

Does a Comparison of Plato's and Confucius's Uses
of the Terms *dikaiosune* and *ren* Reveal Similar
Approaches to Justifying the Ethical Life?

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NOTE: The subject matter of this paper is important, but the academic style makes it somewhat ponderous.

Introduction

Separated by more than 8500 kilometers but only 52 years, two seminal thinkers have shaped the moral philosophy of their respective cultures. While Western ethical theory has been deeply influenced by Plato's *Republic*, Eastern ethical theory has been deeply influenced by Confucius's *Analects*. David Haberman describes the *Republic* as 'one of the most influential books of all time' (86). And Bryan Van Norden compares (with considerable fervor) the *Analects* to 'the combined influence of Jesus and Socrates' (3).

On the surface, there are many similarities between Confucius and Plato. Both taught through means of dialogue, and both expressed reticence to provide direct definitions. Both advocated contemplation and education as the means for moral attainment, and both sought to balance contemplation with service. Both sought to apply their moral theory to public office (though both failed). And while Plato espoused the 'heavenly' forms, Confucius espoused the 'Decree of Heaven.' Moreover, Plato advocated the life of the philosopher, even as Confucius advocated the life of the *chun-tzu*.

More importantly to this paper, Confucius and Plato both advocated an ultimate ethical ideal. Confucius's¹ ethical ideal, *ren*,² is central to the *Analects* (60 of the 499 chapters are devoted its discussion, and the word appears 109 times³). The term is tenuously translated as 'humanness.'⁴ And Plato's ideal, *dikaiosune*, is central to the *Republic* (it appears 248 times throughout his writings, and 131 times in *The Republic*⁵). The term is tenuously translated as 'justice.'

Because of differences in translation, these Greek and Chinese concepts have rarely, if ever, been compared. This is unfortunate, as a careful study of each may yield insight into the age-old question: Why should I be moral?

Confucius and Plato were teachers, and as such, both vigorously advocated their ethical ideals. Yet both seemed ambiguous in their teachings as to *why* one should pursue this ideal. The 'why' issue is vital for the teacher who, having either an Eastern or a Western cultural orientation, is concerned about application as well as theory. Indeed, while avoiding an argument from authority, it must be noted that if two of history's most important ethical thinkers, representing two distinct cultures, advocate similar moral pedagogies, then contemporary teachers should consider the implications.

The modest aim of this paper is to compare Plato's term *dikaiosune* with Confucius's term *ren*, and more particularly, to determine if there is a similarity between Plato's and Confucius's means of justifying these ideals. I will argue that there is a clear similarity (a) between the ideals themselves (concept), and (b) between the ways in which these teachers justify them (pedagogy).

Concept

Before one can argue for a similar pedagogy, one must establish a commonality of concept. Otherwise, one's case is built upon a conflation of categories. Thus, this paper must first demonstrate that there is a certain similitude between *dikaiosune* and *ren*.

dikaiosune

Plato's concept *dikaiosune* is central to the *Republic*. It is tenuously translated as 'justice.' This may be considered an ambiguous rendering, as the term seems to have a more expansive meaning. Some have argued that it is better translated as 'morality' or as 'righteousness,'⁶ but these terms were foreign to Plato's culture. Aristotle claims that the meaning of the original word itself 'seems to be ambiguous.' He states, 'It is clear, then, that there is more than one kind of justice, and that there is one which is distinct from virtue entirely...' (427).

While Plato's definition of *dikaiosune* is not explicitly stated, it is intimated:

1. Plato's concept of *dikaiosune* entails a wide scope of meaning (519c, 519e-520a, 520d).⁷
2. But it does not 'usurp the role of virtue as a whole' (Annas: 13). It is carefully distinguished from other social virtues such as wisdom (428b-429a), courage (429a-430c), and moderation (430d-432b).
3. *Dikaiosune* is a virtue, which regulates our relationships with others (443).
4. *Dikaiosune* is related to harmony: harmony of the individual and harmony of the state (443d). In books II-IV and VIII-IX of the *Republic*, Plato shows that *dikaiosune* is the only state in which a person may find harmonious fulfillment.
5. *Dikaiosune* is an agent-centered ethical ideal. 'Plato shifts from an act-centered to an agent-centered concept of justice,' so that one who becomes a philosopher embodies *dikaiosune* (Annas: 162).

