake of some end other than our self-interest. In certain contexts, it is rational to take up these practices. Socrates also maintains that human nature is such that most of us, most of the time—and not only when we are engaged in certain social practices—best serve our own interests by being moved directly to action by forces other than a concern for our own good. As is well-known, on Socrates' view, the individual human *psyche* bears a structural similarity to the *polis* (435d). It has three motivational modules 'or parts' which, though not all directed in their aim toward the good of the individual, nonetheless motivate humans to achieve this good.

One of the parts of the human *psyche* is that by which we engage in reasoning (*logismos*), otherwise known as the 'rational part' (*to logistikon*) (439d). Like the

rulers of a state, the rational part of our psyches has an executive function (441e, 442b–c) for which it must gain the sort of knowledge that it needs to rule well (428e, 442b–c, 534d). In the state, the rulers ‘will guard against external enemies and internal friends, so that the one will lack the power and the other the desire to harm the state’ (414b), and seek the knowledge required to achieve this end (428c).²⁷ Correspondingly, when our own reason is functioning properly, it will seek knowledge of ‘the better and worse’ (*beltionos kai cheironos*) (441b) and will rule the individual’s psyche in accordance with its understanding of what is good for (*sumpherontos*) the psyche as a whole as well as each of its parts (441e, 442c). Since, on Socrates’ view, human beings depend for their very survival on their cooperative relations with other human beings (369b, 372a), like the rulers in the state, reason must attend both to maintaining good relations with others and to its own internal harmony, if it is to succeed in achieving the individual’s good.

As we might expect of a Rational Egoist, on Plato’s view, one of the motivational forces that drives the rational part of the soul to perform its proper function is a natural intrinsic desire, which no amount of training or repression will eliminate (558d), to rule the psyche in accordance with its knowledge of what is best for the soul and each of its parts.²⁸ But contrary to what one would expect of a Simple-Minded Rational Egoist, reason is also naturally driven by an intrinsic desire for wisdom and learning that is more liberal in its scope than one would expect from a creature whose sole aim was to benefit itself (475b–c, 581b).

While the rational part is the soul’s proper ruler, it is not the soul’s only source of motivation even when the soul is functioning as it should. In the *polis*, it is the ruler’s job to discover and mandate public policies and norms of behavior that are best for the *polis* as a whole (519e–520a). However, according to Socrates, the *polis* runs most smoothly when everyone sticks to his own job (370b, 434b) and acquires the necessary expertise required to perform that particular job (374b–e, 428a–d). Rulers aren’t farmers, and they don’t know how to farm. For a ruler to dictate the details of the planting of cabbages would be a disaster for everyone. Correspondingly, an individual whose soul is functioning properly ‘does not allow *any* part of himself to do the work of another part or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other’ (443c; my emphasis). In particular, while reason should exercise ‘foresight’ (*promêtheian*) (441e) and ‘plan’ (*bouloumenon*) (442b) for the entire soul, it should not demand that the individual act on each occasion solely on the basis of its calculations of the likely personal benefits and harms of each and every possible action. Instead, it should let the other parts of the psyche ‘do their own work’ (442a), and thus motivate the individual to act by the natural desires that have their home in these parts.²⁹

One of these parts is brute appetite: ‘the part with which it lusts, hungers, thirsts, and gets excited by other appetites’ (439d; see also 580e). On Socrates’ view, when I am thirsty, I want drink and am set into motion (*horma(i)*) toward it (439b). Just as the function of the producers and merchants in a state is to make sure that the citizens have the material goods necessary to meet their bodily needs, so too the function of an individual person’s appetites is to make sure that

she consumes these goods. And just as the rulers cannot be everywhere in the state, assessing each particular action of each particular farmer and artisan for its implications for the welfare of the state as a whole, so too, it is impossible for us to focus our rational attention on every particular thing that might have implications for our physical welfare. Given the extraordinary multiplicity of things that demand our attention every day, if it were not for thirst and hunger, it simply might not occur to us to drink or eat, or at least, not often enough to serve our biological needs.

Like the handy alarm feature on my electronic calendar, hunger sends me a signal that reminds me that it's soon time to eat. I don't rethink every appointment when my calendar tells me it is time to go to class or to the dentist, or time to pick up my daughter from school. Similarly, I usually don't second-guess the value of acting on my hunger every time it tells me to eat. On most occasions, I eat simply because I'm hungry, and not because in comparison to all of the possible alternatives available to me, I've reasoned that it's in my best interest to eat this now. Besides, my hunger is more insistent than my calendar's alarm. While I can 'dismiss' my calendar's reminders, the volume of my hunger becomes ever more over-powering until I literally cannot do anything else until I satisfy it. As Socrates notes, necessity demands that we satisfy such natural intrinsic desires (558e).

Of course, when I'm functioning properly, I don't eat just anything, on just any occasion. I don't walk out of class whenever I'm assailed by hunger or attempt to have sex whenever I find someone attractive. Sometimes we must ignore, repress or sublimate our appetites when they motivate us to pursue some object that reason recognizes will harm us (439c, 441b) or against which our emotions rebel (439e–440a). Reason, like the rulers of the state, must maintain control. But maintaining control is not the same as micro-managing. The rulers don't make every decision for each and every farmer, and similarly reason does not take over the function of appetite and calculate on each occasion when it is best to eat, drink or have sex. Instead, the rulers rule by planning ahead and establishing rules of cooperation (*nomoi*) so that, when the artisans and producers do their own work, they will in fact contribute to the good of the state. Correspondingly, it is the function of reason to plan our lives so that, when appetites do their work, they also contribute to our own good. Reason should offer me certain rules of thumb (*nomoi*) about wholesome food options that will not lead to addictive food impulses, and it should also motivate me to act so as to insure the availability of these options when appetites arise. In addition, it should supervise appetite's activities to make sure it 'doesn't become so big and strong that it no longer does its own work but attempts to enslave and rule over' the rest of my psyche (442a). But having planned my life to make room for pleasant meals, having trained and satisfied my appetites in the past so that their demands are typically consistent with my welfare, and having supplied myself with wholesome food for their satisfaction, I can safely allow my appetites to perform their proper function without any further input from reason: I am hungry, and so, I should eat.

