

Commentary on Bobonich

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I.

Socrates is well-known for his commitment to the views that knowledge of good and evil is necessary and sufficient for virtue,¹ and that virtue is necessary and sufficient for happiness.² The Platonic dialogues reflect different views about the exact nature of knowledge, virtue, and happiness, and of the relationship between them; but, as Christopher Bobonich argues, even as late as the *Laws*, Plato appears never to abandon the Socratic thesis that there is, at the very least, a tight connection between these attributes. In particular, Bobonich argues that, in the *Laws*, Plato is committed to the view that the goodness of all goods entirely distinct from virtue is dependent on the virtue of their possessor. He suggests further that Plato's commitment to this dependency thesis is best explained by Plato's commitment to two other theses: (1) that knowledge is sufficient for all virtue, and (2) that the goodness of goods entirely distinct from virtue depends on their possessor's knowledge of the nature of their goodness. While I agree with Bobonich that Plato maintains his commitment to a strong relationship between virtue, knowledge, and happiness in the *Laws*, I disagree with the details of Bobonich's account of this relationship.

II.

During the Athenian Stranger's initial discussion of the proper goal of legislation (*Laws* I, 631c) and again when he justifies the use of artistic censorship in the best state (*Laws* II, 661a-b), he makes a distinction between two types of goods: human goods (which include health, beauty, strength, wealth, and indefinitely many others) and divine goods (which include intelligence [*φρονήσις*], temperance with reason

¹ *Apol.* 29d-30a; *Lach.* 192c-194d; *Char.* 174b-176a; *Prot.* 349e-360e.

² *Apol.* 30b; *Crit.* 47c-e; *Char.* 156a-157b; *Gorg.* 470e, 472eff.

[μετὰ νοῦ σώφρων ψυχῆς ἔξις], justice [which is said to be the result of a blending of both intelligence and temperance with courage], and courage). On two different occasions and in two different ways, the human goods are said to be dependent on the divine goods. First, the Athenian Stranger suggests that, for the *polis*, the possession of human goods is dependent upon and guaranteed by the possession of divine goods: he claims that

T1: . . . if a *polis* takes the greater [divine goods], it will receive the lesser [human goods], and if not, it is bereft of both. (*Laws* I, 631b8-c1)

Bobonich suggests that we should not understand this passage as implying that the *polis* cannot possess things like health, beauty, strength, or wealth, unless it also possesses intelligence, temperance, justice, and courage.³ Instead, Bobonich interprets *T1* in light of a second group of passages, in which the Athenian Stranger describes a dependency relation that exists between the goodness of human goods and the virtue of *individuals*:

T2: You and I, presumably, say that all these things [the human goods] are extremely good possessions (*ἄριστα κτήματα*) for just and pious people, but for unjust people, they are extremely bad (*κάκιστα*), every one of them, from health all the way down the list. (*Laws* II, 661b4-7)

T3: For I clearly mean that the things said to be bad are good for unjust people, and for just people they are bad, and similarly good things are good for good people and bad for the bad. (*Laws* II, 661c8-d3)

In all three passages, Bobonich argues, the Athenian Stranger commits himself to the view that the very *goodness* of those goods which are entirely distinct from the divine goods depends on the possessor's simultaneous possession of the divine goods. Since justice includes the other divine goods, Bobonich's view implies that the positive value of goods entirely distinct from divine goods is dependent simply on their possessor having justice.⁴ This is the thesis that Bobonich calls the "Dependency Thesis":

³ Bobonich makes this point in a longer version of his paper.

