The significance of poverty and wealth in Plato’s Republic

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Abstract
Plato’s views on the significance of poverty and wealth in The Republic challenge us to rethink the role and position assigned to wealth in contemporary society. These ideas on poverty and wealth play an important role in shaping the central arguments of the Republic. The themes and views expressed in the opening dialogue of Plato’s Republic (328b – 331d) serve to introduce some of the core ideas of the Republic. I start with an analysis of the opening dialogue and then I proceed to discuss the significance of Plato’s views on poverty and wealth in the context of The Republic. Through this analysis I want to establish the claim that Plato argues for the following: [1] that justice, in the sense of the morality of individuals and societies, is far more important than the acquisition of wealth, [2] that moderate wealth is important for its function to enable humans to live a moral life, [3] that poverty and excessive wealth have negative consequences for both individuals and societies, and [4] that desiring and possessing excessive wealth disrupts and destroys moral integrity and internal harmony in individuals and societies.

What is the significance of the opening dialogue of Plato’s Republic? Does the dialogue with the old man Cephalus, of whom Socrates remarked, “I thought he looked very old,” (32b) have any role other than leading to the introduction of the topic of justice (331c)? At first sight it seems as if a conversation about the value of old age, the importance of one’s attitude towards

1 The analyses that are to follow are based on interpretations of close readings of the text. The dangers of reading Plato’s dialogues as if they express a systematic philosophical system is stated by Guthrie (1967: 119): “The dialogues of Plato are so different from this [his exposition - HPPL] that anyone who turns back to them after my exposition may perhaps wonder at first, according to which one he first lights on, whether this is indeed the writer whose thought has been here described.” Armstrong echoes a similar sentiment when he says that his systematic presentation of Plato’s doctrines will “almost inevitably . . . do violence to his thought,” because he thinks his version of Plato’s ideas “utterly fails to do justice to its richness, its endless suggestiveness, and its frequent inconsistency.” (1965: 36).

2 Robin Waterfield (1993: xii) chooses morality as translation for dikaiosyne, because he accepts Aristotle’s definition of the Greek word as referring to “something which encompasses all the various virtues and is almost synonymous with ‘virtue’ in general.” He judges that our contemporary understanding of justice is only a part of the Greek definition, meaning roughly “acting fairly and impartially towards others.” This seems to be an unnecessary limitation of the meaning of the concept of justice, as even John Rawls himself is the first to acknowledge that he restricts the meanings of the concept of justice. The wider meanings of the concept are activated in the political philosophies of Iris Marion Young, Agnes Heller, and Michael Walzer, for example. I am convinced that contemporary political philosophers such as those just mentioned will not be too uncomfortable with the remark by Julia Annas (1981: 13) that “the just life turns out to be the moral life after all” and this results from Plato’s insistence on the “cen-
being old, and the role of poverty and wealth in helping you cope with old age, is merely a curiosity to get the dialogue on justice started.  

Socrates and Cephalus on old age

Plato sketches a Socrates that enjoys talking to old people because he believes “we ought to learn from them” (328d, e). Old people have already travelled a road that the rest of us probably will have to travel as well, therefore “we ought to find out from them what the road is like – whether it is rough and hard, or easy and smooth” (328e). Note the emphasis: find out what the road is like, not how to travel it. In this spirit Socrates proceeds to question Cephalus on his experience of old age itself: “Is it a difficult period of one’s life...?” (328e). This question gives Cephalus the opportunity to state that one’s attitude towards old age determines your experience of it.

Cephalus tells Socrates how his peers bemoan old age at their gatherings, which are “invariably used for grumbling” (329a, b). The old men grumble because they have lost the pleasures of their youth, like love, drinking, and feasting. However, their main complaint is about “how their families treat old age like dirt” (329a, b). This fact is the main reason, Cephalus says, why they “go on and on about all the evils for which old age is responsible” (329b). Cephalus rejects their interpretation of old age as something negative, because he – and others – have different experiences: “...in the past, I... have met others like myself who do not feel this way” (329b).

For what reasons does Cephalus have a different view on old age? The key to his view is his emphasis on character. Someone with a self-disciplined and good-tempered character will find “old age isn’t too much of a burden” (329d). This kind of character improves relationships with relatives and helps to experience the lost “pleasures of youth” as a liberation. Cephalus says that when “the desires lose their intensity and ease up” he experiences a “freedom from a great many demented masters” (329e, d). He quotes the poet Sophocles on this issue, who apparently experienced his loss of sexual desire as a great delight. His desires were something from which he broke free, “like a slave who has got away from a rabid and savage master” (329c). Cephalus formulated the significance of freedom from physical desires earlier in the dialogue with Socrates when he said that his “declining interest in physical pleasures is exactly matched by increasing desire for and enjoyment of conversation” (328d).

This part of the dialogue between Socrates and Cephalus introduces ideas that Plato works out in far greater detail later on in The Republic. These ideas are the emphasis on self-discipline to control physical desires, the value of dialogue, and the requirement that leaders of the ideal state must have acquired adequate knowledge, sufficient experience, and wisdom that comes from reaching a mature age before they can start their work as rulers.

The main focus of the ideas on old age expressed by Cephalus are found at the core

3 Brian Donohue (1997: 242) says that it is not surprising that Cephalus “has been largely ignored,” as he appears at the beginning of Book 1 and disappears after “less than three pages of dialogue.” Although I want to argue for a similar conclusion than Donohue does, i.e. “that there is a subtlety in Plato’s dramatic use of Cephalus that is both charming and instructive,” my reasons for doing so are different. Donohue interprets the significance of Cephalus as follows. The way that Cephalus asks his son Polemarchus to continue the debate with Socrates signifies for Donohue “the symbolic philosophic transition from Socrates to Plato” (1997: 244).
of the characteristics of Plato’s ideal philosopher rulers. The ideas that character determines your experience of old age and that old age is a time relatively free from physical desires, while a need for conversation increases, seem matched in the characteristics of the philosopher. The desires of this “genuine lover of knowledge” are “channelled towards learning” (485d). Thus, the “genuine philosopher” is concerned with the “pleasure the mind feels of its own accord” and therefore “has nothing to do with the pleasures which reach the mind through the agency of the body” (485d). The convergence between old age guided by good character and the characteristics of a genuine philosopher suggests the high value Plato bestows on old age.

