Plato’s Science of Living Well

In the fourth century BCE science was still in the process of being midwifed by philosophers. Here I will explain what Plato had in mind when he thought the way of understanding the cosmos that we now call “scientific” is integral to living well. He does not merely think that “doing science” will improve our understanding of the cosmos; rather, he also believes that looking at life with an eye toward science improves our understanding of ourselves in general and in particular how we are to live well. For instance, in the Philebus he explains that anyone who has “never worked out the amount and number of anything at all” will “count for nothing and amount to nothing” (17e). In this we see his thoroughgoing belief that human beings are better off with a proper understanding of the underlying mathematical structure of everything in the universe, especially the human soul.

The central aim of this paper is to explore the role of mathematical-scientific understanding in living well as an individual and as a citizen. In the Protagoras, he writes, “The art of measurement…would make the appearances lose their power by showing us the truth, would give us peace of mind firmly rooted in the truth and would save our life” (356d-e). This art of measurement is the foundation of both the care of self as well as just political interactions because when one masters the art of measurement one is in a position to make the best decisions about how to live.
Even though Plato focuses his attention primarily on justice, it is fair to construe Plato’s overall project as the quest for peace, which he contends will be manifest wherever human beings are provided for in a just and moderate fashion (R. 372a-d). I believe Plato is right to claim that when human beings are provided for in a just and moderate fashion “they’ll live in peace and good health, and when they die at a ripe old age, they’ll bequeath a similar life to their children” (R. 372ad). But peace can only occur in an environment where citizens learn how to calculate the impact of one’s lifestyle on not only one’s own health but also that of the rest of the world’s citizens.

For example, in this passage from Book II of the Republic Socrates indicates that the citizens of the healthy city enjoy erotic experiences with each other. Plato has Socrates say, “They’ll enjoy sex with one another but bear no more children than their resources allow, lest they fall into either poverty or war” (372b-c). These citizens enjoy the pleasures of erōs but regard justice (rather than physical pleasure) as their chief concern. So, as a result, they need to know how to calculate properly how many children their resources can support. Peace continues to elude us precisely because this sort of reflection about the consequences of one’s lifestyle on ourselves and the rest of the world’s citizens is so rare. Plato construes philosophy as psychic medicine because loving wisdom includes precisely this sort of reflection.

Often Plato is construed as believing that asceticism is the appropriate cure for psychic disease.¹ The ascetic interpretation of Plato has long been convention because there are aspects of the dialogues that sound as though they endorse asceticism. I don’t have time
today to explore any of these remarks, but one need only think of the first part of the
*Phaedo* to call most of them to mind. (I’ve argued elsewhere against the ascetic reading
of the *Phaedo* as well as of the *Symposium*.) It is a mistake to interpret Plato and his
Socrates as ascetics because the dialogues make clear that it is impossible to flourish as a
human being until one learns how to love wisdom, which it turns out entails being
properly disposed toward the body. In other words, one flourishes as an individual human
being when one learns how to care for the soul *without* disregarding the body’s needs and
desires, rather than by learning how to deny the body’s needs and desires. Likewise, an
individual polis and the global network of political associations flourish when neither the
extreme of hedonistic indulgence (“body-love”) nor of ascetic body-denial prevails.

There is no hope for peace (personal or political) without justice, and justice can only
materialize when individuals and *poleis* govern themselves in a healthy manner.

The principle of health that Plato has Socrates set forth in *Republic* II is that individuals
should include in their lives only what is necessary; he calls for a moderate rather than
luxurious lifestyle. There Plato makes clear that the appetite for a just and moderate
lifestyle does not come easily to human beings. He has Glaucon say to Socrates that the
moderate kind of lifestyle sounds good enough only for pigs (*R*. 372d), and Socrates
replies:

> All right, I understand. It’s not merely the origin of a city that we’re considering, its
seems, but the origin of a luxurious (*truphôsan*) city. And that may not be a bad idea, for
by examining it, we might very well see how justice and injustice grow up in cities. Yet
the true city, in my opinion, is the one we’ve described, the healthy (*hugiês*) one, as it
were. But let’s study a city with a fever (*phlegmainousan*), if that’s what you want (*R.* 372e).

Glaucon considers Socrates’ healthy city (in which people are provided for justly and moderately) a “city for pigs” and his own notion of a luxurious city the only one fit for human beings (372d). In this we see that the view that human beings ought to live luxuriously rather than moderately is nothing exclusive to modernity.

Plato chooses to characterize the difference between the cities Glaucon and Socrates envision in terms of health and disease because he knows that human beings typically value physical health as inherently good. No one wonders why someone prefers physical health to sickness. So, knowing how instinctive the concepts of physical health and disease are to his audience, Plato crafts the analogy between justice and health for the sake of making more plausible his message that when one lives immoderately (as a result of not properly caring for the soul), both the individual and the *polis* suffer from the ensuing injustice.

