Virtue and Self Mastery in Plato’s Laws

§1 The problem

In Book I of Plato’s Laws, the Athenian, having just identified education (paiedia) as the process of making citizens good (643e-644a), proceeds to elucidate the relevant notion of goodness:

ATH: And we previously agreed that those who are able to rule themselves are good, while those who are unable to do so are bad\(^1\) (644b).

This is to invoke to self-mastery, earlier touted by his interlocutor Clinias as the greatest human achievement (626d-e). The Athenian now turns to give a psychological analysis of the forces involved in such self-mastery:

ATH: [Each of us] has inside himself two opposite and foolish advisors, which we call pleasure and pain.

CL: That’s the case.

ATH: Besides these two, we have opinions about the future, for which the general name is ‘anticipation’ and the particular names are ‘fear’…

d and ‘daring’…. And against all these we have reasoning (logismos) as to which of them is better or worse. When this becomes the common view of a city, it is called ‘law’. (644c-d)

He then invokes a famous model to illustrate the interplay between the pleasures, pains, anticipations, and reasoning:

ATH: Let’s think about it this way. Suppose each of us living things is a divine puppet. Whether we are constituted as the gods’ plaything or for a

\(^1\) Translations are my own.
serious purpose, we have no idea, but we do know that these experiences in us are like opposing cords or strings that tug against each other and pull us toward opposing actions, across the field where virtue is marked off from vice. Now, according to our account, it is to one and only one of these forces that a person must cleave without fail and pull against the other strings.

645a This is the sacred and golden pull of reasoning, also called the city’s common law. The others are hard and iron, like all manner of different kinds, while it is soft and golden. Now, one must always pitch in with the finest pull, that of law, for while reasoning is a fine thing, it is gentle rather than violent, so its pull requires assistants, if our golden kind is to prevail over the other kinds. If this happens, then virtue’s tale, which likens us to puppets, would achieve its point. It also clarifies somewhat what is meant by ‘self-mastery’ or ‘self-defeat’, both for a city and for an individual.

On the most straightforward way of reading this passage (which I will call the “puppets passage”), it depicts internal psychological struggle, and identifies virtue as the victory of the better party to the conflict. However, the Athenian elsewhere unambiguously endorses a conception of virtue that is quite at odds with this picture. At the beginning of Book II, where he gives a fuller account of education, he claims that virtue consists in agreement (sumphonia) between properly cultivated feelings of pleasure and pain on the one hand, and reason (logos) on the other (653a-c; cf. 659d-e, 696c, 689d). Let us call this the “agreement model” of virtue. The account of education in Book I (643b4-644b5), which immediately precedes the puppets passage, coheres with the agreement model, for it allows that a person’s that pleasures and pains can be trained, and therefore properly directed. How then could the Athenian be affirming self-mastery (victory in internal conflict) as virtue in the puppets passage, a few lines later?

One solution is to read the puppets passage as not, after all, invoking internal psychological conflict. Dorothea Frede, for example, proposes that
strictly speaking, only the iron strings actually pull against each other, while reasoning plays the very different role of giving them their direction and content (2011, 217-220). So too Annas (1999: 142-44) concludes that the “self mastery” in which the golden strings are victorious over the iron strings is the condition in which a person’s pleasures, pains, desires, etc are shaped by reason, and similarly Jouët-Pastré 2006: 42 and Laks 2005. Wilburn 2013 gives an extended defense of the latter construal of self mastery, arguing that the golden cord is a general commitment to follow the rational principles that one accepts, rather than a force that actually pulls against the iron strings.

While such readings have the advantage of making the conception of virtue invoked in the puppets passage cohere with the “agreement” model of virtue invoked elsewhere in Laws, they are still highly strained (and implausible) interpretations of the text of the puppet passage itself, which attribute “pulls” (helxeis) to both the golden and iron strings; these “tug against each other “ (anthelkein, 644e) and “pull us toward opposing actions” in a veritable tug-o-war.\(^2\) Wilburn, for example, wrongly claims that the “golden string” requires assistance even to pull against the iron strings (29, 31, 35); rather, the Athenian says, the golden cord requires “assistants” in order to defeat (nikan) the iron strings (645a6-b1). The victory of the golden cord is a matter of overpowering, not eliminating, opposing internal forces. It cannot be reconciled with the harmony model.

\(^2\) Here I agree with Bobonich 2002: 261-4.
§2 My proposal

Thus we are faced with a genuine puzzle: why is the Athenian, in the puppets passage, appealing to a model of virtue that he elsewhere rejects? The solution, I propose, is to recognize that the Athenian deliberately deploys these two competing models for virtue at work in Book I. He appeals to a conception of virtue that his interlocutors endorse (but he doesn’t) in order to convince them of educational proposals that he himself endorses—but that he could not expect to convince them of starting from his own premises. This is, I submit, a deliberate dialectical strategy that he deploys more than once over the course of Book I. I propose to trace this strategy over the course of Book I.

