Socrates’ Conception of Justice: Beyond Aristotle and Rawls

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Abstract

In this occasion, I would like to draw attention to certain passages in the works of Plato and Xenophon, which are indicative of the Socratic novel conception of justice as a virtue (arete) and harmony of the human soul (psyche) of individual citizens of Hellenic city-states (poleis). It will become clear that Socrates’ paradoxical politics of the human soul, in its search for true happiness (eudaimonia) through a virtuous life, and the conception of justice as an internal personal affair, contrasts sharply with the external, relational, and contractual or “social contract theory” of justice. The latter theory has had a long career in the history of philosophy that extends from Aristotle to John Rawls. It was known to Socrates also, but was not valued by him as much as the other, the internal.

I will argue that, if we were to listen carefully to Socrates’ voice, as echoed by Plato and Xenophon, we may be able to grasp the point of urgency of the Socratic call to “take care of the soul” first, before we try to rule and be ruled with justice. It persistently invites us to turn our attention away from the external chaotic discord and towards an inner possible harmony of the human soul. It also invites us to turn away from the so-called goods, promised by the Sophistic greedy pursuit of bodily pleasure and political power, and towards the one thing inside, the most valuable and, usually, the least taken care of, the restless human soul in search for happiness. For him true human happiness is connected to justice and harmony, internally realized first and externally manifested also.

Inwardly, if anywhere, Socrates seems to suggest, from the depths of his personal experience as a Hellenic ethical philosopher, mortal man can discover a way to happiness through virtue, especially the most perfect virtue of all the ethical virtues, the virtue of justice (δίκη, δικαιοσύνη). I would like to submit that the discovery of "the inner person," is the Socratic secret, the Socratic “revaluation of values” if you wish, that sets
him apart from all the Sophists of his time, as his concern with human affairs distinguishes him from the other Pre-Socratic and natural philosophers.

This Socratic conception of justice became also the basis for the Stoic conception of the Greco-Roman Cosmopolis and the Neoplatonic cosmopolitan ideal. It would seem that it is most needed in our time of globalization and should be revived and promoted.

In this study, I would like to draw attention to certain passages in the works of Plato and Xenophon, which are indicative of the Socratic novel conception of justice as virtue and harmony of the well-ordered soul (psyche) of the ideal citizen of the Hellenic polis. It will become clear that the Socratic paradoxical politics of the human soul, in search of true happiness through virtuous activity; and his conception of justice as an internal personal affair first and foremost, contrast sharply with the traditional conception of it. The latter is known as the external, relational or “social theory” of justice, and is found in a long series of thinkers that extends from Aristotle to John Rawls.¹

I would suggest that, if we were to listen carefully to the voices of Plato and Xenophon, with an open mind and pure soul, we might be able to grasp the point and the urgency of the Socratic call. It invites us persistently to turn our attention inward, that is, away from the external chaotic discord and towards an inner possible harmony of the soul. It calls us away from the so-called goods, promised by the Sophistic greedy pursuit of bodily pleasure and political power, and towards the one thing inside, the most valuable and least taken care of, the restless human soul in search for eudaimonia.

Inwardly, if any where, Socrates seems to suggest from the depth of his personal experience as a Hellenic ethical philosopher, mortal man can discover a way to well-being and happiness through virtue (arete), especially the most perfect virtue of all ethical virtues, the virtue of justice (δίκη, δικαιοσύνη).² I would like to submit to you that the discovery of “the inner man” is the Socratic secret, the Socratic revelation, and “revaluation of values” that sets him apart from all the Sophists, as his concern with human affairs distinguishes him from the Pre-Socratic philosophers of nature.³

Well, then, how did Socrates stand with regard to justice? Was he an unjust and dangerous man, corrupter of the youth and an atheist, as his enemies claimed? Or, rather, was he a virtuous man who inspired others to become
good and just persons, as his friends believed? The indictment was clear and categorical: \(\alpha\delta\iota\kappa\epsilon\ Σωκράτης\ldots\) (Socrates commits an injustice). The jury’s verdict and the outcome of the trial with Socrates’ death shocked his friends and have puzzled his many admirers since then. Apollodorus, one of Socrates’ close friends, was very upset and inconsolable with this outcome of the trial and cried out: “But, Socrates, what I find it hardest to bear is that I see you being put to death unjustly!” To which Socrates responded with an ironic smile, “My Beloved Apollodorus, was it your preference to see me put to death justly?”

