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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series
HUM2017-2316**

Plato, Environmental Sustainability, and Social Justice

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ATINER's Conference Paper Series

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This paper should be cited as follows:

Stone, M. (2017). "Plato, Environmental Sustainability, and Social Justice", Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: HUM2017-2316.

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www.atiner.gr

URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

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ISSN: 2241-2891

17/11/2017

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Abstract

How one views the relationship between human beings and the environment may seem to be an issue remote from more pressing human concerns for social justice and political stability. The connections, however, are essential and significant. Our pursuit of justice and our need to reverse the patterns of behavior so damaging to the environment are intimately related. That human conduct toward the environment needs to be changed is one of the main tenets of thinkers and activists who characterize the current state of human impact on the environment as an ecological crisis. What we hear is a call for radical change in the thoughtless and destructive patterns of human consumption by the 20% of the world's population that uses 80% of the world's resources. But all too often, we fail to see the relevance of this environmental issue to the other ethical issues that also rightly demand our attention and so move it to the periphery of our moral vision. In this presentation, I want to call attention to the way Plato connects environmental sustainability to social justice and political stability in the first two books of the Republic. He addresses elements that are central to environmental sustainability that are tightly integrated to social justice and political stability. I will examine the way in which Plato develops this view and defend it against several criticisms. We will see that his view amounts to the strong claim that any just society will be environmentally sustainable. This is true whether the conception of justice like Plato's based on justice as a virtue of a person or on justice as a property of a political institution. Correspondingly, we will conclude environmental sustainability alone is not enough to ensure that solutions to environmental problems are just.

Introduction

How one views the relationship between human beings and the environment may seem to be an issue remote from more pressing human concerns for social justice and political stability. The connections, however, are essential and significant. Our pursuit of justice and our need to reverse the patterns of behavior so damaging to the environment are intimately related. That human conduct toward the environment needs to be changed is one of the main tenets of thinkers and activists who characterize the current state of human impact on the environment as an ecological crisis. What we hear is a call for radical change in the thoughtless and destructive patterns of human consumption by the 20% of the world's population that uses 80% of the world's resources. What principles should guide this change is an important issue. One significant response appeals to a principle of sustainability. The Brundtland Report¹ issued by the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development appeals to sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Another appeals to the need for ethical principles. For example, in *One World*, Peter Singer argues that the problems caused by globalization require that we respond ethically to the reality that we live in one world. "For the rich nations not to take a global ethical viewpoint," he claims, "has long been seriously morally wrong."² In his view, this failure is "in the long term, a danger to their security."³ All too often, the connections between these different responses fail to materialize and we find proposals for sustainable solutions that refer minimally to issues of justice and proposals for ethical solutions that emphasize equity, fairness, and justice but can be rejected as impractical, much less sustainable.

In this paper, I would like to consider one way in which a environmental sustainability can be firmly integrated with social justice and political stability by examining the way Plato joins them in the first two books of the *Republic*. Rest assured I have no plans to advance a Platonic view of the just society in which philosophers rule. Indeed, it has been argued by many philosophers that Plato's dualistic world-view, which splits the immortal human soul apart from its mortal body in nature, provides few resources for constructing a healthy environmental ethic.⁴ Despite these indications to the contrary, Plato's discussion in these early books of the *Republic* are instructive for clarifying what constitutes a sustainable environmental ethic and how this can be related to justice and

¹ Brundtland Report (1987), 54. Retrieved from goo.gl/UNuw0v.

² Peter Singer, *One World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 13.

³ Ibid.

⁴ For example, Val Plumwood criticizes the dualism characteristic of Plato's philosophy and others [Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993)]. She argues that the dualistic tendencies in Plato and others lead to "an alienate account of human identity in which humans are essentially apart from or outside of nature, having no home in it or allegiance to it" (p. 71). Gabriela Roxana Carone argues against some of the criticisms raised against Plato that have appeared in other sources. [Gabriela Roxana Carone, "Plato and the Environment," *Environmental Ethics* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1998)].

peace. I will argue that in Plato's view just societies are environmentally sustainable. After examining how Plato develops this view, I will defend it from criticism. Then I will consider whether his conclusion depends on Plato's understanding of justice or whether it can be extended more generally to other conceptions of justice.

