

## Commentary on Santas

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### Abstract

How does Socrates conceive of the good of the city-state in the *Republic*? Does he conceive of the city as a kind of organic entity, with a good of its own that is independent of the good of the citizens? Or does he think the good of the city includes the good of the citizens. If so, how? Santas argues that the good of the city must include the good of the citizens. Specifically, he argues that the city is organized so that the citizens can attain a great good: the ability to do well the work for which they are best suited by nature and education. In these comments, I raise a challenge for Santas's interpretation and I provide an alternative account of how the good of the city includes the good of the citizens. On my view, the city is organized so that all of the citizens can attain what is in fact the greatest good for the individual: virtue and the rule of reason.

### Keywords

Plato – *Republic* – Politics – Ideal city – Happiness of citizens

### I

How does Socrates conceive of the good of the city-state in the *Republic*? Does he, as Popper and others have argued, conceive of the city as a kind of organic entity, with a good of its own that is independent of, and perhaps even prior to, the good of the citizens? Or does he think that the good of the city includes the good of the citizens? If so, in what way? In his excellent paper, Santas addresses these questions. Santas argues that the good of the city must include the good of the citizens. More specifically, he argues that the ideal city is organized such that all of the citizens attain a great good: the opportunity to do well the work for which they are best suited by nature and education. In these comments, I raise a challenge for Santas's interpretation, and I provide an alternative account of how the good of the city involves the good of the citizens. On

my view, the ideal city is organized so that all of the citizens can attain what is in fact the greatest good for the individual: virtue and the rule of reason.

Santas begins his paper by arguing that it is reasonable to think that the good of the city includes in some way the good of the citizens. After all, Socrates begins his discussion of the ideal city by noting that individuals form cities for the sake of their own good (*Rep.* II, 369b–c); and in *Republic* I, Socrates claims that the true ruler's aim is to benefit the citizens (341b–342e, 345b–347e). Thus, in section one of his paper, Santas provides a list of what is good for individuals, and in section two he provides a list of the goods for individuals that are included in the good of the city as a whole. He argues that three types of goods are relevant: (i) the common goods, or goods that each and every citizen can possess and enjoy, such as the objects of basic needs (food, shelter, clothing), the individual virtues (wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice), and education; (ii) goods that only some citizens possess, but which benefit all of the citizens, such as the specific knowledge and skills of the rulers, auxiliaries, and craftsmen; and (iii) goods that the city itself possesses, but which benefit all of the citizens, for example, its unity, stability, and self-sufficiency.

But how, exactly, does the good of the city include these goods? One possibility is that the good of the city consists in the aggregate, or sum total, of these goods. Santas rejects this proposal for two reasons. First, this picture requires that the goods in question are measurable and perhaps even commensurable; but this is unlikely. Second, this picture suggests that one could increase the good of the city by increasing the aggregate or sum total; but this suggests that it is possible to increase the good of the city by making some citizens happier at the expense of the happiness of others (as long as there is a net gain), which is inconsistent with Socrates' view that justice never involves harming others (*Rep.* I, 335b–336a). But how, then, does the ideal city distribute these goods?

To answer this question, Santas turns to a well-known passage in *Republic* IV, where Socrates compares the process of making a statue beautiful with the process of making a city happy (419a–421c). In this passage, Adeimantus complains to Socrates that he is not making the guardians of his city very happy since they are deprived of material wealth. Socrates replies that we do not make a statue beautiful by painting the most beautiful part, the eyes, the most beautiful color, purple, for then they would not be eyes. Rather, we deal with each part appropriately, so that the whole is beautiful. Similarly, we should not give the guardians the sort of happiness that comes from enjoying luxurious material goods, since then they would not be guardians (that is, those who care for, instead of exploit, the city). Instead, Socrates continues, we should make them, and indeed all of the citizens, the best possible craftsmen of their own work, “and then with the whole city developing and being governed well,

leave it to nature to provide each group with its share of happiness" (*Rep.* IV, 421b–c).<sup>1</sup>

Santas thinks that this passage tells us how Socrates envisages the distribution of goods. According to Santas, the ideal city first and foremost distributes a great good to all of the citizens: the ability to do well the work for which they are best suited by nature and education. Santas says, "Rulers find and derive their happiness from and in ruling the city well, soldiers from defending well, and artisans from provisioning well" (53). The common goods, then, are distributed accordingly; more specifically, they are distributed with a view to enabling the citizens to do well the work for which they are best suited. Thus, the craftspeople should not experience either great poverty or great wealth, since each deters from their ability to do well the work for which they are best suited. And the guardians, as we have seen, are not permitted material wealth at all, since this detracts from their ability to rule well.