A few selected texts from Xenophon and Plato, clearly capture accurately both the character of Socrates and his way of philosophizing, not with a hammer ala Nieztsche, but with a smile, an ironic Hellenic smile which is, simultaneously, a playful seriousness and a serious play. The same texts make clear that Socrates was innocent of the unjust charges brought against him, and that he had a novel conception of justice as a foremost personal affair, a vital matter of the soul, and not a mere social convention:

Hermogenes: Socrates, ought you not to be giving some thought to what defense you are going to make?

Socrates: Why, do I not seem to you to have spent my whole life in preparing to defend myself?

Her.: How so, Socrates?

Soc.: Because all my life, my friend, I have been guiltless of wrongdoing; and that I consider the finer preparation for a defense.

Her.: Do you not observe that the Athenian courts have often been carried away by an eloquent speech and have condemned innocent men to death?

Xenophon, then, describes Socrates’ beneficent influence on the young men of Athens:

No less wonderful is it to me that some believed the charge brought against Socrates of corrupting the youth. In the first place, in control of his own passions and appetites he was the strictest of men; further, in endurance of cold and heat and every kind of toil he was most resolute; and besides, his needs were so schooled to moderation that having very little he was yet very content. Such was his own character: how then can he have led others into impiety, crime, gluttony, lust, or sloth? On the contrary, he cured these vices in many, by putting into them the desire for goodness, and by giving them confidence that self-discipline would make them gentlemen. To be sure he never professed to teach this; but, by letting his own light shine, he led his disciples to hope that they through imitation of him would attain such excellence. Furthermore, he himself never neglected the body, and reproved such neglect in others. Thus over-eating followed by over-exertion he disapproved. But approved of taking as much hard exercise as is agreeable to
the soul; for the habit not only insured good health, but did not hamper the
care of the soul.... And so, in contemplating the man’s wisdom and nobility of
character, I find it beyond my power to forget him or, in remembering him, to
refrain from praising him. And if among those who make virtue their aim any
one has ever been brought into contact with a person more helpful than
Socrates, I count that man worthy to be called most blessed.

Thus spoke Xenophon, the tough-minded Athenian general, of Socrates, the
tender teacher of virtue by word and by deed. In Plato, we find echoes of the
same message and the same moral character shining through the words of
wisdom:

[And] so long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop
practicing philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for
everyone that I meet. I shall go on saying, in my usual way, My very good
friend, you are an Athenian and belong to a city which is the greatest and
more famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed
that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and
similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to truth
and understanding and the perfection of your soul?.... For I spend all my
time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first
and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the
highest welfare of your souls, proclaiming as I go, Wealth does not bring
goodness, but goodness brings wealth and every other blessing, both to the
individual and to the state. Now if I corrupt the young by this message, the
message would seem to be harmful, but if anyone says that my message is
different from this, he is talking nonsense. And so, gentlemen, I would say,
You can please yourselves whether you listen to Anytus or not, and whether
you acquit me or not, you know that I am not going to alter my conduct, not
even if I have to die a hundred deaths.4

Thus spoke Socrates, according to Plato’s report, during his trial in his
defense against the maliciously motivated accusations of corrupting the
young and not believing in the Gods of Athens. A few days later when he
found himself in prison awaiting the preparation of the hemlock, which was
to send his pure soul to join the company of the Olympian Gods, Socrates
had the last opportunity to eulogize philosophy. While conversing with his
friends in prison, he praised the power of philosophy to set the human spirit
free from the bondage of bodily desires and worries. He calmly stated:

