

Description of the Good at Plato's *Republic*, VI 505e1-3

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After identifying “the most important thing to learn” with the Good at *Republic*, VI 505a2, Socrates gives a preliminary description of it at e1-5, before famously comparing it to the sun at 507a7-509b9. The opening part of the description goes as follows:

Every soul pursues [the Good] and does whatever it does for its sake (*ho de diōkei men hapasa psychē kai toutou heneka panta prattei*, e1-2). It divines that [the Good] is something (*apomanteuomenē ti einai*, e2) but is perplexed (*aporousa de*, e2) and cannot adequately grasp what it is (*kai ouk echousa labein hikanōs ti pot' estin*, e2-3)···.¹

In this paper, I present an interpretation of this oft-discussed passage and offer a view on related issues, considering Ferber's recent, illuminating discussion as my starting point.² Ferber believes that 505e1-2 commits Plato (or the character Socrates) to a fundamentally “intellectualist” moral psychology; however, I do not believe it does because we do not necessarily have to interpret the passage as Ferber does. Nevertheless, he seems to be right in ascribing an “intellectualist” position to the author of the *Republic*. I understand that, to show how such a position is consistent

with the recognition of *acrasia*, one has only to ascribe, as Ferber himself does, to Plato the view that every human intention is, if not actually, at least *virtually* directed toward the realization of the Good. Further, I argue that ascription of this view to Plato is the key to understanding both 505e1-2 and e2-3.

1. Two Translations of “*panta pratei*” and Ferber’s Reading

In this section, I shall explain how Ferber interprets “*toutou heneka panta pratei*” (“[every soul] does whatever it does for the sake of [the Good]”), which appears at 505e1 - 2. According to Ferber, there are two ways of translating “*panta pratei*” (for which the translation that I have tentatively cited has: “does whatever it does”): either as (1) “does (literally) everything it does,”³ or (2) “goes to all lengths.”⁴ Ferber favors reading (1), while I prefer (2) (see section two).

What does the whole phrase “*toutou heneka panta pratei*” mean on readings (1) and (2), respectively? First let us consider the case of reading (1). The phrase means that every soul does (literally) everything it does for the sake of the Good. That is to say, *everyone* does everything he/she does for the sake of the Good, and this is a statement of the general theory of human action. As I have said, this is how Ferber understands the phrase.

That statement is strongly reminiscent of the intellectualist position advocated in earlier dialogues such as *Protagoras* (358c6-d2), *Gorgias* (468b7-8), and *Meno* (78b1-2), which is to say that every wrongdoing is due to the ignorance of what is good, and that nobody does wrong willingly. Does this then mean that Plato has retained his early intellectualism

through Book VI of our middle dialogue?

One might think that this cannot be the case. Previously, in the same dialogue, at IV, 439d4-440a8, Socrates said that the soul has three parts or elements, that is, reason, spirit, and appetite, which can *conflict* with one another. For instance, appetite draws the agent to drink something, while reason keeps him/her from doing so. Such a conflict might result in an acratia action. Thus, in *Republic* IV, Plato seems to deviate from his early intellectualism.⁵ However, Ferber suggests that we could understand Plato as retaining intellectualism—if not the same form of intellectualism found in early dialogues, then what may be called a basic insight of intellectualism—through *Republic* VI and even further.⁶ To do so, Ferber considers the point that every *soul* does everything for the sake of the Good as applying to each *part* of the soul. That is, each part does everything under the guidance of its own conception of what is good. Reason takes something *really good* as what is good, spirit something *honorable*, and appetite something *pleasurable*. Therefore, according to Ferber, Plato has retained, from his early to middle to late period, the basic insight of intellectualism to the effect that every human soul, *or at least each part of it*, aims for the Good. To support this “unitarian” interpretation of Plato’s moral psychology, Ferber cites assertions of the intellectualist view that appear later in the *Republic* (IX, 589c6) and in later dialogues (*Philebus* 22b6-8, *Timaeus* 86d7-e3, and *Laws* V, 731c3-5, IX, 860d1-2).⁷