⁴ *T1*, *T2*, and *T3* support Bobonich's Dependency Thesis only on the assumption that all people fall into one of two categories: the category of being just and the category of being unjust. If one can fail to be just without being unjust, then the possibility that one can be benefitted by human goods without being just is not ruled out. For the Athenian Stranger claims only that human goods are bad for the unjust person; he does not say that human goods are not good for those who are neither unjust nor just. Of course, if the categories of being just and being unjust are exhaustive, then we can conclude that the

Bobonich's Version of the Dependency Thesis: G is a Dependent Good (DG) if and only if G is good for a just or good person [or *polis*] and G is bad for an unjust or bad person [or *polis*]. . . . All goods which are entirely distinct from virtue [justice] are DG's. (104)⁵

As surprising as Socrates's claim that *happiness* depends on virtue may be, the view that the very goodness of human goods depends on their possessor's knowledge of their goodness is astonishing. On Bobonich's view, the Athenian Stranger is claiming not merely that, for the unjust person, the goodness of human goods is outweighed by their long-term bad effects, but that, for the unjust person, the human goods have no positive value whatsoever.⁶ An unjust person, so long as he lacks justice, cannot be benefitted in the slightest way, for any length of time, by things like health, beauty, strength, or wealth.

Bobonich argues that a commitment to the Dependency Thesis can be explained only by attributing to the Athenian Stranger the "Knowledge Condition", for which Bobonich finds independent evidence in the *Philebus*:

The Knowledge Condition: Having or using a Dependent Good is not good for a person unless she knows that such use or possession is good for her and knows why it is good for her. (117)⁷

goodness of human goods is dependent on their possessor's justice. For a defense of the claim that the categories of being just and being unjust are exhaustive, see Bobonich's Appendix.

⁵ Since Bobonich does not focus on the implications of the Dependency Thesis for *poleis*, I will ignore this aspect of the Dependency Thesis until the last section of my comments.

⁶ Bobonich distinguishes between these "strong" and "weak" interpretations of the Dependency Thesis in the longer version of his paper.

⁷ Even granting for the sake of argument Bobonich's interpretation of all of the passages from the *Philebus* that he cites, I am skeptical that there is any evidence in this dialogue for the Knowledge Condition. From *Phil.* 20d8-10 and 21b6-c8, Bobonich gets the thesis that "possession of a good without being aware that what one has is good is undesirable" (121). But as Bobonich admits, this awareness need not include the extensive knowledge required by the Knowledge Condition (121-3). On the basis of *Phil.* 64d3-e3, Bobonich concludes that Plato believes that the *best* human life will be caused by a knowledgeable mind (135-6). But this thesis by itself does not imply that the goodness of all of the goods included in this life is dependent on the knowledge

The Knowledge Condition can fully explain the Dependency Thesis only if Plato believes that (1) the knowledge that the Knowledge Condition requires is necessary and sufficient for the possession of the justice on which, according to the Dependency Thesis, the goodness of the human goods is said to be dependent, and that (2) the knowledge that the Knowledge Condition requires accounts for the goodness of all human goods.

Bobonich does not explicitly defend Plato's commitment to (1).⁸ But I assume that Bobonich believes that the possession of justice entails the possession of the knowledge required by the Knowledge Condition, because the Athenian Stranger explicitly says that justice is a blending of *φρονήσις* with the other virtues (*Laws* I, 631c). It is clear that, in other dialogues at least, *σοφία* entails knowledge of good and evil. And so, if "*φρονήσις*" is used interchangeably with "*σοφία*" in the *Laws*, and if *σοφία* still entails knowledge of the good and the bad in the *Laws*, then the *φρονήσις* that just people possess entails the knowledge of good and evil required by the Knowledge Condition. Concerning (2): Bobonich is careful to distinguish his Knowledge Condition from the weaker thesis that the goodness of human goods is dependent on the knowledge that is required for their correct use. This weaker thesis cannot explain the entirety of the Dependency Thesis; for, as Bobonich points out, many of the goods that count as human goods are "valuable for their agent apart from their use" (115-6). To account for the dependency of all human goods on justice, Bobonich must say that even the goodness of *intrinsically* good human goods must depend on their possessor's possession of some sort of knowledge—viz. knowledge that and why these human goods are good for the virtuous.

III.