Like the *polis*, our psyches are composed not of two, but of three, parts. In addition to the rulers and the producers in the state, there is a class of individuals whose job is to be ‘helpers’ (*epikourous*) and aids (*boêthous*) to the rulers’ convictions (414b). Similarly, in our psyches, spirit (*to thumoeides*) naturally serves as reason’s helper (441a). Such an alliance between reason and spirit might lead us to think that whenever spirit acts, it should take its marching orders from reason, but such a picture is at odds with the fact that spirit, like appetite, moves without reasoning (*alogistôs*) (441c). What drives spirit are natural desires that are peculiar to it and account for its ability to help reason: a love of success (*philonikon*) and a love of honor (*philotimon*) (581b).

Socrates seems to believe that all of us, even the citizens of his ideal state, are naturally motivated by an intrinsic desire both to excel and to be recognized by others for our merit. For to encourage the soldiers to perform great deeds for the preservation of the state, Socrates promises the sort of public honors which in Athens had been typically reserved for victorious athletes at the Olympic games. When a soldier ‘is best (*aristeusanta*) and is highly esteemed (*eudokimêsanta*)’ (468b), he will ‘be first to be crowned with wreaths,’ will receive ‘kisses’ from whomever he wants, and will be honored ‘at sacrifices and all such occasions with hymns, seats of honor, meats, and well-filled cups of wine’ (468b–e). Even the eminently rational philosopher-rulers will pursue excellence and honor—only not the sort of honor that is given in most societies. Their reason would rebel against pursuing ‘present honors, thinking them slavish and worthless (*oudenos axias*)’. But their spirit would impel them to pursue honor nonetheless: ‘they prize what is right (*to orthon*) and the honors that come from it (*tas apo toutou timas*) above everything, and regard justice [that is, the justice of the state] as the greatest and most necessary thing (*megiston de kai anangkaiotaton*), serving it and increasing it as they set their *polis* in order’ (540d–e).

Success or failure in the pursuit of these spirited ends gives rise to further spirited motivational forces. Anger is the primary example that Socrates offers of a motivational force that gives rise to spirited desires: but other emotions—especially, shame and pride—also provide an independent motivational source within our psyche. When someone treats us badly, not recognizing the honor and respect we deserve, we are immediately seized by a feeling of anger which impels us to rebel against the wrongdoer. As Socrates asks:

what happens if . . . [a person] believes that someone has been unjust to him? Isn’t the spirit within him boiling and furious (*chalepainei*), making itself the ally of what seems to him to be just? And suffering hunger, cold, and all such things, won’t the spirit of noble souls endure, succeed (*nika(i)*), and not let go until it either achieves its purpose, or dies, or, called to heel by the reason within him, like a dog by a shepherd, calms down. (440c–d)

Though reason always maintains control over the well-functioning psyche, it is also true that, just as the soldiers in the state must act independently of the rulers, spirit ultimately acts independently of our reason. If it were otherwise, if

the soldiers returned to the rulers for orders whenever they needed to act, neither they nor the rulers would ever get their jobs done. Life often requires a quick and nimble response, and our spirited emotions, which are trained early in life by our society's lessons about common forms of noble and shameful behavior (377a–b, 378d), are easily triggered by certain environmental cues to motivate us directly toward appropriate action. Someone is threatening my family or community: spirit spontaneously propels me forward to fight against this threat. In my chaotic juggling of responsibilities, I have forgotten an appointment with a student: I am ashamed and am impelled to email a sincere apology. In situations such as these, my actions are independently and spontaneously motivated by my spirited emotions, rather than by any careful rational deliberation about which actions would best serve my interests on that particular occasion. Since our spirited emotional reactions were trained when we were young before our own reason was fully developed, they are sometimes crude and at odds with what reason tells us is best. Odysseus' spontaneous anger at the outrageous and insulting behavior of his wife's housemaids and suitors motivates him to kill them all; his reason, however, recognizes clearly that, in this situation, it would be disastrous to attack (441b).

The forces of spirit are directed not only toward others who threaten us and our status within the community, but toward ourselves, if we believe that internal forces threaten harm. People who take sexual pleasure in the sight of corpses, Leontius must know, are commonly disvalued by the other members of the community on whom their welfare depends. After all, who wants to live next door to a person who thinks that we might be more attractive if we were dead? When Leontius desires such pleasures nonetheless, and especially when he acts to indulge such pleasures, he feels self-hatred and his spirit motivates him to chastise the unruly part of his psyche (439e–440a).

In this particular case, it is likely that spirit will serve Leontius well. But it's not always like this. Those of us who have grown up in less than ideal circumstances—that is, all of us—will continue to feel some emotional resistance to doing what we now, in our maturity, know to be right, or at least permissible, if such an action is at odds with the behavior that we learned at mother's knee that our community values and esteems. We will feel such emotional resistance, unless we had the good fortune to be able to engage in practices 'from youth onward' that helped us to purge ourselves of these emotional triggers and the unnecessary desires that they motivate (559a).