**Socrates and Cephalus on a wealthy old age**

Socrates responds to the positive view on old age stated by Cephalus in the second part of the opening dialogue. He asks a question expressing a scepticism that he believes most people share. They could question the role of character in a positive experience of old age and rather point to the great wealth possessed by Cephalus as the factor determining his good old age. Cephalus is willing to concede that a good man “wouldn’t find old age easy to bear if he were poor” (330a). However, he rejects the idea that money alone is the decisive factor and that character plays no role. A bad man, Cephalus believes, “would never be content with himself even if he were wealthy” (330a).

Socrates follows up the above response by Cephalus by asking him: “What is the greatest benefit you’ve gained from being rich?” (330d). Cephalus replies that wealth enabled him to live a moral life, so that in his old age he does not have to be worried about being punished in Hades for wrongs he has committed. He values the possession of money highly because of its major role “if one is to avoid cheating or lying against one’s better judgement, and also to avoid the fear of leaving this life still owing some ritual offerings to a god or some money to someone” (331b).

Cephalus thinks wealth “particularly useful” because it enables a person to behave “morally and justly,” which in turn leads to an old age where the person can face the future with “confidence and optimism” (331a, b). Thus, “fears and worries” need not trouble the moral person’s mind; anxiety and fear can be avoided as it is not necessary to “make calculations and to see if he has wronged anyone in any way” (330a). Rather, a moral life enabled by the possession of money gives “confidence and optimism” and - in a quote from Pindar that Cephalus endorses – “sweet hope as a companion, joyfully fostering his heart, comforting him in old age” (331a).

Although the possession of money serves “a lot of other purposes too” (331b), Cephalus places the emphasis on the benefits of fulfilling moral obligations towards other people and the gods. Perhaps this attitude towards money explains why Socrates got the impression that Cephalus does not “particularly care for money” (330c). Socrates thought that Cephalus represents those wealthy people who inherited their money rather than made it themselves.

Plato contrasts those who don’t care for their money, because they did not make it themselves, with the irritating image of those who did make their own fortune. The latter are “twice as attached to it as anyone else” (330c). They are concerned about money for its usefulness, but also because “it is the product of their own labours” (330c). Their excessive concern with their self-made money makes them irritating company, “since money is the only thing they’re prepared to think highly of” (330c).
Cephalus presents a third alternative, an attitude towards money that, in his own words, is the option of “an intelligent person” (331b). In his option the value of money lies primarily in its role to enable a moral life that leads to confidence, optimism, hope, and comfort in old age (330d – 331b). By implication Plato is saying that a lack of money – poverty – makes it very difficult to live a moral life. Adequate resources to escape poverty thus seems a prerequisite for living Plato’s moral life.

Thus far the analysis has shown that Plato values old age shaped by a good character. The lifestyle of a wisely ageing person seems to be equivalent in important respects to the characteristic lifestyle of a genuine philosopher. Wealth has meaning for its ability to enable people to choose a moral life that reduces worries and fears in old age and helps and comforts those approaching death and the world beyond to do so with confidence, hope, and optimism.

Plato explicitly endorses these views expressed by Cephalus. After stating his ideas on old age in the first part of the dialogue, Plato lets Socrates say that he was “filled with admiration for him and his words” (329d). The second part of the dialogue – on wealth and old age – concludes by Socrates commenting on what Cephalus has said: “a thoroughly commendable sentiment, Cephalus” (331c).

Although interesting, the analysis of the debate with Cephalus does not yet prove that Plato’s views on poverty and wealth belong to the heart of the central arguments of The Republic. It does, however, show that Plato uses the opening dialogue to introduce some of the core ideas of The Republic to his readers. In what follows, I want to gradually unravel Plato’s ideas on poverty and wealth and point out how these views play a role in shaping the central arguments of The Republic.

Poverty and wealth in The Republic: Sentiments and observations

Throughout The Republic there are scattered remarks – sometimes to let a dialogue flow and sometimes part of an argument – that suggest Plato was acutely aware of issues about the significance of poverty and wealth in human life. The moral sentiments he expresses go hand in hand with sharp casual observations.

An example of a moral sentiment about the value of money in human life comes in response to an angry outburst by Thrasymachus: “like a wild animal, he crouched and hurled himself at us as if to tear us apart” (336b). Thrasymachus challenges Socrates to state his own opinion on justice “clearly and precisely,” rather than just asking questions and refuting the answers of his partners in dialogue (336c). He is particularly annoyed with what he calls their “deferentially bowing and scraping to each other like simpletons” (336c).

This outburst gives Socrates the opportunity to set things straight about the value and style of their investigation into issues of justice. If they were looking for money, Socrates says, they would not “under any circumstances choose to defer to each other” lest they “ruin their chances of finding it” (336e). However, their search is not for money, but for justice which is “more valuable than pots of money.” Because of the supreme value of justice, they are “doing all we can” (336e). For Socrates this means that they would not be “so stupid as to give in to each other and not do our level best to discover it” (336e).

That Plato values justice far more than money does not imply that money is not important to him. Plato’s views are clear: people ought to take care of themselves. He
states this sentiment explicitly as a loose remark in the context of deciding what is appropriate to include in poetry used for education. Poetry must extol the virtues of a good man. Socrates and his friends agree that a good man will not regard death as a "terrible thing for another good man," will not be overwhelmed by such a loss, or mourn when such a loss occurs. In this context Plato states that a good man is in addition "pre-eminently capable of providing himself with a good life entirely from his own resources" (387d). This implies that the good man is "absolutely the last person to need anyone or anything else" (387d, e).

The value of the ability to take care of oneself in the context of a human community is further specified in a discussion on the practice of medicine. Socrates argues that medical treatment for long-term disabling medical conditions is not worthwhile and would be rejected by everyone except the rich who has no need to work (406d). On the one hand, time is a factor, as no one has "the time to spend his life ill and doctoring himself" (406c). On the other hand, to focus on illness and neglect the job you have been assigned "holds no rewards for him" (406d). For this reason, working people - as against the idle rich - would reject advice recommending long-term treatment for disabling medical conditions. They would rather go back to work and regain their health, or "if his body isn't up to surviving, he gets rid of his troubles by dying" (406e). Plato approvingly refers to Asclepius, a medical expert, who would endorse this course of action. Asclepius did not see "any point in treating anyone who was incapable of living a normal life," as such a person "does neither himself nor his community any good" (407d, e).

