

CHAPTER 1

Distinction Without a Difference? Race and *Genos* in Plato

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1

This paper investigates Plato's views about what we today call race, the classification of human beings according to supposedly hereditary physical and/or psychological traits. I begin by considering and setting aside an objection to this investigation on the grounds that race is a modern concept about which Plato could have had no views (section 2). I go on to examine Plato's ways of classifying people. Plato divides up people in some ways that resemble racial classifications, observing the distinction commonly observed in his time between Greeks and barbarians, and subscribing to ethnic stereotypes about such groups as the Thracians, Phoenicians, and Egyptians. However, the only classification of people he considers significant is according to the capacity for virtue. This leaves it open to Plato to hold that the capacity for virtue is correlated with certain ethnicities, but it does not commit him to such a view (section 3). Whatever he may think about correlations between ethnicity and virtue, however, Plato requires that the allocation of social goods and responsibilities reflect natural inequalities in virtue and that these natural inequalities be assessed directly, rather than via any correlated physical traits. I examine Plato's reasons for holding this position and locate it within some contemporary debates on racial discrimination (section 4).

2

Before turning to Plato, then, let us consider the objection to looking for race or its counterparts among the ancients on the grounds that the concept of race is a peculiarly modern concept. Now one might think that because of the modernity of the concept,

what “race” means cannot be understood outside of its modern historical context – outside, for instance, of the role it has played in the justification of racist institutions such as slavery, colonialism, and segregation. On this basis, one might conclude that looking for an ancient philosopher’s views on race or its counterparts is a hopelessly ahistorical and confused task.

This objection may be thought to follow from the general context-dependence of meaning,¹ or from a special dependence of the concept of race on a modern context. But in the first case, cross-cultural comparisons are not made impossible or wrong-headed just by the context-dependence of meaning – that would require a stronger (and extremely unlikely) condition, namely that any difference in meaning results in incommensurability.² Further, the stronger condition makes nonsense of our practices of translating between cultures and tracking social forms across cultures.³ These practices depend on our judging concepts or social forms to be closer to or more distant from each other. Of course, it is always possible that a particular concept is not translatable by a given ancient counterpart, or indeed, by any ancient counterpart. But whether or not this is the case should be determined not by a theory of meaning or translation, but rather by our judgment about the historical and analytical contexts in which that concept makes sense. (Not that the question is entirely empirical, either, for whether “race” can be translated by some ancient term such as “*genos*” or “*ethnos*” is also partly determined by the analytical hypotheses imposed on the translation by the investigator.⁴ And these in turn depend on the investigator’s purposes.)

But then might the concept of race in particular be new in, and especially dependent on, the modern context? Here, we may contrast the purely scientific character of such concepts as transfer-RNA or the neutrino with the folk character of the concept of race. In his history of the concept of race, Michael Banton shows how this folk concept has been successively modified by scientists’ attempts to give it analytical precision.⁵ Thus from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, race was understood as a lineage or stock, that is, a race was thought to be a group of humans with the same original ancestors, but differentiated from other humans as a result of dispersion, adaptation to different environments, and reproductive isolation. In the nineteenth century, the prevailing idea of race was of a variety or type with each race having its own original ancestor.⁶ Finally, Darwinism synthesized the notions of lineage and type in the idea of an evolving subspecies, in which typical traits are not instantiated in every member, but are instead distributed across a population as a result of genetic variability, random mutation, and natural selection in the competition among individuals. Darwin’s idea of a population gave the notion of race scientific respectability by providing a mechanism for heredity and accounting for the absence of law-like generalizations about racial characteristics. But why do we think that the idea of race is new in the early modern period but is only given new scientific sophistication in the nineteenth century? How do we conclude that in one case we have a new concept, in the other an extension of the old concept? It is true that the word “race” first appears in English in the early modern period, but the first occurrence of a word is not the same as the first occurrence of a concept. It is relatively easy to see how a concept like transfer-RNA or the neutrino can have a first occurrence, a time before which people did not and could not think about it: at some point in inquiry, a new explanatory gap

requires investigators to posit a new entity; the character of this entity is partly determined by its explanatory role within an investigative context, by the theory informing the investigation. Outside of these contexts, transfer-RNA or the neutrino make little sense and play no explanatory role. But this is not how a folk concept like race works. The condition for using and making sense of the concept of race is not a specific scientific theory or investigative context, but rather, the rough idea that people who are related by birth resemble one another. This notion is clearly available to the ancients in general and to Plato in particular.⁷

In what follows, I examine Plato's ways of classifying people, treating his term "genos" as a rough equivalent to our "race", but remaining sensitive to differences between the two concepts. Once the data on Plato is in, we will be better able to judge what, if any, significance there is to these differences between Plato's classification of people and modern racial classifications.

