

Notes towards a New Interpretation of the Virtues in the *Republic*

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The purpose of this paper is to articulate the beginnings of a new interpretation of the virtues in Plato's *Republic*. My primary concern is with the ethical virtues, but, as we shall see, because the ethical virtues are one among several different types of virtues, my account will have much to say about all the virtues. Ultimately, I will argue that there are two central and structural features characteristic of every virtue: first, they function by helping some subject realise its particular work [*ergon*] well, and, second, they are powers [*dynameis*]. As *dynameis*, they will be over some particular object(s) and accomplish something on or with respect to those objects. To fully state the structure of any given virtue, then, one will have to identify what *ergon* it helps its subject to realise as well as what it is over and accomplishes. My interpretation will have interesting implications for understanding the individual virtues, a few of which I attempt to highlight below. I end by laying out some promising candidates for the differentia that makes the four cardinal ethical virtues a distinct grouping from the rest of the virtues. That is to say, I will gesture towards the special feature that makes these virtues *ethical* virtues.

One major assumption of my paper is that there is a unitary account of *dynamis* operating in the *Republic*. What I mean by this is that if (as will turn out to be the case) we discover that several ethical virtues are identified as *dynameis* in Socrates' analysis of them, we may assume that they are *dynameis* of the sort we later learn about from the famous discussion of powers in Book v. This assumption is not obviously correct. Some uses of the term "*dynamis*" in the *Republic* are clearly non-technical and are not meant to be laden with the metaphysical structure discussed in Book v.¹ But I believe the assumption is plausible all the same. For if in a dialogue about justice Socrates defines – or, in any case, identifies the nature of – the cardinal ethical virtues by referring to the *dynameis*, it is a safe bet that in these cases the term is being

1 This is certainly true of the adverbial expressions "*eis dynamin*" (366d3–4, 427e1, 458e3–4 and 590d5) and "*kata dynamin*" (429e7, 507a6 and 535a11). But it is probably true of other humdrum uses as well, e.g. 360a5–6.

used technically. Certainly, it would be a bit strange for Plato to indicate that a particular virtue is a *dynamis* and expect his careful readers to forget this fact when they read Socrates' rich theoretical discussion about what it is to be a power.²

Finally, I should stress that the following is not intended to be comprehensive or definitive. The present contribution is too short to provide the last word on the heady topic of the nature of the virtues.³ My aim here is modest. I provide a set of schematic notes that present a coarse-grained account of the structure of the virtues. This should be instructive in its own right. But it will also draw attention to the hitherto underappreciated role that the *dynamis* play in the *Republic's* moral philosophy.⁴ For if I am correct, it will turn out that powers were foundational to Plato's thinking about the virtues in his most famous dialogue.

1 Some Textual Evidence

Some people may find the suggestion that the ethical virtues are *dynamis* surprising. To allay any worries, let us begin by considering some textual evidence.

One of the major projects of Book IV is to identify and characterise the ethical virtues as they exist both in the city and the soul. It is here that we find the most explicit and detailed statements about their nature as virtues.

The first virtue discussed in Book IV is wisdom and, in particular, the city's wisdom. Though Socrates never provides a succinct definition of wisdom, he comes close at 428c1–d3 when he asks: "Is there some *epistēmē* among some of the citizens in the city just now founded by us that does not judge about some one of the things in the city but about it as a whole, both in what way the city would best deal with itself and other cities?"⁵ It is by the possession of this

2 I was heartened by the fact that none of the other contributors to this volume objected to this assumption during the initial presentation of my paper. This increases my confidence that the assumption is correct.

3 I have elsewhere published a lengthy article arguing that courage is a power in the *Republic*. See Anderson (2024a). Several parts of this chapter include material similar to what is covered in that article.

4 Though scholars have often noted that several of the ethical virtues are identified as *dynamis* in the so-called "early dialogues", there has been a notable lack of attention paid to them in the *Republic's* theory of virtues. To the best of my knowledge, only Reeve (1988) draws a clear and explicit link between the nature of the ethical virtues in the *Republic* and the powers. For more authors that ignore the *dynamis*, see Anderson (2024a, n. 2).

5 The Greek is from the OCT (Slings' 2003 edition for the *Republic*). Translations are my own.

particular *epistēmē* that the city is said to have good judgement and be truly wise (428d8–9). This suggests that the *epistēmē* under discussion is the wisdom of the city. And this seems to be confirmed at 429a1–3, when Socrates – clearly thinking about this very *epistēmē* – says that it is proper for the ruling class of the city to share in “that *epistēmē*, which alone of all the *epistēmai* ought to be called wisdom”. Wisdom is the knowledge possessed by the ruling class that judges how the city is most beneficially ordered and how it should behave.

It is possible to disagree with this interpretation of wisdom. But even if one does, the passage at 429a1–3 leaves little doubt that wisdom is a kind of *epistēmē*.⁶ This is sufficient for our purposes because in Book v *epistēmē* is explicitly identified as a *dynamis*.⁷ And if wisdom is a sort of *epistēmē* and *epistēmē* is itself a power, it follows that wisdom must be a power.