These moral sentiments - that justice is more valuable than money, that taking care of oneself is part of a rewarding life, and that one should be committed to search for justice through dialogue and rational argument - combine with Plato's sharp casual observations of the role of poverty and wealth in human affairs.

Plato accurately observed the negative influence of poverty and wealth in human societies. Popular perceptions about wealth held by ordinary people and the poets make them "perfectly ready to admire bad men, if they're affluent and powerful in other respects as well" (363e). Similar perceptions about poverty cause these same people to have disrespect for, and look down on, people "who are in any way powerless or poor, even while admitting their moral superiority to the others" (363e).

Whereas popular perceptions influence interpersonal relationships, the real conditions of poverty and wealth are "causes of degeneration in the products and practitioners of a craft" (421e). Increased wealth makes a potter less conscientious and under-

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4 Plato's emphasis on self-sufficiency is made in the context of a community of human beings who are interdependent. Copleston (1962: 151-155) says that for Plato people are not independent of one another, but "need the aid and co-operation of others in the production of the necessaries of life." Annas elaborates on Plato's view of the social nature of human beings. She says Plato is primarily interested in the ways in which individuals are "distinctively fitted to co-operate with others in joint efforts." For this reason every individual will find his/her "natural place in some co-operative association" (Annas 1981: 75). This does not mean that the state exists for economic purposes only; it also plays an important role in ensuring "their happiness, to develop them in the good life, in accordance with the principles of justice" (Copleston 1962: 251). Cooper (2000: 24) adds that even individual human good, i.e., a "well-ordered life," is not something accomplished by individuals on their own, but it is a "fundamentally social achievement."

5 Taylor (1948: 276) says the point is simply this: "a man's character and work in life will be spoiled equally by the possession of irresponsible wealth, with no adequate social duties attached to it, and by a
mines the potter’s devotion and willingness to work hard (421d). Poverty means the potter will not be able to provide tools and other essentials for doing pottery (421d). The result is production of inferior goods and an inability to adequately train apprentices (421d). The degenerative effects of poverty and wealth on the crafts are some of the things rulers “must at all costs prevent from sneaking into the community without their noticing it” (421e).

Plato’s casual observations about the degenerative effects of poverty and wealth on crafts, as well as the negative influence of popular perceptions of poverty and wealth on interpersonal relations, combine with the moral sentiments discussed earlier to become embedded in the central arguments of The Republic. How this is done will be discussed next, by first looking at the economic origin of human communities, then at the role of poverty and wealth in the life of the guardians, the disintegration of the ideal state, and finally at the fragility of self-discipline over insatiably greedy desires.

The economic origin of human communities
For Plato the rationale behind the formation of human communities is partially an economic one. This rationale lies in the awareness that individual human beings have “needs” or “requirements” that they cannot fulfil on their own (369b, c). Individuals who experience that they are not self-sufficient in providing for their own needs and requirements form a community where they gather other human beings as their “associates and assistants” to help them “fulfil various needs” (369b, c). These needs are fulfilled through mutually beneficial trade: “people trade goods with one another, because they think they will be better off if each gives or receives something in exchange” (369c).

Plato uses the lack of self-sufficiency in providing for one’s individual needs here as an explanation for the formation of human communities. People have formed communities because they “need one another’s assistance” (Cooper 2000: 11). Later on in The Republic Plato articulates contributing to one’s community as a normative requirement. He advises rulers to “make every individual share with his fellows the benefit which he is capable of contributing to the common welfare” (519e-520a). Rulers must “persuade or compel” individuals to contribute their share, so as “to bind the community together” (520a).

Plato refers to three needs - in the context of the formation of human communities – as being “the most basic and most important of our needs” (369d). They are “food for existence and for life,” “our need for somewhere to live,” and our need for clothing (369d). Later on in The Republic Plato defines “necessary desires,” which seem to be something similar to these needs. Necessary desires are those “which we’re incapable of stopping,” “whose satisfaction is beneficial to us,” and which can be regarded as “essential to human nature” (558e).

To best provide for these needs, labour specialisation is needed. Plato presents several reasons why one person should do one specific job. Differences between people  

penury which breaks his spirit and forces him to do bad and scamped work in order to keep himself alive.” His interpretation somewhat detracts from the force of Plato’s descriptions.

6 Annas (1981: 119) says that to be a just person, “one has to ‘do one’s own,’ know what one’s natural talents are and the ways these should be developed for the common good.” Vlastos (1981: 119) call this a “normative twist” given to the idea of economic reciprocity, that Plato converts into an imperative: “keep to that line of social conduct by which, given your natural endowment and acquired skills, you can contribute maximally to the happiness and excellence of your polis.”
point to a “wide variety of natures” which make individuals “inherently suitable for
different activities” (370a, b). Accommodating individual talents with specialised jobs
has good consequences, which include better productivity, improved quality of pro-
ducts, simplified labour processes, and greater chances of success (370b, c).

Plato realises that the “true community,” one that is in a “healthy condition,” could
easily develop into an “indulgent” or “inflamed” community (372e). Dissatisfactions
with “the provisions and the lifestyle” of the community based on the mutual provision
for one another’s necessary desires would lead to a multiplication of what Plato later
on defines as “unnecessary desires.” These desires are ones that “can be dispensed
with,” provided people have been trained to do so (559a). The presence of these de-
sires “certainly does no good, and may even do harm” (559a).

The harm of the unnecessary desires to the healthy community is an increase in size
for the community until it becomes “bloated and distended with occupations” (373a).
A negative consequence of the increase in size of the community and number of occu-
pations is that the community’s land becomes too small. The need for land leads to the
possibility of conquering other people’s land—thus war against neighbours becomes a
distinct possibility (373d). Plato sees this possibility as that Socrates and his friends
have “now discovered the origin of war” (373e). Once war becomes a possibility, sol-
diers are necessary for protecting the community’s property, as well as the inhabitants
against invaders (374a).