The healthy city becomes feverish once perfumes, pastries, prostitutes, and other such luxurious commodities are incorporated (*R.* 373a). It is difficult for Glaucon to understand why the inclusion of such things as couches and meat cause such problems for the city (*R.* 372c-e). Although the *Republic* does not offer an item-by-item account of why these commodities bring disease to the city, *Gorgias* 464b-465d clarifies why these inclusions are problematic for an individual. This passage catalogues both how the body and soul ought to be cared for as well as the ways in which this care can be imitated.
Socrates says that the care of the body is, on one hand, gymnastics and, on the other, medicine (Grg. 464b). He goes on to say that these are imitated by cosmetics and pastry-baking, respectively (Grg. 465c). The cosmetic knack is the shortcut to appearing healthy just as confections merely imitate medicine’s power to make someone feel better. Resting on the couches of the Republic’s luxurious city is the antipode of the exercise that Socrates refers to as gymnastics in the Gorgias, and eating the pastries Glaucon demands is exactly what Socrates cautions us against in this passage in the Gorgias.

At best a body-lover concentrates on fitness and nutrition (and medicine too whenever necessary), but at worst a body-lover uses cosmetics to appear healthy and eats pastries to feel better physically. Regardless of which type of body-lover one has been, the body-lover who comes to see the necessity of devoting oneself to the care of the soul makes a transition toward politics, which is the name Socrates uses to describe the field of psychic care (Grg. 464b). Just as one engages in physical training (what Plato calls gymnastics) in order to prevent physical disease, one must engage in psychic training (what Plato calls legislation) in order to prevent psychic disease. And just as one submits to medical treatment in order to correct physical disease, one must submit to psychic medicine (what Plato here calls justice) in order to correct psychic disease. The body-lover becomes a soul-lover by putting the psychic crafts into practice. When the psychic crafts are put into practice the soul will be in good shape, just as when one implements the physical crafts, the body will be in good shape. Practiced together this is Plato’s science of living well as an individual.
Even though Socrates points to a variety of commodities that are unnecessary for life in a healthy *polis*, let’s focus for now on the food that causes the *polis* to be feverish. Socrates explains to Glaucon that if the citizens are going to eat meat, then they will need an army to seize from their neighbors more land for pasture, and if the neighbors “too have surrendered themselves to the endless acquisition of money and have overstepped *the limit of their necessities*” then war will be inevitable. Socrates then says, “We won’t say yet whether the effects of war are good or bad but only that we’ve now found the origins of war. It comes from those same desires that are most of all responsible for the bad things that happen to cities and the individuals in them” (*R*. 373c-e).

This commentary about war echoes Plato’s writing at *Phaedo* 66c-d where he has Socrates say, “Only the body and its desires cause war… for all wars are due to the desire to acquire wealth, and it is the body and the care of it, to which we are enslaved, which compel us to acquire wealth.” One might mistakenly deduce from such passages that Plato hates the body and values only the soul. However, even though Plato does prioritize the soul over the body, he does so without entirely denouncing the physical. It is not the body’s needs and desire in general that are problematic, but rather the particular desire for something *beyond* what is necessary—in this case, meat. He does not envision that the end of warring will come as a result of denying the body *per se*. Rather he envisions that the end of warring will come once citizens of the world learn how to measure what they really need, seeing beyond mere appearances of what they merely want. Practicing this science of living, that is, living moderately rather than either hedonistically or ascetically, fosters health and peace among the world’s citizens.
Let us return to Plato’s claim that the art of measurement, what I’m calling the science of living well, will enable one to live healthily as an individual. In the *Gorgias* he has Socrates suggest that one will have a healthy soul and body if one learns how to be moderate in satisfying one’s appetites. Socrates offers an example of how a doctor need not ever restrict the sort of patient who has a scientific understanding of how much and what to eat and drink, while the doctor must rein in a patient who has not mastered the art of measurement. He says, “doctors generally allow a person to fill up his appetites, to eat when he’s hungry, for example, or drink when he’s thirsty *as much as he wants to when he’s in good health*, but when he’s sick they practically never allow him to fill himself with what he has an appetite for” (*Grg.* 505a). Once Callicles agrees to this, Socrates adds, “And isn’t it just the same way with the soul…? As long as it’s corrupt, in that it’s foolish, undisciplined, unjust and impious, it should be kept away from its appetites and not be permitted to do anything other than what will make it better” (*Grg.* 505b).