Though our spirited desires do sometimes lead us astray, especially if we are members of badly ruled societies or in intimate relationships with individuals whose own psyches are badly ruled, they generally serve our own interest. Because we human beings are not self-sufficient (369b), we must be motivated by forces that help us to maintain our standing in the community or in our family, and our natural desires to excel and to be honored certainly help to constrain the worst anti-social inclinations that might lead to a loss of social standing. The shame and pride that motivate us to act in conformity with social norms, even when reason would calculate that it is not in our best interest to do so, can help

to cement the bonds of trust and good-will on which successful social cooperation depends. If I did not feel a passionate loyalty to my family, or at least shame at not feeling it, even on particular occasions on which it is not at all clear how such devotion could possibly serve my interests, then my husband and children would easily detect my lack of passion and lose at least one incentive to invest their own resources into the smooth functioning of our household.³⁰ In the unusual circumstances in which Odysseus finds himself, reason demands that he ignore his anger and check his inclination to retaliate right away. But in more ordinary circumstances, his inclination toward retaliation, even in the absence of clear evidence that such retaliation will be beneficial, serves him well. If Odysseus were to retaliate against someone who has done him or a loved one wrong only when he calculated that it is was in his best interests to do so, he would set up himself and his loved ones to be victims of wrongdoing in circumstances in which his enemies made sure that it would not be in his interest to retaliate. In contrast, a stable disposition to be moved by anger to retaliate, whether or not acting on such anger is in any given case beneficial, gives his enemies reason not to harm him or his loved ones in the first place.³¹ Apparently irrational emotions, then, can indirectly serve our good.

Though the rational agent will allow appetite to determine when to eat and will allow herself to be moved directly by desires for honor and victory or feelings of shame or anger, she will use her reason to figure out in advance which appetitive and spirited desires most reliably contribute to our welfare, and which, if indulged, are most likely to threaten to take over and wreak havoc in our lives. If she discovers that such forces have already infiltrated, reason will demand that the individual pursue practices that will purge the renegade forces within. Reason will organize and plan her life so that, when appetitive and spirited desires beckon, these desires will be met: they will not be at odds with one another, nor will they be so extravagant that they are unlikely to be fulfilled, nor will the meeting of them threaten her social relations on which her welfare depends. Having made such a plan, reason hasn't finished its work. Plans often do not work out, and circumstances change. To continue to benefit the individual, reason must reassess the situation periodically and be open at all times to clear evidence that a different course should be taken. Though reason does all of these things for the sake of the good of the rational agent, in order to achieve this good, reason must allow the rational agent to be motivated directly by considerations other than those of self-interest. A rational agent will behave in this way, because it serves her interests to do so.³²

We have now seen that the sort of Rational Egoism to which Plato is committed is much more complex and sophisticated than the Simple-Minded Rational Egoism that is often attributed to him. In particular, Plato appears to be committed to the following view:

Platonic Rational Egoism: Reason's function in the rational agent is to plan and oversee her life in such a way that the motivational forces that move her to action are those that are most likely to serve her interest.

Because of certain facts about human nature, it is contrary to the human agent's interests to be moved to action only by considerations of self-interest. The rational agent will be moved to action by intrinsic desires for a variety of ends. The rational agent will also be moved to act on the outcome of rational deliberation. But even when deliberating, the rational agent will give independent weight to considerations other than those of self-interest. For any given human agent A, a consideration will have genuine and ultimate normative weight for A just in case, given A's nature and particular circumstances, A will most reliably contribute to her own happiness by giving independent weight to such considerations when deliberating about what to do. A rational agent acts as she ought to act just in case she is moved by motivational forces (whether they are reasons she considers in deliberation or simply desires to pursue certain ends) that her optimally functioning reason would endorse.

Such a view counts as a version of Rational Egoism, for it implies that all facts about what a particular agent has reason to do are grounded in facts about what is in that agent's self-interest. More importantly, it seems to me, such a view has a great deal of plausibility.

As rational agents, we are not, thank goodness, constantly engaged in rational deliberation. We often act simply because we desire to act, or enjoy so acting. Of course, we need to plan ahead and monitor our impulses for their likely effects in the changing circumstances in which we find ourselves, but it is perfectly rational to give our desires some free rein and allow them to motivate us independently of reason. It is rational to do so, Platonic Rational Egoism explains, because, given certain facts about human nature, it would be contrary to our self-interest not to do so.

Platonic Rational Egoism thus explains why, in some circumstances, at least, the mere fact that we have a particular desire seems to give us a genuine reason to act in a particular way, and thus explains the appeal of Humean theories of practical rationality. But it also explains why, in other circumstances, the mere possession of a desire gives us no reason to act in a particular way, and so, why Humean theories are ultimately mistaken. The desires that give us a reason to act are such that the disposition to be moved by such desires would be endorsed by optimally functioning human reason; desires that do not give us reason to act would fail to win such an endorsement.³³

Further, Platonic Rational Egoism explains and supports the view that most of us hold, namely, that, in addition to having a reason to promote our own welfare, we have *independent* reasons to enhance the welfare of others, to create beauty, to understand the world that we live in, to protect and nurture our children, to have close loving relationships with others, to win the respect of our respected colleagues, to eat when we are hungry, to drink when we're thirsty, to feel pleasure, and to avoid pain. According to Platonic Rational Egoism, we have independent reasons to do such things precisely because those who are disposed to be *independently* moved in rational deliberation by considerations in favor of

such actions and who are known by others to be moved by them, in a world in which others are moved directly by such considerations, are more likely to flourish than those who are not moved by them.³⁴