6. By the time we get to the end of the *Republic*, we have more than a theory of justice in the narrow sense. We have been told a good deal about the good life in general (Annas: 13). Socrates says that the search for *dikaiosune* 'concerns no ordinary topic, but the way we ought to live' (352d).

In sum, it may be observed that *dikaiosune* has to do with the right relation of parts. In the case of the individual, this has to do with the three parts of the soul: the appetitive, the spirited, and the rational.⁸ Plato states that a person is just when he 'regulates well what is really his own,' 'puts himself in order,' and 'harmonizes the three parts of himself'⁹ (443d). In the case of the state (*polis*), this has to do with the three classes of its citizens: guardians, auxiliaries, and producers. A society that epitomizes *dikaiosune* helps to produce an individual that epitomizes *dikaiosune*, and an individual that epitomizes *dikaiosune* helps to produce a society that epitomizes *dikaiosune*.

ren

Confucius's concept *ren* (or *jen*) is central to the *Analects*. It is tenuously translated as 'humanness.' This may be considered an ambiguous rendering. The term seems to have a more ethical meaning. Some have argued that it is better translated as 'goodness'¹⁰ or 'love,'¹¹ but these terms fail to capture the 'completeness' of Confucius's meaning.¹²

Kwon-Loi Shun claims the meaning of the original word itself is clouded by 'competing views.' He states that 'in the *Analects* *ren* is used both more narrowly to refer to one desirable quality among others, and more broadly to refer to an all-encompassing ethical ideal' (53).

While Confucius's definition of *ren* is not explicitly stated, it is intimated, and its parallels with *dikaiosune* are notable:

1. Confucius's concept of *ren* entails a wide scope of meaning. It is 'described as something that includes other desirable qualities' (Kwong-Loi Shun: 53).¹³
2. But it is also listed as one desirable quality among others such as courage and wisdom (W9.29, W14.28).
3. *Ren* is a virtue, which regulates our relationships with others. Confucius said the 'direction which unifies everything' and the 'single saying that can keep watch on one's actions throughout one's life is this: considerateness – that which one disfavors, apply not to others' (W4.15, W12.2, W15.24).

4. *Ren* is related to harmony: harmony of the individual within 'the social framework of the ideal state' (Jiuan-Yu: 327). 'The central Confucian idea is represented by a Chinese character that has been explained pictographically as consisting of two parts: the component for "human" and the component for "two." That is, it represents two people standing together in harmony' (Haberman: 16).
5. *Ren* is an agent-centered ethical ideal. One who becomes *chun-tzu* exhibits *ren*. Confucius emphasizes, 'There never existed a *ren* man who was not *Chun-Tzu*' (W14.7).
6. With a full reading of the *Analects*, one senses that it represents the 'consummation of personal ethical excellence' (Van Norden: 27). Confucius states, 'A man who finds *ren* attractive cannot be surpassed' (4.6).¹⁴

In sum, it may be observed that *ren* has to do with the right relation of parts – that is the right relation of the individual to his family, to others, and to the state. Confucius said, 'By being a good son and friendly to his brothers a man can exert an influence upon government' (L2.21). And so, "the transformation of society begins with the cultivation of self within the environment of the family; it then spreads out like ripples caused from throwing a pebble in a still pond" (Haberman: 17).

Comparisons

It must be conceded that there are differences in these two teachers' concepts of their moral ideals – namely that *dikaiosune* draws parallels between the harmony of the state and the harmony of the soul, while *ren* draws parallels between the harmony of the state and the harmony of the family. Yet one must observe that both *dikaiosune*¹⁵ and *ren* entail a wide scope of ethical significance; neither term represents virtue in total. Both terms involve the regulation of relationship with others, both terms emphasize a right relation of parts, both terms describe a condition of harmony, and both terms embody an agent-centered ideal.

Therefore, a careful study of the terms *dikaiosune* and *ren* reveals a striking if (perhaps) imprecise similitude of concept.

Pedagogy

Having established a certain parallel between the two concepts, one may consider a question of method. A careful study of these Greek and Chinese approaches reveals a striking, if (perhaps) imprecise similitude of pedagogy. But this similitude is first noted when comparing the apparent ambiguity of both teachers.