The fact that a different prescription is given to the healthy patient and a much more restrictive prescription to the diseased patient is of great analogical significance for one trying to interpret Plato’s messages about how one who intends to love the soul ought to treat the body. If different prescriptions are written for the healthy and the sick, then one should expect to see not one but two sets of messages in Plato’s corpus about how to live with respect to the satisfactions of one’s desires. And indeed the reader will find two sets of messages about how to treat the body. Throughout the corpus there are numerous passages that call for moderate satisfaction of one’s desires, but these passages appear to stand in tension with Socrates’ occasional ascetic-sounding remarks. This tension is not
due to Plato being conflicted or indecisive about how he thought an embodied inquirer should live. Instead, these seemingly mixed messages reflect Plato’s attempt to have Socrates write two different prescriptions for psychic health.

For his body-loving patients Socrates writes a prescription that calls for caring for the soul rather than centrally valuing the body. It is to this patient that the ascetic-sounding remarks are directed. Asceticism, denial of the body, is the antipode of hedonistic body-love, and as such it is the required first step in curing the psychic illness that inevitably results from inattention to the care of the soul. Just as a sick patient is given a restrictive prescription, so too is the patient riddled with psychic illness in need of an austere prescription. Asceticism is the strictest prescription, namely, what Socrates describes as not being “permitted to do anything other than what will make it better.”

However, someone who has already made the transition away from body-love toward soul-love is not suffering from psychic illness. As a result, Socrates writes a different prescription for this patient. This patient gets a more permissive prescription. Just as a doctor allows a healthy man “to fill up his appetites… as much as he wants to,” so too is the psychically healthy patient allowed to satisfy his/her appetites as much as s/he wants to. There is no danger in allowing psychically healthy people to satisfy their appetites because healthy people have healthy desires. Healthy patients know how to be moderate because they see beyond the mere appearances of what they want, knowing instead which pleasures and how much pleasure to include in a healthy life. In the terms of the Republic, they have healthy desires as a result of having worked to put the soul’s
appetitive and spirited aspects under the guidance of the soul’s rational aspect. Their health results from continued success with satisfying the right sorts of desires, namely, the one’s approved of by the soul’s rational aspect.

In the *Gorgias* Callicles balks at the idea that not all desires for pleasures ought to be satisfied (491e-492a). He claims to believe that pleasure and goodness are identical (492c), and upon hearing Callicles express this view, Socrates remembers having heard someone compare the appetitive aspect of the soul to a jar (493a). In hopes of convincing Callicles “to choose the orderly life, the life that is adequate to and satisfied with its circumstances at any given time” (493c) Socrates compares the hedonistic lifestyle to a leaky jar, which leaks because it has a loose lid (*Grg.* 493b) and contrasts the leaky jar with a jar kept full by a tight lid. He says:

Consider whether what you’re saying about each life, the life of the self-controlled man and that of the undisciplined one, is like this: Suppose there are two men, each of whom has many jars. The jars belonging to one of them are sound and full, one with wine, another with honey, a third with milk and many others with lots of other things. And suppose that the sources of each of these things are scarce and difficult to come by, procurable only with much toil and trouble. Now the one man, having filled up his jars, doesn’t pour anything more into them and gives them no further thought. He can relax over them. As for the other one, he too has resources that can be procured, though with difficulty, but his containers are leaky and rotten. He’s forced to keep filling them, day and night, or else he suffers extreme pain (*Gorgias* 493d-494a).
Here Socrates rejects the hedonist lifestyle because it is difficult and painful to maintain. In contrast, he commends the lifestyle symbolized by a full jar with a tight lid. The question is: does this full jar with a tight lid symbolize the life of moderation or asceticism?

I contend that the only viable interpretation of the jar metaphor is that it indicates that the life of moderation is best. The contents Plato chooses for the jars are the first indication that this metaphor is not intended to recommend the austere life of asceticism. Plato chooses wine, milk, and honey as the contents of the jars, and these choices are absolutely not arbitrary. Wine, milk, and honey are traditionally associated with Dionysus, and consequently this imagery stands in stark opposition to asceticism. Furthermore, if Socrates were trying to encourage the soul-lover to deny the body altogether, as ascetics do, then it strikes me as rather ineffective to represent the ascetic lifestyle as a full jar with a tight lid. If an ascetic has transcended physical appetite, then there is no need for jars of wine, milk, or honey. An empty jar would be a much more natural representation of the ascetic denial of appetites. The point of the jar metaphor passage is, rather, to instruct us to be moderate about the satisfaction of our desires so as to be self-sufficient. This particular “prescription” is aimed at those who have established their own psychic health by transcending the disease of body-love with which Callicles is afflicted.

In the three key passages I’ve discussed today we have seen why it is a mistake to consider Plato and his Socrates ascetics. Furthermore, we have seen what Plato envisions
when he has Socrates say that the failure to master the art of measurement leads to psychic and/or physical disease as well as political conflict. It will serve us well today to take a fresh look at Plato’s suggestion that scientific understanding will enable one to live well both as an individual and as a citizen of the world.

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