

## Plato's conception of *pleonexia* as structural excess

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This paper reconstructs Plato's conception of *pleonexia* as a flaw. Drawing on material from the *Laws*, *Timaeus*, *Symposium*, and *Republic*, it argues that Plato understands *pleonexia* as an excess that disrupts proportion and undermines natural order—whether in bodies, seasonal cycles, cities, or souls. The paper concludes that Plato's account offers conceptual resources for countering the pleonectic worldview defended by figures like Callicles in the *Gorgias*.

### 1. Introduction

In classical Greek thought, “*pleonektein*” and “*pleon echein*” typically denote acts of wronging others to gain a larger share of finite worldly goods like wealth or power, while the corresponding noun “*pleonexia*” usually refers either to such behavior or to the disposition that motivates it. What these uses have in common is their interpersonal orientation: the focal case involves taking more than one's fair share at the expense of others. Although *pleonexia* is frequently problematized for its association with injustice, understood as the wronging of others, fifth-century Athenian political discourse sometimes portrays it as both natural and advantageous for humans to practice. As recent scholarship has shown, Plato intervenes in this cultural context, especially in the *Republic*, where he offers an alternative moral framework in which justice is essential to psychic order and virtue.<sup>1</sup> What remains unclear, however, is whether Plato also offers a substantive account of *pleonexia* that strengthens his philosophical response to the pleonectic worldview.

The fact that a positive conception of *pleonexia* in Plato is relatively under investigated may be due in part to the common suspicion that Plato cannot (and does not genuinely try to) persuade those who fully embrace the pleonectic worldview. Socrates' failure to convince

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Kamtekar, Rachana. “Plato and the Pleonectic Conception of Human Nature,” in *Human*, ed. Karolina Hübner (Oxford University Press 2022). She argues that Plato critiques a “pleonectic conception of human nature”, according to which seeking maximum advantage is natural and good, and replaces it with a conception that centers harmony as the basis of psychic order. See also Ironside, Kirsty, and Josh Wilburn. “Feminizing the City: Plato on Women, Masculinity, and Thumos,” *Hypatia* (2024), pp. 1–24. They argue that the *Republic* eliminates a hyper-masculine culture through its redefinition of justice, its educational reforms, and its reshaping of the guardian class. *Pleonexia*, as they argue (pp. 9-13), is a core feature of the very culture that Plato targets.

Callicles in the *Gorgias* is a paradigmatic case: for someone committed to manliness, freedom, and outward political success, *pleonexia* is not a problem but a mark of human excellence and superiority. By contrast, while Glaucon and Adeimantus are familiar with that worldview, they remain open to persuasion because of their pre-existing convictions about justice.<sup>2</sup> On this reading, Plato's strategy is not to dissuade his opponents about *pleonexia* directly, but to present a more compelling account of justice to those who already regard it as a virtue. This understanding of his strategy has made any novel conceptualization of *pleonexia* seem unnecessary.<sup>3</sup>

This paper argues that Plato does, in fact, have a conception of *pleonexia*—one that can be reconstructed from evidence across multiple dialogues. It is hinted at in an important passage from *Laws* 10.906b3-d4, where The Athenian stranger explains:<sup>4</sup>

“There are some souls residing on earth, which are clearly beast-like, that have acquired unjust gain, and that prostrate themselves before the souls of the guardian [...] and persuade them that it is acceptable for them (as the sayings of vicious people go) to have too large a share (πλεονεκτοῦσιν) among people and suffer no harsh treatment. But we say, imagine, that the flaw (ἀμάρτημα) just named – *pleonexia* (τὴν πλεονεξίαν) – is what is called “disease” in fleshy bodies, “plague” in the seasonal and yearly cycles, and in cities and constitutions, this same thing, by having its name changed, is “injustice” [...] Thus anyone who argues that gods are always indulgent to the unjust and to those who do injustice

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<sup>2</sup> See Balot, Ryan. “Freedom, Pleonexia, and Persuasion in Plato's *Gorgias*,” in *Plato's Gorgias*, ed. J. Clerk Shaw (Cambridge University Press 2024). As Balot observes, Callicles treats domination and the achievements of powerful men as sufficient justification for *pleonexia*, even though he cannot explain how such a life sustains psychic order (p. 190). Accordingly, on Balot's view (pp. 191–92), Socrates makes only limited progress in advancing his views until he engages interlocutors who value psychic health more than outward success. A similar point is made in Burnyeat, M. F. “Justice Writ Large and Small in Republic 4,” in *Politeia in Greek and Roman Philosophy*, eds. Verity Harte and Melissa Lane (Cambridge University Press 2013), p. 212. In his response to the Sachs problem, Burnyeat concedes that “the main body of *Republic* would be a sorry failure” if it were an attempt to respond to someone like Thrasymachus who rejects the assumption that justice is a virtue (348c2 – e4).