Ambiguity

Plato and Confucius seem to contradict themselves in their claims about why one should pursue *dikaiosune/ren*. Should one pursue these ethical ideals for their own sake or for the sake of their benefits? Their apparent contradiction seems to belie their justification of the moral life.

In Book VI of the *Analects*, Confucius says, 'The wise are happy, but the *ren*, secure' (W6.21). He teaches that the man with a heart of the *chun-tzu* (hero/scholar) 'will never seek life at the expense of *ren*; and it may be that he has to give his life in order to achieve *ren*' (W15.8). He teaches that the *chun-tzu* focuses on virtue and responsibilities, while a common man focuses on 'gaining advantage' (L4.11). And he adds, 'Indulging in activities aimed at yielding personal gain yields complaints' (L4.12).

But in Book IX of the *Analects*, Confucius also says, 'He that is really *ren* can never be unhappy' (W9.28). In Book VI, he allows that the man with *ren* will 'seek reward' (W6.22). In Book IX, he says, 'A man with *ren* [has] no worries' (L9.30). And in book XV, a wise man needs *ren* 'to secure power' (W15.32). So on the one hand, Confucius seems to justify *ren* by extolling its intrinsic value. While on the other hand, he seems to encourage *ren* for the sake of its instrumental value.

In Book I of the *Republic*, Thrasymachus 'roars into the midst' of the dialogue with Glaucon and Adeimantus to demand that Socrates¹⁶ justify *dikaiosune*. Thrasymachus warns, 'And don't tell me that it is the right, the beneficial, the profitable...' (336d). He insists that '*dikaiosune* is what is advantageous to the stronger, while *pleonexia* (the antithesis of *dikaiosune*) is to one's own profit and advantage' (344c). In Book II, Glaucon and Adeimantus take up Thrasymachus' challenge, with Glaucon demanding 'I want to hear it [*dikaiosune*] praised by itself' (365d), and with Adeimantus demanding that Socrates show 'how – because of its very self – it benefits its possessors' (367d).

Socrates' response to this formidable challenge is complex, if not inconsistent. He has been widely accused of committing a fallacy of equivocation – that is, of proving something different from what he was asked to prove (what does having a rightly ordered soul have to do with keeping one from stealing?). Moreover, commentators struggle with determining whether Socrates advocated an intrinsic or an instrumental ethic. Throughout the end of the Book IV, he seems to argue that *dikaiosune* is worth having for its own merit. More particularly, he sets out a theory of human nature and its harmony as a state of *dikaiosune*. Then in Book VIII and IX, he returns to Glaucon's challenge, this time arguing that *dikaiosune* is worth having for the sake of its consequences.

Justification of ren

One must admit at the outset that this investigation has certain limitations. The first is its necessary brevity. This limitation is further complicated by the difference in communication styles between Plato and Confucius. Whereas the former presents a detailed argument, the latter, with typical eastern crypticism, presents a series of descriptive statements. And while one may construct an argument from these statements, it takes time to build a case.

A particular danger (ignored by many commentators), and quite tempting due to this paper's word limitations, arises from relying upon isolated proof texts. But the only responsible way to make a claim is to appraise the entire corpus. With this in mind, the Chinese text, the Waley translation, and the Li translation have all been carefully surveyed, with each reference to *ren* classified and indexed, then summarized in chart form to provide as concise an overview as possible.

Justification of <i>ren</i> in The <i>Analects</i>	Waley Translation	Li Translation
Number of sayings addressing <i>ren</i>	60	59
Number of words in the sayings that address <i>ren</i>	4160	2,644
Number of occurrences of <i>ren</i> in the sayings	109	109
Number of references that seem ambiguous	44	43
Number of references that could support intrinsic interpretation	8	10
Number of references that could support instrumental interpretation	8	6

It seems appropriate to admit the following weaknesses with this overview. Some of the sayings placed in the ‘ambiguous’ category could well be placed in the ‘intrinsic’ category, as Confucius often extols *ren* in a way that emphasizes its value, while just falling short of endorsing its absolute intrinsic value. Also, the translator’s own bias can so easily influence his interpretation. Moreover, one cannot be sure that Confucius actually formed these stark categories in his own mind.

