Plato's Republic: Books I-IV and VIII-IX
a VERY brief and selective summary*

Book I:

This introduces the question: What is justice? And pursues several proposals offered by Cephalus and Polemarchus. None seem adequate. Then Thrasymachus offers a cynical but nowadays familiar proposal that "justice" is whatever is in the interests of the powerful. The guiding idea is, in effect, that our moral notions are shaped by the established powers to help secure their position and advance their own welfare. Socrates offers a number of ultimately unsatisfactory replies to Thrasymachus' proposal. Although Thrasymachus eventually gives up the argument, no one other than Socrates seems at all satisfied with the criticisms Socrates has offered.

Book II:

Dissatisfied with Socrates' rebuttal of the idea that justice is nothing more than a device of social control wielded by the powerful to keep everyone else in line, Glaucon asks Socrates to consider a more carefully developed version of the sort of view Thrasymachus offered. Glaucon starts by noting that everything that is of value -- everything that is good -- can apparently be sorted into three exclusive and exhaustive categories: they might be good only because they have good consequences, they might be good only because they are valuable in themselves, or they might be good both because of their consequences and in themselves. As Socrates would have it, justice falls into the third category. Glaucon hopes that Socrates is right and has been raised to think he is, but he wonders whether any argument might be offered in support of the view. He is especially concerned because there seems to be so much to be said on the side of those who think that the only real value of being a just person is to be found in the good consequences one might hope to secure -- a fine reputation, respect, a clear conscience, the affection of others, access to heaven -- and the bad consequences that might predictably come from being unjust -- jail, guilt, the animosity of others, the risk of hell… Much of this book (from 358e-368c) is given over to showing just how many arguments there seem to be for thinking the value of justice rests -- and seems to rest solely -- in the good consequences one might hope to secure from being just.

Against the background of those arguments, Socrates agrees to take on Glaucon's challenge and sets about trying to provide an argument for thinking that justice is, in addition to being valuable for its consequences, valuable in and of itself -- so that a just person has something of value regardless of whether she is rewarded for her virtue. The first step, he thinks, is to get clear on the real nature of justice. To do this, he proposes that we look to an ideal city, since he thinks we will find justice there, if anywhere. Any society, Socrates thinks, has three jobs that must be done: (i) people need to provide the things (material goods, entertainment, medical care) that make a decent life possible, (ii) people need to ensure that the laws are enforced and the society is protected from external threat, and (iii) people need to establish the laws that govern the

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society. Different societies get these jobs done in different ways, of course. Socrates argues, though, that in an Ideal Society, each of these jobs would be done by those who are both naturally suited and well trained to perform them. An Ideal City, he argues, would be a distinctly meritocratic one. His view that women, no less than men, might be well suited to rule was revolutionary at the time -- and for centuries since.

Book III:

In order to encourage harmony within the city Socrates argues that it would be valuable for those with in it to accept a sort of civic religion according to which everyone in the city is related as a brother or sister to everyone else. Moreover, he maintains, while a market economy should govern the interactions of most of the people in the society, those who serve as rulers or guardians of the law should be denied private property and should instead live communally.

Book IV:

Having described what he takes to be an Ideal City Socrates looks for what it might be about the city that makes it just. Along the way he offers an intriguing account of three other virtues -- wisdom, courage, and moderation. When he finally comes upon justice it turns out to be a matter of how the people within the city interact, and, in particular, a matter of whether people are actually playing the roles for which they are naturally suited rather than usurping the roles of others. At bottom, justice in the city is a matter of each doing or having what is properly hers and not doing or taking what properly belongs to others. The whole point of finding justice in the city, remember, was to determine what it is that makes people just. So the question arises, is the justice Socrates thinks he has found in the city likewise what makes an individual just? Socrates ends up arguing that it is. He begins by offering an intriguing -- and highly influential -- argument for thinking the human soul, or psyche, has three distinct parts (reason, spirit, and appetite) that correspond to the three groups of people in an Ideal City (rulers, guardians, and those who provide goods and services) in being naturally suited to the performance of certain jobs. He then maintains that in the way justice in the society is a matter of each group of people playing the role to which it is naturally suited, so too justice in the individual is a matter of each part of the individual playing the role to which it is naturally suited. The upshot is that, according to Socrates, a person is just if, but only if, she is ruled by reason. As he conceives of reason, a person being ruled by reason is a matter of her choices being determined by what she judges to be worth doing under the circumstances. It is a matter not primarily of what you do, then, but of why you do it. The difference between a person who is genuinely just and a person who merely acts in a just way is found in why she does what she does.

With this account of justice in hand, Socrates is in a position to ask about whether and why it might be valuable to be a just person. At this point, with the definition pretty clearly laid out, Glaucon is inclined simply to grant that justice is valuable in itself. After all, he notes, justice appears to be to the psyche what physical health is to the body: each is a matter of the relevant
parts (of mind or body) playing their proper role. Thus, so it seems, justice -- no less than health -- should be recognized as obviously valuable for its own sake.

Socrates is not willing to let things stop there. This might be because he recognizes that one might think physical health is valuable only for its consequences, or it might be because he sees an opportunity to explain in more detail just what is so valuable about justice. Whatever the reason, Socrates proceeds to offer three "proofs" that justice is valuable and that it is valuable for its own sake.