The discussion of the reasons for the formation of human communities leads Plato
into a dialogue about the role and education of the protectors or guardians of the hu-
man community. Much later in The Republic Plato returns to the problems of human
communities where unnecessary desires dominate and the societies become indulgent
or inflamed. For now, the focus is on the role of the guardians, from whom the rulers
are drawn. This issue forces itself on Socrates and his conversational partners, because
“the amount of time allotted just to it, and also the degree of professionalism and train-
ing, should reflect the supreme importance of the guardians’ work” (374e).

Poverty, wealth and the guardians
Plato is convinced that through a sophisticated educational programme a group of
guardians can be trained from which an appropriate group of rulers can be selected.
These guardians will have to be treated in a special way to ensure that they fulfil their
duties. Education will be the chief factor enabling the guardians “to treat themselves
and their wards in a civilised fashion” (416c). The proposed education will lead the
 guardians to value “nothing more important and essential than morality” and conse-
quently to judge “nothing more valuable than integrity and its rewards” (540d). True
 guardians will thus “serve and foster” morality in every part of their work (540d).
Plato judges that they will be genuinely well off, as they will have a life of “virtue and
intelligence,” which he considers the “wealth which is a prerequisite of happiness”
(521a).

Plato argues for education as the chief factor to ensure civilised behaviour by guardi-
ans and to protect the community against their possible abuse of power, but not the

7 Cooper (2000: 11) argues that different talents, capacities, and dispositions with a resulting need for la-
bour specialisation, strengthens our lack of self-sufficiency, as it produces the correlative inability of
people singly to become as expert in everything that needs to be done to maintain their existence as they
can in some of these (different ones for each)
only one. Despite their commitment to morality and experiencing a life of integrity with its rewards, other rules must be made to keep them to their assigned jobs: “these precepts will not only guarantee their integrity, but also the integrity of the community which is in their safekeeping” (417a). What are these precepts and what are they designed to avoid?

The precepts centre mostly around the economic affairs of the guardians [the sharing of wives and children are not discussed here]. The guardians will not have private living quarters and store rooms where others are not allowed to enter (416d). They will share living quarters and have a shared mess hall with food provided by the citizens. The guardians will be remunerated by the citizens through “provisions appropriate to their duties” (543d), which for Plato means provisions “suitable in quantity for self-controlled and courageous warriors” (416d). As said above, they already own the figurative wealth which Plato thinks is a prerequisite for happiness.

The guardians will only be allowed to own property that is considered to be “absolutely indispensable” (416d). As gold and silver are not indispensable, they are not allowed to own it. However, gold and silver apparently have a more corrupting influence than any other kind of property, as severe restrictions apply to them. The guardians are not allowed to wear either of these precious metals, nor to drink from cups made from them, and not even allowed under the same roof with gold and silver! (417a). To convince them to avoid these precious metals to such an extreme, Plato is again prepared to tell them a variation of the noble lie, of the kind he considers “medicine.” The lie goes like this: The guardians have a permanent presence of gold and silver in their minds from divine origin and therefore have no need for earthly gold and silver. More than that, Plato is prepared to add that it would be “sacriligious for them to adulterate and contaminate that heavenly possession by owning the earthly variety” (416e).

Why do the guardians need these precepts? What can go wrong even with the highly educated guardians who have strong moral commitments? Plato thinks the precepts must prohibit the guardians from becoming owners of private property, as such ownership will change their role into “estate managers and farmers.” Owning private property and having private living quarters could interfere with doing their work as well as possible and might “encourage them to commit crimes against their fellow citizens” (416c). Private property could corrupt them into becoming despots and enemies “rather than allies of the inhabitants of the community” (417a). Ownership of private property will thus set them up against the community, spending their time “hating and being hated, plotting and being plotted against” (417a). They will make enemies in their community, whom they have to “fear more, and more intensely” than external enemies (417a). Plato depicts the detail of what goes wrong when these precepts are violated in his story about the degeneration of the ideal state.

8 Bertrand Russell (1979: 129) thinks Plato’s aim with all these measures combined is to “minimise private possessive emotions, and so remove obstacles to the domination of public spirit.” According to Lee (1974: 44) Plato thought that “private interests and private affections distracted a man from his duties to the community.”

9 Plato says the rulers of the community “can lie for the good of the community, when either an external or internal threat makes it necessary” (389b). This use of lies can “serve as a type of medicine for us humans” (389b).

10 Commentators differ on the significance of this section of The Republic. Annas (1981: 294) thinks this section leaves someone who is “intent on the main argument unsatisfied and irritated.” She eventually
The role of poverty and wealth in the degeneration of the ideal state

Plato’s discussion of the gradual disintegration of the ideal state through four phases into the worst type takes place as one of the concluding elements of the central argument of *The Republic*. Socrates and his partners in dialogue discuss the degenerative types of political system to determine “where they and their human counterparts go wrong, so that we can decide whether or not the best person is also the happiest, and the worst the unhappiest” (544a). The aim of the discussion is to contrast the most moral political system and its human counterparts with the least moral ones so that the discussants can be in a position “either to follow Thrasymachus and pursue immorality, or to follow the argument which is developing at the moment and pursue morality” (545a, b).

Plato assumes that a political system results from the “characters of the communities’ inhabitants” that are dominant in a community (545d, e). Changes in political system occur as a result of conflict among “the actual power-possessing members of society” (545d). This conflict emerges when the children of the dominant generation turn out to be different from their parents. In Plato’s four stages of successive degeneration, this difference means a loss of one of the virtues at the first three stages. In this process of gradual disintegration through four stages into dictatorship as the worst type of political system, poverty and wealth play key roles.