3

To begin with the ethnic distinction most common in his time, Plato follows common parlance in treating "Greek" and "barbarian" as an exhaustive classification, using "Greek and barbarian" to mean "everyone, all of humanity."⁸ In *Inventing the Barbarian*, Edith Hall argues that the notion of the barbarian as a social or ethnic type (rather than simply as any non-Greek-speaker) was constructed in fifth-century public discourse as part of panhellenic and anti-Persian propaganda. Some of Plato's writings seem to contribute to or at least reflect this construction of the barbarian: the *Menexenus*, the mock funeral oration allegedly composed by Aspasia, describes Athens' legendary war against the Amazons as of a piece with the wars against the Persians, part of the history of Greek self-defense against barbarian hubris (239b); the speech attributes Athenian war policies to the special Athenian hatred of barbarians, which it in turn explains by the Athenians' purely Greek blood – the other Greeks have mixed blood, being descendants of Aegyptus, Danaus, Pelops or Cadmus, being "by nature barbarians" (245de).

Plato's purpose in the *Menexenus* may be to parody the funeral oration and criticize the sentiments to which it panders. But the Athenian in the *Laws* echoes the sentiment about purity, praising the Athenians and Spartans among the Greeks for saving their races (*genê*) from being mixed with the Persians – but surprisingly, also from being mixed with other Greeks (692e–93a). In the *Republic*, Socrates describes Greeks and barbarians as natural enemies, and Greeks and other Greeks as natural friends; he recommends that the Greeks, when they are at war with each other, not enslave war captives, strip corpses, ravage fields or burn houses – for this would prolong resentment between them, and they should regard each other as people who will one day be reconciled (469b–71b). But what is natural here might be that Greeks would ally with Greeks and against Persians – *given* the Greeks' and Persians' perceptions of each others' interests, or likenesses and differences. That is, Plato may be recognizing a political actuality rather than asserting a scientific necessity. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates ridicules claims to noble descent on the grounds that the philosopher knows that everyone's

ancestors include both rich and poor, kings and slaves, and Greeks and barbarians (175a).

Although this sampling of cites suggests that Plato's attitude towards the Greek–barbarian distinction varies with rhetorical context,⁹ we may privilege the *Theaetetus*' attitude, since it is said to be the philosopher's. In general, when Plato is by his own characterization speaking from the philosopher's point of view, he seems to discard the distinction between Greek and barbarian, as, for example, in the *Statesman*, when the Eleatic Visitor makes the point that not every division into a part is a *genos* or real division in nature:

Let's not take off one small part on its own, leaving many large ones behind, and without reference to real classes [*genê*]; let the part bring a real class with it . . . it's as if someone tried to divide the human race into two and made the cut in the way that most people here carve things up, taking the Greek away as one, separate from all the rest, and to all the other races together, which are unlimited in number, which don't mix with one another, and don't share the same language – calling this collection by the single appellation “barbarian”. Because of this single appellation, they expect it to be a single family or class too. Another example would be if someone thought that he was dividing number into two real classes by cutting off the number ten-thousand from all the rest, separating it off as a single class, and in positing a single name for all the rest supposed here too that through getting the name this class too came into existence, a second single one apart from the other. But I imagine the division would be done better, more by real classes and more into two, if one cut number by means of even and odd, and the human race in its turn by means of male and female, and only split off Lydians or Phrygians or anyone else and ranged them against all the rest when one was at a loss as to how to split in such a way that each of the halves split off was simultaneously a real class and a part. (262b–63a)