Socrates is even clearer about the nature of courage in the city. In fact, he seems to define courage in the city as a sort of *dynamis*. The relevant discussion begins with him identifying the military or auxiliary class as the locus of the virtue in the city. He then explains to Glaucon that the city is courageous if and when this class has within it the power that preserves the correct opinion about the fearful things (429b8–c2). This confuses Glaucon and prompts further explanation. Included in this further explanation is a detailed analogy between dyers, who select and treat white cloth so that it preserves the colour with which it is ultimately dyed, and those who found cities, who select and educate auxiliaries so that they will preserve the correct opinions that they are taught. These opinions are “dyed” fast so that not even the most potent of psychic soaps – pleasure, pain, fear, and desire – can wash them out. At the end of this analogy Socrates returns to the courage of the city and offers his account of it:

Such a *dynamis kai sōtērian* through everything of the correct and lawful belief about fearful and not fearful things I call and set down as courage. (430b3–5)

Though “*dynamis kai sōtērian*” is sometimes translated as “power and preservation”, Socrates is not offering a conjunctive definition of courage as both

6 This is reflected in past scholarship. Many scholars have concluded that wisdom (both in the city and in the individual) is an *epistēmē*. Thus, Cross and Woollsey (1964: 105) claim that the wisdom of the city is the *epistēmē* “which is concerned, not with the interests of any particular person or group, but with the welfare of the city as a whole and its relations with other cities”. Similarly, Santas (2010: 92) tells us wisdom in the individual is: “knowledge that only reason can have about what is beneficial for each part of the soul and the whole soul”.

7 See 477b6, 477b8, 477b12, 477d8–9, 478a7, 478a11, 478a14–b1, and 478d7.

an unspecified power and a preservation of appropriate beliefs.⁸ Two points make this clear. The analogy with dyers cannot reasonably be read to support an interpretation of courage as involving two distinct elements. Those who dye clothes select raw material and treat it so that it acquires the power to preserve the colours which will make it an attractive and marketable piece of clothing. They do not aim to produce wool that has a power and, in addition to and differently from that, preserves colours. Likewise, the members of the auxiliary class are selected and trained so that they develop the *dynamis* that will “preserve through everything the belief about the fearful things” (429b9–c1).

The correct way to read the *kai* in the above definition is epexegetic. It specifies what the power in question does. And if this is right, then Socrates defines courage in the city as a *dynamis*. This is clear evidence that the nature of courage is to be a *dynamis* of a particular sort.

We turn now to justice, the virtue about which we learn most in our dialogue. Unsurprisingly, there are even more indications that Plato conceived of justice as a *dynamis*. The first comes from his discussion of justice in the city. Socrates uses an infamous argument from elimination to find the city’s justice. He claims that the city he and the other interlocutors have constructed is good and, therefore, possesses all four cardinal ethical virtues – and only those four. This gives rise to the strategy of first finding the other three ethical virtues and then finding justice by identifying, if at all possible, whatever ethical virtue remains (427e6–428a8). And this is, in fact, how the discussion of the city’s virtues proceeds. Thus after discussing wisdom, courage, and temperance, Socrates tries to identify the one remaining feature of the city that contributes to its overall virtue as much as the other three:

- [S]: It seems, then, that the power of each to do their own work (*hē tou hekaston en autē ta autou prattein dynamis*) rivals wisdom, temperance, and courage in its contribution to the virtue of the city.
- [G]: Very much so, he said.
- [S]: So, you put down justice as the rival to them for the virtue of the city?
- [G]: Absolutely. (433d6–12)

8 See, for example, Bloom (1991: 108). Grube/Reeve’s translation of “power to preserve” in Cooper (1997: 1063) does a better job of capturing the force of the Greek.

It is because the power of each doing their own work contributes as much to the virtue of the city as wisdom, courage, and temperance that we can be sure that this is justice.⁹

Plato is even more explicit about the nature of justice at the end of Book IV. For after wrapping up his treatment of the virtues and convincing his interlocutors that his account of justice passes certain “vulgar” tests – and is, therefore, really about justice – Socrates asks Glaucon:

[S]: So, are you still searching for justice to be something other than that power (*tautēn tēn dynamin*) which produces this sort of individual and city?

[G]: By god, I am not! (443b4–7)

This passage signals the beginning of the end of the *Republic's* theoretical investigation into the nature of justice, which began at 368c6–7 with Socrates being asked by Glaucon and others to explain the *ti esti* of justice and injustice. At that point in Book II Socrates responds by noting that justice is the same whether it is in a city or a soul and then launches into his discussion of the city. 443b4–7 marks the culmination of the project of searching for justice first within the city and then within the individual, all of which is officially in the service of answering this *ti esti* question. Glaucon's unhesitating response leaves little doubt that he believes justice is a power.

This is compelling textual evidence suggesting that at least three of the four cardinal ethical virtues are *dynamis*.¹⁰

2 Virtue

We have seen that three of the ethical virtues are clearly described as *dynamies*. What we need now is a general account of virtue to help contextualise and make sense of the evidence presented above. I suggest that we find just such an account at the end of Book I.