4. The Rationality and Happiness of Philosophers

According to the Simple-Minded Rational Egoism to which Thrasymachus and Glaucon seem committed, the only sorts of considerations that ultimately count in favor of an action are those that show that the action is in one's self-interest. As we have seen, Socrates is clearly *not* committed to such a view. When the ruler is thinking as a ruler, the only consideration that counts in favor of an action is whether it is best for those whom he rules: the ruler 'never does or orders what is best for himself—at least not when he orders as his practice prescribes' (346e). And yet as we saw, Socrates maintains that, whether it is rational to take up the practice of ruling in the first place depends on whether this practice is likely to be in one's self-interest. If those trained as philosophers have reason to believe that they will receive sufficient compensation for their work in ruling the *polis*, then they do have a self-interested reason to take up the practice of ruling, even if taking up this practice entails losing sight of their own self-interest as the final goal of their actions.

But in the case that concerns us, Plato's superbly rational philosophers do not reason in this way. Even though, *as a matter of fact*, it is in the self-interest of philosophers to rule—for 'there can be no happiness, either public or private, in any other *polis*' (473e)—that thought seems never to cross their mind when they are deciding whether to rule. On that occasion, at least, the only consideration that moves them is whether justice requires them to rule. And while it is also true that, *as a matter of fact*, the state of mind and character that constitutes being a just person is intrinsically valuable for them, more valuable, in fact, than any other thing (444e–445a), when they reflect on whether to act justly on this particular occasion, they don't appear to make a mental note of the ways in which acting justly contribute to this state of mind.³⁵ Instead, Plato's philosophers are willing to suffer the irritations of ruling simply because it's the just thing to do (cf. 440b–c). As just people, they have already made a commitment to justice, and such a commitment entails that they will be moved in practical deliberation directly by considerations of justice.

To this extent, Plato's philosophers are like mothers. When I am interrupted in my efforts to write this paper by my ten-year old daughter's questions about her own homework, it's not as if, when I turn my attention to her, I have decided that this was where my self-interest lies. To the contrary, it appears to me that her interests override mine; yes, it would be great to finish this thought; but no, she needs me now. And that appearance is accurate: her interests do override. I have taken up the practice of motherhood, and meeting the needs of one's children is the end of this practice, even if, on particular occasions, their needs conflict with some of one's most salient desires. Like the philosophers in Plato's

Republic, I sometimes have to be reminded of the commitments that I've made: I'm a mother, and this is what good mothers do. Motherhood demands it. I am *compelled* to act in this way. Plato's philosophers also find themselves on occasion wanting nothing more than to study more philosophy, but they too have made commitments: they are just people, devoted to the practice of justice, and in a context in which the norms of reciprocity prevail, where they owe their education to the cooperative efforts of their fellow citizens, they understand that justice compels them to give up philosophy for a while and rule the *polis* wisely.

Are such choices irrational, according to Platonic Rational Egoism? Only if, in the contexts in which we find ourselves, such choices are incompatible with our own happiness. The fact is, Socrates insists, happiness is possible only in a society in which philosophers take their turn at ruling (473e).³⁶ Though the guardians will have to give up for a while a life devoted exclusively to philosophy, the alternative in which non-philosophers rule or, he should add, in which they are constantly wrangling with one another over whose turn it is to rule or scheming to get out of their obligation, would not make them happier.³⁷ It's much better that they are moved directly in practical deliberation by considerations of justice. Correspondingly, human beings are more likely to flourish in a functional family where all members are committed to attending to and being moved *directly* by a consideration of the significant interests of the others and to sharing the burdens of meting those interests fairly. Put a mother in a dysfunctional family, though, where everyone fights to have his own interests prevail, or fights over whose turn it is to do the housekeeping that we all despise as much as Plato's guardians despise ruling, and all bets are off: the demanding norms of family life make sense only in a context in which one's own interests are also attended to. One would have to be crazy to conform to these norms in any other context, and, as Socrates agrees, one would have to be crazy to take up politics in any context other than an ideal state (496a–e; 520a–b). But since there is no happiness outside of the ideal *polis* in which philosophers take their turn at ruling, the philosophers' love for their fellow citizens, their commitment to acting justly, and their consequent decision to rule are practically rational by the standards of Platonic Rational Egoism: reasoning and desiring in this way and acting upon their decisions and desires make possible not only their own happiness, but the happiness of their fellow citizens, in which they will share.

5. Conclusion

Plato's significant insight is that, for humans, one of the most important questions of practical rationality is not 'What should I do?' but 'How should I be?': Which *dispositions* to action should I cultivate and develop? Which sorts of considerations should I be disposed to give independent weight in practical deliberation? What sorts of long-term commitments should I make? Which appetites should I cultivate? As we have seen, Socrates believes that it is rational for humans to

commit themselves to practical ends other than self-interest and give independent weight to considerations in practical deliberation other than considerations of self-interest. Socrates also believes that human beings don't have a choice but to be moved by intrinsic desires other than our desire for our own good, since we have, by nature and necessarily, intrinsic desires for knowledge, personal excellence, honor, food, drink and sex. As Socrates understands them, our sources of motivation are plural, irreducible and often opposing.³⁸ We count as fully rational agents when the forces that move us are those that we have rationally determined are most likely to serve our interest.³⁹ Such an account of practical rationality counts as *egoist* because it implies that all facts about what a particular agent ought to do are ultimately grounded in facts about what is in that agent's self-interest. In contrast to Robert Shaver's Rational Egoism, Platonic Rational Egoism counts as *rational* egoism, because it posits an important executive role for reason in the causal history of rational action. But in contrast to Simple-Minded Rational Egoism, it does not imply that all considerations that move the rational agent to action are considerations of self-interest.