Method

Turning to ancient philosophy generally and Plato in particular as a way to examine environmental sustainability faces several obstacles. I would like to address two of these before we turn to the *Republic*.

John Rist argues that Plato and other Greek philosophers were not concerned with environmental problems because they did not face them. So he believes we can legitimately ask instead, "Why might the Greek philosophers have been interested in the environment had the environmental problems faced by our contemporary world been brought to their attention?." ⁵ Even from this perspective he thinks that we are hard pressed to get any environmental advice from Plato because moral concern about the environment would have to be based on his metaphysics. Otherwise such a view would not be knowledge, but only be true opinion, which in Plato's view "is shaken by the wind." ⁶ I would grant that Plato never makes a case for the intrinsic value of nature and the environment, which some environmental philosophers believe is fundamental to a strong environmental ethic. I think, however, that in the passages we will examine he is concerned with the land as essential for satisfying our basic human needs. Consequently, he has a significant albeit anthropocentric concern with the preservation of the land as a resource for human goods that are needed for a thriving social and political community. So I grant that Plato was not interested in the full range of environmental problems that confront contemporary philosophers, but I maintain he does explicitly address the environmental problem of how we can draw on natural resources from the environment to meet the basic human needs of our society and ultimately of the world. Since I will argue that his view of the sustainability of this environment follows from his understanding of justice, if my argument is successful this will answer Rist's second concern with such an approach.

A common popular way of understanding sustainability appeals to its three pillars: economic, social, and environmental. According to this model, sustainable responses to the problems that comprise our ecological crisis need to offer a long term vision that is economically viable, that is socially just, and that protects our environmental resources. In this paper, I have chosen to address sustainability from the perspective presented by Shawn Miller. In his study of the environmental history of Latin America he identifies four recurrent themes

⁵ John Rist, "Why Greek Philosophers Might Have Been Concerned about the Environment," in *The Greeks and the Environment*, ed. Laura Westra and Thomas M. Robinson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

central to sustainability: "population, technology, attitudes toward nature, and attitudes toward consumption."⁷ What is unique about this approach is that it is based on the factors related to the historical failures of Latin American civilizations such as the Mayan. These factors also align with the concerns that Plato raises in the early part of the *Republic*, suggesting that perhaps an unstated concern in his thinking about these issues was cultural survival.⁸ In the first two books of the *Republic* Plato addresses all four of these key elements in an argument that introduces a sustainable environmental ethic tightly integrated to social justice and political stability.

From Healthy City to Diseased City

Book II of the *Republic*⁹ begins with Plato's brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, challenging Socrates to offer them a convincing account of justice. The prevailing opinion is that the person who acts justly pays a high price with little to show for it, while those who try to get away with whatever they can without getting caught make the easier and more profitable transaction. Socrates reluctantly agrees and proposes to determine what it is for a person to be just by looking at what it is for a city to be just. He starts with the premise that a person cannot survive alone, but needs the cooperative efforts of others to meet the basic needs for existence. From here he narrates the creation of a city in which as many occupations and activities exists as are adequate for providing a healthy, comfortable existence for its inhabitants.

The citizens of this ideal city will have crafts to provide shelter, clothing, food, and wine. Plato concludes the initial account of this city in a way that sounds uncharacteristically pastoral and unrealistically idyllic. "For nourishment," Socrates explains, "they will provide themselves with barley meal and wheat flour, which they will knead and bake into noble cakes and loaves and serve up on a reed or on clean leaves. They will recline on couches strewn with yew and myrtles and feast with their children, drink their wine, and crowned with wreaths, hymn the gods. They will enjoy having sex with one another, but they will produce no more children than their resources allow, lest they fall into either poverty or war."¹⁰ When Glaucon suggests that the citizens of this city should have relishes with their bread, Socrates is happy to oblige by including olives and cheese, figs, chickpeas, and beans. "And they will roast myrtles and acorns before the fire and drink in moderations. And so they will live in peace and good health, it seems, and when

⁷. Shawn William Miller, *An Environmental History of Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4.