<sup>3</sup> What further suggests that Socrates does not intend to re-conceptualize *pleonexia* is that the term largely disappears from the *Republic* as the dialogue advances, despite its central role in shaping the challenge. It is clearly important to Thrasymachus, who admires “the great power to take more” (τὸν μέγαρα δυνάμενον πλεονεκτεῖν) (344a1-2), and though Polemarchus makes no explicit reference to *pleonexia*, his account of justice clearly reflects the relevant cultural influences. On Polemarchus' “pleonectic assumptions,” see Wilburn, Josh. *The Political Soul: Plato on Thumos, Spirited Motivation, and the City* (Oxford University Press 2021), pp. 84–85. More importantly, when Glaucon and Adeimantus revive Thrasymachus' position, both make explicit appeals to *pleonexia*. Glaucon claims that “in any context, public or private, [the unjust man] is the winner and outdoes (πλεονεκτεῖν) his enemies, and through outdoing (πλεονεκτοῦντα), he becomes wealthy, benefiting his friends and harming his enemies” (362b5-c1). Adeimantus adds that those trained in using persuasion and force believe “we'll outdo others (πλεονεκτοῦντες) without paying a penalty” (365d5). With a few exceptions, translations of Plato's works are drawn from Cooper and Hutchinson (1997), with significant modifications aimed at offering a more literal rendering where appropriate.

<sup>4</sup> The translation of this passage from *Laws* is from C. D. C. Reeve (2022), with slight modifications.

... must in effect be prepared to say that if wolves, for instance, were to give watch-dogs a small part of their prey, the dogs would be appeased by the gift and turn a blind eye to the plundering of the flock.”

On the one hand, this passage recalls the conventional, interpersonal understanding of *pleonexia*, particularly through its characterization of unjust individuals as those who have acquired “unjust gain” and defend the belief that it is acceptable for them to “take more” (πλεονεκτοῦσιν) without suffering consequences. On the other hand, the passage also moves beyond this understanding by identifying *pleonexia* as the flaw (ἀμάρτημα) that manifests in different domains under different names: as “disease” (νόσημα) in bodies, “plague” (λοιμόν) in the seasonal and annual cycles, and “injustice” (ἀδικίαν) in cities and constitutions. This shift suggests that, while *pleonexia* remains linked to interpersonal wrongdoing, Plato also conceives of it as a flaw that gives rise to analogous states of corruption.

In what follows, I take this passage as a cue to investigate what this flaw is across different contexts, with the aim of clarifying the conception of *pleonexia* that emerges and how it connects to Plato’s moral psychology. I begin with two passages in which “*pleonexia*” appears that directly illuminate the account in the *Laws*. At *Timaeus* 81e6-82b7, it appears as an excess that destabilizes the elemental structure of the body, producing disease. At *Symposium* 188a1-b5, it takes the form of an excess that disrupts the structured interplay of opposing forces, dysregulating natural cycles and giving rise to plagues. On my reading, these passages offer complementary conceptions of *pleonexia* as a flaw of structural excess—that is, excess within a structure that disrupts its proportion and undermines its order and harmony. Building on this suggestion, I turn to the *Republic* to show that the same flaw gives rise to injustice, appearing there as a structural excess that inverts the hierarchical structure of soul. I conclude with remarks on how Plato’s conception of *pleonexia* as structural excess provides the conceptual resources needed to confront directly the pleonectic worldview defended in the *Gorgias*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Melissa Lane, Hendrik Lorenz, and Benjamin Morison for their guidance on my dissertation research, which provided the foundation for this essay, and Joshua Wilburn for comments on recent drafts.

## 2. Pleonexia and bodily disease in the Timaeus

In his account of the origin of diseases, Timaeus identifies different underlying issues that destabilize the elemental structure of the body and cause it to degenerate. He includes *pleonexia* among these issues in the following passage (81e6-82b7):

“How diseases originate is, I take it, obvious to all. Given that there are four kinds of stuff out of which the body has been constructed—earth, fire, water, and air—an unnatural excess (ἡ παρὰ φύσιν πλεονεξία) or deficiency may occur among these. Or they may switch regions, each leaving its own and moving into the region of another. Or again, since there is in fact more than one variety of fire and the other stuffs, it may happen that a given part accommodates a particular variety that is not appropriate for it. When these things happen, they bring on conflicts and diseases (στάσεις καὶ νόσους). For whenever each element comes to be or is transformed in a way contrary to nature, parts that used to be cold become hot, or those that are dry go on to become moist, and so with light and heavy, too, undergoing every kind of transformation. Indeed, it is our view that only when that which arrives at or leaves a particular part is the same as that part, consistent, uniform and in proper proportion with it, will the body be allowed to remain stable, whole and healthy. On the other hand, anything that steps out of tune with these [parts], as it departs or arrives from outside, will produce endlessly various alterations, diseases and corruptions.”

Since the body is composed of fire, water, earth, and air, Timaeus explains that disease can result from an excess or deficiency of a given element, from its displacement from its proper place, or from the incorporation of an element unsuited to the natural composition of the body. Among these issues, “*pleonexia*” refers to the unnatural excess (ἡ παρὰ φύσιν πλεονεξία) of one or more elements that comprise the body and its parts. A closer look at Timaeus’ broader account will clarify how such excess arises in the body and how it functions as a cause of disease, as described in the passage above.