§3 Conflict and Self-Mastery in Book I

When Clinias first invokes the ubiquity of conflict (626a), he has in mind war between cities; however, he is easily led by the Athenian to agree that conflict occurs not just between cities, but between the villages that make up the city, between the households that make up villages, between the people in those households, and even within each individual person (626c-d). We may use the term ‘self-mastery’ to refer to victory in the latter kind of conflict.

A reader of Republic IV might find it odd that the Athenian shows no interest at 626c-d in analyzing the further psychological complexity that self-mastery implies. He will take this up only later, in the puppets passage (644-645). Here, having barely invoked the self-conflicted individual, he immediately
directs attention to cases of conflict within families and within cities. In the former case, he has Clinias agree that it is far better for all the family members to be reconciled with each other than for one set of brothers to vanquish or defeat the other (627c-628a). He then applies the point to the city: internal conflict (stasis) is an evil in itself, so avoiding it altogether by reconciling citizens to each other, is preferable to having one set of citizens defeat another (628a-d). He draws the conclusion that peace, rather than victory conflict, is the greatest good, and thus it should be the ultimate aim of the legislator (628e).

The Athenian stops short of applying this conclusion to the case of an individual person. He fails to draw the conclusion that readers of the Republic might expect to be the obvious moral here: that internal psychological harmony is preferable to self-mastery in a struggle against opposing internal impulses. The effect is to leave on the table the conflict model of virtue (even though the theoretical basis for its repudiation has been laid).

Next, he enumerates the range of virtues that legislators must cultivate in citizens, given that the ultimate goal is not victory but peace (629-632). Citizens require not just courage but justice, temperance and wisdom, he argues, the latter three being more valuable than the courage on its own. Yet, the argument by which the Athenian establishes this conclusion takes the curious tack of conceding that military success is to be taken “most seriously” (629a2-3). In a hypothetical conversation with the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus, he starts from the

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3 Although he betrays some awareness that he issuing locutions “self-mastery” and “self-defeat” that do not normally apply to such entities; what goes unstated, but is obvious to the dialogue’s original readers, is that these are the locutions apply to an individual person. One might surmise that Plato is calling our attention to the omission.
assumption that excellence in war is of the utmost importance (629b-d), and limits the question to which kind of war (external or civil) is the most grievous (chalepos). On the face of it, this concession contradicts the conclusion, just articulated by the Athenian, that war is not the legislator’s ultimate focus (628c9-e5; to be reiterated at 630d4-7). However, the virtues that he claims are required for success against internal faction include temperance and justice (630a-c; developed further in 631c-e). These, rather than equipping a person for success in the battles of a civil war, will prevent faction and civil strife from arising in the first place. So, however strained the assumption that this expanded range of virtue displays “excellence in civil war”, it appeals to normative assumptions that the Athenian’s interlocutors find attractive. Here we have a clear instance of a general dialectical strategy: the Athenian appeals to the paradigm of self-mastery endorsed by his interlocutors in order to reach a conclusion that transcends that paradigm.

At 632e the conversation turns to the project of identifying the institutions that promote the expanded range of virtues. The interlocutor’s plan is to take up the virtues one by one, starting with courage (633a-634c) and then temperance (635b-637e). As this plan is executed, the notion of self-conflict and self-mastery is once more injected into the discussion. Both virtues are construed on the self-mastery model: courage as a struggle against pains and fears, temperance as a struggle against desires and pleasures (633a-634c, 635b-d). Thus, once again, the Athenian appeals explicitly to the conflict model of virtue.
In effect, he advocates the value of temperance by casting it in terms that his interlocutors value.

The construal of courage and temperance as struggles against pleasures and pains allows the Athenian, next, to introduce his central contention: that virtue concerns pleasures and pains, and hence that legislators must devise institutions to train both (636d-e). The task of cultivating “pleasures and desires” in citizens is assigned to paideia (education) and education is defined as the process of shaping and directing a citizen’s pleasures and desires towards justice (643b). This is to anticipate the account of paideia which opens book II, where the “agreement” model of virtue is articulated explicitly for the first time. But here in Book I, it is immediately followed by the puppets passage (and the psychology of conflict that it models), and the bridge is supplied by invoking Clinias’ conception of self-mastery as a paradigm for the sort of goodness that paideia is supposed to inculcate (644b-c).