Still, it must be conceded that Confucius taught both the intrinsic and the instrumental value of *ren*. A summary textual analysis (excluding ambiguous references) indicates that he emphasized the intrinsic value of *ren* 53% percent of the time, and the instrumental value 47% percent of the time.¹⁷ Even if one allows that this paper erred in its classification of the sayings by a factor of 20%, an uncomfortable conundrum remains: Confucius justified *ren* on both intrinsic and instrumental grounds. The principal question, then, is this: how (or why) did Confucius take this approach?

The answer may be found by an exegesis of the key texts on which his approach pivots. Because of space limitations, only two may be examined, but they are truly representative. In Book IV, Confucius states that ‘the *ren* man rests content with *ren*, but he that is merely wise pursues *ren* in the belief that it pays to do so’ (4.2). And in Book VI, he says that ‘a person with *ren* works hard first and seeks reward later – that is *ren*’ (6.22). Three textual observations are in order.

1. The word 'merely' indicates that an individual may pursue *ren* for its benefits, but that an individual who becomes *ren* may *become* content solely with its transcendent value (rightness).
2. The words 'seek reward' indicate that *ren* may be sought for its benefits.
3. The words 'first' and 'later' indicate that there can be a relative primacy in one's motivation and that *one may defer, as opposed to eliminate*, the hope for benefits.

While this paper has not engaged in extensive critique of current commentary (there does not seem to be any available scholarship comparing *ren* and *dikaiosune*), it may be helpful to demonstrate, briefly, how these observations are complimented by the contemporary debate over Confucius's moral justification.

David Haberman argues that 'Confucius proposed "doing for nothing." Specifically, this involves doing what is right simply because it is morally right, and not for any other reason' (16). But Haberman's case is based upon just three (dubious) proof texts. Philip Ivanhoe helps to balance Haberman's position when he writes, 'Confucians insist that one follows the Way because it is the Way and not for the benefits to be derived therefrom. At the same time, they insist with equal conviction that only the Way can lead to a harmonious and flourishing society' (9).

Ivanhoe's corrective is useful, but it does not go far enough. Essentially, he argues that one may know that *ren* is beneficial while pursuing it for entirely different reasons. But Confucius was too practical for such distinctions. He continually reminded his disciples that *ren* is beneficial, while at the same time insisting that it was right.

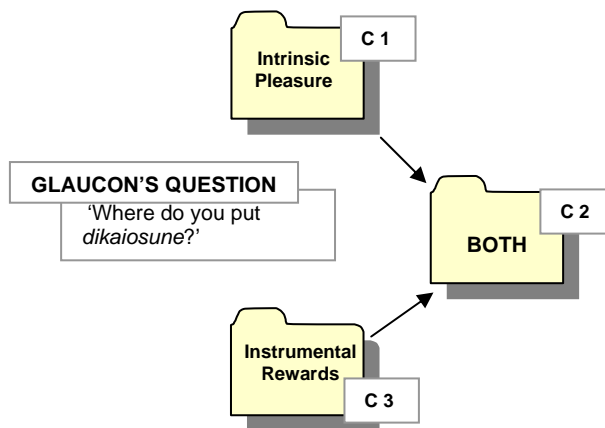
Yen-Hui, a disciple of Confucius, states in the *Analects*: 'I see it in the front; but suddenly it is behind. Step-by-step the Master skillfully lures one on' (9.10). Steven Wilson's exegesis of 6.22 recognizes the balance in stating that the person of *ren* 'does not merely pursue virtue for instrumental reasons but because it is inherently desirable' (112).

In sum, Confucius knew that the disciple could not separate his knowledge of the benefits of *ren* from his motivation for pursuing it. Instead, he extolled the deontological value of *ren*, while emphasizing the teleological benefits. He taught that *ren* is beneficial. It is not *ren* because it is beneficial; it is beneficial because it is *ren*. By becoming a *chen-tzu*, the individual may embody the intrinsic value of *ren* while experiencing its instrumental value.

Justification of *Dikaiosune*

Once again, the limitations of this paper prevent a detailed analysis of the *Republic*. Instead, we will focus on one vital passage, using it as a lens with which to see into Plato's attempt to justify *dikaiosune*.

