artificial position of entitlement. Additionally, equality in the pursuit of the Good is even more fundamental both to what it means to be a human being as well as to the very meaning of the *polis* in its truest form, and thus it is at this level, in the very definition of value itself, that human beings are established as equals. In this way, Plato and Socrates teach all of us, past and present, that to be a human being is to hold a share in the pursuit of goodness. While innumerable factors, both natural and conventional, will affect the success of that pursuit in as many ways as there are individuals and different kinds of associations, it does not conceal the reality that every soul is equal to all others in at least this one way, the natural orientation of each soul to the truth of being in the Good.43

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ERGON AND LOGISTIKON IN *REPUBLIC*

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Abstract: This paper explores the tension between two views attributed to Plato: 1) that every person in a just society must fulfill his function, and 2) justice requires philosophical wisdom. It is argued that (2) is not Plato’s view in *Republic*, and that this can be seen as early as Book II.

I

Some Introductory Remarks

In ‘Justice and Psychic Harmony in the Republic’, Gregory Vlastos claims that Plato’s analogy of justice in the city and the soul depends on the following thesis:

P(I): A moral predicate is predicatable of a given *polis* only when, and exactly because, it is predicatable of persons who compose that *polis*.

This conception of the relation between part and whole gives rise to some significant problems for Plato’s conception of justice. Indeed, it seems to demand that every member of a just city will have a soul structured such that reason reigns over appetite and passion. If one embraces the view that justice consists in the possession of philosophic wisdom, then P(I) commits one to the claim that each member of the *polis* has such wisdom. This, of course, contradicts Plato’s claim that only philosopher kings have knowledge. So, one cannot hold P(I) if one holds

P(II): To be just is to have philosophical knowledge.

For, if one holds P(I) and P(II), it follows that

C: The just city is composed only of philosopher kings (i.e. those who have philosophical knowledge).

My aim in what follows is to offer an account of Plato’s analogy of city and soul which accepts the truth of P(I), but which denies P(II), and hence denies that a commitment to P(I) entails a commitment to C. I will approach this thesis by first examining the notion of function (*ergon*) as it appears in Plato.

43 Many thanks to my colleagues who participated in the Association of Political Theory Conference at the University of Indiana/Bloomington, 2006, for providing generous comments helping to inspire these concluding thoughts, even though all errors that can be sifted out are wholly mine. Much gratitude is owed to the editor, Kyriakos N. Dimnentsiou for his kind encouragement and good will. Additionally, I thank anyone who read and commented on this paper from behind blind review. All comments received led to an improved article, and I appreciate the effort anonymously contributed. As stated above, thanks also go out to my good colleagues in attendance at the Association for Political Theory conference at the University of Indiana (2006).

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A Few Quick Remarks on Function and Ergon

As is obvious, Plato’s analysis of justice would be unintelligible without the notion of _ergon_, or function. Unfortunately, however, the notion of the _ergon_ of something is by no means transparent. Some features we typically regard as part and parcel of functionality are as follows:

1) A function is associated, at least in many instances, with the agency that brings it about. A thing has a function, on this view, because of the purposes possessed by those who designed the thing in question.

2) A function can be explicated in terms of the end-state it is designed to bring about.

3) Talk of function is intrinsically normative. When one introduces the notion of functionality, one can also speak of the ability of some $x$ to _fulfill_ its function.

These features should not be construed as either necessary or sufficient conditions for function. They are introduced here only in an effort to come to terms with the notion of _ergon_ as we find it in Plato’s _Republic_.

Take, as an example, the following instance: a missile is sent to hit a particular target. Here, we might say that the function of the missile is to strike the target. We might say, in addition, that it has this function in virtue of those agents who designed the missile. In this respect, we would consider the analysis of function in terms of (1) above: the function in question would be the result of the purpose of some agent or agents.

On the other hand, we might explicate the function of the missile in terms of the particular end-state the functional object was meant to bring about. In this case, we would not need to refer to any antecedent agency. The function of the missile, we might say, was to destroy its target. Insofar as it achieves this end-state, it has fulfilled its function.

As is obvious, (1) and (2) are not mutually exclusive. We can explicate the notion of the missile’s “function” in terms of both (a) an aetiology of the function, and (b) the end result of the function. Both of these models of functionality might serve us rather well in different contexts: the first might be useful for talking about the function of an artifact (e.g. the head of an arrow), whereas the second might serve us better when we consider evolutionary explanations (e.g. we might speak of the function of social cooperation as increasing species stability, to use a rather crude example).