Plato makes the assumption that all things decay, his ideal state included. One part of his explanation of the origin of this decay seems unconvincing and not fully consistent with other parts of *The Republic*. This part runs as follows. The decay is set in motion by the faulty selection of times for breeding children. These faulty bred children do not provide the best possible material for leadership. The more convincing part is the following. When they become leaders, conflict will erupt amongst the iron-bronze class (merchants, farmers) in the state and the gold and silver classes (rulers and guardians). The conflict gets resolved through a compromise about ownership of property. The leaders will scrap a crucial restriction of Plato’s ideal state, viz. a ban on ownership of private property for the guardians and rulers (547b, c). As a result members of this community will have a “craving for money” and a “fanatical respect for gold and silver” (548a). They will also lift the restriction on private storerooms and thus will hide away gold and silver for themselves. These changes with respect to private property combine with the poor selection of breeding times and inadequate edu-

judges this section as “very weak” as part of the main argument (1981: 295). Part of her frustration is that Plato never makes it clear “where he is theorising and where he is describing contemporary facts, and this leads to confusion” (Annas 1981: 295). She does, however, credit the section with “some deep and interesting points about what happens when the soul is dominated by parts other than reason” (Annas 1981: 305). Field (1967: 127) judges this section differently. He finds in this section “descriptions so characteristic of the fourth century that we can say once more that...his readers must have taken them to apply to their own time.”

11 Lee (1974: 30) judges this part of *The Republic* as Plato’s version of negative theory: Plato’s depiction of the “major social evils of his time,” Plato presented his proposal of the ideal state “to combat those evils.”

12 Armstrong (1965: 60) thinks that Plato works with the following assumption: “his two greatest works on the State are concerned with considering how from difficult and refractory human material philosophers may construct a fortress which will for a time resist the flux of inevitable decay, the law that all must pass away that comes to be.”
tion to eliminate reason and philosophically oriented rulers— with their associated virtue of wisdom—from society.

Despite the strong attraction of wealth, spirit (the passionate element) will dominate in this society, commonly referred to as a timarchy (or military aristocracy). The philosophical rulers and reason, with their characteristic virtue wisdom, have been displaced, so the guardians and spirit with their virtue of courage are in control of the community and its dominant individuals. The nature of the guardians are “more suited for war than peace” (547e) and therefore in this community “there’s only one aspect which particularly stands out— all its competitiveness and ambition” (548c). When these individuals dominate, the community “will spend all its time on warfare” (548a).

Individuals in a timarchy have lost their “best guardian,” which for Plato means a “mind which combines reason and culture” (549b). Only when this guardian “resides in someone throughout his life” is his goodness “kept intact” (549b). Individuals in the timarchy are dominated by their spirit with its virtue of courage and therefore value “military achievements” and will be “ambitiously eager” for positions of authority (549a). Although this kind of individual will disdain money at a young age, when he gets older “he’ll welcome it at every opportunity.” This changed attitude results from the “mercenary side” that comes to the fore in the absence of reason, the best guardian (549b).

In a timarchy at least two virtues, courage and self-discipline, are still intact. The degeneration into an oligarchy means the loss of the virtue courage, with self-discipline remaining as the only virtue in state and individuals. An oligarchy is “inevitably divided into haves and have-nots” (551a), which means that oligarchies have “both excessive affluence and utter poverty at the same time” (552b). This is the result of a community and dominant individuals that regard money as the “be-all and end-all” of its existence. Making money is the valued activity, whilst for Plato the higher they rate money means “the lower they rate goodness” (550e). Emphasising money and having strongly contrasting rich and poor groups lead to constant conflict in a community. Although people live in the same place, they are “constantly plotting against one another” (551d).

Oligarchic individuals are “acquisitive and mercenary,” with desires taking control in their souls (or minds) (551a, 553c). With desires in control, reason plays a subordinate and complementary role: “the only calculations and researches he allows his rational mind to make are concerned with how to start with a little money and increase it” (553d). Spirit is similarly restricted in its functioning, allowed only to respect and admire “wealth and wealthy people,” whilst his ambition is focused on “the acquisition of money and to any means towards that end” (553d). These dominant individuals of an oligarchy place supreme value on money (554a), and they are thrifty and hardworking. The virtue of self-discipline is still in place and thus Plato says that they experience an internal conflict, because “his better desires by and large control his worse ones” (554d). Consequently not all desires are satisfied, only the essential ones, while the others, regarded as pointless, are suppressed (554a). The active virtue of self-discipline makes the oligarchic individual an “ascetic” and a “hoarder” (554a).

The degeneration of the oligarchy into a democracy begins with “the impossibility of the citizen body of a community simultaneously rating affluence highly and being adequately self-disciplined” (555c). Valuing affluence above everything else makes people “insatiably greedy” for what they wrongly regard as the good life, viz. “to get
as rich as they possibly can" (555b). The concomitant "negligent sanctioning of indiscipline" reduces many people to poverty and bitterness. Bitter about their losses, they long for revenge. The successfully wealthy people are ignorant that the destitute "plot against them" and "long for revolution" (555d), as they "ignore everything except making money" (556c).

The ignorance of the rich people concerning deep social dissatisfaction enables the bitter poor people to size themselves up against the rich. They observe the following: "Poor people tend to be lean and sun-tanned, and when they stand in the battle-line next to the rich with their indoor pallor and plentiful extra flesh, they notice their breathlessness and utter ineptitude" (556d). From this observation the poor will conclude that it is "their own cowardice that has allowed the rich to get rich" (556d). Their discussions in private lead to a firm conviction: "They're ours for the taking. There's nothing to them" (556d, e).

The ensuing conflict, which need not be violent, resolves in favour of the poor and this victory signals the start of democracy. Through this conflict some of the rich are killed or expelled, while all the others are given equal rights (557a) like "freedom of speech" and "the right to do as he chooses" (557b), which implies that everyone can "make for himself the kind of life which suits him" (557b).

The democratic individual is without any of the three virtues. He loses the last remaining virtue of self-discipline, which the oligarchic individual still had. The democratic individual rejects the distinction between necessary and unnecessary desires and therefore judges all pleasures as "alike and of equal value" (561c). There is no willingness to accept the "truth of the idea that there are differences between pleasures" (561b, c). For this reason the democratic individual "tends them all equally," which for Plato means he spends as "much money, effort and time in his life on necessary pleasures as on unnecessary ones" (561a).