Next let us consider what the phrase “*toutou heneka panta prattēi*” means on reading (2). That is, what does it mean to say that every human soul “*goes to all lengths*” for the sake of the Good? According to Ferber, this implies that every human soul (or, I would add for Ferber, the best, i.e., rational, part of the human soul) “leaves nothing undone” for the sake of the

good. As Ferber says, if this passage were read in this way, Plato would be breaking with his early intellectualism, and indeed, Plato's recognition of acratia in Book IV would indicate such a break. Another indication would be in our very passage if it were read as just described. For, as a matter of fact, acratia does exist. So, if the rational part of everyone's soul leaves (literally) nothing undone for the sake of what it takes to be good, this should mean that anyone's⁸ best judgment can be overthrown by impulse. In this way, Plato would be giving a psychological account of acrasia. The interpreters who perceive such a development in Plato's moral psychology include Gregory Vlastos, Donald Davidson, Terry Penner, Christopher Rowe, and Myles Burnyeat.⁹

2. The "Goes to All Lengths" Translation Consistent with Plato's Retaining the Basic Insight of Intellectualism

I would like to follow Ferber in assuming that Plato retains what may be called a basic insight of his intellectualism in the *Republic*, although what I call such does not perfectly overlap with what he does (more on this below). This assumption is supported by passages from later writings as cited in the previous section.¹⁰ However, I am reluctant to assume, as Ferber does, the words "*panta pratein*" at 505e1-2 as meaning "does (literally) everything it does" (i.e., reading (1)), for "*panta pratein*" and similar expressions such as "*panta poiein*" and "*pan poiein*" often mean "to do everything to achieve the relevant goal" (i.e., "to go to all lengths" or "to make every effort"), rather than "to do everything that the agent does." (See *Apology* 39a1, *Meno* 89e7, *Phaedo* 114c3, *Republic* 488c2, 504d2, and *Philebus* 58d5.¹¹) There are certainly exceptions, for example, *Gorgias* 468b7-8, where a

general theory of action is at issue.

Now, Ferber speaks as if the “goes to all lengths” translation were incompatible with his “unitarian” interpretation.¹² This seems to be because he regards the “goes to all lengths” translation of 505e1-2 as unambiguously meaning that every soul—that is, the best part of everyone’s soul—“leaves (literally) nothing undone” for the sake of the Good. However, this is only one of two possible ways of taking the “goes to all lengths” translation itself (let us call that reading (2-a)). Another way is by taking it to mean “every soul makes every effort” (in which case “*panta* (everything)” is used hyperbolically; let us call this reading (2-b)). It is possible, and seems to me plausible, to translate 505e1-2 as “every soul makes every effort for the sake of the Good.”¹³ So read, the passage by itself does not commit Socrates to an anti-intellectualist (or, for that matter, intellectualist) moral psychology. I shall return to the issue of how I eventually interpret this passage.

3. How Exactly Recognition of Acrasia Is Consistent with Intellectualist Insight

As we have observed, Ferber suggests, in rather cautious terms,¹⁴ that, in order to show how Plato’s recognition of acratia in *Republic* IV is consistent with a basic insight of intellectualism, Socrates’ claim at 505e1-2 about a whole *soul*, which Ferber takes as committed to intellectualism, can be taken to apply to each *part* of the soul. To me, however, this extended application seems stretched, for, generally speaking, talk of a whole soul and talk of a part of it are different.¹⁵ However, we do not have to accept this risky line. Actually, one of Ferber’s points suffices to demonstrate

consistency between a basic insight of intellectualism and recognition of *acrasia*. Ferber interprets 505e1-2 as meaning that every soul does everything it does—I add for Ferber, *at least—virtually* (as opposed to *actually*) for the sake of the Good.¹⁶ That is, although we do not always think about the Good explicitly, our every intention is guided by our concern with the Good, and this concern is always working at least at a deep level of the soul. To elucidate this idea, Ferber mentions Aquinas’ point that “the force of our first intention with respect to [the ultimate end] persists in each desire, even though it is not adverted to.”¹⁷ Regarding the idea that our concern with the Good is always working at least virtually, Ferber could have referred to what Socrates says at VII, 518c4-519b5, that is, that every human soul has the innate capacity to see the truth, a capacity that may or may not be activated, depending on which direction the soul turns.¹⁸ Certainly, this passage does not explicitly concern action or volition, but cognition, whereas 505e1-2 concerns action and volition, and possibly cognition as well. But from Ferber’s reading, both passages are related to a deep level of the soul.