The second half of Book I contains a series of arguments designed to respond to Thrasymachus' subversive claims about justice, its place in the political

9 Cf. 433b7–c2.

10 A case can be made for thinking of temperance as a *dynamis* as well, though the textual evidence is less straightforward. I lack the space to offer a nuanced treatment of that evidence here.

sphere, and, finally, the superior value of injustice vis-à-vis human prospering.¹¹ In Socrates' final stand against the sophist, he purports to show that – contrary to what his opponent has argued – justice is actually the *sine qua non* of the prosperous human life. The argument unfolds in two stages. First, Socrates introduces and delineates two foundational concepts that underlie the demonstration to come: *ergon* and *aretē* (352d–353d). And then, after securing Thrasymachus' agreement about the basic meaning and operation of *erga* and *aretai*, he applies them to the human soul and its *ergon* of living. This application apparently shows that the life of the just individual is prosperous, whereas the life of the unjust individual is miserable (353d–354c).

It is the first stage of this argument that concerns us here. Socrates begins by asking whether we shouldn't "put this down as the *ergon* of a horse or anything else: that which someone could do either with it alone or best with it" (352e3–4). Thrasymachus does not quite understand, so he is offered a series of examples meant to illustrate Socrates' point. First, he is told that there is nothing else in the world by which we see than the eyes; and similarly, there is nothing else by which we hear than the ears. Since these are the only things that can do the relevant sort of perceiving, Socrates explains, it is the *ergon* of the eyes to see and the *ergon* of the ears to hear. Socrates next turns to manufactured tools to elucidate what he meant by the second part of his account of *ergon* – namely, what it means to do something "best". We are told that many things could be used to prune grapevines, such as swords, cooking knives, or teeth. But the pruning knife designed for this purpose prunes the vines best of all. For this reason, Socrates explains, only it has the function of pruning vines.

These examples offer paradigmatic cases of things that have an *ergon* in virtue of the fact that they alone or best of all can do some activity. And they are apparently sufficient to motivate Socrates' point. For Thrasymachus now seems to understand:

[S]: Now, then, I think you might understand better what I was just now asking when I inquired if this is not the *ergon* of each: that which it alone or finest of all accomplishes.

[T]: Ah, I understand. And this seems to me to be the *ergon* of each thing. (353a9–b1)

11 "Prospering" and "prosperous" are my translations for, respectively, "*eudaimonia*" and "*eudaimōn*". These are non-standard translations, which I discuss and defend in Anderson (2024b: 5–8).

After getting Thrasymachus to agree to this, Socrates takes the concept of *ergon* as settled and moves on to the related concept of *aretē*. The virtues are those things without which subjects cannot accomplish their *ergon* finely or those things by which subjects accomplish their *ergon* well (353b16–c2 and 353c5–7). Socrates' understanding of *aretē* is, then, dependent upon and conceptually derivative of his understanding of *ergon*. This is made very clear by the way he first introduces the concept:

And then does there seem to you to be a virtue for each thing which has also been assigned an *ergon* (*hōper kai ergonti prostetaktai*)? (353b2–3)

The perfect here is quite important. Subjects get *aretai* only after they have *already* been assigned an *ergon*.¹² The same point is emphasised in the discussion that follows. For in the next stretch of text the two interlocutors clearly proceed to infer that a subject admits of an *aretē* from the fact it has an *ergon* (353b4–13). Functions come first. Virtues follow. In short order Socrates and Thrasymachus conclude that *aretai* are those things that enable subjects with a particular *ergon* to accomplish that *ergon* well. Let us call this the “Functional Account of Virtue”.

In the second stage of the argument Socrates suggests without any opposition that living is the *ergon* of the soul, and then he reminds Thrasymachus of their past agreement that justice is the *aretē* of the soul. (It does not seem to trouble Socrates that the “agreement” he refers to was at best less than wholehearted; see 350c12–d7). From this Socrates infers that justice is the very thing that enables the soul to realise its *ergon* of living well. And since living well is here presented as being equivalent to prospering, justice turns out to be the one thing we cannot do without if we are going to be prosperous.

This stage of the argument moves quickly and quite possibly relies on a vitiating equivocation of the term *eu prattein*, which sometimes takes a grammatical object and has the meaning “do something well” but also can be used idiomatically to indicate that someone is doing well, i.e. that they are prosperous (353e4–5). Plato also gives clear dramatic hints that Socrates' argument is problematic.¹³

12 Of course, the “already” here does not need to be understood temporally. I am not suggesting Socrates thought nature literally gave subjects *erga* and then offered them *aretai* to accomplish their *erga* well. The perfect tense makes a conceptual point. We can only understand *aretai* in light of the *erga* they help to accomplish well.

13 It is not only Thrasymachus who is left unpersuaded by the claims made about justice and the soul. Glaucon and Adeimantus are too, and the latter of the two later implies that Socrates' argument in Book I was overly formal and lacking substance (367b3–5 and 367e1–3).

But the problems seem to me to be restricted to the second stage of Socrates' argument – that is to say, they are restricted to Socrates' application of the Functional Account of Virtue to the particular case of the human soul. I can see no reason to doubt or second-guess the Functional Account of Virtue itself. To the contrary. The detailed examples Socrates uses and the care he takes to make sure Thrasymachus understands the steps of the argument suggest that Plato accepted and endorsed the account of *ergon* and *aretē* produced at 352d–353d.