Based on his description of the process of replenishment (ὁ δὲ τρόπος τῆς πληρώσεως) (81a2), an unnatural excess arises from the overconsumption of food and drink. On the one hand, Timaeus thinks that whenever food and drink are consumed, these substances are thoroughly broken down so that their elemental particles circulate through the body, filling its depleted areas by naturally gravitating toward their own kind. On the other hand, he also thinks that the creator gods foresaw that humans would be “intemperate (ἀκολασίαν) in matters of food and drink,” and for this reason, they designed the lower abdomen, specifically “to prevent the swift destruction of our mortal race by disease (νόσους)” (72e3-73a1). In this design, anything “superfluous” (τοῦ περιγενησομένου) is stored in the belly—in a receptacle wound round with intestines—so that nourishment passes through slowly, filling the body only as needed. This mechanism is intended both to support replenishment and to guard against

disease, but in light of the account of disease above, Timaeus seems to think that overconsumption can eventually overwhelm this mechanism, producing an excess (*pleonexia*) of superfluous material that will fill and nourish parts of the elemental structure beyond proper measure.

There are at least three ways in which *pleonexia*, understood as an unnatural excess, functions as a cause of “conflicts and diseases” (στάσεις καὶ νόσους). First, it fills the body in ways incompatible with health as Timaeus conceives it. On his view, a body is constantly depleted by its environment and can maintain health only by correctly replenishing its elements. In the above passage, he says, “only when [the element] that arrives at or leaves a particular part is the same as that part, consistent, uniform and in proper proportion with it, will the body be allowed to remain stable, whole and healthy” (82b3-5). Having an unnatural excess implies that parts will be disproportionately replenished or filled, beyond what a body can productively absorb or harmonized with its elemental structure.

Second, apart from disrupting proportions, *pleonexia* causes parts to undergo other transformations as well. Timaeus says above that, under such unnatural conditions, “parts that used to be cold become hot, or those that are dry go on to become moist, and so with light and heavy, too, undergoing every kind of transformation” (82a6-b2). Outside the body, such transformations occur when elements interact, leading to various combinations and dissolutions. Within the body, where elements are ordered and situated, an unnatural excess will fill and grow parts in ways that can initiate aberrant interactions, thus provoking conflicts and transformations.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, there is good reason to think that *pleonexia* destabilizes the elemental structure progressively, as its effects compound over time. First, since Timaeus thinks that elements are naturally drawn to their own kind, any unnatural excess will tend to accumulate further, filling the body in ways that exacerbate disproportion, conflict and transformation within its elemental structure.<sup>7</sup> Second, since replenishment is pleasant, *pleonexia* naturally encourages continued

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<sup>6</sup> For his simpler account of elemental changes, see *Tim.*, 49b7-c6, where transformations generally follow degrees of condensation or dissolution, or some combination of one with degrees of warming or cooling. For more his nuanced explanations, see *Tim.*, 55d8-58c4, and cf. 60e2-61c2, where he discusses the specific ways in which such-and-such power or property has such-and-such transformative effect on such-and-such quantity of such-and-such element, and under such-and-such circumstances.

<sup>7</sup> In his voidless *kosmos*, Timaeus says that each element (through its set of properties and powers) interacts with other elements and gravitates towards its own kind (*Tim.*, 58d8). He thinks that the elements that comprise our body “follow the manner of the movement of anything within the universe at large—everything moves toward that which is of its own kind” (*Tim.*, 81a2-4).

excess. According to Timaeus, the body experiences pleasure and pain through emptyings (κενώσεις) and fillings (πληρώσεις), with each sensation arising in proportion to the degree of loss or gain (64d-65b). An unnatural excess, then, implies that the body is not only overfilled with food and drink, but also pathologically disposed to continued overconsumption, whether in pursuit of sustained pleasure or in avoidance of the pain of emptying.<sup>8</sup>

I have shown that *pleonexia*, as it is conceived of the *Timaeus*, is an unnatural excess of elemental material that a body stores when it is overfilled with food and drink. It functions as a structural flaw—an excess that destabilizes the body’s elemental composition by replenishing its parts beyond proportion and generating elemental conflicts and transformations. It is also interestingly linked to intemperance (ἀκολασίαν) or insatiability (ἀπληστίαν) in the *Timaeus*. The intemperate person fills his body without satisfying it, which not only excessively stimulates “the mortal part of soul,” which is “always grazing” in the region where excess food and drink are stored (65a, 70e; c.f., 72e-73a), but also produces a *pleonexia*.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Pleonexia and plagues in the Symposium

In further support of the structural interpretation of *pleonexia*, I turn to Eryximachus’ speech in the *Symposium*. He starts by accepting Pausanias’ view that *Eros* motivates people differently, depending on which species of *Eros* it is—common/hubristic or heavenly/orderly—but whereas Pausanias highlights its influence on human souls (186a), Eryximachus wants to show that *Eros* has influence “not only in the human domain, but also in that of the gods” (186ab). In the following passage (188a1-b5), where he mentions *pleonexia*, he discusses how *Eros* manifests through the arrangement of the seasons of the year:<sup>10</sup>

“Even the arrangement (ἡ σύστασις) of the seasons of the year is full (μεστή) of both these [kinds of *Eros*]. When what I just mentioned—hot and cold, wet and dry—happen to be drawn together (πρὸς ἀλλήλα) by orderly *Eros* and receive a temperate harmony and union, [the arrangement] brings good climate and health for humans, animals, and plants, and it does no harm. But when hubristic *Eros*

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<sup>8</sup> By contrast, a healthy state entails stable pleasure, on Timaeus’ view, since nothing “steps out of tune as it departs or arrives from outside [the body].”

