

# Book Reviews

**Dominic Scott**, *Levels of Argument. A Comparative Study of Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford: OUP, 2015, 235 pp.

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Dominic Scott's *Levels of Argument* is a comparison of the *Republic* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, focusing on the methods and structures of the texts' arguments. In his analysis, Scott's chief point is that in both texts, Plato and Aristotle recognize two separate "routes" or arguments that are both capable of leading one to an understanding of why justice is beneficial (in the case of Plato) or the human good (in the case of Aristotle). In both texts, the shorter route is seen as a less rigorous but adequate method of arguing for the authors' respective conclusions. It is also the route that both authors actually traverse in the texts. The longer route, in contrast, is taken to be more rigorous: its arguments are more precise and detailed but as a consequence are far more difficult to follow. However, Scott argues that the authors differ in their attitude to this longer route. Plato sees it as an ideal, one that he would like to follow but cannot due to its difficulty. In contrast, Scott argues that Aristotle sees the longer route as superfluous given that political science is a practical discipline. In addition to articulating and comparing these two routes, Scott also discusses key methodological passages, contrasting Plato's journey out of and then back into the cave with Aristotle's comments about whether he is working to or from first principles. In what follows, I will focus on how Scott distinguishes the two routes, elaborating on those parts of his argument that I take to be the most crucial in drawing this distinction. I will then briefly look at what we learn from this comparison and mount a worry about his reading of Aristotle.

Scott begins by discussing the short route that Plato takes in the *Republic*. Scott's primary challenge in distinguishing this route, which he identifies as being contained in books II–IV and then elaborated on in IX and X, is showing that it can be understood without reference to Plato's theory of the forms, which occupies Plato in the central books of the *Republic* and which Scott identifies as unique to Plato's longer route. To this end, Scott enumerates various methodologies that are at work in II–IV, showing how they fit together to form a coherent argument that does not rely on the theory of forms but rather on hypothesis, political analysis, and moral psychology. Scott identifies three primary methods. First, Socrates begins with a hypothetical method in his parallel between the city and soul. In short, Scott argues that Socrates explicitly isolates as a hypothesis the contention that justice found in the state will be the same as that found in the soul. This allows him to proceed to analyze justice in the state and then apply it to the soul, since the state is larger than the soul and, Socrates reasons, justice will be easier to see in it. In Socrates' analysis of the state, Scott maintains (following Santas)<sup>1</sup> that justice is identified in

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<sup>1</sup> Santas, G. 2006, "Methods of reasoning about justice in Plato's *Republic*," in *The Blackwell Guide to Plato's Republic*, ed. Santas 2006, 125–45.

the city using a functional method. As is well known, the consequence of this analysis is that justice in the state is each of its three parts performing its proper function well, all under the rule of reason. After applying the account of justice in the state to justice in the soul, again relying on a hypothesis, Socrates is able to maintain that justice in the soul, too, is each of its parts performing its characteristic function well. Finally, Socrates draws an analogy between justice and health to help show that justice is indeed something that is choiceworthy in itself: “it is ‘some kind of health, beauty and good condition of the soul’; vice the opposite: ‘disease, ugliness, and weakness’ (444d12–e1)” (25).

However, even if Scott is correct that Socrates’ argument does not reference any portions of Socrates’ later theory of forms, it raises a serious problem that has led other commentators to supplement it with the theory of forms. The problem is that “by defining justice in the soul as something analogous to health or harmony, Socrates certainly makes it appear good for the individual. But he needs to show how this special notion of justice, ‘Platonic Justice’ as it is often called, is related to ‘conventional justice’, as manifested in certain familiar types of action. If he cannot, his account of justice risks being irrelevant to the challenge made at the beginning of book II: what he was required to demonstrate was the value of justice conventionally understood” (30).