We are now back to our starting point, the Athenian’s claim at 644b that “we previously agreed that those who are able to rule themselves are good, while those who are unable to do so are bad.” The Athenian evidently has in mind Clinias’ invocation of self-mastery as the greatest achievement (626e). However, given his arguments at 628a-d, it is misleading of the Athenian to represent himself as having endorsed this conception of excellence. Indeed, the conception of virtue presupposed in the account of education that the Athenian has just finished sketching (643b-644b) conforms to the harmony model of virtue that is the natural moral to draw from 628d-e.
It is worth noting, however, a curious feature of the Athenian’s language here. The expression he uses, “rule themselves” (*archein hautôn*) is an odd one to employ to invoke self mastery. It has not been used in this sense previously in the dialogue. Rather, the locutions used for self mastery and self defeat have been: “victory over oneself” (*nikân auton hauton*, 626e2), being “master of oneself” (*kreittôn hautou*, 626e8), “being worsted by oneself” (*hêttasthai auton huph’ hautou*, 626e3 or *hêttôn hautou*, e8), “lack of control (*akrateia*)” (636c7), and self-control (*enkrateia*, 645e8. The expression “ruling themselves” (*archein hautôn*), by contrast, has been used to describe the political autonomy of the good brothers in the warring family at 627e1, as contrasted with the political subjugation of the wicked brothers who are ruled (*archesthai*) by them (627e3). The expression is used again in this political sense at the end of Book II, where the inebriated sumposiast is described as thinking himself fit to rule (*archein*) his companions as well as himself (671b5)—the self-rule in that case is not self-control, but autonomy. Nowhere else is the expression used in *Laws* in the sense of self-mastery (victory over conflicting internal impulses); nor is it in *Republic* or *Protagoras.*

Only in *Gorgias* 491d, does Plato use the expression “ruling oneself” (*archein heautou*) in the sense of self-restraint. But even there

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4 Nor does Plato use it to characterize internal conflict in the *Republic* (pace Bobonich 1994: 18, Dorion 2007: 135). In that dialogue, parts of the soul are described as ruling (*archein*) and being ruled (*archesthai*) by each other, or as ruling or being ruled by the person (442c-443b, 558d, 561b, 590c-d, 606d), and a person is said to rule or be ruled by other persons (579c, 590e-591a). However, the expression “rule over oneself (*heautou archên*)” where it does occur (561b4) does not mean self mastery, but rather self-rule (autonomy). And where we would expect to find the locution, as an elegant contrast with “*allôn... archein*” (579c7-8), we find instead “*heautou akratôr*”—suggesting that the most natural sense of the expression is not self-mastery. Similarly in *Protag.*., the disputed issue is whether knowledge rules (*archein*) a person, or whether instead a person can be “worsted” (*hettasthai*) by pleasures etc. (352e1) or have pleasures “master” (*kratein*) him.
Callicles’ initially puzzled reaction marks this as an extended sense of the expression, whose primary application is political (self-rule) rather than psychological (self-restraint).

I suspect that the Athenian’s use of the expression “rule themselves” at this point in *Laws* would likely strike Plato’s intended audience first in its primary, political sense. The extended context preceding the present text is the account of *paideia*, which presents the “accomplished citizen” as knowing how to “rule and be ruled (archein te archesthai) with justice” (643e6). It is only this political kind of “ruling themselves” that the Athenian can legitimately represent himself here as having agreed belongs to good people. But it is in the extended, psychological sense, that Clinias has invoked it to characterize the good person. The ambiguity might well be deliberate on Plato’s part, as it allows the Athenian to appeal to the paradigm of virtue that so appeals to his interlocutors, but without endorsing it.

The conflict model persists through the rest of Book I (646-650). Drinking parties are proposed by the Athenian as venues for cultivating “resistance to pleasures.” By reducing inhibitions, they expose citizens to the very sort of “shamelessness” that temperance must battle against—in the way that simulated battle conditions expose one to the fears and pains that courage must resist. Yet, in these closing pages too, the Athenian also appeals (quite unobtrusively) to the agreement model. For example, at 647b9-c1, 648b8 and 649c4, the courageous person is presented as “fearless” (*aphobos*), or more precisely as “lacking certain fears” (*aphobia phobôn tinôn*, 647c3-4), rather than victorious in
a struggle against fears. And at 649c8-10 the point of exposing citizens to situations in which they are naturally prone to shamelessness, is to give them practice in “being least (hēkista) shameless and full of boldness” (c10) : that is, rather than cultivating the capacity to win the struggle against inappropriate feelings of shamelessness (the conflict model), the goal is not to experience shameless impulses at all in those situations (the agreement model).

The focus in these passages on questions about training allows us to appreciate the relation between the two models of virtue. The victory in the struggle against fears or shameless impulses (self-mastery of the sort prized by Clinias) will be an important step in the cultivation of the disposition of fearlessness (or lack of shamelessness) that characterizes virtue on the harmony model. In effect, what the Athenian’s interlocutors see as the pinnacle of human achievement the Athenian himself sees as only a stage in the development of a much greater excellence.

His interlocutor’s conception of excellence as self-mastery, even though it is mistaken, is a partial grasp of the truth that the legislator must comprehend. Thus there is no dialectical dishonesty on the Athenian’s part when he appeals to his opponents’ conflict model virtue of virtue, even though he advocates the harmony model as the one that legislators should adopt as their goal.
Works Cited