I argue now, however, that we have reason to resist Santas's interpretation of how the ideal city distributes goods, for it is unlikely that Socrates thinks that doing one's own work well is constitutive of happiness. First, Socrates never explicitly states that doing one's own work well is a crucial component of happiness. It is telling, I think, that doing one's own work well does not show up on Santas's otherwise exhaustive list in section one of his paper of what is good for individuals; it simply is not evident that Socrates thinks that this is an important good for an individual in the way that he thinks that possessing knowledge and the virtues, for example, is an important good for the individual.

Second, there is explicit evidence that Socrates does *not* think doing one's own work well is a primary component of the happiness of at least one class of citizens: the rulers. Socrates characterizes the rulers as finding happiness in purely intellectual activities and as being very reluctant to rule. Indeed, Glaucon asks Socrates if he is doing the rulers an injustice by compelling them to rule and thus making them live a worse life when they could live a better one (*Rep.* VII, 519d). Socrates' response is telling. He does not respond by claiming that ruling is a component of the rulers' happiness. Instead, he reminds Glaucon that the aim of the city is not to make one class of citizens outstandingly happy, but to produce this condition in the city as a whole (*Rep.* VII, 519d–520a). This suggests that the primary reason that the rulers should do their own work well is not that it benefits themselves, but that it benefits their fellow citizens and contributes in some way to the good of the whole. And when Socrates goes on to consider what sorts of reasons will persuade the philosophers to rule, he does not appeal to the idea that ruling is a primary compo-

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1 Translations are from C.D.C. Reeve 2004.

ment of their own happiness, but rather to the idea that ruling is the just thing to do (*Rep.* VII, 520a–e). All of this provides very strong reason against thinking that doing their own work well is itself a component of the rulers' happiness at least; instead, doing their own work well provides a benefit to others. Of course it may turn out that ruling is *required* for the philosophers' happiness, but if so it will not be due to the fact that ruling itself makes them happy, but due to some other reason.

But does the statue passage suggest, as Santas claims, that doing one's own work well is a primary component of happiness? I do not think so. There can, of course, be little doubt that the passage asserts that it is only when the citizens do their own work well that all of the citizens can attain happiness. But this connection could hold for one of two reasons. Socrates may think that when each citizen does his or her own work well then all of the citizens will be happy since doing one's own work well is constitutive of happiness. But he may think instead that when each citizen does his own work well then all of the citizens will be happy since each citizen contributes, through their own work, to the common good, and thus to the happiness of all of the citizens.

We have three reasons to read the statue passage the latter way. First, Socrates first introduces the idea that the citizens should do the work for which they are best suited on the grounds that doing so contributes to the common good. In *Republic* II, Socrates argues that cities are formed because individuals are not self-sufficient, but need many things that they cannot provide for themselves; accordingly, they join together as partners and helpers (369b–c). He goes on to argue that everyone will be best able to get what they need if each citizen does the work for which he or she is best suited and contributes his own work for the common use of all (369d–370c). This suggests that the point of having the citizens do the work for which they are best suited is not that doing the work itself makes them happy, but that doing so contributes to the common good.