I will explain. Every seeker after wisdom knows that up to the time when
philosophy takes it over his soul is a helpless prisoner, chained hand and foot in
the body, compelled to view reality not directly but only through its prison bars,
and wallowing in utter ignorance. And philosophy can see that the
imprisonment is ingeniously effected by the prisoner’s own active desire, which
makes him first accessory to his own confinement. Well, philosophy takes over
the soul in this condition and by gentle persuasion tries to set it free.... After such
training, my dear Simmias and Cebes, the soul can have no grounds for fearing
that on its separation from the body it will be blown away and scattered by the winds, and so disappear into thin air, and cease to exist altogether.\(^5\)

No wonder, then, that the Socratic preoccupation with the vulnerable human soul and its need of constant care and purification; as well as the loftiness of his thought and the urgency of his message, disturbed, perplexed, and annoyed many Athenians. For them, the philosopher and his questioning became a thorn in their side, a reminder that they could do better as human beings with their lives on earth. Let us listen to the moving confession of young Alcibiades about the effect of Socrates’ ethical teaching on the restless soul of this aspiring Athenian:

And there’s one thing I’ve never felt with anybody – not the kind of thing you’d expect to find in me, either – and that is a sense of shame. Socrates is the only man in the world that can make me feel ashamed. Because there’s no getting away from it, I know I ought to do the things he tells me, and yet the moment I’m out of his sight I don’t care what I do to keep in with the mob. So I dash off like a runaway slave, and keep out of his way as long as I can, and then next time I meet him I remember all that I had to admit the time before, and naturally I feel ashamed. There are times when I’d honestly be glad to hear that he was dead, and yet I know that if he did die I’d be more upset than ever – so I ask you, what is a man to do?\(^6\)

“What is a man to do?” with Socrates and his questioning. That is the question. Coming from Alcibiades in his confessional mood, as portrayed by Plato’s genius, it indicates the frustration, humiliation, and uneasiness which men, like Alcibiades, Euthyphro, Thrasymachus, Meno, and others, felt as a result of the Socratic elenchus. It also shows the agonizing moral choice between virtue and vice that men must make at some point of time and abide with it. Which road, are we to take, the uphill road of virtue, like the young Heracles, or the downhill road of vice and political intrigue? The choice would seem easy to someone who knows the respective ends to which these two roads of opposite destinations ultimately lead. The apotheosis and glorification of Hercules and the condemnation of Alcibiades serve as clear markers for anyone to see and to judge for them-selves. History has shown that Socrates was right, when he advised young Athenians not to aspire to rule their country, before they had become masters of them-selves and had succeeded in putting their house “within” in order.\(^7\)

III

In this light, I believe that Plato’s *Republic* will make better sense, if we read it not simply as a treatise on politics or poetics, psychology or epistemology, ontology or eschatology; but in a Socratic way, that is, if we see it as true ψυχαγωγία, a leading of the soul. For it is great drama presented as a
battleground where Sophistry and Philosophy fight over the soul of a representative Athenian, Glaucon, Plato’s brother and Socrates’ good friend. Philosophy was victorious in this match at the end, which contrasts with Sophistry’s victory at another moral battle for the soul of young Pheidippides, son of Strepsiades, as immortalized by Aristophanes’s art in the Clouds. At the end of the Republic, Glaucon is saved by Philosophy in the person of Socrates. He was able to see clearly that the just life of the philosopher, who contemplates the eternal Forms with a healthy and well-ordered soul, is preferable to the life of a tyrant. The latter is usually spent in the pursuit of bodily pleasure and political power, unjustly gained in a Sophistic or Machiavellian manner, by fraud or by force:

And then, said I, he not only will not abandon the habit and nurture of his body to the brutish and irrational pleasure and live with his face set in that direction, but he will not even make health his chief aim.... [But] he will always be found attuning the harmonies of his body for the sake of the concord in the soul.

By all means, he replied, if he is to be a true musician.

And will he not deal likewise with the ordering and harmonizing of his possession? He will not let himself be dazzled by the felicitations of the multitude and pile up the mass of his wealth without measure, involving himself in measureless ills.