The point of this excursus is primarily negative. Plato’s notion of function fits _neither_ of the ones mentioned above. The _ergon_ of some $x$ will not be explicated in terms of the end-state it produces, nor in terms of the purposive agency that brings it about. In this respect, we might well be at sea in attempting to understand the notion of a function in Plato’s sense of the term. Indeed, a function, in Plato’s sense of the term, is _intrinsic_ to the thing in question.

Perhaps appropriately, the definition we get of an _ergon_ is itself a functional definition: “the function of each thing is what it alone can do or what it does better than anything else” (353a).

We see here a striking difference in Plato’s notion of function and the notion of function which is now salient to the modern mind. We tend to think of function as a rare and festive occasion: we find it in human artifacts (there by human agency), in evolutionary explanations (but only retroactively), and in various other useful descriptive vocabularies. In Plato, however, function is by no means rare and festive. Indeed, it is taken as a basic feature of things as we find them. This is implicit in the passage just quoted. Plato does not claim that the function of _some_ thing is what it does or what it does best. Rather, he claims that the function of _each_ thing is what it does or does best. Now, it is easy to focus on the first portion of the above definition, ignoring the latter half: we can think of a function as that which a particular $x$ ‘alone can do’. A function is not merely what some $x$ alone can do—it is importantly what $x$ _does better than anything else._

After introducing this notion of function, Plato quickly introduces the third feature of functionality adumbrated as (3) above: namely, normativity. For every function, we can speak of an _excellence_ (virtue _arête_) associated with the function (353b). But otherwise, to speak of functions is to acknowledge normative considerations; it is to acknowledge considerations of performing functions well.

The importance of these claims about function and virtue in _Book I_ should not be underestimated. Some $x$ has a function $f$ if and only if $x$ can uniquely achieve $f$, or can achieve $f$ better than any other $y$. When $x$ _actually_ fulfills $f$, we can speak of the virtue of $x$. It is precisely this view of function and virtue that permeates the discussion of justice in the remainder of _Republic_.

There are a few things to note about the notion of justice as Plato employs it. It is a predicate to be ascribed to the proper functioning of a set of things, not merely a particular thing. This feature of justice is what demarcates it as a relational virtue. _Justice occurs when ‘each part is doing its own work._
ergon] (441e). A just man and a just city are similar in exactly this respect: in the just city, each class of persons performs those duties for which it is best suited; in a just soul, each part of the soul functions precisely the way that it should. In each case, we see the operation of logistikos, thymoeides, and epitymhetikon doing precisely that for which they are optimally suited. Logistikos governs both thymoeides and epitymhetikon. Thymoeides aids in the control of epitymhetikon by emotionally responding in the appropriate way to stimuli. 5

The relational character of justice, moreover, is not merely a philosophical peculiarity. The term 'dikaiosyne', in ancient Greek, designates the social virtue par excellence. As Vlastos points out,

The word [dikaiosyne] could carry a sense broad enough to cover all virtuous conduct toward others, though for the most part it was used in a more specific sense to mean refraining from pleonexia [roughly: greed]... What holds these two senses together is that dikaiosyne is the preeminently social virtue; it stands for right dealings between persons. 6

For Vlastos, the extension of justice from city to soul is for this very reason problematic. To speak of dikaiosyne is a predicate relating to a single person, and not as a relational predicate characterizing activity among persons, is to stretch the meaning of the term in question. 7

The problems surrounding the city-soul analogy by no means end here. Indeed, some commentators have gone so far as to say we should simply ignore the analogy as a merely heuristic device aimed at allowing us to better grasp Plato's conception of the moral life. 8 And, indeed, this is precisely the role Plato claims for the city when it is first introduced in Book II. 9 Before jetisoning the city analogy, however, we ought to see what can be salvaged and what not in the comparison of city and soul.

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5 It is worth noting explicitly that thymoeides need not side with logistikos in this way, though this seems to be suggested at 440b. The point here is that thymoeides will never side with the appetites provided that reason is in control.
7 Indeed, it is this view that lurks at the heart of Vlastos's claim that Plato equivocates on dikaiosyne, and that this equivocation renders his argument at 441c-f unsound. See his 'Justice and Psychic Harmony in the Republic', cited above.
8 This is the position Julia Annas develops in Platonic Ethics, Old and New (Ithaca and London, 1999). See especially ch. 4.
9 Plato introduces the city in order to see justice 'weit large' before examining how it appears in the individual.