In fact, we have good reason to believe that the Functional Account of Virtue is operant in the remainder of the dialogue. Consider the following statement Socrates makes in Book x when he turns to the topic of poetry for the second time:

So then the virtue, beauty, and correctness of each tool, animal, or action is related to nothing other than the use to which each thing was made (*pepoiēmenon*) or naturally purposed (*pephykos*). (601d4–6)

The distinction between being made and being naturally purposed clearly looks back to the discussion of *erga* in Book I, which includes a distinction between natural objects and manufactured products. Recall that eyes and ears are used as examples of subjects that alone of all the things in the world can do something; and the pruning knife is used as an example of a subject that accomplishes something best of all. As we can see from this passage in Book x, the foundational ideas presented in Book I are preserved – and, it seems to me, presupposed – throughout the remainder of the dialogue.

This conclusion is significant for two reasons. First of all, it gives us crucial information about how the virtues in our dialogue should be understood. In particular, it can help us to flesh out our earlier discussion of the material from Book IV. If the Functional Account of Virtue is presupposed throughout our dialogue, it must be the case that each of the cardinal ethical virtues enables its subject to accomplish its *ergon* well.

And second, it gives us further reason to believe that the virtues are *dynamis*. For when we are explicitly introduced to the powers for the first time in Book v, Socrates characterises them as those entities that enable us to do whatever we do:

Powers are a class of the things that are which enable us to do whatever we are able to do – and anything else to do what it is able to. For example, I say sight and hearing (*opsin kai akoēn*) are among the powers. (477c1–4)

This makes the *dynameis* very promising candidates for those entities that enable subjects with functions to realise their functions well – that is to say, for being virtues. Indeed, since *dynameis* seem to enable everything to do what it is able to do, it is hard to see how virtues could fail to be *dynameis*.¹⁴

We can reach the same conclusion by attending to Plato's careful use of examples throughout the *Republic*. Recall that Socrates relies most of all on the examples of eyes and ears in Book I. The conversation he has with Thrasymachus leaves little doubt that the virtue of the eyes is *opsis* and – given very reasonable assumptions and a straightforward reading of the text – we can infer that the virtue of the ears is *akoē* (353c3–4 and 352e8–10). Given these examples, it can hardly be a coincidence that *opsis* and *akoē* are named as the two paradigmatic *dynameis* at 477c1–4. This is yet further proof that the virtues discussed in Book I are powers.¹⁵

3 One Objection

Before moving on I would like to consider and respond to one objection.

Start by noting that early in Book II Glaucon tells Socrates that he desires to hear of justice and injustice, “what each is and what power each has all on its own in the soul”.¹⁶ Talk of virtues having powers occurs once before this passage and once after (351b8 and 588b7–8). Though some scholars have (correctly, in my opinion) treated 358b4–6 as evidence that justice *is* a *dynamis*,¹⁷ one might be tempted to argue that texts such as these show instead that the virtues possess powers – and are, therefore, something above and beyond powers. Consider by way of analogy that, as a human agent, I possess many powers.

14 Those with keen eyes will have noticed that in Book v *dynameis* are said to enable anything to do what it is able to do, whereas in Book I the *aretai* are said to be what enable subjects to realise their function well. This is an important point, and it deserves more space than I can give it here. But briefly: this does not pose a serious difficulty to my interpretation because *dynameis* come in degrees. The same power may function maximally effectively in one subject but only moderately effectively in another. Both are *dynameis*, but only the former is a virtue because only it allows its subject to accomplish its *ergon* well. I address this point further with the example of *opsis* below.

15 Sight is discussed in connection with the virtues by Payne in chapter 12 of this volume as well.

16 “*ti t' estin hekateron kai tina echei dynamin auto kath' auto enon en tē psychē*” (358b4–6).

17 For example, Irwin (1977: 325–6, n. 8) says about this passage: “To say what justice is is to say what power of the soul it is; that is why the question about its *dynamis* is coupled with the demand to know what it is, 358b4–6”.

Yet I am more than the sum of those powers. They are in me and at my disposal. There is a “me” behind them that possesses and uses them. Does 358b4–6 suggest that the virtues are – like me – something more than their powers?

I think not. For at least two reasons it would be a mistake to take these passages to indicate this. First, one must be careful not to give these three passages too much weight. When Glaucon expresses his desire to hear what justice is, he is implicitly admitting his ignorance about the virtue. So, it would be unwise to take his statements as authoritative. It is not until Book IV that he (and we) learn the true nature of justice, and it should be clear by now that in that book we learn that justice is a power. More importantly, there is a way of making sense of this sort of talk even though the virtues are powers. In fact, it is not uncommon for Plato to lapse into a way of speaking that implies *dynamis* have *dynamis*.¹⁸ This occurs because *dynamis* are essentially active and there is a natural tendency to posit a doer behind any doing. In lieu of any other relevant subject the power is itself reduplicated, and we get talk implying that *dynamis* have *dynamis*. (Compare the tendency of some English speakers to talk as if gravity has a power or force that pulls us to the earth.) But this talk is compatible with it being the case that the power in question is just a power. There is, therefore, no reason such passages should make us doubt that justice – or wisdom or courage, for that matter – is conceived of as a *dynamis* in the *Republic*.