No, I think not, he said.

He will rather, I said, keep his eyes fixed on the constitution in his soul, and taking care and watching lest he disturb anything there, either by excess or deficiency of wealth, will so steer his course and add to or detract from his wealth on this principle, so far as may be. (Republic, 591c-e)

Clearly, then, justice for Socrates is not a kind of social contract, as European philosophers from Locke and Rousseau to Rawls have claimed, nor is it even an Aristotelian mesotes to be prudently found somewhere between giving too little and taking too much of valuable things, or between distributing proportional benefits and penalties to different persons according to their moral merit and their legal liabilities respectively. But rather it is an internal harmony of the soul resulting from a proper ordering of the various parts and their respective functions, giving to each what is due to them to be determined by the right reason and in accordance with true human nature.

The Platonic Socrates had to work hard to win Glaucon over and persuade him that, contrary to Thrasymachus’s claim, if he wished for true human happiness and fulfillment, reason requires that the life of justice be chosen over the life of injustice and its ephemeral pleasures. He had to try
hard to clarify his novel conception of justice as harmony of the human soul, and distinguish it from the traditional, poetic, and sophistic conceptions of δίκη (justice in accordance with custom) and δικαιοσύνη (justice in accordance with the law), represented by Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus, respectively. For the Platonic Socrates, unlike pious old Cephalus, it is not good enough to equate justice with paying your debts to men and to Gods, especially towards the end of your life on earth, out of fear that you may have to give an account to the judges in Hades.

Also, unlike Polemarchus and the poet Simonides, Socrates cannot accept as justice the customary and ordinary view that one owes to help his friends and to harm his enemies, no matter how common sense and patriotic such a claim may appear to be. And, unlike Thrasymachus and his fellow Sophists, Socrates cannot find satisfactory the pragmatic claim that justice is only a convention and serves the interests of whoever happens to have the power to make the laws to his liking. It is not that Socrates does not see the expediency of these views, or their social utility and convenience; rather he is convinced that the question of “what is justice?” is very fundamental and equivalent to the question “what kind of life for man is worth living?” Should we live the live of justice and virtue or its opposite? Moreover, which of the two options is more likely, and more reasonably, to lead us to human happiness in this life and in the lives to come, if the prospect of reincarnation is not just wishful thinking, but a real possibility?

Let us consider, therefore, Socrates’ thoughtful response to Polemarchus and Thrasymachus and, then, compare them with his reply to Crito, when the latter tried to persuade him to run away as “the right thing to do,” in order to see his consistency:

It is not then the function of the just man, Polemarchus, to harm either friend or anyone else, but of his opposite, the unjust.

I think that you are altogether right, Socrates.

If then anyone affirms that it is just to render to each his due and he means by this that injury and harm is what is due to his enemies from the just man and benefits to his friends, he was no truly wise man who said it. For what he meant was not true. For it has been made clear to us that in no case is it just to harm anyone.

I concede it, he said.

We will take up arms against him, then, said I, you and I together, if anyone affirms that, either Simonides or Bias of Pittacus or any other of the wise and blessed said such a thing.

I, for my part, he said, am ready to join in the battle with you.

(Republic, 335e-336a)
Again:

Thrasymachus, instead of replying, said, Tell me, Socrates, have you got a nurse?

What do you mean, said I. Why didn't you answer me instead of asking such a question?

Because, he said, she lets her little snotty run about drivelng and doesn't wipe your face clean, though you need it badly, if she can't get you to know the difference between the shepherd and the sheep.... But when in addition to the property of the citizens men kidnap and enslave the citizens themselves, instead of these opprobrious names they are pronounced happy and blessed not only by their fellow citizens but by all who hear the story of the man who has committed complete and entire injustice. For it is not the fear of doing but of suffering wrong that calls forth the reproaches of those who revile injustice. Thus, Socrates, injustice on a sufficiently large scale is a stronger, freer, and more masterful thing than justice, and, as I said in the beginning, it is the advantage of the stronger that is the just....