Plato argues that a dictatorship evolves out of democracy because of the insatiable greed that democrats have for freedom. This greed turns freedom into a lawlessness "that seeps into everyone's homes" (562e). This condition unleashes in people desires that are normally kept restrained and under control by "convention and by the co-operation of reason and the better desires" (571a). Found in "everyone of us" (572b), Plato classifies these desires as unnecessary and describes them as "terrible, wild, and lawless" (572b), a "stinging swarm of desires" (573d). He also refers to them as "the lustful, dictatorial desires" (587a) and an "evil, crazed minority" that oppresses the mind of the dictatorial individual (577d). The ruler of this set of negatively described desires is one Plato refers to as "the dictator lust" (573d), "lust, the captain of the bodyguard the others form" (573e), and the "dictatorship of lust" (574e). Lust removes any "regard for law and convention" in the dictatorial individual (575a) and makes this individual willing to "stop at nothing" (575a). This is clearly shown in what a dictatorial individual does once he has exhausted his income through the satisfaction of his swarm of desires. He will start borrowing money (573d) and when that source is depleted, he will look for something to steal through deceit or force (574a). He would not hesitate to steal from his parents (574a, b) and then he would "turn his hand to a bit of burglary or to mugging travellers late at night" (574a). These crimes would be followed by an attempt to try "to empty out a temple" (574d).

The rise of the dictator is strongly influenced by poverty and wealth. Poor people in a democracy select a person to champion their cause. In a democracy they "form the
largest section of the population” and their champions “do their very best to rob the rich” (565a). Unfortunately for the poor, Plato believes these champions of theirs only “distribute the trivial amounts they don’t keep for themselves to the general populace” (565a). These champions become enemies of the rich, who tries to find ways of assassinating them (566b). For this reason they need a bodyguard, which eventually puts one of them in power and causes the wealthy to flee “without delay and without worrying about cowardice” (566c) – the alternative is to be murdered.

Once the rule of a dictator starts, the initial “amiable and gentle person” turns into a ruler that provokes war to “keep the people in need of a leader” (566e). He taxes the people to make them poor so that they are “forced to concentrate on their daily business and have less time to plot against him” (567a). He kills all possible enemies that might threaten his position of power (567a) and then he proceeds to plunder the community’s wealth to pay for the satisfaction of his own desires. In line with Plato’s “general principle” that “overdoing anything leads to a huge compensatory shift towards the opposite” (563e), citizens of a democracy have exchanged “considerable, and even excessive, freedom for the worst and harshest kind of enslavement” (570c) – both at individual and political levels (564c).

Plato’s conclusion at the end of this discussion of the process of degeneration is that his ideal state offers the best option and a dictatorship the worst (576d). People living under a dictator are “as unhappy as any community can be” (576e), as there is no other community where there is so much “moaning, complaining, grievances, and hardships” (578a). He judges his ideal state, though, as the “happiest one possible” (576e), where people are “as happy as any community can be” (578b). Plato’s judgement about the two communities at the “opposite ends of the scale” (576d) leads him to the conclusion that the happiest person is the “best and most moral person” and the unhappiest person is the “worst and most immoral person” (580c). To fully understand the significance of this conclusion, Plato’s views on justice must be discussed from the perspective of the role of self-discipline in containing desires.13

The fragility of self-discipline over insatiably greedy desires

In Plato’s well-known tripartite division of the soul (or mind), reason and spirit are considered the “better parts,” while desires are judged the “worse part” (431a). For this reason self-discipline or self-mastery requires that “the part which is naturally better is in control of the worse part” (431a). In the case of a just person whose desires are self-disciplined, fulfilment of those desires takes place as and how reason directs them (586d, e). A desire which attains its objective successfully will get “the truest pleasure available to it when it is guided by truth,” which for Plato means “when it follows the leadership of knowledge and reason” (586d).

The concord or harmony that occurs when “the whole mind accepts the leadership of the philosophical part” has a positive effect on all three parts: “then each part can do its own job and be moral in everything it does, and in particular can enjoy its own

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13 Cooper (2000: 15) argues that for Plato's Socrates “it is only the powerful attraction of luxuries and the innate tendency of human beings to follow their open-ended capacity and desire for pleasure, even where it goes against their own good, that could lead them, or tempt them, to violate the principles of justice as mutual aid. So it is only when we take into account, in addition to people's desire for their own good, their desire for pleasurable gratification through luxuries, that we can see justice, properly speaking, playing a role in human life.”
pleasures, and thus reap as much benefit and truth from pleasure as is possible for it" (586e-587a). Similarly, a disruption of the unity and harmony provided by the rule of reason means that the disrupting part (spirit or desires) fails to attain its own pleasures and “it also forces the other parts to go after unsuitable, false pleasures” (587a).

Why does Plato call desires the worse part? The fact that desires are “naturally insatiably greedy” makes them a threat to the unity, harmony, concord, or attunement of the human soul (442a). The insatiability of the greed of desires is a permanent source of instability for individuals.14 If the desires are satisfied to the extent that they get “saturated with physical pleasures,” desires might “try to dominate and rule” the other two parts of the human soul, i.e. reason and spirit (442a, b). This possibility is a serious threat, because desires are described as forming a “major constituent” of the human soul (442a). If desires dominate and rule the individual, they plunge “the whole of everyone’s life into chaos” (442b). This chaos can happen both in the lives of individuals and communities, if self-discipline is absent.15

Another image shows the frightening power Plato ascribes to desires in human beings. Plato asks his partners in conversation to model the human soul (mind) by giving it three elements that correspond to reason, spirit and desires (see 588b – e). Reason is represented by a man, the smallest creature of the three. A lion, larger than the man, represents the spirit. Desires, the “bestial aspects of our nature” (589c, d), are represented by a creature with a “single – if varied and many-headed – form, arrayed all around with the heads of both wild and tame animals, and possessing the ability to change over to a different set of heads and to generate all these new bits from its own body” (588c).

Plato uses this rich imagery to point out to the supporter of immorality that to say one gains from injustice implies that we are saying “we’re rewarded if we indulge and strengthen the many-sided beast and the lion with all its aspects, but starve and weaken the man, until he is subject to the whims of the others”(588e – 589a). However, the view that justice is beneficial means that the inner man’s control is strengthened and that this inner man’s relationship with the many-headed beast becomes like that between a farmer and his crops: “by nurturing and cultivating its tame aspects and by stopping the wild ones growing” (589a-b).