<sup>9</sup> The creators placed this psychic part in the belly, according to Timaeus, so that “its noise and clamor” does not disturb the motions of the most divine part of soul (70e), but the latter part of his account suggests that when the desire of food and drink prevails over the desire of wisdom, this appetitive part will “amplify its own motions” (τὸ μὲν σφέτερον αὐξοῦσαι) and produce ignorance, “the gravest disease of all” (80ab).

<sup>10</sup> The following passage from Plato’s *Symposium* is translated by the author.

governs the seasons of the years, it corrupts many things and causes harm. For plagues (οἱ λοιμοί) delight to arise from such conditions and many other lawless diseases among animals and plants. Frosts, hailstones, and blights likewise arise from *pleonexia* and disorder among such erotic relations (ἐκ πλεονεξίας καὶ ἀκοσμίας περὶ ἄλληλα τῶν τοιούτων γίγνεται ἐρωτικῶν)."

In this passage, *pleonexia* is presented as a disorder that arises when common *Eros* governs the seasonal arrangement. Eryximachus begins with a description of the local effects of this disorder, including harms to plants, animals, and humans—what he calls “plagues” and “many kinds of lawless diseases” that result from climatic extremes, such as frosts, hailstones, and blights. But according to him, all these effects arise ἐκ πλεονεξίας καὶ ἀκοσμίας, an underlying condition that becomes clearer when contrasted with that fostered by heavenly *Eros*. Unlike common *Eros*, heavenly *Eros* produces a favorable climate in which plants and animals flourish, doing so by drawing together (πρὸς ἀλλήλα) hot and cold, wet and dry, and establishing a temperate harmony and union in their relations. By contrast, common *Eros* fosters *pleonexia* and disorder in their relations (περὶ ἄλληλα), which dysregulates the seasons, ruins the climate and inflicts widespread harm. This contrast suggests that *pleonexia* arises when dynamic qualities—that is, the various qualities that interact with one another in a given system through movement or change—are drawn together in erotic relations that disrupt their natural, structured interplay.

Eryximachus’ medical account of erotic influence offers a couple of clarifications that strongly suggests that *pleonexia*—the disorder that disrupts structured interplay—consists in a form of excess.<sup>11</sup> In the case of bodies, on his view, the relations among dynamic qualities become disordered when those qualities are excessively intensified, whether through bodily fulfillment or erotic stimulation. A comparable process, I suggest, occurs when the seasonal arrangement becomes full (μεστή) through the influence of common *Eros*.

The first point of clarification concerns the mechanisms by which *Eros* acts upon dynamic qualities to shape their relations. Eryximachus offers a hint when he defines medicine as “the science of *Eros*’ influence on a body with respect to its filling and emptying (πρὸς πλησμονὴν καὶ κένωσιν) and claims that expert physicians use this knowledge to promote concord among the most basic qualities in the body (186c6-e1). His point is that the physician “can implant the proper species of *Eros* when it is absent,” particularly by fostering the sort of

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<sup>11</sup> N.b., that Eryximachus’ medical account directly informs his broader understanding of erotic influence. The objects of erotic influence, moreover, are the same across bodies and heavenly regions. In the above passage, he mentions “what I previously mentioned”, referring back to the most basic qualities in bodies, which are naturally opposed (ἔχθιστα τὰ ἐναντιώτατα) (186d6-e1).

interplay that generates bodily health (186d1-5). His reference to filling and emptying, however, suggests a more specific mechanism. In mimicking the effects of heavenly *Eros*, the physician strengthens or weakens dynamic qualities by inducing bodily states of fullness or depletion, presumably through food and drink, as well as other medical interventions common at the time, such as various methods of purgation (e.g., inducing vomiting, bloodletting, and so on).<sup>12</sup> *Eros* itself, then, appears to operate by directly intensifying or diminishing these qualities, thereby shaping the erotic relations that reflect its nature.

The second point of clarification concerns an asymmetry between the kinds of *Eros*. Both can shape relations by intensifying dynamic qualities—a point suggested by Eryximachus’ claim that health or disease depends on which parts within a body receive gratification (χαρίζεσθαι).<sup>13</sup> Just as medicine, on this view, fills the body in ways that stimulate only those parts whose gratification promotes health, so too does heavenly *Eros* selectively gratify through intensification. By contrast, common *Eros* appears to do so indiscriminately. More significantly, only heavenly *Eros* is clearly associated with diminution. When Eryximachus warns that melodies shaped by common *Eros* must be enjoyed in moderation, lest they give rise to “intemperance” (ἀκολασίαν), he links this concern to a parallel one in medicine—namely, the need to manage desires in relation to the art of cookery, so that one may enjoy pleasure “without disease” (ἄνευ νόσου) (187e1-6). This suggests that medicine—and by extension, heavenly *Eros*—not only intensifies qualities by filling the appropriate parts, but also diminishes them when necessary, particularly in cases where improper gratification has generated disorder in the interplay among dynamic qualities. In this respect, too, common *Eros* differs: it appears to act solely through intensification. The relations it shapes thus reflect the disorder that arises when the body is filled beyond measure and the wrong parts are continually gratified.