I am surprised at you, Thrasymachus. After hurling such a doctrine at us, can it be that you propose to depart without staying to teach us properly or learn yourself whether this thing is so or not? Do you think it is a small matter that you are attempting to determine and not the entire conduct of life that for each of us would make living most worth while? (Ibid. 343a-344d)

And again:

Do we say that one must never willingly do wrong, or does it depend upon circumstances? Is it true, as we have often agreed before, that there is no sense in which wrongdoing is good and honorable? Or have jettisoned all our former convictions in these last days? Can you and I at our age, Crito, have spent all these years in serious discussions without realizing that we were no better than a pair of children? Surely the truth is just what we have always said. Whatever the popular view is, and whether the alternative is pleasanter than the present one or even harder to bear, the fact remains that to do wrong is in every sense bad and dishonorable for the person who does it. Is that our view, or not?

Yes, it is.

Then in no circumstances must one do wrong.

No.

In that case one must not even do wrong when one is wronged, which most people regard as the natural course.

Apparently not....
So one ought not to return a wrong or an injury to any person, whatever the provocation is. Now be careful, Crito, that in making these single admission you do not end by admitting something contrary to your real beliefs. I know that there are and always will be few people who think like this, and consequently between those who do think so and those who do not there can be no agreement on principle; they must always feel contempt when they observe one another's decisions. I want even you to consider very carefully whether you share my views and agree with me, and whether we can proceed with our discussion from the established hypothesis that it is never right to do a wrong or return a wrong or defend oneself against injury by retaliation, or whether you dissociate yourself from any share in this view as a basis for discussion. I have held it a long time, and still hold it, but if you have formed any other opinion, say so and tell me what it is. If, on the other hand, you stand by what we have said, listen to my next point. (Crito, 49a-e)

In the light of these passages, we should not be surprised to find in the heart of Plato’s Republic, these very Socratic words:

But the truth of the matter was, as it seems, that justice is indeed something of this kind, yet not in regard to doing of one's own business externally, but with regard to that which is within and in the true sense concerns one's self, and the things of one's self. It means that a man must not suffer the principles in his soul to do each the work of some other and interfere and meddle with one another, but that he should dispose well of what in the true sense of the word is properly his own, and having first attained to self-mastery and beautiful order within himself, and having harmonized these three principles… he should then and then only turn to practice…

What you say is entirely true Socrates…

Virtue, then, as it seems, would be a kind of health and beauty and good condition of the soul, and vice would be disease, ugliness, and weakness. In passages like the above, the paradoxical conception of justice as persistently envisioned by the Platonic Socrates is consistently stated. It is clearly in opposition not only to the Sophistic theories of his time, but also to the great poets of the past, Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, the Tragedians, and the traditional proverbial wisdom of the seers and sages of Greece. In Socrates’ view, justice is something personal, an internal harmonious ordering of the human soul seen in its complex tripartite nature, and not an external social convention to keep some order and peace in the everyday dealings of the partners in a given political association. It is that healthy and harmonious ἔξις ψυχής (state of the human soul) from which naturally flow all the praiseworthy manifestations of ethical and political virtues, the acts of temperance, of courage, of prudence, of fairness, of piety, etc.

Consequently, a citizen whose soul has been shaped by the Socratic care and Platonic paideia, will have a stronger incentive to avoid all actions
of vice and violence to others than the reasonable concern about common social life and utility. His own soul and its health and wellbeing are at stake at any time and in any action performed. With the Socratic internalization of justice, even the intention and the thought of doing the right or the wrong thing counts positively or negative in determining the moral worth of human beings, as ethically responsible persons. Only the person who has established the harmony within his/her soul and has put his/her own house in order, will have the will and the ability to deal with his fellow citizens in a manner which is fair and just. More to the point, only such a person will have the right to rule in the city with justice, himself being ruled by right reason. Such a noble goal inspired and justified the demands of the recommended special education in the Republic, which was designed to turn human souls towards the light of the Good, and the harmony radiating from there:

And if you assume, dear Glaucon, that the ascent and the contemplation of the things above is the soul's ascension to the intelligible region, you will not miss my surmise, since that is what you desire to hear. But God knows whether it is true. But, at any rate, my dream as it appears to me is that in the region of the known the last thing to be seen is the idea of good, and that when seen it must needs point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and the author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this.... If this is true, our view of these matters must be this, that education is not in reality what some people proclaim it to be in their professions. What they aver is that they can put true knowledge into a soul that does not possess it, as if they were inserting vision into blind eyes.