In the dialogue, Young Socrates has just divided the arts of collective herd rearing into the art concerned with rearing humans and the art concerned with rearing animals (262e). But, the Eleatic Visitor argues, in a scientific investigation one may not separate the art of rearing human beings from that of rearing animals merely because one commonly distinguishes the human species from other herd animals. Real *genê* may be contrary to, and may correct, common sense. And as it turns out, humans are quite close in kind to pigs (266c). The Eleatic Visitor illustrates his point with the example of the common Greek division of human beings into Greeks and barbarians. The Greek–barbarian division misleadingly suggests that barbarians, having one name, are a single *genos* when in fact they are “unlimited in number” or heterogeneous, not sharing the same language and not mixing with one another. Of course, this does not mean that Greek or any other national or ethnic grouping is not a real *genos*, for the explicit criticism is only against treating barbarian as a *genos*, but it does show Plato to be critical of classifications that serve no intellectual purpose other than dividing people up into “us” and “them”. A possible target here would be someone like Euripides, who treats all non-Greeks as exotic and alike in their exoticism.¹⁰

What then are the natural kinds of human beings? If we consider Plato's use of the term *genos*, we find him using it in a variety of received senses but also to challenge commonsense classifications by means of a philosophical or scientific classification. Examples of *genê* include the elements or principles (*Timaeus*, 48e ff, *Philebus*, 23d ff),

the branches of expertise (*Sophist*, 223cff, *Statesman*, 263e), kinds of perception (*Theaetetus*, 156b) or capacities in general (*Republic*, 477cd). A person's *genos* also comprises his descendants and/or ancestors (*Cratylus*, 395c; *Alcibiades 1*, 120a–21b), his ethnic group (*Phaedrus*, 237a; *Republic*, 469c). There is also a male *genos* and a female *genos* (*Republic*, 453a–57a), an androgynous *genos*, a lesbian *genos* and an “entirely masculine” one (*Symposium*, 191e, 193c). A *genos* may also be a species (*Protagoras*, 321c), for example, there is the *genos* of the cicada (*Phaedrus*, 259c), dog (*Republic*, 459b), or a still more inclusive class, such as the winged *genos* (*Sophist*, 220b) or the *genos* of tame and herd-living creatures (*Statesman*, 266a). Finally, there is the *genos* of gods and that of humans (*Hippias Major*, 289ac; *Charmides*, 173c).

Plato's use of *genos* is revisionary when he classifies people according to their virtue. According to the *Cratylus*, a person's *genos* depends on his character and conduct rather than his descent. As Socrates puts it, “. . . when a good and pious man has an impious son, the latter shouldn't have his father's name but that of the kind [*genos*] to which he belongs . . .” (394de). He also interprets Hesiod's *genê* as describing distinctions in virtue:

Well, I don't think he [Hesiod] is saying that the golden race is by nature made of gold, but that it is good and fine . . . don't you think that if someone who presently exists were good, Hesiod would say that he too belonged to the golden race? (398ab)

In the ideal city of the *Republic*, people are divided up into the *genê* of philosopher, military auxiliary, and money-maker, according to the kind of virtue they are capable of achieving (434c, 519e). Their membership in these different groups according to their different capacities for virtue is represented in the Myth of Metals' classification of citizens into gold, silver, or bronze and iron races (*genê*) (414b–15d).¹¹ The myth of the *Phaedo* also divides up people according to the type of virtue or vice their life has exhibited, representing these divisions by the different species into which people are reincarnated: gluttons, violent persons and drunks are reincarnated as donkeys; the unjust as wolves, hawks and kites; and the type who practice social virtue are reincarnated into the social *genê* of wasps, ants, or humans. Only the philosophically virtuous end up in the *genos* of the gods (81e–82b). These reincarnation outcomes show people for what they are.¹²

There is some ambiguity here in whether it is one's capacity for virtue, realized or not, or one's actual achievement or non-achievement of virtue, that determines one's *genos*.¹³ This question does not arise for the ideal society, where capacities for virtue are always realized, but since they are not so realized in ordinary societies, we might well ask: are Socrates and Alcibiades the same *genos* even though Socrates fulfilled his capacity for virtue whereas Alcibiades was corrupted (assuming that Alcibiades had the capacity for philosophical virtue)? Modern racial thinking would group Socrates and Alcibiades together, since it classifies people according to their supposedly innate capacities.¹⁴ But the *Cratylus* passage puts father and son – whose capacities we may reasonably expect to be the same, because it is “according to nature” for a horse to give birth to a horse, a king to a king, and a good man to a good man (393c–94a) – in different *genê* on the basis of their actual piety and impiety. To the extent that Plato

classifies people by achievement rather than capacity, and acknowledges that capacities may not be realized, his classifications are distanced from racial classifications.