⁸. Owen Goldin notes that in the *Critias* Plato is concerned about the way in which the overharvesting of timber around Athens "has led to a general decline in their ability to sustain life." [Owen Goldin, "Ecology of the *Critias* and Platonic Metaphysics," in *The Greeks and the Environment*, ed. Laura Westra and Thomas M. Robinson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 74].

⁹. Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2004).

¹⁰. *Ibid.*, 372bc.

they die at a ripe old age, they will pass on a similar sort of life to their children."¹¹ Glaucon ultimately objects that the city Socrates describes would more accurately be described as a city of pigs. Pigs may be satisfied with olives, cheese, figs and chickpeas, but human beings will want luxuries beyond these simple relishes. So Socrates agrees to describe not merely how a city, but how a luxurious city arises.

The addition of luxuries to the city that Plato describes as the true city, the healthy, make the new city a feverish one. A city in which more things and more types of entertainment requires more types of craftsmen and more servants; it requires more types of food, including meat, and ultimately more land to raise the crops and animals for food. "The land," says Socrates, "that used to be adequate to feed the population we had then will now be small and inadequate."¹² Plato summarizes this result of this situation and what leads to it succinctly, "Won't we have to seize some of our neighbors' land, then, if we are to have enough for pasture and plowing? And won't our neighbors want to seize part of ours in turn, if they too have abandoned themselves to the endless acquisition of money and overstepped the limit of their necessary desires?."¹³ Socrates and Glaucon agree that the inevitable result is war,¹⁴ a stark contrast to the healthy city which avoided both poverty and war.

Commentators on this passage who are interested in its environmental implications have offered limited remarks mainly to the effect that the pursuit of luxuries in the feverish city leads to war. The true city or the healthy city offers an ecologically friendly alternative. Timothy Mahoney notes that it "seems to be a prototype of a simple, small-scale social arrangement of the sort that many ecologists would urge as an antidote to the typical social arrangements of today's industrialized countries."¹⁵ Anthony Preuss notes that the narrative of the true city has all the elements of a Garden of Eden or a Golden Age myth: "an initially healthy state of humanity lost through a human defect in character; no serpent here, nor marital negotiations, just Glaucon's desire to have chairs and tables, and a diet that includes meat." Preuss also sees in this first city the expression of the Greek ideal of self-sufficiency or *autarkeia*. This ideal for human activity, he claims, is "an idea with obvious ecological consequences: the inhabitants of the first society of the *Republic*, the so-called "city of pigs," live peacefully with their neighbors fundamentally because their way of life is self-sufficient."¹⁶

These implications are certainly suggestive and significant. Mahoney's comments relate meaningfully to the call for technologies of scale that reduce our impact on the environment. Although Preuss's first comments seem to indicate that the healthy city belongs to an age that is forever lost, his second observations resonate with the efforts of both individuals and communities to find local

¹¹ Ibid., 372c.

¹² Ibid., 373d.

¹³ Ibid., 373d.

¹⁴ Ibid., 373e.

¹⁵ Timothy A. Mahoney, "Platonic Ecology, Deep Ecology," in *The Greeks and the Environment*, ed. Laura Westra and Thomas M. Robinson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 53.

¹⁶ Anthony Preuss, "Some Ancient Ecological Myths and Metaphors," in *The Greeks and the Environment*, ed. Laura Westra and Thomas M. Robinson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 12.

resources for food and energy self-sufficiency. Neither, however, accurately focuses on the way sustainability is achieved in this narrative or the way in which justice is part of the picture.