The significance of self-discipline in Plato’s Republic is thus to protect individuals and communities against the chaos brought about by inappropriate rulers.16 Appropriate rulers are reason aided by spirit for individuals and philosopher-kings aided by

14 Waterfield (1993: xxvi) says that Plato judges that the “natural state of the desirous part is one of pleonexia: it goes on wanting more and more (442a, 562b, 586b), and will inevitably degenerate.” For Plato this means that “all of us have the tendency toward excess within us.” Waterfield says Plato designed the rule of the guardians to check this tendency. Elsewhere Waterfield (1993: lxxii) describes this tendency as the “nightmare forces of chaos and evil.”
15 Waterfield (1993: xi) believes pleonexia is a central issue for Plato. All partners in the dialogues of The Republic, Waterfield says, agree with the common assumption amongst the ancient Greeks that “immoral behaviour involves pleonexia (trying to get more than your fair share) and that morality is to be thought of, negatively, as the avoidance of pleonexia, and positively as attending to others’ goods (343a, 372a).”
16 Stallcy (1983: 55-56) describes the ideal of sophrosune as the mainspring of The Laws, Plato’s much later dialogue on politics. Left to themselves, Plato says in The Laws, “the passions would lead us into all manner of excess and wickedness” and therefore Plato says that a “lack of self-control is the root problem for all existing communities” (Stalcy 1983: 97). In The Laws as well as The Republic, people possess sophrosune “if reason governs our passions and keeps us in the way of moderation (Stalcy
guardians for communities. Appropriate rulers know how to “order and control” desires (430e). Self-discipline obtains when all three parts of both individuals and communities agree on “who the rulers should be” (431e). For this reason the virtue of self-discipline, contrary to the limited applicability of wisdom and courage, “spans the whole octaval spread of the community” (432a).

A self-disciplined community or individual thus is one where there is “unanimity, a harmony between the naturally worse and naturally better elements of society as to which of them should rule both in a community and in every individual” (432a). This is the core of the central argument of The Republic, which contains the answer Socrates gives to the challenge issued by Adeimantus: “So it’s not enough just to demonstrate that morality is better than immorality: show us why one of them, in and of itself, makes anyone who possesses it good, whether or not it is hidden from the eyes of gods and men, while the other one, in and of itself, and whether or not it is hidden from the eyes of gods and men, makes him bad” (367e). The virtues of self-discipline (moderation), courage, and wisdom produce concord or harmony. This results when justice reigns in individuals and communities. Justice enables each part of individuals and communities to fulfil its specialised role and assigned function. Therefore justice is a good in itself that leads to the best result—happiness—and it is rewarded by the gods.

Besides describing the state of self-discipline as “unanimity” and “harmony,” Plato also describes it as “concord,” “attunement,” “order” and “control.” The condition or state of individuals and communities thus described turns into chaos if desires are allowed to violate the boundaries of their assigned role. One of the chief ways to disrupt the fragile unity, harmony, concord, attunement, and order among the three parts of individuals (reason, spirit, and desires) and communities (golden, silver, and iron-bronze classes) is a lack or excess of material possessions, i.e., in terms expressed by Plato: wealth, affluence, money, poverty. For this reason we could say that Plato points to an “economic basis of social disorder” (Stalley 1983: 98).

Plato is explicit about the disrupting influence of lack or excess of material resources on a person’s “inner society,” which can cause “trouble brewing among its members” (591a). A just person will monitor this influence and, depending on “his having either too much or too little property, will increase or decrease his assets accordingly” (591a). The full strength of the corrupting influence that Plato believes poverty and wealth have on individuals and communities has revealed itself fully in his detailed descriptions of the degeneration of the ideal state. It might be worthwhile to spell out the strength of this influence from a different perspective.

Plato tries hard to convince his readers that the rulers of his ideal state would resist

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17 To interpret self-discipline (self-control, moderation, or temperance) as central to the argument of The Republic, corresponds with the definition of justice amongst the ancient Greeks given by Vlastos (1981: 116). He says that justice was used in the specific sense of “refraining from pleonexia,” which means refraining from “gaining advantage for oneself by grabbing what belongs to another—his property, his wife, his office, and the like—or by denying him what is (morally or legally) due him—fulfilment of promises made to him, repayment of monies owed him, respect for his good name and reputation, and so forth.”

18 Lee (1974: 25) thinks that Plato had “the deepest distrust of what would today be the profit-motive and of the political influence of private wealth.” Amnas (1981: 18) says that when finished reading the Republic, “we know in the sharpest terms just how low Plato puts the life dedicated to moneymaking.”

temptations to become corrupt, or alternatively, they would not allow their desires to 
wrest control from reason and its aid, spirit. The guardians would have sufficient 
defences to avoid abusing their power and would thus not enrich themselves or satisfy 
their desires at the cost of the citizens. Will this be the case, even according to Plato 
himself? The first flaw in Plato’s attempt to convince his readers is his unconvincing 
explanation of the origin of the decay of the ideal state. Its origin lies in the faulty se-
lection of breeding times which would produce poor human material for leadership. 
These new leaders would not appropriately value the right kind of education and they 
would start quarrelling about private ownership of property. Their compromise with 
one another to restore private ownership for the guardians sets the process of degener-
ation in motion.

This explanation of the origin of decay is an unconvincing cover-up of something 
Plato seemingly finds almost inexplicable: how could the philosopher kings [rulers] in 
whom justice fully reigns, who have had an ideal education and training, combined 
with several safeguards to stop any possible abuse of power, still turn their backs on 
reason? How could they ignore the value of their strong moral commitments and start 
sliding down a slippery slope of degeneration to eventually become dictators? The an-
twer to these questions is simple: it is the strong influence of the bad desires ignited by 
material wealth and riches.

To fully appreciate how strong Plato judges poverty and wealth as bad influences 
that can disrupt individuals and communities, one must look at the things that a lack or 
excess of material possessions are able to disrupt and overrule. For what reasons does 
Plato believe philosopher kings would be the best rulers, reasons that eventually are 
not strong enough to contain desires for an excess of material possessions? The rea-
sons Plato presents in favour of his philosopher kings are as follows:

1. The guardians are ruled by reason, the philosophic part of human beings. Reason, 
combined with culture, is the “best guardian” for human individuals, according to 
Plato, as its active presence will ensure that the person’s goodness is “kept intact” 
(549b).