4 Power

At this point we have filled in the first half of the picture I wish to sketch in this paper. But as emphasised above when considering the text of Book IV, the virtues are not only things that enable subjects to realise their function well. They are *dynamis* that enable their subjects to realise their functions well. To complete our picture, then, we must turn to the famous discussion at the end of Book V in which Socrates tells us about the *dynamis*.

This much-discussed passage will be familiar to everyone reading this volume:

I see neither colour nor shape belonging to powers, nor any other of those features had by many other things, looking to which I distinguish

18 Long ago, James Adam (1969, 1:339) noted that Socrates sometimes talks about *doxa* as if it were a *dynamis* and other times as if it has a *dynamis*. Adam correctly recognised that despite the variation in expression, Socrates understands that – strictly speaking – *doxa* is a power.

for myself some things from others. In the case of powers, I look only to this: what it is over and what it accomplishes. And by reference to this I call each the power it is. What is ordered over the same thing and accomplishes the same thing I call the same power; what is ordered over something different and does something different I call a different power. (477c6–d5)

In this canonical statement of the nature of the powers we are told that each power is distinguished by being (1) over something(s) and (2) accomplishing something. Therefore, to understand any given power one must know what it is over and what it accomplishes.

How exactly we are to understand these two features is a matter of scholarly controversy, the details of which are best avoided here. I will simply state that, following the recent work of David Lefebvre, I take Socrates to be identifying two distinct features of each and every power.¹⁹ Of course, these features are linked. (Indeed, they are so closely linked that Socrates can speak as if they are one: N.B. he looks only to “this”, in the singular). That which the power is over are the objects on which it typically operates; what it accomplishes it typically does to or with respect to those objects. It does not follow from this, however, that the two are inter-defined or so tightly conceptually related that identifying one feature immediately tells us about the other.

Indeed, it is important to keep some daylight between the two because in the case of any given *dynamis* it might be obvious what it accomplishes but not at all obvious what it is over.²⁰ It is quite clear, for example, that *opsis* must accomplish seeing. But what on earth is it over? Shapes? Colours? Some mixture of the two? One can only identify what it is over after thinking about the activity and investigating how it functions out in the world. In other cases, the objects of a power will be obvious but what it accomplishes will not be. And this is, I suspect, why Socrates distinguishes between that over which the power is set and that which it accomplishes, even if he sometimes speaks of these two features as if they are one.

5 The Structure of the Virtues

We are now in a position to draw some conclusions about the structure of the virtues. Because the Functional Account of Virtue tells us that virtues enable subjects with particular *erga* to realise their *erga* well, it will be true of every

¹⁹ Lefebvre (2018: esp. 229–72).

²⁰ Lefebvre (2018: 259) stresses this point.

virtue that they (1) belong to a subject and (2) contribute to realising that subject's function well. And because the *aretai* are also *dynamais*, it will further be the case that they are (3) over something(s) and (4) accomplish something(s). If the argument of the paper is on track, all this will be central to the anatomical make-up of the virtues in the *Republic*. This is an important metaphysical finding about the nature of the virtues.

We can go further and put some flesh onto this bare-bones analysis by discussing a couple of examples. Doing so will help make the central claims of the paper more perspicuous. It will also highlight several interesting upshots of thinking hard about the structure of the virtues in the way I have attempted to do here. Let us begin with the relatively simple case of a non-ethical virtue about which we learn much in our dialogue, *opsis*. After that we shall turn to the more difficult case of courage.

Book I indicates that *opsis* is the virtue of the eyes because it is that by which they realize their *ergon* well (353b1–c8).²¹ We also learn that the *ergon* of the eyes is to see because there is nothing else in the world that can see (352e6–11). Turning now to the material from Book V, we can safely say that what *opsis* accomplishes is seeing. However, as was noted in the previous section, it is not initially clear what *opsis* is over. Fortunately, other evidence suggests an answer. One important passage from Book VII indicates that *opsis* acts upon, and therefore is over, colours (507d10–11).²² This same point is made somewhat more explicitly in a passage of the *Charmides* addressing the possibility of self-reflexive *dynamais* (168d6–7).²³

Given these findings, the anatomy of *opsis* must look like this:

Subject: the eyes
 Function of the subject: to see
 Over: colours
 Accomplishes: seeing

21 Admittedly, it is not Socrates but Thrasymachus who suggests that *opsis* is the virtue of the eyes at 353c3–4. But Socrates does not deny that *opsis* is the relevant virtue. He simply flags that identifying the particular virtue of the eyes is less important than figuring out what that virtue will do at this point in the argument.

22 “*enousēs pou en ommasin opseōs kai epicheirountos tou echontos chrēsthai autē, parousēs de chroas en autois*” Cf. *Men.* 76d1–5.

23 “*kai hē opsīs ge pou, ō ariste, eiper opsetai autē heautēn chrōma ti autēn anankē echein. Achrōn gar opsīs ouden [an] mē pote idē*”. For a more thorough discussion of powers in the *Charmides*, see Gonzalez in this volume.