In Book II, as part of the argument mentioned earlier, Glaucon distinguishes three classes of good things: (C1) a good we 'welcome for its own sake,' (C2) a good 'we like for its own sake and also for the sake of what comes from it,' and (C3) a good we would choose 'for the sake of the rewards' (357b-d). He then asks Socrates the pointed question, 'Where do you put *dikaiosune*?' His choices may be illustrated as follows:

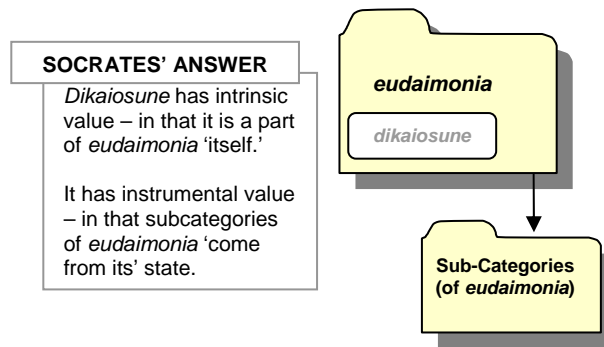


The precise wording of Socrates' answer reveals the fundamental assumption beneath the construct of the entire *Republic*. Socrates replies that *dikaiosune* is 'to be valued by anyone who is going to be blessed with happiness, both because of itself and because of what comes from it' (358a).

With the words 'because of itself and because of what comes from it,' it may appear that Socrates is placing *dikaiosune* squarely in C2, but this assumption is incorrect. Instead, Socrates deftly reframes the context of his answer (a typical Socratic move) by adding a new category to Glaucon's construct:

ἐγὼ μὲν οἶμαι, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, ἐν τῷ καλλίστῳ, ὃ καὶ δι' αὐτὸ καὶ διὰ τὰ γιγνόμενα ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ἀγαπητέον τῷ μέλλοντι μακαρίῳ ἔσεσθαι. οὐ τοίνυν δοκεῖ, ἔφη, τοῖς πολλοῖς, ἀλλὰ τοῦ ἐπιπόνου εἶδους, ὃ μισθῶν* θ' ἔνεκα* καὶ εὐδοκιμῆσεων διὰ δόξαν ἐπιτηδευτέον, αὐτὸ δὲ δι' αὐτὸ φευκτέον ὡς ὄν χαλεπὸν .

The key to this passage¹⁸ is the phrase: to be blessed with [ultimate] happiness. Glaucon uses the terms 'harmless pleasures,' 'rewards,' and 'other things,' but Socrates replaces these words with the overarching (root) term *eudaimonia*. Essentially, he subordinates pleasure to the larger category of ultimate happiness. His answer may be illustrated as follows:



Essentially Socrates is saying, 'Yes, Glaucon, *dikaiosune* may be valued both for itself and because of what comes of it – but in a higher way than you understand.' He then proceeds to argue for both the intrinsic and the instrumental value of *dikaiosune*. The primary argument may be summarized as follows:

1. *Dikaiosune* is justified both for its intrinsic and its instrumental value.
 - 1.1. *Dikaiosune* has intrinsic value because it *constitutes* a part of *eudaimonia* (and thus it is related non-casually to *eudaimonia*). – Books II-IV
 - 1.1.1. It constitutes a part of *eudaimonia* because it is a state where parts are rightly related.
 - 1.2. *Dikaiosune* has instrumental value because it *contributes* to other parts of *eudaimonia* (and thus it is related casually to *eudaimonia*). – Books VIII-IX
 - 1.2.1. It contributes to other parts of *eudaimonia* because its presence causes certain benefits.

In sum, becoming *dikaiosune* is identical with achieving a part of *eudaimonia*. When one 'becomes *dikaiosune*,' one may also experience certain benefits. *Dikaiosune*, then, has both intrinsic and instrumental value.

This understanding helps to explain why Socrates argued for two (seemingly) opposing positions in Books II-IV and Books VIII-IX. It also helps to explain the strategy underlying Socrates' answer to Thrasymachus. Rather than arguing that *dikaiosune* is good for the weak and the strong, Socrates demonstrates the way in which *dikaiosune* enables the weak to become strong (through their harmony with the whole).

Socrates may not present a satisfactory argument,¹⁹ but he does not commit a fallacy of equivocation. Thrasymachus insists that '*dikaiosune* is what is advantageous to the stronger' (344c). But Socrates demonstrates that those who become *dikaiosune* (philosophers) become strong (or healthy).

