Christopher Rowe: ‘On justice and the other virtues in the Republic: whose justice, whose virtues?’

Why does justice as defined in Book IV of the Republic play so little part outside the Republic? Anyone who thinks that each dialogue needs to be treated separately – or who thinks that the Republic simply represents the culmination of Plato’s thinking – will not be unduly worried by such a question. However there are some indications internal to the Republic itself that the definition in Republic IV is not intended to be Plato’s, Plato’s Socrates’, final word on justice. Even if we pass over the fact that Socrates operates with a quite different account of justice in Book I (after all, as some suppose, Book I may be just a Socratic left-over, with the remaining books announcing Plato’s new-found independence), we still have to account for the fact that Socrates reminds Adimantus in Book VI (504A4-6) that the treatments of the virtues in Book IV were based on the division of the soul into three eidê – and this division of the soul was explicitly not based on the most accurate method available (IV, 435C-E). Now of course it does not follow that following another method (a ‘longer and more considerable’ one: 435D3) would have led to a different result. However in Book X Socrates does in fact re-open the very kind of question from which the Book IV analysis starts: does the soul, as it is in truth (611B10) have many eidê, or only one (612A4)? Once again, there is no proof that the ultimate outcome of this re-opening of the question may not actually be a re-affirmation of the Book IV account, perhaps in subtler and more nuanced terms; and after all, does the Timaeus – generally held to be written after the Republic – not give us precisely a Book-IV-style tripartition of the soul? Yet at the same time, the Book X passage surely does suggest that, if the soul is seen in abstraction from its travails in the body (and in relation to its love of wisdom: 611D8), it will look quite different; the Book IV treatment merely captured what happens to it, its pathê, and its eidê, in its life as part of that composite thing called an anthrôpos (612A4-6).

My argument is that all of this allows another version of justice, and indeed of sôphrosunê and courage, to re-surface alongside the versions introduced in Book IV: precisely justice, sôphrosunê and courage as Socrates first introduced them in Book I. And as a matter of fact Socrates himself describes the sôphrosunê and justice that the philosopher-ruler will craft in Callipolis as (merely) ‘demotic’ (500D6-8), I take it by contrast to his own sôphrosunê and justice, which will be of a superior, and Socratic, sort.

My initial question then turns into a different one: why should Plato and his Socrates spend so much time arguing for an idea of justice that they regard as strictly second-rate?