Although, as I have stated, I am reluctant to agree with Ferber’s interpretation of “*panta prattai*” at 505e1-2 (based on reading (1)), I eventually follow him in recognizing what may be called a basic insight of intellectualism in the same passage. I shall return to this point below. For now, let it suffice to say that I agree with Ferber in ascribing the view to Plato in the *Republic*. I cite 518c4-519b5 as evidence that Plato has a view *congenial* to the sort of idea that Ferber and I ascribe to Plato, to the effect that our concern with the Good is always working at least virtually. This sort of idea may also be called a basic insight of intellectualist moral psychology (the other being that every human soul, *or at least each part of it*, aims for the Good).

This enables us to explain how, for Plato, recognition of *acrasia* is consistent with intellectualist insight. The basic insight of intellectualism concerns our *at least virtual* concern with the Good, which is supposed to be working regardless of whether one is acting or not, and of whether one acts, when one does, *acratically* or not.

4. Why the Soul Is Perplexed

The phrase that I have focused upon so far, “*toutou heneka panta pratei*” (505e1-2), is followed by “*apomanteuomenē ti einai, aporousa de kai ouk echousa labein hikanōs ti pot' estin*” (“[every soul] divines that [the Good] is something but is perplexed and cannot adequately grasp what it is,” e2-3). In this section, I shall elucidate the meaning of this phrase. In so doing, I shall appeal to the suggestion that Ferber and I make, that is, for Plato, we have a certain concern with the Good, which is always working at least at a deep level of the soul. This creates a connection between the foregoing three sections of this paper and the present one. For the same sort of idea is at work, I suggest, both in 505e1-2 and e2-3.

When Socrates says that every human soul “divines that the Good is something,” he means that everyone has some inarticulate understanding of, or presentiment about, the Good.¹⁹ As we observed in the previous section, Socrates will say later at VII, 518c4-519b5 that every human soul has the innate capacity of seeing the truth. It seems plausible to say that this potential knowledge of all truth (including truth about the Good) brings everyone (at least) a vague understanding of the Good.

When Socrates goes on to say at 505e2-3 that every human soul “is perplexed and cannot adequately grasp what

[the Good] is,” he seems to be speaking about what happens when one is inclined or forced to *express verbally* one’s inarticulate understanding of the Good. The word “*aporousa* (is perplexed)” is reminiscent of the experience that a subject of Socrates’ questioning typically has.²⁰ We already have some grasp of the Good, but this grasp is still weak, and Socratic examination confirms that this is so. That we are still in this intermediary state regarding the cognition of the Good explains why our soul “is perplexed.” The soul would not be perplexed if it had either no presentiment about the Good at all or a clear understanding of it. Our perplexity is a *ratio cognoscendi* of the presence of some understanding of the Good in us.

If I am right in suggesting that at work at 505e2-3 is the idea of our at least virtual concern with the Good, this seems to support Ferber’s view that a similar idea is (already) present in e1-2. It is by this route that I concur with his view, and not by following his apparently risky interpretation of “*panta prattei*.”

Conclusion

To conclude, I first summarize my discussion and then raise a couple of questions for future inquiry.

First, to summarize my discussion, Ferber, on the one hand, reads ‘*toutou heneka panta prattei*’ at *Republic* VI, 505e1-2 as meaning that every soul does literally everything it does (reading (1)) for the sake of the Good, and, hence, as committed to intellectualism. In contrast, I would like to interpret the phrase as meaning that every soul makes every effort (reading (2-b)) for the sake of the Good, and, hence, as uncommitted to intellectualism. Ferber’s reading is that

everyone does everything *virtually* for the sake of the Good. I follow him in ascribing this *view* to the author of the *Republic*. This version of intellectualism, which may be called a basic insight of intellectualism, is compatible with the recognition of akratic action shown in Book IV. Ascription of this view to Plato is the key to understanding both 505e1-2 and e2-3.

