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Small and large letters – and beyond

(Abstract. 20 or 40 minutes)

The analogy of the small and large letters in *Republic* ii is notoriously unsatisfactory. It builds a huge building on a flimsy foundation. It contributes little, if indeed anything, to the development of the argument. As a premiss to the argument, it is no more than a flagrant *petitio principii*. As an analogy, it adds little to the understanding of the parallelism of soul and city. In analyses of the *Republic*, it is mostly perfunctorily mentioned but quickly laid aside. (But see now Ferrari, Burneyat and Gill.) Yet, it is presented as a mainspring of the whole program of the *Republic*.

It has not passed unnoticed that the arguments for the identity of justice in soul and city do not, in fact, depend on the identity of the two postulated inscriptions. Williams tried to salvage the argumentative function of the analogy by the principle of ‘whole and parts’. But the just city is not like his merry group of sailors, which is a group of merry sailors. It is rather like a well-ordered group of sailors, which is not a group of well-ordered sailors. And Plato acknowledges that much.

According to his philosophical method, Plato starts from an agreed assumption – in this case that ‘justice, *we say*, belongs to individual man and also to the whole city’ (368a2-3) – which he then proceeds to justify by arguing from the accepted conclusion to its premisses. The letters are *somehow* the same in both inscriptions (368d5, e3). The seemingly innocent reservations ‘*we say*’ and ‘*somehow*’ will turn out to be crucial.

City and soul are constructed separately, on different premisses, and their structures are shown to be parallel. This has brought Gill to analyse the function of the letters analogy as pointing to the structural identity of justice in city and soul. I shall show, however, that Plato is arguing for more than mere structural similarity. Ferrari justly observes that one is entitled to expect that the analogy should lead to a less weak connection between the two terms of the comparison, the double inscription, on the one hand, and justice in city and soul, on the other. Indeed, shortly after proposing the simile, Socrates says that the *identity* of city and soul has been assumed (cf. 441d5, 443b7-8, c4). But the identity of justice in city and soul is too critical for Plato's program for a mere assumption to suffice. At 435d3, he announces ‘the longer road’ he will take. After the central similes, he says that the future philosopher-king will have to travel this road (504b2), proceeding then to develop the mathematical curriculum.

I shall show what deeper function the analogy of structure plays in Plato's argumentation and indeed in his metaphysics. The central similes of the *Republic* and the meta-mathematical considerations that follow them are of maximal importance not only for the education of the philosopher, but also for the understanding of the analogy of the small and large letters and its function in the overall argument of the *Republic*.

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