According to Platonic Rational Egoism, the connection between rational agency and self-interest is more indirect and thus more intuitively plausible. In contrast to Simple-Minded Rational Egoism, Platonic Rational Egoism does not have the implication that we should not care about anyone's interest other than our own,⁴⁰ and in contrast to Simple-Minded Rational Egoism, Platonic Rational Egoism can justify moral concern as well as moral conduct.⁴¹ Just as significantly, Platonic Rational Egoism helps to explain simply, and without appeal to metaphysically and epistemologically mysterious properties,⁴² two distinct phenomena which any adequate account of practical rationality must explain.

First, from the deliberative first-person perspective of the rational agent, the regress of practical reasons will often end in considerations other than those of self-interest. Most of us, when we engage in practical deliberation weigh opposing considerations against one another—e.g., moral considerations, aesthetic considerations, considerations of personal loyalty, considerations of professional duty, and considerations of self-interest. We do not try to reduce all of these considerations to, or even ground them in, considerations of self-interest. We treat them all as having independent and ultimate weight.

And second, despite our commitment to the independent and ultimate weight of considerations of justice, Thrasymachus' question, 'Is it really rational for me to act as justice demands?' still seems pressing. The meta-normative question, 'Why is it the case that considerations of justice are normative?' requires an answer. Moreover, Socrates' strategy for answering this question—namely, to show that a just person is happier than an unjust person—seems intuitively compelling. In fact, a good deal of scholarship on the *Republic* is devoted to demonstrating that, despite apparent problems, Socrates' project of defending justice succeeds. Most scholars are eager to show that justice really does pay, and not just because they want to persuade sleazy and self-indulgent people to be just. Instead, they want to persuade *themselves*, people who already committed to being just, that it really is rational for them to act in this way.

Such phenomena give rise to a kind of puzzle. It seems that there is an irresolvable tension in our conception of rational agency. On the one hand, we seem to believe that reasons for action are plural and irreducible, and, in particular, that one kind of reason, moral reasons, are ultimate reasons. But, on the other hand, at least many of us believe that, in order to show that *we really do have a reason* to be moral, we must show that somehow morality is in our self-interest.

Platonic Rational Egoism reconciles these two aspects of our own thinking about reasons for action by drawing a distinction between the normative question, 'What sorts of ultimate practical reasons do I have to act?' and the meta-normative question, 'In virtue of what facts do these considerations actually *count* as ultimate reasons for action?' Plato's answer to the second, and not the first, question is egoist. Practical reasons come in many varieties. However, if a given consideration actually counts as a reason for a particular person to perform a particular act, then it's because of certain facts about how weighing such a consideration in practical deliberation is likely to affect one's self-interest.⁴³ For those of us who are both philosophers and practical reasoners, it is especially important to keep the distinction between these two questions clearly in mind.⁴⁴ For unless we do, our insights as philosophers will be at the expense of our ability to behave well.⁴⁵

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NOTES

¹ That is, desires for objects or states of affairs that are not viewed merely as means to some other objects or states of affairs that one desires. See, e.g., Williams 1980. I will call any theory of practical reasoning that puts as a constraint on what counts as a practical reason for A to Φ that A has or would have certain desires that would be satisfied by Φ -ing a 'Humean account of practical reasons,' even if those who hold such theories would reject such a label. So, Michael Smith's account of practical reasons counts as Humean on my view. (See Smith 1994: ch. 5, and Smith 1995: 109–31.)

² That's not to say that we all believe that we always have overriding reason not to hurt others. Sometimes our reasons for refraining from hurting others are outweighed by other considerations.

³ Of course, some philosophers disagree with this common-sense view. See, e.g., Street 2009.

⁴ So, at least, Socrates suggests in the *Apology*, when he explains why he was unwilling to use certain rhetorical tricks to achieve his goal of persuading the jury to acquit him (*Ap.* 38d–39b). See also Plato's *Euthydemus* and *Gorgias*, where he represents, and has Socrates disparage, the argumentative tricks of sophists and rhetoricians.

⁵ For ease of exposition, I will frequently use the term 'self-interest' where the Greeks would be more inclined to speak of 'his own good' or '*eudaimonia*' or 'doing well' (*eu pratein*). Human beings value and have an interest in many things, not all of which are part of their *self-interest*, as I mean to be using the term.

⁶ And depending on the relationship between the satisfaction of desires and self-interest, Humean theories of practical rationality and rational egoist theories might have the same practical implications. I argue against their equivalence in Gentzler 2004. In any case, these theories are logically distinct in the explanatory priority they give to desire-satisfaction or welfare in determining the reasons that we have to act. For the Humean, it is because a particular action satisfies certain actual or hypothetical desires that we have reason to do it. For the egoist, it is because a particular action stands in some relation to our self-interest that we have reason to do it.

⁷ Sidgwick 1907; Prichard 1928; Foster 1937: 386–93; Adkins 1962: 249–53; Vlastos 1991: 200–33; Irwin 1977: 177–91; 1995: chs 4 and 15. Some scholars resist attributing to Plato the doctrine of Rational Egoism, preferring instead to speak of Plato's *eudaimonism*.

⁸ Most notably, Kraut 1973: 330–44; Cooper 1977: 151–7; White 1999: 497–512; 2002: 189–214.