**Book VIII**

The first "proof" unfolds via an extended exploration of a variety of societies and a corresponding variety of personalities. Socrates identifies four constitutional structures that differ from the one possessed by an Ideal, and Just, society: Timocracy, Oligarchy, Democracy, and Tyranny. What differentiates each of these from the natural Aristocracy and from each other is primarily which group of people end up ruling. In an Ideal City, the rulers are those who are naturally suited to rule -- people who identify their own welfare with the welfare of the whole city, who are well versed in what is good for the whole city, and who are willing and able to commit themselves to doing what is good for the whole even when it means sacrifice to themselves or those they love. In a Timocracy, those who rule are concerned more with honor, its preservation and promotion, than with the welfare of the whole city. In an Oligarchy, those who rule are concerned more with wealth, its cultivation and enjoyment, than with the welfare of the whole city. In a Democracy, those who rule are concerned more with popularity and pleasing the masses, than with what might be good for the whole. And in a Tyranny those who rule are concerned not with honor, nor money, nor even with popularity, let alone with what is good for the whole, but with satisfying their own unrestrained desires.

These five constitutions all find analogues among people, and Socrates suggests that it is useful to think of people as being aristocratically, or timocratically, or oligarchically or democratically or tyrannically souled. Socrates doesn't assume real people fall neatly into one group or another, but he does think keeping an eye on these different types will give us a handle on some significant differences among people. Which sort of person someone is turns on how he or she makes her decisions. Is she governed primarily by a concern with what others might think (then she is timocratically souled), or by a concern with what will increase her wealth (then she is oligarchically souled), or a concern with what she just happens to feel like doing at the moment (then she is democratically souled), or a concern simply to satisfy, or at least feed, some unrestrained desire.

**Book IX:**

As Socrates sees things, an aristocracy (of the sort embodied in his Ideal State) and an aristocratically souled person differ from the others in that only they are truly free and
autonomous -- the others are all enslaved either to what others think, or to money, or to the incidental strength of their desires -- and only they are genuinely in the position to pursue and secure what is good for them -- the others are all in effect forced to pursue what sometimes, by their own judgment (were they to use it), is not worthwhile. These are, Socrates holds, the features that distinguish a just person from all others, and they are features, he assumes, that are obviously of value in and of themselves. Moreover, he points out, their value turns not at all on what rewards or punishments others might bestow on one. To be autonomous and able to pursue what one values is to be in a valuable state regardless of what consequences might or might come as a result. So ends the first "proof" at 580d.

The second "proof" notes that instead of dividing people into the five types above, we might instead divide them into three according to whether they live a life ruled by reason, or one ruled by spirit (and so a concern with honor), or one ruled by their appetitive part (and so a concern with satisfying some desire or other). He then points out that, if asked which life is the best, the odds are that people will recommend just the life they happen to be leading. So a person ruled by reason will recommend her life, a person ruled by spirit, hers, and a person ruled by appetite, hers. Given these incompatible answers, who should we believe? Socrates suggests the smart thing to do is to believe whoever is a competent judge in these matters. To be a competent judge, he suggests, a person must meet three criteria: (a) she must have had whatever experience is relevant, (b) she must be able to think clearly about her experience, and (c) she must be able to take in and weigh considerations offered by others who know whereof they speak. When it comes to choosing among possible lives, he then argues, those ruled by reason are uniquely qualified as competent judges. Only they, he maintains, actually satisfy all three criteria. We therefore should accept their opinion as to which life is better and their opinion is that the life ruled by reason -- the just life -- is the best. (Whether they are also of the opinion that such a life is better in itself is something Socrates doesn't actually address.) So ends the second "proof" at 583b.

The third "proof" relies on distinguishing between genuine pleasure and the mere relief of pain. The former is positively valuable whereas the latter involves only the elimination of something disvaluable. In between the positive state of enjoying pleasure and the negative state of suffering pain, there is as well a state of neither enjoying pleasure nor suffering pain, which is neither valuable in itself nor disvaluable in itself. Against this background, Socrates then argues that a life spent trying to satisfy ones desires is a life spent merely eliminating the painful experience of desire. While one may well feel relief on the satisfaction of a desire and mistake this feeling for positive pleasure, one will not yet have secured anything valuable so long as one has merely eliminated the desire by satisfying it. Genuine value, which can be found in pure pleasure, is best secured by those who turn their attention away from their own desires and a focus on satisfying them to sources of pure pleasure (e.g. beauty and truth). The person best able to do this, Socrates then argues, is a person who rules her choices by reason, not those who strive constantly either to secure the respect of others or to satisfy their appetites. So ends the third "proof" at 588.
About each of these three "proofs" one might reasonably worry that they fall short of showing that being just -- i.e. having reason rule one's choices -- is good for its own sake. Indeed, it is tempting to think that each at best establishes that being just is good because of its consequences. So there are grounds for worrying that Socrates never actually met Glaucon's original challenge. Especially when it comes to the first of the "proofs" I think quite a bit can be said on behalf of the suggestion that Socrates did argue quite persuasively that having a well-ordered soul is good for its own sake. But what more might be said is something appropriately left to reflection and discussion.