At first sight, the Dependency Thesis appears to have a surprising and unfortunate result. The Athenian Stranger explains that the principle behind the laws that he is proposing for Magnesia is to render the citizens "as happy as possible and especially dear to one another" (*Laws* V, 743c6; see also, IV, 715). Since, on the Athenian Stranger's view,

possessed by the mind that creates this life. Even when we put these two claims together, we still do not get the Knowledge Condition.

⁸ See Bobonich, nn. 7 and 11.

virtue guarantees happiness (*Laws* II, 660e), the legislator should legislate with virtue as a whole in mind, but

T4: . . . especially and preeminently that which rules the whole of virtue, intelligence (*φρονήσις*), mind (*νοῦς*), and belief (*δόξα*), attended by passionate desire (*μετ' ἐρωτός τε καὶ ἐπιθυμίας τούτοις ἐπομένης*). (*Laws* III, 688b1-4; see also I 630c and XII, 963a)

Most people, the Athenian Stranger comments, would be lucky if they attained *φρονήσις* by the time that they entered old age (*Laws* II, 653a). In fact, *φρονήσις* is so rare that the lawgiver will have to hand over Magnesia to guardians, only some of whom will have *φρονήσις*; the rest will have mere true belief (*Laws* I, 632c; see also IX, 875d). Since the legislator cannot hope that the majority of the citizens will have complete *φρονήσις*,

T5: he should attempt to implant as much *φρονήσις* in the city as possible, but especially he should eradicate folly (*ἄνοιαν*). (*Laws* III, 688e6-8)

It seems that, if the Dependency Thesis is true, then not only will most of the citizens of the state lack *φρονήσις*, the greatest of the divine goods, and therefore fail to have the justice necessary to be benefitted by the human goods; but, in addition, because, according to *T2* and *T3*, human goods are actually *bad* for unjust people, most of the citizens will be *harmed* by goods like health, beauty, strength, and wealth, which the Athenian Stranger claims the best state will inevitably acquire (*T1*). The Athenian Stranger's suggestion that the principle behind the laws is to make the citizens as happy as possible would be a bad joke if the great majority of them will receive little benefit and much harm from its policies.

We might try to avoid this counter-intuitive implication of the Dependency Thesis, by suggesting that, when the Athenian Stranger articulates it, he has in mind something less than complete justice which in turn requires something less than complete *φρονήσις*.⁹ According to this suggestion, the categories of justice and injustice are exhaustive, but they include within them many different levels of justice and injustice.¹⁰ In Magnesia, the laws will dictate some good actions and proscribe many bad actions, and also explain the rationale behind their orders (*Laws* IV, 718a-c); so many of its citizens of Magnesia should

⁹ In fact, Bobonich suggested something like this in discussion.

¹⁰ The Athenian Stranger speaks explicitly of lives that are just to various degrees (*Laws* II, 662e), and he speaks of different levels of intelligence and folly (*Laws* III, 687d-690c).

count as having at least some degree of justice.¹¹ If the Dependency Thesis requires only that people have some degree of justice in order to be benefitted by human goods, then most of the citizens of Magnesia will benefit rather than suffer from the human goods that the *polis* will acquire.

But if we adopt this strategy to reconcile the Dependency Thesis with the Athenian Stranger's assumption that most of Magnesia's citizens will be benefitted by human goods, we will have to reconsider Bobonich's Knowledge Condition. Given the very strong conditions that Plato places on knowledge throughout the dialogues, it is doubtful that the minimum level of *φρονήσις* that would be required for benefiting from human goods would entail *knowledge* that and why human goods are goods for just people.¹² In fact, the Athenian Stranger claims explicitly that it is precisely because most people will always lack knowledge of good and evil that legislation is necessary in the first place (*Laws* IX 875d). At best, the majority of citizens will acquire many true beliefs about the goodness of human goods.

This difficulty with the Knowledge Condition might suggest that we replace it with what we can call the "True Belief Condition":

The True Belief Condition: Having or using a dependent good is not good for a person unless she truly believes that such use or possession is good for her and has a true belief about why it is good for her.