Now Plato might have thought that distinctions among people on the basis of virtue cut across ethnic distinctions, rendering ethnicity morally and politically irrelevant; alternatively, he might have thought that virtue, by nature, belongs, or is more likely to belong, to certain ethnicities than others. These interpretive possibilities are underdetermined by the textual evidence: Plato's inegalitarianism does not by itself commit him to the racialist view that different ethnicities or races have different psychological capacities, but it is compatible with racialism.

On the one hand, Plato's subscription to standard ethnic stereotypes might incline him to think that different peoples are predisposed to virtue or vice, or to particular virtues and vices. For example, Socrates says that Thracians, Scythians and other northerners are high-spirited, Greeks love learning,¹⁵ and Phoenicians and Egyptians love money (*Republic*, 435e–36a); Plato may think that this means Europeans can have the virtue of military auxiliaries, Greeks that of philosophers, and Phoenicians that of money-lovers. In the *Republic* these ethnic stereotypes illustrate the principle that the forms and qualities characteristic of a state are characteristic of individuals in that state. However, the “same forms and qualities” principle only tells us that there is a relationship between individual and state characteristics; it says nothing about the ultimate cause of those characteristics. Are the individual characteristics natural and inherited or themselves the result of the political constitution in which these people live? In the case of the Phoenicians' and Egyptians' love of money, the Athenian in the *Laws* wonders whether this quality is due to defects in their legislators, incidental misfortune, or some other natural circumstance.¹⁶ Certainly Plato's favorite explanation for morally significant character-traits is political constitution, including education. So, for example, Persian rulers tend to be tyrannical because their education has been neglected: they have grown up in the care of women and eunuchs, fabulously wealthy and learning that wealth is to be honored – instead of learning to value virtue most, bodily goods second and property last of all (694c–96, 697ac). This explains why they do not rule in the interests of their people, and that in turn explains why the Persian people are unwilling to fight for their rulers (or cowardly, as many Greeks think); finally, the rulers' need to hire mercenaries to fight for them confirms the high value they place on wealth (697d–98a). Thus, even though he subscribes to various ethnic stereotypes, Plato does not posit a natural link between ethnicity and virtue.¹⁷

Plato may, however, be perpetuating a morally loaded stereotype in his characterization of the tyrant. Plato's tyrant is licentious, fond of luxury, a slave to his desires; he brooks no criticism and surrounds himself with flatterers. This characterization both resembles the popular stereotype of the Persian, and fits into the classical literary practice of “barbarizing” vicious characters – representing their vices in barbarian garb.¹⁸ But even if this accurately describes Plato's characterization of the tyrant, it is countered by his remarks about Persians themselves, as when he has Socrates remind Alcibiades that he must compete with the noble birth and cultivated virtue of Persian rulers (*Alcibiades 1*, 120d–24a) and when he praises the Persian king Darius (*Laws*, 695cd; *Letter VII*, 332ab).

On the other hand, one might think the opposite – that Plato’s ranking of people according to the psychological criterion of virtue makes him unlikely to discriminate on the basis of bodily criteria. In that case, Plato’s attitude would confirm Harry Bracken’s thesis that dualism has historically provided a “modest conceptual barrier to treating race, color, sex, or religion as other than accidental” because it defines a human being by a non-bodily essence.¹⁹ But suppose we take as evidence for Plato’s position on the relevance of bodily criteria to virtue his position on sex-discrimination. In this case, Plato argues on the one hand that the socially valuable capacities of individual women and men must be determined individually, by sex-blind methods, and on the other hand, that the distribution of socially valuable capacities is sex-related. As Socrates puts it in the *Republic*, “it’s true that one sex is much superior to the other in pretty well everything, although many women are better than many men in many things” (455d). By analogy, Plato might think that there is some natural correlation between ethnicity and virtue (whether as a result of inheritance or some other condition, such as climate). There is a hereditary component to virtue – it is “according to nature” for good men to have good sons (*Cratylus*, 393c–94a), which is presumably why the ideal city seeks to improve its citizens by arranging their mating and breeding (*Republic*, 459a–61b).²⁰ However, it would seem that, with ethnicity as with sex, virtue is too important, and the body too unreliable, to be depended on to sort people. Even with the controlled breeding in the ideal city, parents of one *genos* sometimes give birth to children of another (*Republic*, 415bc, 460c, 546bd).