The Healthy City Revisited

In the narration of the healthy city Plato carefully balances all the factors that Williams lists as crucial for cultural and environmental sustainability: attitude toward consumption, technology, population, and attitude toward nature. The citizens of this city consume only what is necessary. It is clear from the narrative the food, shelter, and clothing are necessary, but beyond this the passage itself is not entirely clear what middle ground lies between basic necessities and the luxuries of the feverish city that are unnecessary. Later in the *Republic*, however, Plato clarifies what appetites are necessary and what are not. The necessary ones are "those we cannot deny" and "those whose satisfaction benefits us" because, he reasons, "we are by nature compelled to try to satisfy them both."¹⁷ So bread in his view is necessary because it is something that we cannot do without and relishes are necessary because they are beneficial. Conversely, the unnecessary foods are those that are unhealthy for body and soul, and the appetite for these foods if restrained and educated from an early age can for the most part be eliminated. Of food that is "harmful to the body and harmful to the soul's capacity for wisdom and temperance," Socrates asks, "Wouldn't it be correct to call it unnecessary?" and Adeimantus answers, "Entirely correct."¹⁸

The creation of technologies in the healthy city follows the earlier discussion regarding the nature of a craft or *techne*. A craft is a practice that exists in order to remedy a deficiency in something. For example, the craft of medicine exists in order to heal diseases of the body. A sick body needs something. "That is why the craft of medicine has been discovered—because a body is deficient and it is not satisfactory for it to be like that."¹⁹ As Plato identifies the needs of the healthy city, farming for food, building for shelter, weaving and shoemaking for clothing and shoes, the population of the city begins to grow.

In contrast to Preuss's observation that Plato fashions the healthy city as self-sufficient, Socrates observes that "it is almost impossible, at any rate, to establish the city itself in the sort of place where it will need no imports."²⁰ This addition also serves to indicate that the city that Plato is more the projection of a possible city than an idealized city from a Golden Age, as Preuss suggests. Acknowledging the need for producing additional goods for trade, exporting what the city can provide for itself and importing what it cannot, causes the city to grow even further. As the city grows, however, the same moderation that its citizens exercise in their consumption of food and other goods they apply to their sexual appetite and limit their population to what their land can support with the addition of trade.

¹⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 558d.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 559b.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 341e.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 370e.

In Plato's words, "they will enjoy having sex with one another, but they will produce no more children than their resources allow, lest they fall into either poverty or war."²¹ Finally, though it would be an exaggeration to say that the denizens of this city have respect for nature as such or believe that nature has intrinsic value, it is clear throughout the narrative that they live their lives in relationship to a natural world of which they are a part. Nature provides not only the resources necessary for their well-being, but also establishes the proper limits to their city's growth. In the literal sense of economy, *oiko-nomos*, it provides the law governing the home.

We can summarize the environmental sustainability found in the story of this healthy city as follows. This story provides a way to understand the relationship between human beings and the environment. Plato would not have us understand the term "the environment" either abstractly or independently of its political connections. His understanding is both concrete and political. Our relationship to the environment is a relationship to the land and the natural resources that provide the goods that are both necessary and beneficial for our well-being. The land in question is within the territorial boundaries of our country, not outside of it. Population and economic growth are limited to what can be produced from its natural resources using available technologies. Although ideally this land would be sufficient for the needs of the people living on it, Plato is no isolationist. The goods that we cannot produce at home, we may be acquired through fair exchange with other countries. The perspective towards nature Plato offers is clearly anthropocentric, but the city's dependence on nature and respect for its limits is an essential part of the narrative. Though, as Mahoney notes, the story of the city's creation may suggest to the reader a "small-scale social arrangement,"²² the description does not restrict the size. If the land of the city is large and rich in natural resources, then it could support a sizable population.