They do indeed, he said. (517b-518d)

We can continue quoting passages like this beautiful one from Plato's Dialogues and from Xenophon's Memoirs, but the point should be clear by now as to where Socrates stood regarding the politics on the inner harmony. This was to be found in the depths of the human soul and serve as a solid foundation for building the just politeia.

IV

In conclusion and looking at Socrates in the light of Platonic and Xenophonian insights, it becomes evident that by rising above the common interests of the business-as-usual mentality of the multitude in the market place (αγορά), the Socratic call could have an appeal to only a few. They were prepared to turn their attention inward in search for the real self, to try...
to see the soul within, cultivate it with care, and lift it upwards in an earnest search for the true, the good, and the beautiful, that is, the divine element within us. At the highest level of the purified soul, the wise man can teach only by his life and example, for words are of no avail. His life in philosophy becomes a model for other to emulate and to follow, if they can. He becomes the ideal teacher who can inspire the chosen few by his exemplary life, but inevitably he is bound to irritate the many. Those who can look at such a model and listen to the Socratic call may themselves take the road to philosophic enlightenment as lovers of wisdom and virtue.

In his philosophic and uncompromising spirit, Socrates was, in my judgment, such a man and such an enlightened teacher. Plato and Xenophon, the late Stoics and the late Platonists, all saw in Socrates the enlightened man and the inspired teacher who was able to inspire others by his way of living in truth and dying for it. There is good hope today that, if this aspect of Socrates' spirit were to be revived, it could perhaps serve as a bridge between East and West, as they seek a common ground to build a better world on a global understanding of humanity with some philosophic sanity. But before that possibility becomes a reality, the Socratic last call for the harmonious polis within, the health of the soul of the human being, and the spirit of Hellenic philosophy, would have to be revived.

May we be more fortunate than the Renaissance Humanists and Platonists of Mistra and Florence, in the task of reviving the spirit of Hellenic philosophy and its Socratic virtues! May we apply them to external politics and to the inner polis, with the freedom to theorize without restrictions and the responsibility to care for the soul!

May we “Hold ever to the upward way and pursue righteousness with wisdom always and ever, that we may be dear to ourselves and to the gods both during our sojourn here and when we receive our reward, as the victors of the games go about to gather in theirs. And thus both here and in that journey of a thousand years, whereof I have told you, we shall fare well.”

May we grasp the meaning of Socrates' words and live accordingly: “They live best, I think, who strive best to become as good as possible; and the pleasantest life is theirs who are conscious that they are growing in goodness.”

Finally, may we pray to our God, as Socrates prayed to his God: “Dear Pan, and all you other gods who dwell in this place, grant that I may become fair within, and that such outward things as I have may not war against the spirit within me.”

1. In the Nicomachean Ethics, Book V, 1129a-1130a, Aristotle makes it clear that, although justice (δικαιοσύνη) is an ambiguous word with several distinct meanings, as a “perfect virtue” it always has a social and relational character because it refers “to the other person” (προς έτερον). “This form of justice, then, is complete, but not absolutely,
but in relation to our neighbor…. It is complete because he who has it can exercise his 
virtue not only in himself, but towards his neighbor also; for many men can exercise 
virtue in their own affairs, but not in their relations to their neighbor…. For this same 
reason justice, alone of the virtues, is thought to be ‘another’s good’, because it is related 
to our neighbor; for it does what is advantageous to another, either a ruler or copartner.” 