Finally, I raise two questions for future inquiry.

The preliminary description of the Good, the first part of which I have discussed in this paper, goes on to say: “[nor can the soul] acquire the sort of stable beliefs it has about other things (505e3-5).” Like many interpreters, I take “other things” to refer to the Beautiful and the Just. Therefore, here Socrates is saying that our beliefs about the Good are less stable than our beliefs about the Beautiful and the Just. What constitutes the difference between the two cases? Tentatively, I think that regarding the latter case, we tend to be satisfied with what is generally accepted as just and beautiful in our society. Mostly, our concern for justice is motivated by our fear of being punished or by our fear that the current social order is disrupted by others’ unjust doings. Our conventional conception of justice suffices to meet either concern. Moreover, for the most part, our interest in beauty derives from our desire to take pleasure in beautiful things or to look beautiful to others. Again, in either case, all that usually matters is society’s shared sense of beauty. But as for what is good for each of us or for our happiness, we tend to be unsatisfied with what our society merely accepts as happiness. For our happiness, our concern is to be *really* happy. A question thus arises. What is the relationship between our concern to be really happy and our at least virtual concern with the Good to which I have drawn attention in this paper?

Second, in the simile of the sun (VI, 507a7-509b9), Socrates highlights the aspect of the Good as what belongs to

or, indeed, governs the intelligible realm—an aspect of the Good that is not mentioned in the preliminary description of the Good at 505e1-5. How are the two passages related? The consideration of these two questions can be left for another occasion.

Notes

¹ Grube and Reeve's translation with modifications.

² Ferber.

³ Shorey, 91, Cornford, 216, Waterfield, 231, Griffith, 211.

⁴ Apelt, 259, Wiegand, 239, Gabrieli, 234, Irwin, 336, Burnyeat, 14.

⁵ For example, Anagnostopoulos argues that, while for Socrates (as depicted in Plato's early dialogues) one can only desire what is good, for Plato in the *Republic* one sometimes desires what one falsely takes to be good. Anagnostopoulos, 180-183.

⁶ Ferber, 236.

⁷ Ferber, 236.

⁸ This is what Ferber thinks. However, one might believe that a virtuous person's best judgment cannot be overthrown by impulse.

⁹ Vlastos, 45-80, Davidson, 225-6, Penner and Rowe, 222, Burnyeat, 18-9.

¹⁰ One can add *Laws* IX, 860d5-e4.

¹¹ For this usage, see Irwin, 336.

¹² Ferber, 234-5.

¹³ Gabrieli, 234.

¹⁴ Ferber says, 'we *could* say: Not only every simple soul, but also every tripartite soul, does everything for the good (*italics added*)', 236.

¹⁵ Stalley points out that Bobonich and others have regarded each part of the soul as "agent-like", that is, as having its own desire and

cognitive capacities such as beliefs and some form of reasoning. However, as Bobonich himself admits, this view causes a serious problem as to how to explain acrasia. If each part of the soul has its own desire and beliefs, it would seem that acrasia could happen again *within* it. Stalley avoids this problem by understanding that neither appetite nor spirit but reason alone has beliefs about the good. Stalley.

¹⁶ Ferber, 239-40.

¹⁷ *ST*, 1a2ae, q. 1, art. 6. Gilby's translation.

¹⁸ Harte observes a similar idea in the fact (as she takes it, rightly, I think) that in the cave simile (VII, 514a1-517a7) the prisoners' words are supposed to refer to real things outside the cave. She suggests that to explain this puzzling situation, we should assume that each prisoner has some implicit cognitive grip of real things from the beginning. As Harte points out, this idea is congenial to the theory of recollection (*Meno* 81c5-e2, *Phaedo* 72e1-73b2, and *Phaedrus* 249b5-250c4). Harte.

¹⁹ As for *Socrates'* divining about the Good, Ferber discusses that it is between *doxa* and *epistēmē*, 236-7. See also Gonzalez, 273.

²⁰ For descriptions of perplexity that Socrates brings up, see *Laches* 200e1-201b5, *Gorgias* 522b2-c3, *Meno* 79a-80d4, and *Theaetetus* 149a6-10, 150b6-151d6.

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