Although Adeimantus in the dialogue has difficulty saying anything about justice and injustice after hearing Socrates' narrative, I would argue that the story addresses the relationship between the environment and social justice. At a minimum, social justice requires that the environment, the land belonging to a country, be used and managed in order to provide for the basic needs of its citizens: their food, clothing, and housing, followed by those goods that are beneficial for their health and well-being. Minimal social justice demands this proper use of the environment. What strikes us as unrealistic about this picture and what clearly what rubs Glaucon the wrong way is the same thing that actually makes the healthy city sustainable—the moderate demands that its citizens place on the environment and on each other. They are not ascetics—wine is considered to be one of their necessities—but they do moderate their desires. It is also no coincidence that their society roughly satisfies the definition of justice Plato offers in Book IV that "justice is doing one's own work and not meddling with what is not one's own."²³ More specifically, the appetitive part of the soul is exercising its virtue, temperance or moderation (*sophrosune*), and this moderation makes their

²¹ Ibid., 372b.

²² Mahoney, "Platonic Ecology, Deep Ecology."

²³ Plato, *Republic*, 433a.

way of life environmentally sustainable. So at least in this first account of a city-state justice in the body politic implies environmental sustainability.

The Luxurious City

The story, however, does not end with the healthy city. The juxtaposition of this idyllic, healthy city with the luxurious, feverish city brings the challenge that Glaucon originally raised about justice back to our attention. The conclusions we can draw from this larger picture are richer than the basic observation that the moderate, healthy city avoids poverty and war, whereas the luxurious, feverish city ends up at war with its neighbors (and most likely with some of its citizens in poverty). Plato must continue the narrative because the challenge that Glaucon has raised against justice involves a plausible claim about human nature, a claim that is the basis for the existence of the luxurious, feverish city. Glaucon proposes that at heart there is no real difference between a just person and an unjust person precisely because of the nature of human appetites. If they were free to do whatever they wanted without having to bear any negative consequences the just and the unjust person would behave the same. "The reason for this," Glaucon explains, "is the desire to do better (*pleonektia*) than others. This is what every natural being naturally pursues as good. But by law and force, it is made to deviate from this path and honor equality."²⁴ The point Glaucon makes here corrects the point argued earlier by Thrasymachus that the desire to do better than everyone is what distinguishes the unjust from the just.²⁵ In the view Glaucon offers, there is no fundamental psychological difference between the unjust person and the just. The phrase "to do better" may sound like everyone has a penchant for self-improvement, but the Greek term *pleonektia* suggests a greediness to have more than one is due. In the *Laws* Plato even identifies it with injustice.²⁶ This is precisely the desire that drives the feverish city.

Glaucon describes the underlying human condition that motivates his challenge to justice as *pleonektia*, the desire to have more than everyone else, a sort of unquenchable greed if you will. You have some of it, I want more of it. I get more of it, whatever it is, and I want still more. The conflict that leads to war between the luxurious city and its neighbors arises from the consistent application of Glaucon's premise. In order to have enough land to satisfy our excessive desires when ours is no longer adequate, we will have to seize some of our neighbor's. "And won't our neighbors," Socrates continues, drawing the conclusion, "want to seize part of ours in turn, if they too have abandoned themselves to the endless (*apeiron*) acquisition of money (*chremata*) and overstepped the limit of their necessary desires?."²⁷ Two words in this passage deserve comment. The first is "chremata" which is translated as "money." It

²⁴ Ibid., 359c.

²⁵ Ibid., 350b-c.

²⁶ Ibid., 906c.

²⁷ Ibid., 373d.

definitely refers to money, but it can also refer to property and other material goods. What we might now call consumer goods. The second is "*apeiron*" with is translated as "endless." A more literal reading of this word as "without limit," I think is better. In relationship to the healthy city in which consumption is limited by what things are necessary and beneficial, here consumption oversteps the limit of what is necessary, and in fact has no logical limit. This is an accurate definition of excessive consumption characteristic of contemporary society.

In the narrative of the luxurious city political instability and war is the natural consequence of a world in which all of the countries demand more than what their land can provide and what they may acquire through fair international trade. If we posed Plato's view in this narrative as the dilemma of excessive consumption, it might sound something like this. Either only a few countries demand and consume way more resources than they need at the expense of other nations, or all countries demand and consume resources extravagantly. To the extent that Plato would be willing to adopt a conventional view that justice involves "honoring equality,"²⁸ he would say that the first situation is unjust. The second situation in which all countries equally demand excessive natural resources leads to political instability and possibly war.