Unfortunately, the True Belief Condition does not help us to avoid all of the problems with the Knowledge Condition. The True Belief Condition is supposed to replace the Knowledge Condition as an explanation of why human goods are good only for the just person (and not for the unjust person). The explanation that the True Belief Condition provides is that the just person truly believes that the human goods are

¹¹ Presumably not all of the citizens will count as even minimally just. The Athenian Stranger admits that, since many citizens will not be persuaded by the laws's explanations of goodness, the laws will often resort to compulsion and chastisement (*Laws* IV 718b; IX, 875d-e).

¹² Bobonich addresses this concern in the last part of his paper where he attempts to weaken the Knowledge Condition to allow that "something less than knowledge is sufficient for benefit, while not emptying the Knowledge Condition of content" (134). Here Bobonich highlights ways in which the philosophers's and non-philosophers's beliefs about the value of virtue overlap, but it is not clear to me how *exactly* this overlap of beliefs is supposed to supplement or reduce the Knowledge Condition.

good for her, and she has a true belief about why they are good for her. But this explanation raises the obvious question: what makes the just person's belief that human goods are good for her a true, as opposed to a false, belief? The answer cannot be simply that the just person believes that the human goods are good for her: the unjust person might also believe that the human goods are good for him; yet the Athenian Stranger claims that they are not. So the just person's belief that an object is good cannot be the *sole* good-maker of these goods. If the just person's belief that the human goods are good for her is true because her belief about why they are good for her accurately identifies some *other* good-making feature of these goods when possessed by her, then *this* good-making feature should be cited in any explanation of the Dependency Thesis. But once we have identified some other good-making feature of the human goods for the just person, we may no longer need to appeal to the True Belief Condition (or the stronger Knowledge Condition) to explain the Dependency Thesis.

IV.

So let's begin again and see whether we can discover an alternative explanation for the Dependency Thesis. Since we are making a fresh start, let's consider whether we should accept Bobonich's particular version of the Dependency Thesis in the first place. Bobonich suggests that the goodness of all goods entirely distinct from virtue is dependent on the justice of their possessor: an unjust person, so long as he lacks justice, cannot be benefitted in the slightest way, for any length of time, by goods that are entirely distinct from virtue. It seems that the Athenian Stranger cannot be committed to exactly this claim, since at T3 he says that certain things *are* good for those who lack justice; in particular, the so-called bad or evil things (presumably, the opposites of health, beauty, strength, and wealth) are said to be good for unjust people. In fact, the Athenian Stranger appears to be committed to a thesis that we can call "The Inversion Thesis":

The Inversion Thesis. Human goods are bad for the unjust person, and human evils are good for the unjust person.

If this thesis is true, then at least some things can be good in the absence of justice. The Inversion Thesis thus suggests a revision of the Dependency Thesis:

A Revision of the Dependency Thesis: G is a (dependent good) DG iff G is good for a just person and G is bad for an unjust person. All human goods are DG's. Human evils are dependent evils (DE's), and E is a DE iff E is evil for a just person and E is good for an unjust person. The value of DG's and the disvalue of DE's are dependent on their possessor having justice.

An explanation for this revised version of the Dependency Thesis¹³ is implicit in the Athenian Stranger's own remarks. Clinias and Megillus, the Athenian Stranger's interlocutors, are not convinced that this thesis is true. The Athenian Stranger attempts to identify the source of their disagreement by asking them whether they agree that the (complete forms of the) divine goods of φρονησις, temperance with reason, justice, and courage are sufficient for happiness (*Laws* II, 660e), and that the person who lacks the divine goods altogether and is unjust "is pitiful (ἄθλιος), and lives miserably (ἀνιαρῶς)" (*Laws* II, 660e6). If he is also arrogant, then there is little chance that he will become just, and consequently, the shorter his life, the better (*Laws* II, 661c).