Aristotle frequently, quotes with approval the Aristotelian definition of justice, and even 
devotes a whole section (#65) to what he calls the Aristotelian Principle. Like Aristotle, 
Rawls emphasizes the social character of justice by stating that “Justice is the first virtue of 
social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought”(p. 3). Although he recognizes that 
“Many different kinks of things are said to be just and unjust,” including laws, institutions, 
decisions, judgments, attitudes, dispositions, and persons, he stresses that “Our topic, 
however, is that of social justice”(p. 7).

Interestingly, Rawls mentions Socrates only once and only because Nietzsche had 
included him (together with Goethe) in his list of great men! (p. 325) Plato does not fare 
any better than Socrates in Rawls' book. He is mentioned briefly only twice in the 
footnotes (p. 454n and p. 521n). The one refers to “Plato's Noble Lie,” and the other 
relates him to the strange Hegelian notion of something called "private society." 
Surprisingly, there is no mention of the Socrates who discussed with Glaucon the origins 
of justice as a “social contract” in Book II of the Republic. Yet, Rawls book extends to 
more than 600 pages and is supposed to be an elaboration and an upgrading of the 
social contract theory. (p. 11)

2. This is the thesis of J. Burnet and A.E. Taylor which has been accepted by W. 
Jaeger, F.M. Cornford, W.K.C. Guthrie, E. Ballard and, recently, L.E. Navia to whose 
excellent work, Socrates, the Man and his Philosophy, (Lanham, MD: University Press of 
America, 1985), I refer for the relevant bibliography. Compared with Vlastos' and other 
analytic treatments of the subject, it is a more meaningful approach to understanding 
Socrates, who made the Delphic precept of "know thyself" the motto of his mission.

3. These expressions are used by many but more often by J. Sykoutris, the most 
enthusiastic of Modern Greek students of the Platonic Socrates, in his collected works, 
Nietzsche, who diagnosed a danger in the Socratic “revaluation” of the older and nobler, 
in his judgment, Hellenic and Sophistic values, made Socrates the target of his merciless 
critique in all his works from The Birth of Tragedy to The Twilight of the Idols, as I have 

5. Phaedo 82e-84c.
7. President Clinton, for example, not less than Alcibiades, could have learned 
something from Socrates’ wise advice, regarding the perils of political power and the 
snares of sexual pleasure.
8. Rawls states: “My aim is to present a conception of justice which generalizes and 
carries to a higher level of abstraction the familiar theory of the social contract as found, 
say, in Locke, Rousseau, and Kant…. [The] guiding idea is that the principles of justice for 
the basic structure of society are the object of the original agreement. They are the
principles that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association." Op. cit., p. 11; also, p. 459ff.


10. Aristotle, who has built into the definition of justice the concern “for others,” as we already said in note no. 1, can recognize the application of justice to the inner soul, and even to the household, only as metaphorical and analogous to the proper application of justice. The latter is to be understood as a political virtue regulating the acts of individual citizens having a baring on the welfare of other citizens. By extension the doctrine can be applied to the relations between city-states, of course: “Now all the various pronouncements of the law aim either at the common interest of all, or at the interest of a ruling class determined either by excellence or in some other similar way; so that in one of its senses the term ‘just’ is applied to anything that produces and preserves the happiness, or the component parts of the happiness, of the political community.” NE 1129b 14-20.

11. In this respect, it would seem that both the wisdom of the Platonic Socrates and the wisdom of Aristotle the Platonist are very close to the Indian wisdom which is expressed in the Vedantic Tat tuam asi, as I have argued elsewhere. See “On Western Rationality and Its Alleged Relation to Aristotle.” Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research XII, No. 1 (1995): 49-77; and the forthcoming revised and expanded new edition of the book by Ashgate (in 2006).

12. Consider Socrates’ many and alternating masks: The gadfly of the Apology, changes to the stingray in Meno, to the midwife in Theaetetus, to pedagogue in the Republic, to Silenus in the Symposium, to cicada in Phaedrus, and to a lovely swan singing sweetly its last sweet song in Phaedo.

13. Republic 621c-d.


15. Phaedrus 279b-c.