A few points should be noted. First, attentive readers will realise that the same Greek word, “*opsis*”, is given as an example of a *dynamis* in Book v and that it is also indicated to be an *aretē* in Book I. This presents a *prima facie* difficulty for my view. For it looks as if there are two different *opseis*: one that is merely a *dynamis* enabling the eyes to see and one that is a virtue enabling them to see well. This raises a host of questions. Are these two types of *opseis* distinct entities or are they somehow connected? If they are connected, in what sense is the virtue special? How are we to know if an instance of *opsis* is a *dynamis* or a full virtue?²⁴

Thinking about these questions is instructive because it helps to reveal the different ways a *dynamis* can fail to be a virtue. For example, a *dynamis* can fail to be an *aretē* because it enables a subject to do something other than its function. Since powers enable everything to do whatever they are able to do, there must be, for example, some *dynamis* that enables a sword to prune grapevines. But because it is not the *ergon* of the sword to prune grapevines, this *dynamis* will not be a virtue. This is true even if the *dynamis* enables the sword to prune grapevines as well as any sword could. Powers can also fail to be virtues if they enable a subject to realise its *ergon* but do not enable it to do this well. The first sort of failure is a failure of relevance. The *dynamis* that enables the sword to cut grapevines might be quite impressive, but because cutting grapevines is irrelevant to the *ergon* of the sword it will not be a virtue. The second failure is one of performance rather than relevance. The *dynamis* enabling pruning knives to prune is relevant precisely because pruning is the *ergon* of the knife in question. But it may fail to be a virtue if it does not enable the knife to prune well.

This suggests a solution to our difficulty. For it turns out that many *dynamis* admit of degrees of performance. Among the powers discussed in the *Charmides* passage referred to above are hearing, desire, love, and fear. We know from experience that such *dynamis* come in degrees. Many people seem to be much more susceptible to fears and love – both in terms of the frequency with which they feel the emotions and their intensity – than others. It may well be that my ability to fear and to love is blunted and is not operating as well as it is for you. The prominence of eyeglasses and hearing aids makes it even more obvious that something similar is true of the perceptual powers as well. Many people can see but cannot do so with much precision or over great distances unaided. They cannot see well. Yet those with 20/20 vision can see with a great amount of precision and over relatively great distances all on their own.

24 I thank Andrew Payne for helping me to appreciate the full force of this difficulty. He discusses sight in his contribution to this volume as well.

My suggestion, then, is that one and the same power, *opsis*, comes in degrees and that it becomes a virtue only when it passes some threshold of enabling the eyes to see well. Whereas some people's *opsis* is operant but falls far below the threshold of ideal sight, other people have access to maximally effective *opsis*. For that reason, they have the genuine virtue that enables their eyes to realise their function well, whereas the former group merely possesses the *dynamis* that enables them to do what they do in a mediocre fashion.

It is worth noting that Plato's point is not the overly simplistic one that whoever has virtue – *opsis* sees colours perfectly whenever colours are present. At 507d10–e3 we learn, for example, that no one can see at all unless light is present to facilitate the activity. Nor does Plato think the abstract structural analysis presented above exhausts what there is to say about the activity of seeing. He is quite aware that there are important mechanistic and physical aspects of seeing as well (cf. *Ti.* 45c–d).²⁵ The analysis in the *Republic* helps to explain how *opsis* can be a virtue. The point is that those with the virtue will see colours and the objects they form at some relatively high level. And, moreover, insofar as they do this, they are realising the special activity of their eyes to a greater degree than many other people ever do.

Let us turn now to courage. This case will be more complex and controversial. But for that reason, I hope it might also be more interesting.²⁶

The text of the *Republic* leaves no doubt that the subject of courage in the individual must be the *thymoeides*. Just as there is a *dynamis* in the auxiliary part of the city and it is by that part that the city is courageous (429b8–c1), so too it is in virtue of their spirit that we call an individual courageous (441b10–c2). The spirit is the “location” of the courageous individual's courage. It is admittedly less clear what the function of the spirit is. But the evidence suggests that at least *qua* member of the tripartite soul its function is to serve as reason's ally and to fight on reason's behalf against the destabilising force of appetite.²⁷

We have seen compelling evidence that courage is a power. Things get a little counterintuitive when we try to specify what it is over and what it accomplishes. It is quite natural to think that courage must accomplish external

25 The materialistic account of seeing offered in the *Timaeus* is briefly discussed by Gonzalez in his contribution to this volume as well.

26 The following is a truncated analysis of what is presented at greater length in Anderson (2024a).

27 Consider, in particular, 442a4–b8 and 440a9–c4. In these two passages Plato explains how the spirit works on behalf of reason to control or fight the worst impulses of appetite. In doing so it ensures that the agent will act on reason's deliberations. Cf. Singpurwalla (2013).

courageous activity.²⁸ However, as will become clear momentarily, this cannot be right. Instead of thinking about what the power accomplishes, we should start by thinking about what it is over. For the textual evidence concerning this is more plentiful and explicit than the evidence about what it accomplishes.