The preceding discussion clarifies that common *Eros* shapes relations in bodies by intensifying dynamic qualities without restraint or discrimination. This unchecked intensification leads to excess and disproportion in their interplay, which comes to be marked by extremes rather than harmony and union. Although Eryximachus explicitly mentions

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<sup>12</sup> Unlike Timaeus, who uses πλήρωσις to invoke a more general kind of filling for his cosmological framework, Eryximachus uses πλησμονή, which connotes bodily fulfillment in respect of food and drink. C.f., the account of medicine as that which knows “the foods that are best for the body” at *Gorgias* 464d.

<sup>13</sup> “It is necessary,” he says, “to gratify (χαρίζεσθαι) the good and healthy parts” and “to refrain (ἀχαριστεῖν) from gratifying the bad and diseased parts” (186c2-4)

*pleonexia* only in connection with the disordered relations that arise when common *Eros* governs the seasonal arrangement, his underlying concern is the same. When any interplay is governed by excess rather than balance and restraint, the result is that it becomes pleonectic and disordered. In the body, such interplay produces disease; in heavenly regions, it disrupts the seasonal arrangement, producing extremes of climate and widespread plague. In both cases, proportion and harmony are undermined by structural excess, which is to say, by a form of *pleonexia*.

#### 4. *The structural logic of injustice*

Plato's *Laws* introduces *pleonexia* as a flaw variously described as “disease” (νόσημα), “plague” (λοιμόν), and “injustice” (ἀδικίαν). To clarify the conception of *pleonexia* implicit in this account—and to lay the groundwork for understanding its role in Plato's moral psychology—I have examined passages in which *pleonexia* is explicitly associated with disease or plague as an underlying cause. These passages suggest that, for Plato, it is a structural excess that disrupts proportion and harmony and gives rise to disorder.

Before turning to Plato's moral psychology, it is necessary to address an interpretive difficulty raised by the *Laws*. It states that when *pleonexia* arises in political domains, it is called “injustice”, a claim that implies a corresponding usage in psychic domains. The Platonic corpus never explicitly offers an account of *pleonexia* defined as injustice parallel to the accounts we find in the cases of disease and plague, however. As a result, the interpretive strategy used to clarify the connection between *pleonexia* and disease or plague cannot be applied as directly in the case of injustice. A further complication is that when Socrates offers descriptions of injustice, he identifies it instead with meddling (*polupragmosunē*) or conflict (*stasis*), phenomena that sometimes function as distinct causes of an unjust state.<sup>14</sup> That state

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion on this point, Lane, Melissa. *Of Rule and Office: Plato's Ideas of the Political* (Princeton University Press 2023). Lane calls attention to the “principles of dynamics” that are at play in the transformative coming into being and the transformative passing away of unjust constitutions (p. 264). Based on the *Republic*, Books VIII and IX, she explains that each flawed constitution lacks rulers who can safeguard its current officeholders. As a result, each constitution is such that it is vulnerable to the emergence of a different group of rulers—through meddling and exchange—whose characters can impel political change (pp. 68-69). This change is precipitated by the predominance of these new rulers, on the one hand, and the disunity and στάσις among the current, soon-to-be previous rulers, on the other hand. But per the point about safeguarding officeholders, these new rulers will form a constitution that is no less vulnerable those same principles of dynamics, for which reason this process will repeat itself. For her full discussion, see, pp. 264-72.

itself is also at times described as *injustice*.<sup>15</sup> It is unclear, in other words, whether injustice is to be identified with meddling, with *stasis*, or with the disordered state they produce—and none of these are straightforwardly equated with *pleonexia*.

A possible solution emerges when we view these phenomena as mutually reinforcing aspects of a single disordering process through which injustice arises. Meddling, *stasis*, or disorder may receive different emphasis in different political or psychological contexts, but each belongs to a unified dynamic—one that allows injustice to be identified with any of them, at any stage of the degeneration. On this view, the claim that *pleonexia* is called *injustice* need not imply that it is equivalent to meddling or *stasis*, or that it holds a privileged connection to injustice. Rather, it indicates that *pleonexia* is one key aspect or feature of the same underlying process by which cities or souls become unjust.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, in the *Timaeus* and *Symposium*, where *pleonexia* is associated with disease and plague, it is best understood as synonymous with disease or plague in the somewhat looser sense that it is a defining part of the process by which such states present. Hence, it is not inconsistent, for example, when Plato identifies injustice with *stasis* and also treats *stasis* as an effect of injustice, as he does in *Republic*, Book I, where Socrates names *stasis* among the outcomes of injustice (351d3–352c9). Depending on the purpose at hand, injustice may be presented as a pattern of behavior, an underlying state of disorder, or a set of activities that give rise to that state. If *pleonexia* is a feature of the degenerative process by which cities or souls become unjust, then it is not surprising that “injustice” may sometimes serve as a name for it.

In the following section, I turn to the *Republic* to identify the aspect of injustice that I take as *pleonexia* in the soul. I argue that it consists in the undue authority of one of the subordinate soul-parts, resulting from its being filled with so-called pleasures and rendered big, strong, and insatiable. Several considerations support this interpretation: its structural analogy to *pleonexia* in other domains; its causal connection to injustice in souls; an explicit reference to *pleonexia* in Book IX of *Republic*; and a passage from *Laws* III, where this same feature is treated as a primary cause of injustice in souls.