Environmental Sustainability and Justice

From the perspective that many environmentalists adopt that the world has limited resources and therefore cannot accommodate the unlimited acquisition of goods by all nations, this second situation is evidently environmentally unsustainable. Plato, of course, does not have this global perspective. If anything, since he argues that human crafts are invented to remedy the deficiencies we find in our social experience, Plato is more likely take the perspective of an environmental technologist who believes that we can invent technologies that indefinitely expand the pool of resources that we have on earth. At any rate, his response to the second situation is surprising. We might expect him to argue that annexing land from a neighboring country is unacceptable since it seems to be a solution that cannot be sustained, at least without conflict. Instead he expands the city further by the addition of an army that will protect it from the potential aggression of its neighbors. The city's luxurious way of life can be sustained, but only with the help of a sufficiently strong army. What is sufficient? An army that is stronger than its neighbor's army.

We might have thought that the moral of the story was that an unjust city, which consumed more than its share of the natural resources, was not sustainable. Instead Plato offers us a society in which its excessive consumption is sustained by force. The outcome in which the city now has and consumes more resources than its neighbors, an outcome maintained by force, creates inequalities in wealth

²⁸ Ibid., 359c.

between the city and its neighbors. Now we see how injustice arises there. So one of the important implications of this passage is that for Plato a society may be environmentally sustainable and yet be unjust. In other words, sustainability does not imply justice. This is an important implication inasmuch as contemporary images of sustainability typically include a token nod to equity as part of sustainability. Plato, however, acknowledges what can be seen all too frequently that inequities can be perpetuated indefinitely with force or other means of coercion. So environmental equity or environmental justice must be something that is sought together with sustainability, not something that can be assumed to follow from it.

Justice and Environmental Sustainability

Although justice does not follow from environmental sustainability, I would argue that for Plato environmental sustainability follows from justice. In the story of the healthy city, he establishes what we called the lower limit for justice in relationship to the environment. At a minimum a just society must use its natural resources to provide the goods that are necessary and beneficial to everyone in society. Whatever it cannot produce from its own territory, it must secure through trade with other societies. From the story of the luxurious city, we can see the upper limit of a just society. A just society cannot be one in which its members "have abandoned themselves to the endless acquisition of money and over stepped the limit of their necessary desires."²⁹ A just society cannot consume more than what it can provide using its own resources and technologies and what it can acquire through trade with other societies.

Plato's own view of justice is one that at the level of the individual involves the psychic virtues wisdom, courage, and temperance. Though each plays a role in the preservation of society, the most relevant in relationship to environmental sustainability was temperance. Cultivating this virtue is essential to keeping the consumption of goods in society between the lower limit of what is necessary and beneficial for the well-being of its members and what exceeds the upper limit of what it can provide. Arguably reason can provide guidelines for what these limits are.³⁰ Educating and persuading members of a society to develop and practice this virtue is obviously the challenge, one the possibility of which even Plato seemed pessimistic about.

Although Plato takes great pains to critique the view of justice that Glaucon offers, it is an account of justice which also provides for environmental sustainability. As C. D. C. Reeve observes according to this view of justice, which originates with Thrasymachus in Book I, "being just is primarily a property of *laws* or *political institutions*, and only derivatively a property of the actions that

²⁹ Ibid., 373d.