2. The guardians are “genuine philosophers” whose desires are “channelled towards 
learning” (485d). A person so strongly focused in one direction, i.e. someone who 
is concerned with the pleasures “the mind feels of its own accord,” has “corre-
respondingly less desire for other things” (485d). This strong focus combines with 
self-discipline to make the genuine philosopher “constitutionally incapable of tak-
ing seriously the things which money can buy” (485e).

3. If they find wealth not in money or material possessions, guardians find it in a life 
of “virtue and intelligence” (521a) For Plato these treasures are the wealth which 
he considers to be “a prerequisite of happiness” (521a).

20 Vlastos (1981: 134) gives a beautiful description of just how impossible it seems in terms of Plato’s ar-
arguments that his philosopher kings could become corrupt. Using the rich imagery of the inner man, the 
lion and the many-headed beast, he says that “control over the lion and the beast (or what is left of it) 
has been secured at so deep a level that reason’s dominance no longer calls for the exercise of repressive 
force. All three are reconciled to their respective roles and so to one another. The subordinates concur 
willingly, even affectionately, in reason’s hegemony; they are slaves so attached to their master that they 
feel servitude as friendship. In such a state of soul how could reason’s orders fail to be carried out? And 
since reason orders only what is just, how could a soul so integrated within itself engage in unjust con-
duct?”
4. How did the guardians come to have these priorities? They went through a detailed educational programme over many decades. Their education is the “chief factor” protecting them from corruption. Their education has led them to value morality as most important and most essential, as it brings them “integrity and its rewards” (540d).

5. Education is not fail-safe. Although the chief factor, other things are needed as well (416c). The value of a good education alone is not something “we should stake our lives on” (416b). For this reason Plato formulates various rules [precepts] to govern the lives of the guardians, mostly directed to prohibit them from private ownership of material possessions and from having private lives (families).

6. These rules, together with their education and implied moral lifestyle are not to apply to anyone who merely present himself/herself to be guardians. Guardians are selected through both a comprehensive educational programme and performance tests over a period of 15 years. Whilst gaining practical experience through taking up positions of responsibility lower than being rulers, they are tested to determine whether they “remain unmoved by all the various temptations they are exposed to” (539e). When they reach the age of fifty, they must emerge from these tests “unscathed and with absolutely outstanding performances in every task they undertook and branch of knowledge they studied” (540a), if they are to be selected to become rulers.

7. These specially selected guardians with their strong moral commitments will also ensure that good quality leaders are available to take over from them. Plato suggests that they will be “constantly training others to follow suit” so that they can bequeath “guardianship of the community to others in their place” (540b). Having completed this transition of power, they are ready to die. As “reward for their particularly virtuous lives” (Waterfield 1993: 425), they go to the “Isles of the Blessed” when they die (540b).

Plato’s use of a faulty selection of breeding times as explanation of the origin of the decay of the ideal state seems like a feeble facade behind which he hides the enormous power and influence of a lack or excess of material possessions on the desires of human individuals. All his elaborate arguments to ensure that reason rules in the lives of individuals and communities are shown to be very vulnerable where they ought to be the strongest – in the lives of the carefully selected and highly educated guardians. The source of their vulnerability is bad desires, those Plato earlier called “unnecessary.”

**Conclusion**

Philosophers today still have to confront the dramatic consequences of the vastly unequal distributions of poverty and wealth on both local and global scale. They still do it today as Plato did in *The Republic* – through sustained, in depth, moral analysis and by means of rational arguments. But what can we learn from Plato to guide us in evaluating poverty and wealth in our world?

Can we take the content of Plato’s views seriously on issues of poverty and wealth? I believe so – his vast set of political experiences in Athens [and elsewhere in the ancient world], as well as his sensitive moral analyses of human behaviour in his dialogues give good reason to do so. It is worthwhile noting his political experience. Plato was involved – in different ways – with many political events during his life. Field
(1967: 6) says that an Athenian philosopher in Plato’s time “could not be a cloistered scholar but had to know what it is like to be a man of action too.” He witnessed and participated in many wars, observed different political systems at work and failing – in Athens and elsewhere, knew people who were involved in political upheavals and bitter struggles for power (family members and friends), instructed politicians and would-be leaders in the art of philosophy, and saw the moral decay that results from war and bad government (See Nelson 1982: 23-25; Copleston, 1962: 151-155; Lee 1974: 11-25; Waterfield 1993: xii-xiv. Annas 1981: 3-6; Huby 1972: 1-4). He describes his own time as “an age which has abandoned its traditional moral code but found it impossibly difficult to create a new one” (a quote from the Seventh Letter, in Lee 1974: 16).

If my interpretation of The Republic is correct, Plato confronts us with more than unflattering vignettes of democracies and democrats, similar to those depicted by Alexis de Tocqueville of American citizens in the 19th century (for the similarities see Nelson 1982: 42-43). Plato forces us to respond to his challenge about the excesses of personal freedom and wealth in contemporary democratic societies. Many critics judge, Stalley (1983: 98) says, that in our world there is a lack of “firm, generally accepted standards, that people live only for the pleasure of the moment, that they value financial gain above everything else, that there is no sense of belonging to one another, no sense of common responsibilities, or of common concerns.”

Julia Annas (1981: 2) argues that it is “impossible to be neutral about The Republic.” Plato’s passion about the issues in the book leads him to “jolt us into awareness” about such issues and “their shocking consequences” (Annas 1981: 2). For this reason Annas thinks The Republic demands responses from us, forces us to think through our ideas, and to present arguments in their defence. Annas is specifically correct about Plato’s views on poverty and wealth. What are the ideas from Plato’s Republic that confront us concerning poverty and wealth?

Plato’s views on the significance of poverty and wealth in The Republic challenges us to rethink the role and position assigned to wealth in contemporary society. Plato wants us to question the priority we give to personal and social morality compared to the priority of acquiring wealth. His views make us aware that desperate poverty disables moral functioning in individuals. The Republic requires us to note afresh the negative and disruptive consequences that poverty and excessive wealth might have, not only for individuals, city-states, and even larger societies like contemporary democracies, but even the global village. Perhaps the strongest challenge coming from Plato is to critically evaluate our consumerist society to determine to what extent desiring and possessing excessive wealth still disrupts and destroys moral integrity and internal harmony of individuals and societies.

Bibliography