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<sup>15</sup> E.g., sometimes Socrates likens injustice to disease (444d3-10), implying that “injustice” refers to a political or psychological state of vice. At other times, he names injustice alongside cowardice, immoderation, and ignorance, described as “the turmoil and straying of [component] parts” that collectively constitute the whole of vice (444b–c).

<sup>16</sup> See also Wilburn (2021), who notes that although modern scholars have been puzzled by what appears to be Plato’s flexible use of psychological terms, “Plato himself was entirely comfortable ascribing a variety of activities and motivations both to the embodied human being and to their soul or one of its parts” (p. 24).

### 5. *Structural excess and injustice in souls*

Socrates describes the just person as one who will not embezzle a deposit of gold or silver, rob temples, betray his friends or city, and so on, and the reason is that “every part within him does its own work, whether it is ruling or being ruled” (443b1-2). Such a person has ordered himself (κοσμήσαντα), having harmonized the three parts of the soul (συναρμόσαντα τρία ὄντα) (443d5-6). In a soul so ordered, injustice simply does not occur, since “he does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow them to meddle with each other (πολυπραγμονεῖν πρὸς ἄλληλα)” (443d2-3). Here, meddling implies a disruption of psychic order and relational harmony, which justice prevents by ensuring that each part performs its own function in proper subordination. Building on this account, the following passage shows that justice also prevents a form of structural excess (442a4-b3):

“Having been nurtured in this way, and having truly learned their own roles and been educated in them, [reason and spirit] will govern the appetitive part, which is the largest part in each person’s soul and is by nature most insatiable (ἀπληστότατον) for money. They’ll watch over it to see that it isn’t filled (πίμπλασθαι) by the so-called pleasures of the body and that it doesn’t become so big and strong (πολὸν καὶ ἰσχυρὸν) that it no longer does its own work but attempts to enslave and rule over the classes it isn’t fitted to rule, thereby overturning everyone’s whole life.”

This passage illustrates how excess arises within the soul when reason and spirit fail to restrain appetite. Their proper function includes ruling over the appetitive part and ensuring that it is not “filled” (πίμπλασθαι) by the so-called pleasures of the body. When this regulation fails, the appetitive part may become “big and strong” enough to abandon its own work and then attempt to enslave the ruling parts. Filling this part with pleasure is thus tantamount to empowering it beyond measure, which destabilizes the psychic relation of ruling and being ruled. In other words, this excess disproportionately empowers a soul-part that is by nature subordinate and thereby inverts the hierarchical structure of the soul.

That this structural excess—though unnamed—participates in the very process by which souls become unjust is supported by Socrates’ later description of injustice in souls. He says that “it must be a kind of conflict (στάσιν), meddlesomeness (πολυπραγμοσύνην), and interference in the work of another (ἀλλοτριοπραγμοσύνην), and the uprising (ἐπανάστασιν) of one part of the soul against the whole, so that it may have authority (ἄρχη) within it” (444b1-3). These named psychic activities achieve the same result as the previously discussed structural excess: they empower a lower part of the soul. But whereas the above passage focuses specifically on the unchecked growth and domination of appetite, this description generalizes

the problem, identifying injustice with the uprising (ἐπανάστασις) of any subordinate part, whether spirit or appetite. In either case, the soul becomes governed by what ought by nature to serve (τοιούτου ὄντος φύσει οἷου πρέπειν αὐτῷ δουλεύειν) (444b4-5)—a reversal in the relation of ruling and being ruled that Socrates describes as unnatural and analogous to the condition of diseased bodies (444d3-10). Given this connection between injustice and the empowering of a subordinate part through filling it, the account of psychic degeneration in Book VIII is especially instructive: at each stage, the excessive filling and growth of a lower part increases injustice, with the degree of injustice corresponding to how low and powerful the dominant part becomes.<sup>17</sup>

A reason for identifying this structural excess as *pleonexia* appears later in the *Republic*, where Socrates explicitly uses the term when describing individuals who gorge themselves on bodily pleasures. He likens them to grazing cattle, always looking down toward the earth and their dinner tables, feeding, growing fat and fornicating, but never getting “filled” (ἐπληρώθησαν) with real being or experiencing pleasures that are stable and pure (586a1-8). These are precisely the kinds of indulgence that fill—and thereby empower—the appetitive part, and Socrates attributes the escalating drive behind this indulgence to *pleonexia*: “And because of *pleonexia* for these things (ἔνεκα τῆς τούτων πλεονεξίας), they kick and butt them with iron horns and hooves, killing each other, because their desires are insatiable (ἀπληστίαν), and the reason is that they do not fill themselves (ἑαυτῶν πιμπλάντες) . . . with what truly sustains them” (586b1-4). This suggests that such people have a big and strong appetitive part, which not only inclines them towards bodily gratification but also intensifies their desires through its inability to be satisfied. It also indicates that Plato associates *pleonexia* with this underlying condition.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Throughout Book VIII, Plato depicts each unjust soul-type as marked by an increase in desire in a lower part, which destabilizes the soul’s hierarchy. The timocratic individual has a father who nourishes the rational part, allowing it to grow (αὐξόντος) (550b2), but rival influences cultivate the spirited and appetitive parts, creating internal tension until he surrenders rule to the spirited element. The oligarchic individual, reacting to his father’s downfall, turns greedily to wealth, making appetite “a big king” (μέγαν βασιλέα), filled with pleasures and desires (ἡδονῶν καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν γέμοντα) (553c6, 559c9). The democratic individual secretly nourishes desires that had not been eliminated by his father, causing them to “become many and strong” (πολλά τε καὶ ἰσχυραὶ ἐγένοντο) (560b1). Finally, the tyrannical soul develops a dominant erotic craving—“a big drone” (μέγαν κηφήνα)—which is “nourished and intensified to the extreme” (ἐπὶ τὸ ἔσχατον αὐξοῦσαι τε καὶ τρέφουσαι) by other filled-up desires (573a1, 573a6-7). See, Hitz, Zena. “Degenerate Regimes in Plato’s *Republic*,” in *Plato’s “Republic”: A Critical Guide*, ed. Mark L. McPherran (Cambridge University Press 2010), pp. 103–131.