⁹ In Gentzler (ms.), I argue that Plato succeeds not only in getting an egoist defense of justice off the ground but also in getting it to fly.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Annas 1981: 21. It is a bit surprising that Annas finds this to be an objectionable feature of Cephalus' attitude toward virtue, since, in later work, she attributes to all of the major Greek moral philosophers the view that virtue is to be valued for its contribution to happiness, and in this context seems not to find the position morally objectionable. See Annas 1993; 1999.

¹¹ Lesley Brown believes that Rational Egoism is incompatible with proper moral motivation, but argues that Plato is nonetheless committed to Rational Egoism (L. Brown 2007).

¹² While rational egoism appeals to many, in sophisticated philosophical circles it has fallen out of favor as a general and complete account of the nature of reasons for action. For recent criticisms of rational egoism, see Parfit 1984: 187–99; Korsgaard 1999; Shaver 1998; and Kraut 2007: 39–41. We can put aside Korsgaard's objections to egoism aside without further ado. Since Plato's conception of self-interest is distinct from a desire-satisfaction account, it is not subject to the objections that Korsgaard raises against an instrumentalist conception of egoism. See Gentzler 2004.

¹³ Nicholas White, 1999: 21, describes '*eudaimonism*' as 'the thesis that the final aim of a human being's rational deliberation is his or her happiness or well-being'. For other accounts of this sort, see Baier 1993: 201 and Kraut 2007: 40.

¹⁴ In this paper, I won't take up the much more complicated question of what other conditions are required for practical deliberation to be 'correct'. Most scholars seem to assume that the only thing that is distinctive of Rational Egoism is its account of the ultimate ends of correct deliberation.

¹⁵ Sidgwick 1907: 91.

¹⁶ Translations of the Republic are based on Grube 1992.

¹⁷ I am assuming that, at least for the most part, we can get a sense of Plato's views by paying special attention to the words of Socrates in the dialogues. (For a defense of this view, see Kraut, 1992: 1–50.) However, in the end, I am not deeply wedded to this view. Those who are suspicious of our ability to attribute any positive philosophical doctrine to Plato on the basis of what the character Socrates says in the *Republic* can

regard the doctrines that I attribute to him simply as doctrines to which the character Socrates appears committed in this dialogue.

¹⁸ C. D. C. Reeve argues that nonetheless the philosophers of Plato's ideal state do have instrumental egoistic reasons to rule, since otherwise they would be ruled by those who would be unable to insure the conditions for their happiness (Reeve 1988: 202–8). Eric Brown argues against Reeve's interpretation on the ground that it is inconsistent 'with the *Republic's* ethical thesis,' namely to show that justice is a good in itself 'without regard to consequences' (E. Brown 2000: 4). But Brown's objection fails to distinguish between the value of just actions and the value of the state of the soul that is responsible for such actions. It's the latter that Socrates was asked to defend as a good in itself, and Reeve focuses on the instrumental value of just actions, like the just action of ruling. The main problem with Reeve's interpretation as a way of preserving an egoist interpretation of Plato's conception of practical rationality is that, though it may well be true that the philosophers of Plato's ideal state do have instrumental egoistic reasons to rule, such considerations play a minor role in the argument that the founders give to the philosophers. While it is true that the founders remind the philosophers that they have given them the education required to be rulers, both for their own sake and for the sake of their fellow citizens (520b–c), considerations of justice play a significant and independent role in persuading the philosophers to rule. Reeve doesn't explain how affording such independent weight to considerations of justice is compatible with Rational Egoism.

¹⁹ Eric Brown attempts to reconcile the philosophers' decision to rule with their pursuit of their self-interest by noting this reference (and others) to 'compulsion'. According to Brown, this 'compulsion' comes in the form of the laws that require them to rule. As Brown explains:

The law changes the circumstances and thereby alters how much happiness is available. Were there no law, the philosophers would act justly and achieve maximal happiness by refusing to rule. Given the law, the philosophers act justly and achieve maximal happiness (for the circumstances) by ruling. Justice is fully consistent with (indeed, required for) maximal happiness in any given situation. (E. Brown 2000: 10)

Yet it remains unclear to me why on Brown's account the mere existence of a law that 'compels' the philosophers to rule makes such a difference to the circumstances in which they might achieve maximal happiness. It would be one thing if the philosophers were motivated to obey the law that compels philosophers to rule because of a concern to avoid the punishment that might follow from a violation of the law: for, in such circumstances, the philosophers would be threatening their own happiness if they disobeyed. Yet, in addition to seeking to reconcile the philosophers' decision to rule with their self-interest, Brown seeks to avoid an interpretation of the politics of the *Republic* that would imply that we should not take his political reforms seriously—a result that he suggests would follow from the suggestion that the philosophers must be 'compelled rather than persuaded' to rule (ibid.: 3). On Brown's view, the philosophers are motivated directly by the fact that the law would be just: 'For any just command the founders give to the philosophers [in the form of a law] will be obeyed straight-away, without need of any threats' (ibid.:13). But this explanation simply pushes the interpretive problem one step backwards: What reason do the philosophers have to obey a just law? If the explanation is simply that doing justice always contributes to one's happiness, then the appeal to the existence of the just law is doing no work that an appeal to the justice of ruling (in the

absence of a law) doesn't do. Yet Brown himself is skeptical that (in the absence of a law) the philosophers would have regarded ruling, *even if it were the just thing to do*, as something that contributed to their welfare (ibid.: 3–9).