It would appear, then, that, on the Athenian Stranger's view, the divine goods are the only goods with *significant* intrinsic value. But, in addition, anything that would contribute to the possession of divine goods would be instrumentally very good, and anything that would contribute to the possession of hellish evils¹⁴ (folly, intemperance, injustice, and cowardice) would be instrumentally very bad. If human goods contribute to the possession of divine goods when they are possessed by the just, and if they contribute to the possession of hellish evils when they are possessed by the unjust, then we have a straightforward explanation of the first part of the Dependency Thesis. In the hands of the unjust, the intrinsic value of human goods is outweighed by their instrumental disvalue, and so they count as bad for the unjust person.¹⁵

¹³ Henceforth, and unless otherwise noted, whenever I speak of the Dependency Thesis, I mean this revised version of the Dependency Thesis.

¹⁴ This is my term, not the Athenian Stranger's.

¹⁵ Notice that, if we accept this explanation of the Dependency Thesis, we will have to reject Bobonich's view that, according to the Athenian Stranger, human goods are *in no way* good for the unjust person. On my view, human goods have some intrinsic value for whoever possesses them, but in the hands of the unjust this intrinsic value is outweighed by the negative value of their consequences. There is an early precedent for this use of the terms "good" and

We can see why the Athenian Stranger might believe that human goods can play a significantly negative instrumental role in the hands of the unjust if we consider the role that he claims pleasure plays in all human lives. According to the Athenian Stranger,

T6: we want to have pleasure; we neither choose nor want pain. A neutral state, though not desired as an alternative to pleasure, is desired as a relief from pain. We want less pain and more pleasure; we do not want less pleasure and more pain. But we should be hard put to be clear about our wishes when faced with a choice of two situations bringing pleasure and pain in the same proportions. . . . All this is of necessity ordered in this way. . . . (*Laws V*, 733a9-c1; see also II, 663b4-6)

In fact, the Athenian Stranger comments, the suggestion that people can be motivated in any way other than by a consideration of pleasure and pain is a result of “ignorance and inexperience of life as it is really lived” (*Laws V*, 733d4-6). In short, the Athenian Stranger seems to be committed to the thesis of Psychological Hedonism:

Psychological Hedonism: All human beings are always motivated to pursue a maximization of pleasure over pain.

It does not follow from a commitment to Psychological Hedonism that everyone believes that pleasure is identical to the final human good. In fact, the Athenian Stranger himself seems to believe that pleasure is a mere human good—good when possessed by the right people on the right occasions, bad when possessed by the wrong people on the wrong occasions (*Laws I*, 636d-e). Yet it does follow from Psychological Hedonism that human beings will not be motivated to pursue the final good if a pursuit of this good will yield less pleasure.¹⁶ It is for this reason that legislation is necessary (*Laws IX*, 875a-c). A *polis* will succeed in its task of promoting virtue and happiness only if it can convince its citizens that the most virtuous lives are also the most pleasurable (*Laws V*, 732e). It achieves this goal through the education provided by and dictated by the laws (*Laws II*, 662e-663e) and by pro-

“bad” in the *Protagoras*. There Socrates considers certain actions to be bad even though they immediately produce some good (=pleasure): they are bad because they lead in the long run to a great deal of pain (*Prot.* 353c-d).

¹⁶ The Athenian Stranger’s commitment to Psychological Hedonism may seem to be contradicted by his suggestion at *Laws IX*, 864a-b that people who are just act according to their belief (δόξα) about what is best; whereas those who are unjust are ruled by pleasure and pains. However, there is no contradiction involved so long as those who act according to their conception of the best are actually motivated by their anticipation of greater pleasure.

viding painful punishment for acting in ways that are contrary to a pursuit of the final good (*Laws IX*, 875a-e).