Indeed, in the case of both the city and the individual courage is presented as operating on what we might call practical beliefs or deliberations about what ought to be done. Recall again Socrates' definition of courage in the city:

Such a *dynamis kai sōtēria* through everything of the correct and lawful belief about fearful and not fearful things I call and set down as courage. (430b3–5)

It is a particular sort of belief that courage operates on and preserves. This belief is practical because it informs our behaviour. Now consider the most important passage about courage in the individual. We say an individual is courageous:

whenever their spirit preserves through both pains and pleasures the thing prescribed by rational accounts as fearful or not. (442b10–c2)

The sentences that follow this one indicate that these prescriptions derive from a rational soul-part that has knowledge of what is best for the body and soul (442c4–7). This knowledge informs the rational part's prescriptions to the spirit. So here, too, it seems that courage operates upon and preserves prescriptions or decisions about what ought to be done.

These two passages are notable because they do not give the impression that courage acts on the external world or directly causes any sort of external behaviour. Quite to the contrary. Like justice in the individual, these texts indicate that courage is conceived of by Plato as operating on and affecting the internal workings of the soul.²⁹

The textual evidence indicates that courage is over our practical beliefs or prescriptions about what is or is not to be feared. This now leaves us with the question of what courage accomplishes. Mercifully, we can answer this

28 Wolfsdorf (2005: 338) makes this suggestion in his discussion of the *Laches*: “Let us now turn to the work of courage ... The obvious candidate is courageous corporeal action; that is to say, the psychological state of courage enables a person to act courageously”.

29 It is quite clear that justice is conceived of as primarily operating within the soul rather than without. Consider 443c9–d2: justice is not *peri tēn exō praxin* but about action *peri tēn entos*.

question by appealing to the work of others. Josh Wilburn has persuasively argued that we should understand the well-functioning spirit as “ensuring that reason maintains [its] judgements in the face of appetitive impulses”.³⁰ In response to the appetitive impulses that threaten to destabilise reason’s judgements, the power of courage preserves those judgements. This is what Plato is saying when he tells us that the spirit of the courageous individual “preserves through both pains and pleasures the thing prescribed by rational accounts”.

If this is correct, then the anatomy of courage will look like this:

Subject: the *thymoeides*

Function: to be reason’s ally in the fight against appetite³¹

Over: reason’s prescriptions about what is and is not fearful

Accomplishes: preserving these prescriptions

Thinking about courage in light of our structural analysis of the virtues is interesting because it forces us to confront a number of facts that are often overlooked in scholarship. First, courage primarily acts upon beliefs or practical prescriptions. That being the case, it cannot be that courage directly accomplishes external courageous activity. Instead, it works with reason to preserve the beliefs that motivate our behaviour. Thus it only indirectly brings about any sort of external behaviour. Furthermore, because courage preserves reason’s prescriptions, which are themselves about what we ought to do, courage has a much wider scope than is normally assumed. It will, for example, help us resist the urge to act on base sexual desires if we have decided that doing so is bad.³²

6 What Makes the Cardinal Ethical Virtues Special?

I would like to end with the observation that Plato clearly regards the cardinal ethical virtues as somehow special. Consider the following passage from Book IV:

The first three [virtues] in the city have been spied out by us...Whatever would the remaining form be, because of which the city still shares in virtue? Surely, it’s clear that it is justice. (432b3–6)

³⁰ Wilburn (2015: 8).

³¹ Calling the *thymoeides* reason’s ally is of course somewhat metaphorical. But it gets at the basic point that in the tripartite soul the spirit is meant to work with reason to prevent appetite from upsetting reason’s deliberations.

³² As the spirit at least attempts to do in the case of Leontius at 439e–440a.

This passage implies that wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice together make up the *whole of the city's aretē*. Other passages in the *Republic* likewise imply that these four ethical virtues make up the whole of the individual's virtue (445c1–7). Similar claims are made about the ethical virtues elsewhere in the corpus.³³

But how and why are these four virtues special? They are certainly not the only virtues. Plato's point cannot be that the power enabling the excellent sight of the eyes or the perfect hearing of the ears are not genuine virtues. It follows directly from the Functional Account of Virtue that they are, and, as we have seen, Plato returns to talking about such virtues throughout our dialogue. Nevertheless, texts like the one quoted above would seem to indicate that the ethical virtues work together in a unique way and, moreover, that they are especially salient for us to think about when we are considering the well-functioning of the city and the soul.

Why should this be? One possibility is that these virtues are relevant when it comes to ethical appraisals of others. Contemporary moral philosophers are accustomed to thinking of the virtues as states of characters that dispose individuals to engage in virtuous activity. According to this picture, virtuous acts are explanatorily prior to virtues because the virtues are just those states that dispose individuals to practice virtuous acts, which are what we often look to in assigning praise and blame.³⁴ Following this, we might think that what makes the cardinal ethical virtues especially worthy of discussion is that they are the *dynameis* that dispose us towards the ethical actions that we all care about and want to see more of in the world.

Yet though there is evidence in the Platonic corpus that lacking the moral virtues or possessing the vices is associated with activities that make one an appropriate subject for anger, resentment, and many of the other reactive emotions normally associated with blame,³⁵ this cannot be the whole story.

33 Consider just a few examples: *La.* 190c–d, *Men.* 79a–c, *Prt.* 329c–d, *Phd.* 69a–c, *Lg.* 630e–631d. All these texts state or clearly imply that there are a small number of ethical virtues that make up the whole of virtue.