In a later paper, Brown supplements his account of the motivation of the philosophers by appealing to the influence of their early childhood education that will habituate them into 'objecting to what is shameful' at an early age (402a), an inclination that they will retain even at the end of their philosophical education (E. Brown 2004: 286). Though Brown continues in this paper to object to alternative views on the grounds that they do not fully explain why the philosophers are 'compelled' to rule, it's not clear to me how Brown's new interpretation fares any better. If the philosophers are naturally inclined toward justice, why would they need to be compelled to rule, if justice required them to rule?

²⁰ Peter Vernezze 1992: 336–7 argues that the philosophers' reluctance to rule is only temporary, and eventually they come to love ruling. But I think that Eric Brown is exactly right when he reminds us that Socrates maintains that it is precisely the philosophers' (continued) aversion to ruling that makes them most suitable to rule (520e–521b) (E. Brown 2000: 7).

²¹ White 2002: 204. Timothy Mahoney attempts to reconcile the philosophers' decision to rule and their self-interest by arguing that, on Plato's view, 'the good life' simply consists in those things that are genuinely good: 'Since reason desires the good of everything and anything, it actually desires what is good from an impersonal point of view, i.e., without regard to whose good it is' (Mahoney 1992: 279). But such a reconciliation of justice and self-interest comes at the cost of defining self-interest in such a way that Rational Egoism is true by definition. If what is good for the self is whatever reason desires, then of course it is rational to pursue our self-interest. While Rational Egoism may have more plausibility than most contemporary philosophers believe, it is hardly trivially true (Irwin 1994: 164). For a related criticism of informed-desire accounts of welfare, see Overvold 1980: 105–18.

²² Variations on this argument are given by Foster 1936: 301–8, White 1986: 22–46; 2002: 204. Julia Annas and Arthur Adkins also maintain that Socrates' remarks here are incompatible with Rational Egoism, but instead of concluding that Socrates is not committed to Rational Egoism, they conclude that his views are simply inconsistent (Annas 1981: 266–71; Adkins 1962: 290–3). Those who discuss the question whether Plato is a rational egoist seem to assume a simple-minded version of Rational Egoism. See White 1999: 497; 2002: 177; Kraut 1973: 330; 1991: 252–3; Cooper 1977: 147.

²³ See 345a–b and 352d, quoted above.

²⁴ This strikes me as a most implausible account of the end of the ship captain *qua* ship captain. For our purposes, though, it really doesn't matter whether Socrates has accurately identified the ends of these practices, only that he has identified practices whose ends are something other than the good of the practitioner.

²⁵ R. 420b. See Morrison 2001: 1–25, for a defense of this interpretation of this passage.

²⁶ Bratman 1992: 1–15; Harman 1999: 52.

²⁷ Socrates maintains that the acquisition of such knowledge requires an arduous 50 year educational program that covers a wide variety of disciplines, as diverse as music, military service, mathematics and astronomy (520d–540b).

²⁸ For a compelling argument that, on Plato's view, reason possesses an innate desire to rule, see Cooper 1984: 122–6. Cooper does not however agree with my suggestion that reason rules for the sake of the benefit of the soul of which it is a part. (See, Cooper 1977: 144–49. I agree with Eric Brown's 2004: 278 argument against Cooper's view.)

²⁹ Most scholars do not take seriously Socrates' suggestion that there is distinct work for each of the parts of the soul to do. Instead, on their understanding of Socrates' position, in the properly functioning soul, reason provides the sole source of motivation, and the only job of the other parts is either to enforce reason's commands or to be disciplined by reason. It's not then surprising that they are then left wondering what Socrates could possibly mean by saying that, in the just soul, reason doesn't 'meddle' with the work of others. For, on their understanding of Socrates' position, it is precisely reason's job to micro-manage the work of the other parts. See Cooper 1998: 111, n. 47.

³⁰ Frank 1988: ch. 10.

³¹ Ibid.: 168–70; Ridley 1996.

³² An analogous observation has been made by certain utilitarians who have defended the application of certain rules or norms other than the norm to maximize happiness on the grounds that by following these norms we will be more likely in the long run to maximize happiness. They argue that, given the limits of human knowledge and the nature of human character, human beings are more likely to promote the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number if they cultivate in themselves a propensity to treat as reasons for action considerations other than those bearing on which course of action is most likely to promote the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number. See Brandt 1996: 142–55; Railton 1984: 134–71; 1988: 398–416.

³³ Thus Platonic Rational Egoism also explains and supports the commonly held view that when people act in a way that is consistent with the way that optimally functioning reason would endorse, we are inclined to say that they have acted as they ought or as they have reason to act, even if as a matter of fact they weren't *rational* in so acting because their own rationality played no causal role in motivating their own action. It thus also explains why someone like Shaver might be inclined to define Rational Egoism without any reference to rationality or reasoning.

³⁴ See Pinker 2002 for an accessible overview of the relevant biological literature.

³⁵ Socrates makes the rather puzzling remark that just actions are those that cause a just character, rather than, as we might be inclined to believe, just actions are those that are caused by a just character (443e).

³⁶ White insists that the philosophers would be happier if they refused to rule:

[i]t does not seem possible to mistake Plato's explanation of the motivation that the philosophers would have for choosing the activity of philosophizing over ruling. It is that such a life is better and happier. (White 2002: 204)

And again:

If Plato thought that the rulers' life would be made better by governing the city, or even that a life of ruling would be as good as a life of philosophizing, he could not have said that in consenting to rule, they are consenting to live a worse life when they could live a better. (ibid.: 206–07)

The passages that White has in mind when he makes these claims are 519d, which he quotes at the end of this last statement, and 520e–521a, which I quote in full above. 519d has absolutely no force since these words are Glaucon's rather than Socrates'. Let's look again, this time more carefully, at Socrates' actual words at 520e–521a:

If you can find a life (*bios*) that's better than ruling for the prospective rulers, your well-governed *polis* will become a possibility, for only in it will the truly rich rule—not those who are rich in gold but in that which is necessary to be rich

in happiness (*hou dein eudaimona ploutein*), namely, a good and rational life (*zôês agathês te kai emphronos*).