Given this problem, other scholars such as Cooper (1977) and Kraut (1992a) have maintained that we must rescue the argument by appealing to Plato’s theory of forms in V–VII. One of the solutions, what Scott calls the indirect version of the metaphysical solution, focuses on the role that contemplation plays in the good life. This view notes that in books V–VII, the just person is ruled by reason and devotes himself to contemplating the forms. The consequence of this is that the just person is not motivated to pursue competitive and appetitive goals which are the primarily motivators of unjust action and are what move people to invade the interests of others, i.e. *pleonexia* (31). Thus, the just person is indirectly just; his actions are not motivated by justice itself but are just as a consequence of his being directed at the contemplation of the forms.

Scott objects to this resolution of the problem on the grounds that by the end of book IV, Socrates and Glaucon are satisfied with their account of justice. They think that the argument they have presented so far has demonstrated that Socrates’ peculiar brand of justice, which amounts to a state of the soul, entails that one will perform conventionally just actions. Thus, reasons Scott, the solution to the problem must be found within books II–IV (33).

Scott’s solution begins with looking at what he calls the Psychological Solution, which maintains that the alignment of Socratic and conventional justice is found in the restraint of unnecessary appetites – i.e. those appetites that are not required for health and which we can unlearn, such as overly strong desires for sex, money, and food (33). In passages VIII 554a5–8 and 558d4–59d11, Socrates goes through a series of unjust states and souls, showing that when unnecessary appetites are too strong, they warp the reason of the city and soul. But in the just city and soul they are kept in check, and reason is able to freely pursue its own good. As a consequence, the just city and person will not be led to engage in *pleonexia* against others and commit conventional injustice (34).

However, Scott argues, there is no reason we need to look all the way to book VII for this solution; it is already contained in book IV. For there, Socrates goes through the education and nature of the just state, noting that the guardians will have to be brought up without poetry and music that encourage strong desires for food, drink, and sex, and the just state is one where excessive desires are kept in check (35–38). Moreover, Socrates notes, extending the city state parallel, that the soul will be similar to the state in just these ways: nature and nurture. Thus, we

can conclude, the just soul, too, will have restrained unnecessary desires. As a result, reason will be able to pursue its own good, and one will not be motivated to engage in *pleonexia* and commit conventionally unjust acts (33–38). Thus, Scott concludes that the short route is an adequate route toward an understanding of why justice is beneficial.

In contrast, the longer route represents a separate, more rigorous argument for justice. In contrast to the short route, which rests on a hypothesis, the longer route is distinguished by the fact that its conclusions do not rely on hypotheses; rather one is led to an understanding of the Form of the Good, an unhypothetical first principle not susceptible to further proof. This route is found in the allegory of the cave, which describes how one begins with mathematics, a discipline that allows one to study intelligible forms but which depends on unproved assumptions, and moves to dialectic, which yields an understanding of the Form of the Good itself (49 f.). However, despite its high level of rigor, Socrates does not follow this route. Doing so would be too hard and take too long; indeed, for the rulers, it will take a significant part of their lives, from the ages of 20 to 50.

After analyzing the *Republic*, Scott turns to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, arguing that like the *Republic*, it also recognizes two distinct “routes” of argument: a shorter route that Aristotle actually takes in the *NE* and a longer route that Aristotle acknowledges is possible and more rigorous but does not embark upon. Turning first to the longer route, Scott acknowledges that Aristotle’s cannot look like Plato’s; Aristotle denies the existence of the Form of the Good. Nevertheless, a distinctly Aristotelian longer route can be found by looking at how the arguments in the *NE* connect to other of Aristotle’s works. In their compressed form, these arguments sometimes make explicit reference to other texts, as in the case of *NE* VI 1139b27 and the *Analytics* (117). At other times the connection is implicit, as in the case of the teleology in the function argument, which connects with the *Metaphysics* and *Physics* (117). Scott maintains that we could construct a longer route by following up on these connections. When Aristotle mentions teleology, we could turn to his more detailed arguments to fill in his argument. When he talks about divisions in the soul, we can supplement his argument with details from *De Anima*. Doing the same throughout the *NE*, we could come up with highly ambitious, much more detailed arguments for those conclusions that Aristotle draws in the *NE* (117 f.).