³⁰ For example, see Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton, "High income improves evaluation of life but not emotional well-being," *PNAS*, 107, no. 38 (2010). They argue persuasively that income greater than approximately \$75,000 does not increase emotional well-being.

are in accord with those laws."³¹ Glaucon revives this conception of justice as a contractual arrangement among members of society, who "decide that it is profitable to come to an agreement with each other neither to do injustice nor to suffer it. As a result, they begin to make laws and covenants; and what the law commands, the call lawful and just."³² We might call this justice without Justice, since there is no appeal to some underlying Platonic form of Justice itself. In the context of the story of the luxurious city, this is that type of international agreement which neighboring city-states would need to establish to prevent war from breaking out among them. Such an agreement might restrain one city-state from seizing the land of another for its own use. In Plato's own time the Delian League was formed to protect the alliance of Athens with the other city-states from the Persians. So appealing to this type of agreement as a way of avoiding the war that seems inevitable between the luxurious city and its neighbors seems reasonable. In our own time we might view the Kyoto Protocol or the most recent Paris Agreement as agreements of this sort. They establish international principles for reducing emissions to slow global climate change. For countries to adhere to these agreements is just, and to ignore them unjust. To the extent that the guidelines set up in these agreements are based on reliable scientific research, following them, that is, doing what is just leads to environmental sustainability.

For both of these accounts of justice, a basic criticism is that they are unworkable. With respect to the first, people are unlikely to moderate their desires as long as they do not have to, and it is more unlikely for them to moderate them for the sake of the common good. With respect to the second, Glaucon himself observes that a person who is strong would never submit to the contract established by those who are weaker. "For him," he says, "that would be an insanity."³³ On the international scale, this type of sentiment seems to underlie the United States' unenthusiastic response to the agreements established for reducing emissions.

A related and more serious criticism of approaches to environmental problems that appeal to principles of justice is raised by Garrett Hardin. He advocates that we adopt a lifeboat view of ethics. We in the rich nations must recognize that our own boat has a limited carrying capacity. While we may admit a few more people into the boat we must keep most of it in reserve for our own future needs, thinking about our obligations to our future generations. The lifeboat approach insures that we maintain an adequate supply of resources for our needs as we bring our population growth to zero. In this lifeboat approach to ethics traditional principles of justice that would apply to those in the poor nations simply do not work. According to a Christian principle of justice that we should help our neighbor, with might let a few of those swimming in the water outside the boat in, but which ones? We certainly could not let them all in without sinking the boat. Accord to Marx's view to distribute goods to each according to his needs, we run into the same problem because the needs of the poor outside our boat are equally

³¹ C. D. C. Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings, the Argument of Plato's Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 11, emphasis in text.

³² Plato, *Republic*, 359a.

³³ *Ibid.*, 359b.

dire. The sort of voluntary restraint suggested by Plato's view of justice will not work either because of the tragedy of the commons. "If everyone would restrain himself, all would be well; but it takes only one less than everyone to ruin a system of voluntary restraint. In a crowded world of less than perfect human beings, mutual ruin is inevitable if there are no controls. This is the tragedy of the commons."³⁴ I think that the best response to Hardin's criticism is that the analogy between a lifeboat with the rich in the boat and the poor in the water does not fairly describe our environmental crisis. In particular, I think that the rich have more than adequate resources to share with the poor and work toward a more equitable use of resources.

Conclusion

As Hardin's approach to environmental problems suggests focusing on reducing population and protecting our natural resources independently of some conception of justice is obviously harsh, but in the end I would argue simply wrong. The first two books of Plato's *Republic* offer a rich way of understanding how justice leads to environmental sustainability. In Book II especially, he provides an image of a city coming into existence in which through temperance and wisdom its inhabitants live within the limits of what their natural resources and their ingenuity can produce. Justice in this society either as a virtue of its citizens or as a property of its political institutions is the means for environmental sustainability. Even if one thinks that principles of justice themselves are not sufficient for environmental sustainability, this conclusion implies that an essential part of any solution to the problem of sustainability also address problems of justice. As Plato's transition from the problems caused by the luxurious to the introduction of a guardian class implies, sustainability can be achieved with force in the absence of justice. Although it may be naïve to look for an absolute Platonic ideal of justice, whatever conception of justice we construct must incorporate our relationship to the environment as an essential element to achieving justice and peace.

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³⁴ Garrett Hardin, "Lifeboat Ethics: the Case Against Helping the Poor," in *The Environmental Ethics & Policy Book. Third Edition*, ed. Donald Van De Veer and Christine Pierce (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), 404.

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