Notice that Socrates does *not* say that the philosophers who agree to take their turn at ruling are less happy than they would have been had they refused to rule and continued to do philosophy full-time. Instead, Socrates describes these philosophers-rulers as continuing to have what is needed to be 'rich in happiness, namely, a good and rational life'. Socrates does not ask the philosophers to give up a life of philosophy for a life of ruling. Instead, Socrates explains, '[e]ach of them will spend most of his time with philosophy, but, when his turn comes, he must labor in politics and rule for the *polis's* sake' (540b–c).

³⁷ But what if they had a magic ring, like Gyges'? Wouldn't they be better off if they used it to get out of ruling? While it may well be true that a life of doing philosophy is better than a life of ruling, just as it is likely that a life of doing philosophy would be better than a life of washing dishes, it does not follow that either engaging in a little ruling or washing a few dishes detracts from one's welfare. To assume that the one claim does follow from the other is to assume a conception of happiness that Socrates himself would reject.

On Thrasymachus' and Glaucon's view, the more things that you get that you happen to want, the better off you will be. For this reason, any time people willingly decline something that is more desirable than something else, they have chosen, irrationally, to be less happy than they could otherwise be. It's for this reason that Thrasymachus believes that the unjust person always 'out-does', and thus is happier than, the unjust person: for he always gets 'more' of the things that he wants (343d–e). But, as I have argued elsewhere (Gentzler 2004), Plato would reject this conception of happiness. Happiness is *not* a matter of getting more and more of the things that one prefers. Instead, it is a matter of achieving a kind of 'oneness'—a harmony of one's psychic parts. Just as the musician, who, in tuning his lyre wants to achieve perfect harmony of pitch, the person who is seeking happiness seeks harmony between the different motivational forces within her psyche; she does not seek to 'outdo'—indeed there is no sense in which she *could* outdo—someone else who is perfectly tuned (349e). Once a person has achieved such harmony, there is nothing further that would improve her welfare, and there are few irritations that will threaten it. That's not to say that a person in a perfect state of happiness wouldn't appreciate an offer to take her turn at the dishes so that she could continue to work on her philosophy paper; however, it is simply not the case that, taking her turn at doing dishes makes her less happy than she otherwise would be. Her psychic harmony is in no way threatened by such labors. Nor, *pace* Glaucon, is it the case that agreeing to take their turn at ruling will detract from the happiness of the philosophers of Socrates' ideal *polis*. Despite such labor, they will retain their psychic harmony.

³⁸ White is thus right to observe that, for the Ancients, practical reasons are not necessarily harmonious (White 1999: 497–512; 2002: *passim*). As we have seen, however, it does not follow from this observation that they are not committed to Rational Egoism.

³⁹ Compare Gauthier 1994: 690–720 and Schmidtz 1992: 445–466. While Plato agrees with Gauthier's claim that we can decide which principles of action to adopt, he doesn't agree with his view that ultimately which principles are correct is itself a practical matter to be decided by a consideration of one's goals. For this reason, I believe that Plato's position is not subject to the objections that J. David Velleman raises against Gauthier's position 1997: 29–52.

⁴⁰ Contra Shaver 2010 and Kraut 2007: 40.

⁴¹ Contra Flanagan and Rorty 1993: 11.

⁴² Ancient scholars and contemporary philosophers alike may be surprised to see any theory that is labeled 'Platonic' as eschewing metaphysical and epistemological excess. But as I have argued elsewhere, Plato's moral epistemology does not appeal to any mysterious faculties of detection (Gentzler 2005), and as others have argued, Plato's theory of the forms need not be regarded as unduly extravagant (see Fine 1993, and Irwin 1995: ch. 10).

⁴³ When thinking about Rational Egoism, it's easy to get confused by an ambiguity in the English word 'reason'. According to Platonic Rational Egoism, the *reason* that certain considerations count as practical reasons for *X*—that is, the best *explanation* for the fact that they count as practical reasons for *X*—has to do with facts about *X*'s self-interest: something doesn't count as a genuine practical reason for *X* unless it is likely to be in *X*'s self-interest to regulate his actions by appeal to considerations of this sort. But the *reasons* themselves—that is, the considerations that *X* weighs in deliberation—need not themselves be considerations of self-interest.

Lest the reader conclude from my defense of Plato's position that I myself am a convinced rational egoist, let me put my cards on the table. Although I agree with, and have learned a lot from, Plato's general approach to understanding reasons for action, I do not believe that self-interest is the end to which we must appeal in order to explain why certain considerations count as ultimate reasons for human action.

⁴⁴ Contrary to some critics of indirect forms of consequentialism (e.g., Williams 1986: 109–10), I do not believe that it counts against the *truth* of a philosophical theory that it is often necessary not to attend to that theory in order to act well in the world.

⁴⁵ Earlier versions of this paper have been presented at Cornell University and at the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy. I learned a lot from the suggestions and skepticism of those who attended these papers, and who read other earlier drafts. I am particularly indebted to the incisive comments of Alice Phillips Walden, Clerk Shaw and Nishi Shah.

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