34 See, for example, Thomson (1997: 281): “I mean for the list [sc. the list of virtues] to include all those act properties F such that there is a character trait consisting in proneness to performing F-ish acts, and it is a virtue. Thus, being just is on the list since there is a character trait consisting in proneness to performing just acts – I am taking the noun ‘justice’ to refer to it – and it is a virtue”.

35 This is implicit in Protagoras’ celebrated discussion of punishment at *Prt.* 323d–324d. The Greeks get angry at people (and are right to get angry at people) who commit acts of injustice or behave intemperately because they have failed to acquire the virtues they should have acquired through education, training, and practice.

First, Plato thinks about the ethical virtues differently than contemporary ethicists typically do. He does not primarily conceive of them as states that dispose us to act in certain ways. When Plato talks about courage he does not focus on the sorts of activities it gives rise to in the external world. He focuses, instead, on what it does to our beliefs or deliberations. There is no reason to believe he gives explanatory priority to external virtuous behaviour. In fact, to the extent that he discusses the relationship between virtuous behaviour and the virtues themselves, things seem to run in the opposite direction. The virtues are defined or characterised first and only then are we told that we can understand virtuous deeds as those that produce the virtues in us (444c2–e2). Of course, I do not mean to deny that Plato thinks people who possess justice will act justly. I am only pointing out an important difference between Plato's thinking about the virtues and what we find in contemporary work on the virtues.

Second, Plato seems to recognise more kinds of ethically virtuous activities than ethical virtues. So far as I can tell, there is no good reason to think that Plato would deny that one can act generously or magnificently, ungenerously or unmagnificently (402b9–c8). But unlike Aristotle, Plato does not think one must posit *eleutheriotē* and *megaloprepeia* as independent ethical virtues on par with wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice to explain generous or magnificent actions.³⁶ They apparently correspond to no power in our psychology. One indication of this is that they are not particularly informative about one's character or behaviour. The Platonic agent who is both wise and temperate is *already* likely to share extra money if they come into any. Their temperance entails that they are not particularly attached to wealth or the pleasures it can buy, and their wisdom recognises that charity is good. We may rightly call them generous. But that does not make *eleutheriotē* as salient in understanding their behaviour as their wisdom or temperance. Similarly, *aneleutheria* is surely a bad thing. But the text of the *Republic* suggests that this is because it is a painful marker of some deeper psychological pathology (577d1–5) or because it upsets the proper relationship between the spirit and the appetite (590b6–9).

We need a different answer to the question of what makes the cardinal ethical virtues special. Luckily, I think the points raised in this paper gesture towards some candidate answers.

Consider first the subjects of these virtues. One thing that seems unique about the virtues discussed in Book IV is that they all have parts or aspects of the tripartite soul as their subjects. We have seen already that the subject of courage is the *thymoeides*. It is equally obvious that the subject of wisdom

36 Aristotle discusses *eleutheriotēs* in N.E. IV.1 and *megaloprepeia* in IV.2.

must be the rational soul-part (442c5–8). As is well known, temperance extends through all the parts of the soul (442c10–d1). But Socrates' own emphasis on our pressing need to keep particular pleasures in check suggests that temperance especially implicates the appetitive part of our soul (430e3–9). Whereas justice really is concerned with all three soul-parts *qua* members of a genuine tripartite whole (443c9–444a1).

So it may be that what makes the cardinal virtues special and ethical is that they alone have the various parts or aspects of the tripartite human soul as subjects.³⁷

Another possibility is suggested by our discussion of *eleutheria* and *megaloprepeia*. Plato believed that the four cardinal virtues are overwhelmingly responsible for how well our lives go. Certainly, the argument of the *Republic* suggests that the four cardinal virtues working together are as solid a foundation for securing human prospering as one could hope for. Socrates' project in the dialogue is to show that those who have justice will be more prosperous than those who are unjust *no matter what else is true of the just and unjust agents*. Plato clearly thought these four virtues were especially important for living a good life. And this may explain why Plato talks about these four making up the "the whole" of virtue. After all, if our final function as humans is to live a human life and these four virtues are what help us to realise this function well, what more could there be to human virtue (442c5–8)?³⁸

7 Conclusion

Within the *Republic* one finds underdeveloped but nevertheless clear hints about how to understand the structure of the virtues. In this paper I have tried to collect these different hints and bring them together in a set of notes that sheds light on the metaphysical nature of the virtues. I have argued that there is a basic structure to each of the virtues. Because the virtues enable subjects with particular *erga* to realise their *erga* well, they will (1) belong to a subject and (2) contribute to realising that subject's function well. And because the *aretai* are *dynamais*, they must be (3) over something(s) and (4) accomplish

37 Cf. 518d9–519a5, where Socrates seems to refer to wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice as the virtues of the soul.

38 This suggests one reason why the second part of Socrates' last argument in Book I is problematic. There he identifies justice as the only virtue of the soul, thereby implying that it is the only virtue needed for the soul to realise its function of living well. But in Book IV we learn that there are three other virtues of the soul.

something. Finally, I have drawn on this structure to gesture towards an answer to the question of what makes the cardinal ethical virtues special and distinct from the rest of the virtues. Hopefully, the considerations adduced here indicate that more attention should be paid to the *dynamis* in Plato's moral philosophy.

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