Plato’s position on the relationship between bodily characteristics and virtue is best stated in the terms of a view Socrates airs in the *Cratylus*:

some people say that the body [*sôma*] is the tomb [*sêma*] of the soul, on the grounds that it is entombed in its present life, while others say that it is correctly called ‘a sign’ [*sêma*] because the soul signifies whatever it wants to signify by means of the body. I think it is most likely the followers of Orpheus who gave the body its name, with the idea that the soul is being punished for something, and that the body is an enclosure or prison in which the soul is securely kept [*sôzetai*] – as the name ‘*sôma*’ itself suggests – until the penalty is paid . . . (400c)

Elizabeth Spelman has suggested that something like this is Plato’s view in the case of sex. Although the soul–body distinction allows Plato to look beyond a person’s sex in judging her abilities, Spelman argues, Plato treats a person’s body as something that nevertheless does or ought to say something about her nature, if not in this life then in its reincarnation. Thus, vicious men are reborn as women (*Timaeus*, 42bc, 90e–91a); the most appropriate punishment for cowardly men is to be turned into women (*Laws*, 944e).²¹ And as we saw in the *Phaedo*, unjust men are reborn as hawks, wolves or kites, socially just men as wasps, ants or humans, and so on (81e–82b). Obviously, such a sign is not infallible, and so is not usable for assigning people to their various civic roles, the performance of which requires different types and levels of virtue. Thus, Plato requires a scrupulous body-blindness of his guardians when it comes to casting people into civic roles. On the other hand, if the only problem with using bodily criteria to identify psychic criteria is reliability, then it would seem that Plato would not frown on this type of discrimination for situations in which mistakes are more tolerable.

What makes even a slight unreliability in physical criteria for identifying virtue intolerable, for Plato, is the magnitude of the moral and political implications of the differences in virtue. Happiness depends on virtue (*Gorgias*, 470e; *Phaedo*, 69bd, 80d–82c, 113d–14c; *Euthydemus*, 278e–82e; *Republic*, 587ce). In the *Republic*, people's different capacities for virtue determine what sort of work they may do in their society – whether rule it, guard it morally or physically, or just fill its breadbasket (412be, 433e–34c, 453b–6b). In the *Laws*, citizenship itself depends on virtue (846d–47a). Since capacities for virtue are set by nature (*Republic*, 580bc, 442be), nature itself sets ceilings on the civic roles people may occupy and the happiness they may achieve.

But underlying Plato's judgment that mistakes in identifying virtue are intolerable is a deeper moral principle that entirely rules out racial and sexual discrimination, as well. In the *Republic*, Socrates says that the aim of the law in the ideal city is the maximization of all the citizens' happiness:

in establishing our city, we aren't aiming to make any one group outstandingly happy but to make the whole city so, as far as possible. We thought that we'd find justice most easily in such a city . . . We take ourselves, then, to be fashioning the happy city, not picking out a few happy people and putting them in it, but making the whole city happy . . . you musn't force us to give our guardians the kind of happiness that would make them something other than guardians. We know how to clothe the farmers in purple robes, festoon them with gold jewelry, and tell them to work the land whenever they please. We know how to settle our potters on couches by the fire, feasting and passing the wine around, with their wheel beside them for whenever they want to make pots. And we can make all the others happy in the same way, so that the whole city is happy. Don't urge us to do this, however, for if we do, a farmer wouldn't be a farmer, nor a potter a potter, and none of the others would keep to the patterns of work that give rise to a city . . . In this way, with the whole city developing and being governed well, we must leave it to nature to provide each group with its share of happiness. (*Republic*, 420b–21c, cf. 519e–20a)

Discrimination on the basis of anything that is even slightly imperfectly correlated with virtue violates the injunction to maximize happiness. For since happiness depends on virtue, a socially misassigned citizen would not only not do her job well and so harm or impede the pursuits of those dependent on her work, she would herself not be realizing her own best capacities and so would be living a less happy life.