Second, throughout the statue passage Socrates emphasizes that it is most important to ensure that the *guardians* do their own work well, presumably because they can provide the greatest benefit to the citizens by governing the city well. He says:

But for most of the others, it matters less [that they do well the work for which they are best suited]: cobblers who become inferior and corrupt, and claim to be what they are not, do nothing terrible to the city. But if the guardians of our laws and city are not really what they seem to be, you may be sure that they will destroy the city utterly and, on the other hand, that they alone have the opportunity to govern it well and make it happy. (*Rep.* IV, 421a)

This suggests that the point of making sure that each citizen does their own work well is not that this itself makes individuals happy—if so, then why would it be irrelevant if the craftspeople did their job well? Does Socrates not care about their happiness? Instead, the point of making sure that each citizen does their own work well is that their doing so is beneficial for all of the citizens, in so far as each citizen's work contributes to the common good. Since the rulers are in the position to provide the greatest benefit, or indeed the greatest harm, to all of the citizens through governing the city, it is crucially important that they are able to do their own job well.

Third, Socrates' most explicit attempt to persuade *all* of the citizens to do their own work—the noble lie—does not appeal to the idea that doing their own work well makes them happy, but rather to the idea that doing their own work well provides a benefit to others. The noble lie conveys three main ideas: (i) all of the citizens were born in the earth and so should consider one another brothers (*Rep.* III, 414d–e), (ii) the god has given each of them a nature that suits them to do a certain work for the city (*Rep.* III, 415a), and (iii) the most important thing they can do for the city is to make sure that each citizen does the work for which he or she is best suited (*Rep.* III, 415b–c). Socrates is clear that the primary purpose of the noble lie is to get the citizens to care for one another. When Glaucon claims that it is likely that only future citizens will believe the story, Socrates says, “Well, even that would have a good effect, by making them care more for the city and for each other” (*Rep.* III, 415d). It is reasonable to infer, then, that the noble lie attempts to persuade the citizens to do their own work by encouraging them to view one another as kin and thus to care for the welfare of their fellow citizens, and to believe that the best way to care for their fellow citizens is to do the work for which they are best suited by nature. Again, this suggests that the reason the citizens should do their own work is not that doing the work itself makes them happy, but rather, that it provides a benefit to others.<sup>2</sup>

There is reason, then, to doubt Santas's thesis that the ideal city includes the good of the citizens by first and foremost distributing a great good to all of the citizens: the ability to do their own work well.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the practical purpose of ensuring that each citizen does their own work well is that it benefits others. But how then does the ideal city include the good of all of the citizens?

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2 See my 'Unity and the Happiness of the City: Plato's Political Ideal' for more evidence for the view that the citizens care about the welfare of their fellow citizens and that this is what motivates them to do the work for which they are best suited.

3 See Kamtekar 2001 for further arguments against the view that doing one's own work well is a crucial component of happiness.

## II

Santas is correct that we should begin by thinking about what is good for individuals; and in section one of his paper he provides a long list of things that are good for individuals, including food, shelter, and clothing, physical health, education, and the individual virtues, wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. But of course these goods are not all on a par for Socrates: virtue and the rule of reason take pride of place. Thus, in *Republic* IV, Socrates argues that justice—the state of the soul where reason rules and the non-rational parts are in harmony with it—is absolutely required for a life worth living (442d–445b). In addition, in *Republic* IX, Socrates claims that the just and happy individual makes all of his decision with a view to maintaining the just condition of his soul. He says:

[the just person] will keep his eye fixed on the constitution within him and guard against disturbing anything there either with too much money or with too little. Captaining himself in that way, he will increase and spend his wealth, as far as possible by reference to it. ... Where honors are concerned, too, he will keep his eye on the same thing. He will willingly share in and taste those he believes will make him better. But those that might overthrow the established condition of his soul, he will avoid, both in private and in public. (*Rep.* IX, 591d–592a)

In this passage, Socrates claims that the just and happy person makes the just condition of his soul his primary aim; other goods, such as money and honor, are chosen with a view to whether or not they promote or detract from his virtue. If, then, Socrates thinks that the happy person makes virtue his primary aim, and chooses the other goods with a view to promoting and maintaining his virtue, then it is reasonable to suppose the ideal city makes inculcating virtue in the citizens its primary aim, and distributes the remaining goods accordingly.