By contrast, Aristotle’s shorter route is precisely that route that Aristotle leads his audience down in the *NE*, using his highly compressed arguments (120). That this route is an adequate route to an understanding of the human good depends centrally on the *NE* being a work of practical philosophy whose primary goal is action, not knowledge. For Scott, this means that the *NE*, as a work of political science, is meant to provide arguments and conclusions that can be used by politicians and their advisors in legislating for a state (106–115, 121). Thus, although the arguments in the *NE* are compressed, what he has provided the audience with is sufficient for their practical aims. The compressed arguments give them details about virtue that are sufficient for drafting legislation. Going beyond the level of detail in the *NE* would be superfluous.

Scott largely defends his contention that this route is a distinctive, adequate route by analyzing Aristotle’s discussions of the limits of “precision,” i. e. “*akribeia*.” These passages not only show that the short route is adequate; they also reveal that Aristotle acknowledged the existence of a longer route. Scott acknowledges that *akribeia* is not used uniformly across the *NE*. However, when Aristotle is discussing how detailed his arguments need to be in a practical work, he uses the term to note that it would be possible to achieve more precision although it would be superfluous to do so. The clearest passage that Scott cites in favor of this reading is Aristotle’s claim that “the expert in politics too should study the soul, and should study it for these reasons, and as far as adequate for his inquiry. Going into further precision is presumably more burdensome

than the project demands” (I 13, 1102a23–5, cited in Scott 129. Scott cites similar passages at X 8, 1178a20–3 and X 4, 1174b2–4). It is clear that Aristotle states here that the political scientist only needs a certain amount of precision given the sort of project that he is engaged in, while simultaneously acknowledging that it would be possible to embark upon a study that contained a much higher level of precision. The idea is that more precision would not give them any more reason for why activities are virtuous or how to achieve virtue. Thus, the short route is adequate in Aristotle, the long route possible but superfluous.

Scott’s analysis and comparison of the methodologies of the *Republic* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* highlights interesting aspects of each work not typically recognized by commentators. Typically when being compared, the *NE* is seen as a far more practically minded work than the *Republic*, which requires that future rulers embark upon an ascent to the Realm of the Forms. But Scott’s account shows that Plato is far closer to Aristotle’s practicality than typically appreciated. Rather than relying on an ascent to the Form of the Good, the primary argument in the *Republic* relies on arguments that utilize Socrates’ account of moral psychology, which places a significant amount of weight on moral upbringing. In the case of Aristotle, the comparison shows that despite his initial rejection of the Platonic longer route, Aristotle recognizes that a longer, highly theoretical – as opposed to practical – path to understanding the human good is possible. In contrast to Plato, he simply does not think it is worthwhile for his particular audience to follow that path.

To finish, I would like to raise a worry about Scott’s account of the two paths in Aristotle. In showing the sufficiency of the shorter route, it is important to Scott’s account that this route not borrow from the longer route. Assuming Scott’s interpretation is correct, this is fairly clear in Plato: the short route uses a series of methods such as hypothesis and analogy that depend on political and psychological analyses while the long route depends on an ascent to the forms using study in math and dialectic. But, assuming his interpretation is correct, the adequacy of the short route in Aristotle is much less clear. In Aristotle’s discussion of the *phronimos*, to be practically wise, one must not only know *that* virtue is good, he must also have some understanding of *why* it is good. On Scott’s reading, the *phronimos* can get away with having a sketchy understanding of the good and the reasons why it is good, since he is involved in a practical rather than a theoretical pursuit. But given that these arguments are abbreviations of much longer arguments, they are incomplete. For the *phronimos* – or even just a political leader – this is bad news. For acting or legislating in accordance with some good requires that one have a strong belief that it is good. For instance, with a weak belief, one might be easily convinced to give up that good and pursue another good. Thus, it would seem beneficial to the *phronimos* and legislator to complete the sketchy arguments in the *NE* by borrowing from the longer route. But if this is the case, it is hard to see how Scott’s short route is a distinctive route at all. Rather, it appears to simply be a sketch of the long route, which is in fact just the single, continuous argument that one finds in the *NE* in a sketchy form.