Thus, even though Plato posits deep differences in virtue, resulting in great differences in civic role and happiness among citizens, he considers all the citizens' happinesses equally (the law aims at the happiness not of one class, but of the city as a whole). Differences in citizens' happiness and virtue are meant to be the result of nature alone, not of any social arrangements. But racial discrimination would involve inequality at the level of the consideration of citizens' interests.²²

It will be useful, at this point, to contrast Plato's views with those of some modern egalitarians, for superficial similarities between the two may be misleading. Indeed,

Stephen Jay Gould credits Plato with one hereditarian commitment crucial to modern racism: “that social and economic roles accurately reflect the innate construction of people.”²³ I take Herrnstein and Murray in *The Bell Curve* as typical modern spokesmen for inequality. They claim that there are intellectual differences between the races (and classes), which result in the less intelligent races’ economic backwardness, but that this fact should not affect how individuals are treated because a given individual may fall anywhere on a “bell curve” distribution for the population of which he is a member.²⁴ How close are these views to Plato’s?

Plato shares with the modern inegalitarians the view that there are important natural inequalities among people which social planning should attend to and perpetuate, in a good society. But Herrnstein and Murray think that cognitive stratification is inevitable, that in any society the stupid are generally poor and the smart generally rich – although this is most true in modern “rational” societies. So in their view, the society in which we live is the best or near-best society. By contrast, Plato thinks that stratification by intellectual qualities is very difficult to achieve, because societies tend not to value intellectual qualities (philosophers *should* be rulers, but they are not in fact). For the same reason, he rejects wealth as evidence of superiority. Further, while he believes that the capacity for virtue is hereditary, he also recognizes that people as a whole have not been bred for virtue. Modern “invisible hand” type theories according to which environmental pressure or natural selection just happens to result in a naturally superior group’s social ascendancy would surely seem like mumbo-jumbo to Plato. For Plato would not accept that any group that comes out on top in any social competition is for that reason superior: the criterion for superiority is virtue, and virtue is not valued except in a society designed to value it. In the *Gorgias* Socrates undermines Callicles’ might-based conception of natural superiority on just these grounds – by questioning the criteria on which he bases his claims about superiority (488bff). Thus, while Plato does consider just and desirable an order in which roles reflect the innate construction of people, on his view such an order must be brought about by rational planning, which involves great effort, understanding, calculation, supervision – not just natural and social selection. On Plato’s view social and economic roles *should* reflect the innate construction of people but in ordinary societies they *do not*. Thus, his inegalitarianism does not legitimate existing inequalities as does the moderns’.

These observations lead us to note another difference: Plato’s ranking of people is hyper-elitist. Virtue is too rare to belong to a whole race or ethnicity; even with a lot of attention given to breeding and education in the ideal city, true virtue belongs to the smallest class (*Republic*, 429a–30c), namely philosophers (*Phaedo*, 69bd, 80d–82c).²⁵ The idea of racial superiority is, ironically, far too egalitarian for Plato.²⁶

Finally, there is the issue of exactly how social planners are to treat natural inequalities. Here, Plato may seem to be quite close in spirit to Herrnstein and Murray, for they too claim that a just social order will reflect natural inequalities as social inequalities. Herrnstein and Murray ask, “How should policy deal with the twin realities that people differ in intelligence for reasons that are not their fault and that intelligence has a powerful bearing on how well people do in life?” Their recommendation is cash supplements for hardworking but cognitively deficient persons so that they can achieve a minimal standard of living, and the revitalization of family and community

to help these cognitively deficient persons get on with their lives and to give them the feeling of being valued.²⁷ In short, they propose charity for those they consider the stupid and poor, acknowledging that their stupidity, and thus their poverty, is not their fault.

Plato shares Herrnstein's and Murray's basic pessimism about the lots that fall to people but he does not seem to judge this apportioning unfair and attempt to compensate for it when it is undeserved. This is because Herrnstein and Murray seem to think that goods ought to be apportioned according to merit – hence their concern with fault. This contrasts with Plato's principle of justice in the *Republic*, which, as we have seen, simply apportions both goods and responsibilities so as to maximize happiness. Citizens' shares of goods in the ideal city are unequal not because of differences in merit, but when different shares are required by their work²⁸ (thus philosophers and military auxiliaries may not own private property, although farmers and householders may [416d–17b]), or when they serve as an incentive to virtuous behavior (like kissing rewards in the military to encourage brave performances in battle [468bc]), or when they are suited to their different natures and capacities to be benefited (thus the philosophical class is given an education in dialectic, but the lower classes are not [535a–39d]). In principle, the lower classes of the ideal city are given no less than the ruling class – they are all given what makes them as happy as possible.