We can now see why the entirety of the Dependency Thesis is true. Human goods have some intrinsic value, and they also provide pleasure; in fact, wealth, beauty, and strength are identified as goods which can “drive us frantic with the intoxication of pleasure” (*δι’ ἡδονῆς αὐτὴν μεθύσκοντα παράφρονος ποιεῖ*) (*Laws I*, 649d6-7). Since the human goods provide pleasure, the person who possesses them has no psychological motivation to change her way of life. This is for the best in the case of a just person. But when human goods are possessed by an unjust person, their intrinsic value is outweighed by the significant instrumental disvalue of their contribution to complacency. Conversely, the so-called evils—sickness, ugliness, poverty, and weakness—would be of great instrumental value for the unjust person either because they promise to shorten a miserable life, or because the pain that accompanies these conditions will motivate the unjust person either to change or to end his life.

If this explanation of the Dependency Thesis is right, then not only do we not need the True Belief Condition, but in fact we must reject it. The True Belief Condition entails that having or using a dependent good is not good for a person unless he truly believes that such use or possession is good for him and has a true belief about why it is good for him. However, one can imagine a citizen of Magnesia who barely meets the *φρονήσις* condition on minimal justice: he has taken to heart all of the laws of the state, is eager to do his part for the whole of the state, but has not yet memorized, much less fully comprehended, the complex account of the role that pleasure plays in human motivation. Such a person will enjoy the pleasures that he receives from human goods and they will make it easier for him to continue along the path of virtue; but he might be confused about whether the pleasure that these goods provide is truly good for him or merely of neutral value. He would fail to meet the True Belief Condition, and yet, according to the explanation of the Dependency Thesis that I provided above, he would nonetheless benefit from pleasure. Since the suggestion that he would indeed benefit from pleasure is independently plausible, we should reject the True Belief Condition.¹⁷

¹⁷ Since the quality of one’s life is dependent on having true beliefs about what sort of life one should live, the positive value of human goods is dependent on one’s possession of some sorts of true beliefs; but the positive

There is still one loose end to be tied. As we saw above, the Athenian Stranger suggests in *T1* that the *polis's* possession of the divine goods is necessary for the *polis's* possession of human goods, and we can now understand why this is so. It is hard to imagine how a *polis* could possess the human goods of health, beauty, strength, and wealth, without the majority of its citizens possessing these human goods as genuine goods. But a foolish, cowardly, intemperate, and unjust state will not have the resources to provide the majority of its citizens with health, beauty, strength, and wealth, and, just as importantly, it will not foster lives for its citizens in which these human goods are genuinely good. It is for these reasons, I suggest, that the *polis's* possession of human goods is said to be *dependent on* its possession of the divine goods. The Athenian Stranger also claims that the *polis's* possession of human goods *follows from* its possession of divine goods, and assuming the truth of psychological hedonism, we can see why this is true. As we saw above, a *polis* will succeed in its task of promoting virtue and happiness only if it can convince its citizens that the most virtuous lives are also the most pleasurable (*Laws V*, 732e). And so, a wise, temperate, just, and courageous *polis* will be set up in such a way that its citizens will be as just as possible, and will be rewarded with the human goods that give them so much additional pleasure.

V.

As Bobonich admits, the Knowledge Condition to which he appeals to ground his version of the Dependency Thesis is strong, counter-intuitive, and inconsistent with a literal reading of the Inversion Thesis. Further, on his view, we must turn to a different dialogue, the *Philebus*, in order to find any support for the Knowledge Condition. We might add that the Knowledge Condition sits awkwardly with the Athenian Stranger's suggestion that the citizens of Magnesia will be as happy as possible, and, if held in the *Philebus* or *Laws*, would mark a significant departure from the theories of goods that Plato defends in earlier dialogues. In contrast, my revision and explanation of the Dependency Thesis are based on assumptions to which the Athenian Stranger is explicitly committed in the *Laws*. They are consistent with a literal reading of the Inversion Thesis, and with the Athenian Stranger's

value of human goods is not dependent on the sort of true beliefs that the "True Belief Condition" specifies.

suggestion that most of the citizens of Magnesia will benefit from the human goods that it will acquire. Finally, my explanation of the Dependency Thesis provides the basis for a theory of the human good that even Socrates would find congenial.¹⁸

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