<sup>18</sup> This description recalls the progressive or self-reinforcing aspect of *pleonexia* apparent in the *Timaeus*, where improper filling both stems from and contributes to an underlying excess. Socrates seems to illustrate this self-reinforcing mechanism with tale of Leontius (439e-440d), who “struggled

Before turning to the conclusion, I want to return briefly to the *Laws*, the dialogue whose analysis of *pleonexia* as a flaw (ἀμάρτημα) prompted this inquiry. There, Plato links injustice to a disproportionate allocation of authority within the soul, reinforcing the interpretation that the structural excess I have identified is not only constitutive of injustice, but also precisely what he names *pleonexia*. This connection is made explicit in *Laws* III, where the Athenian describes the collapse of an early Greek empire as a result of its rulers “erring” (ἀμαρτόντες) by “taking more (τὸ πλεονεκτεῖν) than what the established laws allow” (690d5, 691a4).<sup>19</sup> To illustrate the nature of this political flaw, the Athenian offers a series of analogies (691c1-4):

“If someone goes against proportion and gives what is too big to what is too small, whether sails to ships, nourishment to bodies, or rule to souls, he will, I take it, ruin everything. Some things, grown wanton, lead to disease; others to injustice (ἀδικίαν) born of wantonness. [...] A first-class lawgiver’s job is to have a sense of proportion and to guard against this danger.”

The flaw, in general terms, consists in giving too much to something too small, which violates proportion. The soul, just like cities, bodies, and even ships, is ruined when one errs in distributing “rule to the soul” (ψυχαῖς ἀρχάς). Earlier in the discussion, the Athenian emphasizes the importance of cultivating strength of mind such that “desires are kept under control,” particularly those belonging to the part of soul that experiences pleasure and pain and quarrels with a soul’s natural ruling principles (τοῖς φύσει ἀρχικοῖς) (688a1-b4, 689b3). The implication is that injustice arises when authority is disproportionately allocated to this part of the soul—precisely the kind of structural excess that characterizes *pleonexia*.<sup>20</sup>

To return to the more complicated case of the political analogue of *pleonexia*, my interpretation suggests that injustice in the city also arises from a kind of *epanastasis*—the uprising of a part that is by nature subordinate—when individuals seek honors or offices they

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with himself”, so as to avoid taking pleasure in a shameful sight, but was at last “overpowered (κρατούμενος) by the desire” and took a look, saying to himself, “take your fill of the beautiful sight (ἐμπλήσθητε τοῦ καλοῦ θεάματος)!” When the appetitive part has excessive authority, it can motivate behavior that reinforces its strength and size through additional filling.

<sup>19</sup> On their pleonectic overreach, see *Laws* III 690e7-691a4: (ATHENIAN) So where do we suppose this destructive process invariably starts? Among kings or people? (CLINIUS) Most instances suggest that this is probably a disease of kings whose life of luxury has made them arrogant. (ATHENIAN) So it is clear that it was the kings of that era who were first infected by the acquisitive spirit in defiance of the law of the land (τὸ πλεονεκτεῖν τῶν τεθέντων νόμων).

<sup>20</sup> C.f. also the definition of injustice in souls at *Laws* IX.863e6-864a1, according to which it is “the domination of passion and fear and pleasure and pain and envies and desires in the soul (τὴν γὰρ τοῦ θυμοῦ καὶ φόβου καὶ ἡδονῆς καὶ λύπης καὶ φθόνων καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν ἐν ψυχῇ τυραννίδα)”.

do not deserve. As Socrates remarks, such a person is “exalted” (ἐπαίρομενος) by wealth, strength, or popularity and attempts to claim roles for which he is undeserving (ἀνάξιος ὢν), disrupting the natural relation of rule in the city (434a9-b3). This view is also corroborated in the *Laws*. In Book III, political ruin followed, not merely from the pleonectic erring of rulers, but from the allocation of power to rulers whose ignorance of a Hesiod principle led to *stasis* rather than unified judgement.<sup>21</sup> Hence, the Athenian speculates: “But if anyone had been able to control the various offices and produce a single authority out of the three, he would have saved all the splendid projects of that age from destruction” (692c3-7). Book VI later develops this conviction into an account of political justice, which aims to avoid the *stasis* that fills political organizations by distributing shares of authority proportionally—“granting the greater to those that are greater in virtue, and the less to those of the opposite character” in accordance with “what is fitting to each in due measure” (757b7-c7). This account is already anticipated in *Laws* III, where the Athenian insists that no one of the greatest ignorance “should be entrusted with any degree of power (ἀρχῆς)” (689c7-8), since doing so ruins cities through the political discord that would follow from meddling and professional incompetence within the ruling class.