I propose, then, that the ideal city is organized with a view to ensuring that all of the citizens can attain the greatest degree of virtue and the rule of reason possible for them. This is possible when each citizen does the work for which he or she is best suited, and in particular, when those who are truly wise and virtuous govern the city, for it is these individuals that both know how to design the city's institutions with a view to enabling all of the citizens to attain the greatest degree of virtue possible for them and can be counted on to do so.

There is evidence for this view in a passage in *Republic* IX, where Socrates explains why it is best for everyone if philosophers rule. He says:

Why do you think someone is reproached for menial work or handicraft? Or shall we say that it is for no other reason than because the best element is naturally weak in him, so that it cannot rule the beasts within him, but can only serve them and learn what flatters them? ... In order to ensure, then, that someone like that is also ruled by something similar to what rules the best person, we say that he should be the slave of that best person who has the divine ruler within himself. It is not to harm the slave that we say he should be ruled, as Thrasymachus supposed was true of all subjects, but because it is better for everyone to be ruled by a divine and wise ruler—preferably one that is his own and that he has inside himself; otherwise one imposed on him from outside, so that we may all be as alike and as friendly as possible, because we are all captained by the same thing... This is clearly the aim of the law as well, which is the ally of everyone in the city. It is also our aim in ruling our children. We do not allow them to be free until we establish a constitution in them as in a city. That is to say, we take care of their best part with the similar one in ourselves and equip them with a guardian and ruler similar to our own to take our place. Only then do we set them free. (590c–591a)

This passage claims that the purpose of having philosophers rule is so that everyone can attain some degree of virtue and the rule of reason. Note that Socrates claims that the ultimate aim here is to give the citizens a rational guardian *of their own*, for Socrates compares the aim of the law to our aim in raising our children, and our aim in raising our children is to give them a guardian and ruler similar to our own to take our place.<sup>4</sup>

Further, in *Republic* VI, Socrates describes the philosopher's activity in ruling as consisting in making the citizens themselves virtuous. Socrates claims that the philosopher whose mind is directed towards the things that are (the forms) puts his soul into a virtuous and rational order. He says, "...As he looks at and contemplates things that are orderly and always the same, that neither do injustice to one another nor suffer it, being all in a rational order, he imitates them and tries to become as like them as he can" (500c3–7). But Socrates immediately goes on to say that if the philosopher rules, then he would put this sort of order into the citizens' souls, presumably through an appropriate constitution and laws. He says:

And if he [the philosopher] should be compelled to make a practice—in private and in public—of stamping what he sees there [the forms] into

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4 See Kraut 1973 and Wilberding 2009 for similar readings of this passage.

the people's characters, instead of shaping only his own, do you think he will be a poor craftsman of temperance, justice, and the whole of popular virtue? ... (*Rep.* VI, 500d3–501c2)

This shows that Socrates thinks that the philosopher-ruler aims to instill some degree of virtue and the rule of reason in all of the citizens, for the philosopher is explicitly described as making his own character virtuous, and, if made to rule, attempting to put the same pattern into the souls of his fellow citizens.

In sum, then, while Santas would argue that the ideal city is first and foremost organized with a view to ensuring that each citizen is ensured a great good, the ability to do well the work for which he or she is best suited, I would argue that the city is first and foremost organized with a view to ensuring that each individual can attain virtue and the rule of reason. The practical purpose of having the citizens do their own work, then, is to ensure that all of the citizens can have what they need, most importantly, guidance from those who know how to inculcate virtue, but also, of course, protection, food, shelter, clothing and the products of the other crafts.

Of course this suggestion opens up crucial questions. How, for example, should we conceive of the difference between the philosophers' and citizens' virtue and understanding? How, exactly, do the education, laws, and distribution of other goods inculcate virtue and the rule of reason in the citizens? And what, if anything, is the relationship between doing one's own work and the practice of virtue?<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, I think this conception of how the ideal city includes the good of the citizens is the more promising route to pursue.<sup>6</sup>

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5 See 'Unity and the Happiness of the City: Plato's Political Ideal' for my answers to some of these questions, as well as my own interpretation of the relationship between the good of the city and the citizens.

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