We have found that while there is no conceptual impossibility in Plato's having views about race, he considers moral distinctions between people more significant than ethnic ones – although the two might be related. But while Plato's views about a possible relationship between virtue and race are underdetermined, his criteria of moral superiority undermine, rather than legitimate, existing inequalities, and his principle of justice rules out the meritocratic intuitions that are the basis of modern racism.²⁹

Notes

1. Proponents of meaning holism might hold this. Thomas Kuhn (1962), p. 128, writes: “neither scientists nor laymen learn to see the world piecemeal or item by item. Except when all the conceptual and manipulative categories are prepared in advance – e.g. for the discovery of an additional transuranic element or for catching sight of a new house – both scientists and laymen sort out whole areas together from the flux of experience. The child who transfers the word ‘mama’ from all humans to all females and then to his mother is not just learning what ‘mama’ means or who his mother is. Simultaneously he is learning some of the differences between males and females as well as something about the ways in which all but one female will behave toward him. His reactions, expectations, and beliefs – indeed, much of his perceived world – change accordingly.”
2. This point is made by Dudley Shapere (1981), p. 55.
3. Donald Davidson (1984), p. 197, argues that conceptual schemes and languages are necessarily translatable, because to interpret a speaker at all one must accept most of his utterances as true, which makes it impossible for one to say that his beliefs and concepts are radically different from (or for that matter, the same as) one's own.
4. W. V. O. Quine (1960), ch. 2.

5. Michael Banton (1987), pp. xi–xiv, 1–97.
6. On the modern debate between proponents of monogenesis and polygenesis, see Richard Popkin (1980), pp. 79–102.
7. To the extent that this notion is deeply embedded in our beliefs, Davidson’s argument against incommensurability, from the possibility of interpretation, applies: we are bound to find equivalents for the notion when we translate from another culture.
8. See, e.g. *Symposium*, 209e, *Alcibiades 1*, 105b, 124b, *Lysis*, 210b, *Republic*, 423a, 544d, *Laws*, 814a, 886a. Plato uses a similar pairing, of citizen and foreigner (*xenos*) in the same way (*Theaetetus*, 145b, *Apology*, 30a, *Meno*, 94e). But the citizen–foreigner distinction is purely political: in the *Laws*, where Plato distinguishes sharply between the political and moral treatment appropriate for foreigners (*xenoi*) and for citizens (764b, 816e, 849ad, 853d–54d, 866bc), Magnesian citizenship is had by birth or initial immigration plus meeting a virtue-qualification, but Magnesia’s initial immigrants come from all over Crete as well as from Sparta and Argos (708a), and the foreigners are simply later arrivals.
9. Which, even if they do not tell us just what Plato thought about the distinction, surely do tell us what attitudes were culturally available.
10. On Euripides’ treatment of barbarians, see Helen Bacon (1961), ch. 3.
11. While it is a lie that citizens have these metals in their souls, the lie represents something of the truth in that they differ in virtue and therefore ought to occupy different civic roles.
12. Thus an unjust person is an anti-social hawk living in a human body; reincarnation gives him the body that fits his soul. Julia Annas (1982), pp. 125–7, has complained that the myth of the *Phaedo* is “confusing and confused” because it tries to fit the idea of reincarnation as punishment or reward into the *Gorgias* framework of a final judgment. But if we view the animal reincarnations of the *Phaedo* as representing who or what we really are (the *Gorgias* expresses this idea in terms of the soul being naked when it goes to receive judgment), there is no confusion. I am grateful to Omar Bozeman (unpublished mss.) for suggesting what different work stories of the afterlife might do apart from apportioning reward and punishment.
13. Thanks to Julie Ward for bringing this issue to my attention.
14. The distinction between nature and nurture is often drawn too sharply to be accurate, as if human and environmental effects are somehow outside of nature. For a critique of this distinction, see Richard Lewontin (1992), ch. 5.
15. Cf. Hippocrates (1986), 16, 23.
16. In Hippocrates (1986) the cause of national traits is climate rather than descent: Asians tend to be well built because of Asia’s temperate and unvarying climate, for “everything [vegetable or human] grows much bigger and finer in Asia,” but the same climate also makes them cowardly (this is aggravated by their monarchical constitutions [cf. 23]), and like one another (16). However, nurture and nature are not mutually exclusive, and environmental effects may become hereditary: the Macrocephali’s long heads are due, initially, to their custom of manipulating the head to elongate it, but later because “nature collaborates with custom” so that offspring inherit their parents’ long heads (14).
17. One may object that subscribing to the stereotypes in the first place is racist (this objection is due to Eric Brown). It is certainly true that we use the term “racist” to characterize stereotyping attitudes themselves. But even though subscribing to stereotypes may be prejudice, it is not strictly speaking racist if it does not explain the stereotypes by heredity – for a race is a group linked by heredity.
18. Cf. Edith Hall (1989), ch. 5.
19. Harry Bracken (1978), p. 250. In the same vein, Bracken writes elsewhere (1973), p. 83: “from Plato to Descartes racist doctrines have been more comfortably situated within the