## 6. Conclusion

I have argued that Plato conceives of *pleonexia* as a structural flaw—a *para phusin* excess—that manifest across different domains. It produces disease when it destabilizes the elemental structure of the body, brings about plague when it dysregulates the seasonal and annual cycles, and gives rise to injustice when it inverts the hierarchical structure of cities or souls.

I conclude with a final reflection on how Plato confronts the pleonectic worldview through his conception of *pleonexia*. Its most forceful defender is Callicles in the *Gorgias*, who claims that natural justice entitles the superior man to the greater share, and that “the best and most powerful among us” will eventually restore such justice, when he seizes his rightful share and is revealed our master (483c8-484a6).<sup>22</sup> Though unlawful by convention, pleonectic

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<sup>21</sup> I.e., that “when it is harmful to get the whole, and the half is enough, then enough is better than a feast, and is the preferable alternative” (690e1-5).

<sup>22</sup> I do not mean to conflate Callicles with Plato’s other interlocutors who defend *pleonexia*, such as Thrasymachus, but rather to treat Callicles’ views as representative of what Plato aims to confront. On Callicles as a paradigmatic figure, see Balot, Ryan K. *Greed and Injustice in Classical Athens* (Princeton University Press 2001), p. 5. On important differences between Callicles and Thrasymachus, see

behavior expresses natural excellence, on Callicles' view, and it produces a just political hierarchy. In the *Laws*, where unjust individuals defend their right to take more, such behavior is linked explicitly to *pleonexia*, which I have argued is an excess in pleasures or desires that disproportionately empowers a subordinate part of soul. In the *Gorgias*, we find a reference to a similar kind of excess, when Callicles insists that happiness lies in letting desires grow “as big as possible” (ὡς μεγίστας) and “filling” them (ἀποπιμπλάναι) with whatever one wants (491e9, 492a2). Socrates problematizes this psychic state through a myth that analogizes the desiring part of soul to a leaky jar that can never be filled (492e7-d3). In foolish souls, he says, this part is “intemperate” (τὸ ἀκόλαστον), constantly demanding to be filled, much like the diseased bodies described by Timaeus or Eryximachus. But unlike these figures, who offer diagnostic frameworks for problematizing structural excess, Socrates draws on imagery from a myth, attributed to “a clever man, a teller of stories,” which Callicles might dismiss as “fancy phrases and contracts of men that are contrary to nature” (492c3-8).

In the *Republic*, we are provided with the conceptual resources for grasping that there is a psychic structure and that *pleonexia* harms it by disrupting proportion and undermining order—just as it harms anything else.<sup>23</sup> Although the conception of this psychic structure is not fully articulated in the *Gorgias*, its basic logic is clearly already in place. Socrates claims that anything—whether a body, a soul, or something else—is good only when it possesses its characteristic excellence, which requires an orderly internal condition. This principle supports his view that a soul with its own proper order (κόσμον ἔχουσα τὸν ἑαυτῆς) is superior to a disordered one (τῆς ἀκοσμήτου) (506e4-5). This principle also applies universally, for which reason Socrates says that wise people call the universe “a world order (κόσμον), rather than a place of disorder or intemperance (οὐκ ἀκοσμίαν οὐδὲ ἀκολασίαν)” (508a3-4). Although Socrates does not call *pleonexia* a flaw here, he importantly criticizes Callicles for failing to recognize the power of proportionate equality, wrongly believing that “one ought to practice getting the greater share” (πλεονεξίαν οἶε δεῖν ἀσκεῖν) (508a7). Here “*pleonexia*” refers to a

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Barney, Rachel. “Callicles and Thrasymachus,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta.

<sup>23</sup> This raises the question of whether Callicles is denied the chance to refine his view using Socrates' psychological framework. He stops defending his view after Socrates compares the superior man to undiscerning hedonists at 494b-e. If Callicles were allowed to refine his account, his superior man might resemble one of the unjust rulers of *Republic* VIII or IX, someone who has successfully gained a larger share. But even in that case, Socrates could argue that his soul is disordered by the same excess. For Socrates, any soul that permits *pleonexia*—whether in the appetitive part or in the spirited part—is inferior to the just soul, which preserves its proper order by filling its parts without empowering them.

way of life, or the interpersonal wronging by which the superior man exalts himself, and it is connected to the same proportion-disrupting error that ruins order anywhere else.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> N.b., that since practices and their corresponding states are referred to by the same name in *Gorgias*, “pleonexia” also plausibly refers both to pleonectic practices and to what comes into being in a soul that is filled by such practices. For instance, when Socrates reiterates that one should practice justice and self-control, the reason is so that they come into being (παρέσται) in the soul, making the soul just and self-controlled.