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III

Ergon and Logistikos

In what follows, I would like to focus my attention on one problem: the view that each member of a city must be just in order for the city itself to be just. This was precisely the thesis called P(I) above. The most salient objection to this view is the claim that it results in a reductio ad absurdum: if every member of a city must be just for the city itself to be just, this entails that all members of a society must be controlled by their own reason, and this seems to suggest that wisdom must be the property of each social class—a claim directly anathema to Plato's view that a city will not be just until it is ruled by philosopher-kings.

It is my contention that one can salvage this thesis by holding that C does not follow from P(I). It is my further contention that one can make this case by paying careful attention to the notion of function Plato advocates. The way to make P(I) compatible with the denial of P(II) is as follows: a function of some x, as stated above, is either what a thing alone can do, or what that thing can do better than any other thing. Clearly, philosopher-kings are more suited to ruling the polis than any other members of the polis—and this because we simply define the philosopher-king as that person who has knowledge of the good. Equally clear, however, is the following: of the three parts of the tripartite soul, the logistikos is better suited to rule the individual than either thymoeides or epitymhetikon.

Plato is committed to the view that different persons have different aptitudes. If knowledge is required for justice, then it follows that Plato is committed to the view that only a small portion of persons can be just persons. But if this is so, the central dictum of the Republic begins to look rather ludicrous: what difference might it make that the just life is always superior to the unjust life, when only the few, the proud, the philosopher-kings are capable of living this life?

More potent objection to the view that knowledge is required for virtue is the following: if, as Plato says from Book I on, justice is the proper functioning of the parts of any x, and we recognize that some x are incapable of philosophical wisdom, then it would follow that a lack of philosophical wisdom would constitute a just life for those incapable of such wisdom. 'Doing one's own ergon', in this instance, would involve the absence of wisdom—which, if we construe justice as requiring the possession of philosophical wisdom, would be the absence of justice. But this is patently absurd, for it would entail that a just life for some x would be an unjust life.

One might respond to this position by claiming that there is an important asymmetry between the justice of a city and the justice of a soul. This may well be so, but it does not seem to be Plato's view. He says explicitly that we find the three parts of the city in the soul as well—and, moreover, that these parts are identical to their macroscopic counterparts (435e-436c). Thus,
claiming an asymmetry amounts to giving up Plato's position on the matter—something we could have done much earlier, had we wanted to avoid the problems that arise from the city-soul analogy.

This gives *prima facie* plausibility to P(I) — but it does not yet make the analogy between city and soul a coherent one. What these considerations do suggest, however, is that C does not necessarily follow from P(I) — or, better put, if it *does* follow from P(I), Plato's view is seriously flawed.

So, how can we possibly understand the notion of the *ergon* of *logistikôn*? If it is not to find philosophical wisdom, what then is its function? As I claimed above, the *ergon* will not be the product of some agency, nor will it be cashed out in terms of a resultant end-state. To discover the function of *logistikôn*, we will need to see what it does either uniquely or better than anything else. One suggestion (and it is only a suggestion here) is that the function of *logistikôn*, while always best suited for governing, will vary in accordance with the *ergon* of the individual. On this view, the philosopher-kings can be said to aim at philosophical wisdom — and this is precisely because it is their function to attain that wisdom which is necessary to governing the state. Also on this view, the other classes will be governed by *logistikôn*, will aim at recognizing the rational control necessary to functioning well at the job one does.

One advantage of this reading is that it reconciles the eventual city-state analogy with the early definition of justice as ‘doing one’s own *ergon*’ in Book I and in the simple city of Book II — a definition Socrates thought was approximately adequate to justice, and which made no mention of philosophical wisdom.12

My view, then, is this: *logistikôn* aims at rational control, but what this entails will vary according to the aptitudes of the individual. The artisan is not constitutionally suited for philosophical knowledge, and hence his *logistikôn* will not aim at such knowledge (if it did aim at such knowledge, the artisan would be unjust, as he would be ignoring his own *ergon*). His *logistikôn* is suited, however, to recognizing the function he fulfills in the city-state — to recognizing his place and his *ergon*. It is precisely this which allows us to say that the artisan of the just city is himself just, though he does not possess philosophical wisdom. In short, by claiming that the *ergon* of *logistikôn* is

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12 This is *not* to claim that the *ergon* of *logistikôn* is in any sense relative. It is to claim, rather, that the way in which *logistikôn* fulfills its function will correspond to the aptitudes of the individual in whom it functions.