- Aristotelian tradition than among the dualists.” But essential and accidental do not exhaust the possibilities.
20. Heredity is not a sufficient condition of virtue, of course, for in the absence of a good education, good men will have bad sons, as they do in Athens (*Meno*, 93c–94e); for without a good education even philosophic natures are perverted (*Republic* 497b). Thus the condition that is “according to nature,” that good men have good sons, does not come about in the normal course of events but requires extensive social planning. Thanks to Steve Gerrard for bringing the *Meno* passage to my attention.
 21. “Plato seems to be saying . . . that there is a fittingness of one kind of soul to one kind of body: the kind of soul you have shows in the kind of body you have, and can’t be shown in another kind of body. Or perhaps he is saying that the kind of soul you have *ought* to show in the kind of body you have . . . and if there isn’t a good fit in this life there will be in the next” (Elizabeth Spelman (1994), p. 100).
 22. In the modern context, Peter Singer (1978), pp. 185–203, argues that what is wrong with racial discrimination is that it leads to bad consequences for individual and society, consequences that conflict with the deep moral principle of equal consideration of interests – not that race is irrelevant to work; Singer describes several cases in which race may be relevant, such as in considering only Black actors to play the role of a Black character.
 23. Stephen Jay Gould (1981), p. 20.
 24. Herrnstein and Murray (1994), ch. 13, esp. pp. 312–13.
 25. Racism, like anti-Semitism on Sartre’s brilliant analysis, gives people the sense that they possess something of value simply in virtue of their membership in a race, as a result of their birth and without their having to do anything to earn it; thus, it “is an attempt to give value to mediocrity as such, to create an elite of the ordinary” (Sartre (1948), p. 23).
 26. There is a more egalitarian strand in Plato. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates suggests that all human souls are equal in their capacity for virtue, since they have all seen the forms – which is necessary for a soul to be able to bring many perceptions together into a reasoned unity and thus to understand speech (249bc). But the equality of all human souls across reincarnations is compatible with extreme inequality among human lives, as one sees in the *Phaedrus* ranking of souls according to how much of the forms they have most recently seen: philosopher, lawful king or military commander, statesman, household manager or financier, trainer or doctor, prophet or priest, representational artist, manual laborer or farmer, sophist or demagogue, tyrant (248de).
 27. Herrnstein and Murray (1994), ch. 22, esp. pp. 535–40, 547–8.
 28. Gregory Vlastos (1978), p. 178, describes Plato’s principle of distribution in the *Republic* as a principle of functional reciprocity: “all members have an equal right to those and only those benefits which are required for the optimal performance of their function in the polis.” I am in agreement with Vlastos insofar as he denies that the distributive principle is meritocratic, and insofar as what one requires for one’s work is a basis on which goods are distributed. However, I do not think it the exclusive basis for distribution, and I do not think it should be put in terms of citizens’ *rights*. While it is indeed right that citizens should have what they need to do their work (because it maximizes the good), it is not clear that they have a right to it in the sense of being able to demand it and expect their demand to be upheld by the coercive forces of the state.
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