Comparisons

It must be conceded that there are differences in these two teachers' use of their moral pedagogies – namely that Plato advocated *dikaiosune* as good, whereas Confucius advocated *ren* as right.

Yet one must observe that both teachers, despite their vast cultural differences, developed an agent-centered ethical ideal; Plato advocated becoming a philosopher, while Confucius advocated becoming a *chen-tzu*. Both teachers sought to justify their moral ideal while motivating their students to pursue that ideal. And so, both argued for the intrinsic and the instrumental value of their ideals. Therefore, a careful study of Plato's and Confucius's uses of the terms *dikaiosune* and *ren* reveals a striking, if (perhaps) imprecise, similitude of pedagogy.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to answer the question: Does a comparison of Plato's and Confucius's uses of the terms *dikaiosune* and *ren* reveal similar approaches to justifying the moral life?

With regard to concept, it may be concluded that both terms have to do with the right relation of parts, both terms entail a wide scope of meaning, both terms involve the regulation of our relationship with others, and both terms foster a condition of harmony. With regard to pedagogy, both teachers developed an agent-centered ethical ideal that encompassed reason and motivation. Both sought to justify their moral ideals while motivating their students to pursue those ideals. And so, both argued for the intrinsic and the instrumental value of their ideals. Therefore, a careful study of Plato's and Confucius's uses of the terms *dikaiosune* and *ren* reveal similar approaches to justifying the ethical life.

The parallel approaches of these East-West thinkers deserve note. Plato and Confucius seemed concerned about the application as well as the theory of ethics. The ethicist today might observe that if one abstracts instrumental value from ethical theory, one loses the appeal so necessary for ethical action. And if one abstracts intrinsic appeal from ethical theory, one loses the certitude so necessary for ethical resolve.

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¹ Throughout this paper, the name 'Confucius' will refer to the source of the sayings in the Lun Yu (*Analects*). The brevity of this discussion will not permit me to engage in textual debate regarding authorship, but I take books III-IX to be among the oldest, and I question the origin of books X and XX.

² Sometimes transliterated as *jen*.

³ This number is based on a survey of the Waley Translation.

⁴ Some scholars argue that the original meaning of *ren/jen* was similar to the Latin *gens*, or clan. It implied that one had the qualities of a true member of their tribe. It came to represent the 'human being,' as contrasted with the 'animal,' and applied to conduct worthy of a man. Of this ancient meaning, translator Arthur Waley argues, 'there is not a trace in the *Analects*' (20).

⁵ This number is based on a survey of the Greek text in the Perseus online classics collection.

⁶ Cf. (Annas: 11)

⁷ Cf: (Annas: 70)

⁸ I use Terrence Irwin's English terms for *epithumetikon*, *thumoeides*, and the *logistikon*.

⁹ Justice is the condition that ensures harmony; but it is not identical with the condition itself. Aristotle (Plato's student) clarifies the distinction between the general concept of virtue and *dikaiosune* with these words: 'They are the same but their essence is not the same; what, as a relation to one's neighbor, is *dikaiosune* is, as a certain kind of state, without qualification, virtue' (426).

¹⁰ Cf: Arthur Waley's Introduction to the *Analects* (21)

¹¹ Cf: (Yu: 326)

¹² James Legge calls *ren* 'complete virtue,' but he admits, 'We cannot give a uniform rendering of this term' (23).

¹³ Cf: (14.4)

¹⁴ Quotations from the *Analects* from the translation by Arthur Waley are denoted by a 'W.' Quotations from the translation by David Li are denoted by an 'L.'

¹⁵ John Ferguson makes an intriguing claim: '...the Platonic definition of *dikaiosune* has no obvious antecedents in Greek usage, but is in many ways akin to the Hindu *Dharma*. The general derivation of Plato's thought at this point from Indian originals appears to me to be certain, and the most probable channel of its mediation the Pythagoreans' (26-27).

¹⁶ Scholars dispute whether or not the Socratic position represents Platonic thought, but for the purposes of this paper I will use the term Socrates to represent Plato, especially as it relates to setting out (at least) the nature of the argument (if not its conclusion).

¹⁷ This is based on averaging both the Waley and the Li translations.

¹⁸ Cf: (358a)

¹⁹ The force of Plato's argument has been rightfully challenged on many points, including its elitism, its intellectualism, and its monolithic approach.