Socrates
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Socrates and Plato

- (See timeline, p. xiv.) Socrates was born in 470BCE, about 150 years after the birth of Thales. He was executed in 399BCE. Plato was a friend and follower of Socrates, born 428BCE and died 348BCE.
- Philosophy has evolved significantly in the 200 years or so preceding Plato's probable period of work. From relatively rudimentary metaphysical and epistemological claims and theories have grown the complex, sophisticated, and wide-ranging thoughts of a great philosopher.
- Our appreciation of Plato owes in no small part to the volume of his surviving work. In addition to its philosophical merit, Plato's work is significant for its artistry. He wrote in *dialogue* form, creating more or less fictional conversations as vehicles of his thought; the characters of the dialogues were his contemporaries – friends, associates, even family members. Unlike the other great Greek philosopher, Aristotle, Plato infuses much of his work with drama and passion.[1]
- Socrates wrote nothing (evidently); his method was entirely oral. Plato is our primary record of his thought, though other records exist, notably those of Xenophon and Aristotle. Aristophanes parodies Socrates in his comic play, *The Clouds*. Plato's affection for and admiration of his mentor is evident in much of his writing.
- Socrates thought is (thought to be) reflected in the "early" dialogues, such as *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*, and in the first book of *Republic*. In other Platonic dialogues, Plato uses the character of Socrates to advance his own views. The difference between their methods and beliefs is particularly evident in *Republic*.
- The *Sophists*: (See pp. 104-5 for a useful, brief discussion.) The Sophists were professional instructors of rhetoric and philosophy – especially moral philosophy: they charged money for their services, in some cases, evidently, a great deal. Their services became valuable with the development of democratic political institutions. Sophists provided philosophical examination of moral truth and also the rhetorical means of advancing one's political agenda. Famous Sophists include Protagoras, Gorgias, Critias, and Antiphon. Both Socrates and Plato were scornful of the Sophists' mercenary ways and reputed disregard for truth. They (Plato and Socrates) thought a proper regard for truth to be essential to our political and personal well-being. Gorgias and Critias appear in dialogues by those names; Protagoras' views (including the dictum that man is the measure of all things) are addressed in the *Theaetetus*, an important dialogue on thought and language.

[1] We are told, however, that Aristotle did write fictional or dramatic works of considerable quality; none has survived.

- An important element of the backdrop against which we view Socrates and Plato is the political instability of the time. Imperial Athens was in decline and suffering the 30-plus years of the Peloponnesian Wars. There were several violent changes of government, during this period. Plato's family was closely involved, and Plato himself dabbled in politics, primarily to unfortunate effect. Socrates' death is in part a product of these political upheavals. These events have a strong influence on Plato's thought.

Socrates' Method and General Views

- Socrates' philosophy is striking for its focus on our moral life. Whereas most of the Pre-Socratic philosophers examined metaphysical and epistemological matters, primarily, Socrates is concerned almost exclusively with ethics[2]. To some extent, this is a consequence of his times: the Peloponnesian Wars (431-404BCE), among others, disrupted social life, giving rise to increased discussion of ethical and political matters; the Sophists formed an important part of this discussion.
- *Elenchus*: This term refers to Socrates' method, a process of examination involving successive definition of some important term (justice, piety, courage, etc.) and evaluation of that definition by reference to common belief. The method is repetitive: new definitions are offered and examined as previous ones are found lacking. We see this method displayed in *Euthyphro* and in Book I of *Republic*.
- Implicit in the *elenchus* is Socrates' belief in a single *eidos* (form, idea) giving definition to the given virtue (justice, piety, etc.). See e.g. *Euthyphro* 6d. These *forms* are the objects of intellectual thought and represent true reality. Note the apparent influence on Plato's own views.
- In addition to discovering a specific moral truth, the *elenchus* was intended by Socrates to improve the moral quality of its subject. Socrates believed that each of us should engage in a regular, continual process of self-examination, and that doing so was both necessary and sufficient for a happy, prosperous life. The unexamined life, in other words, is not worth living. (See *Apology* 38a.)
- Socratic Wisdom: knowing that we don't know. In the *Apology* we see recounted Socrates' famous charge handed down by the Oracle at Delphi. The Oracle declared that none in Athens was wiser than Socrates (21a). Socrates' elenctic examination of his peers constitutes his effort first to interpret and then to sustain the Oracle's proclamation. At first, Socrates is puzzled and he examines those renowned for wisdom – political leaders, poets, and craftsmen. He finds the Oracle confirmed when he realizes that he, at least, is aware of and professes his ignorance of important moral truths (23b). Socrates goes on to make it his business (as "gadfly") to keep Athenians honest about their moral knowledge (i.e., their lack thereof).
- Socrates' major beliefs: despite his avowals of ignorance, Socrates appears to hold a number of positive claims.
    - Unity of Virtue: the various, individual virtues (such as courage, piety, moderation, etc.) are all aspects of a single, over-arching virtue, namely

[2] 'Ethics' derives from the Greek *ethos* meaning custom or habit.

wisdom. Note that this implies that the individual virtues are themselves *noetic* states – i.e., states of knowledge. Evidently, for Socrates, to know (the definition of) courage is necessary and sufficient for being courageous.

- Virtue its own reward: Socrates believes that wisdom is necessary and sufficient for happiness (i.e., *eudaimonia*, living well; see Aristotle for further discussion of human happiness). As above, wisdom is to be the result of elenctic inquiry.
- No Weakness of Will: Socrates held that no one knowingly acts except in his/her best interest. This means that "weakness of will" is impossible: one cannot know that act A is better than B, but do B for lack of will-power. In such cases, Socrates maintains, one in fact identifies B as better than A. (Aristotle holds an opposing view.)
- Justice: It is better to suffer injustice than to perform it. (See *Apology* 39e, *Republic* I.) It is only by *performing* an injustice that one can harm oneself. A corollary: one cannot be harmed by others; one can be harmed only by oneself (41c-d). (Cf. Socrates' attitude towards Meletus and Athens and to the threat of harm to himself in *Apology*.)
- Equality: Socrates believes that all persons are equally capable of wisdom. Everyone should participate in self-scrutiny. Compare Plato and Aristotle, who maintain that some are better capable of morality and goodness than others.

- Reconciling Socrates' major beliefs: It is not clear that all of Socrates' claims can be true.
  - Will the *elenchus* yield its intended result? Are its two primary goals (discovery of truth, wisdom) compatible?
  - Socrates frequently finds fault with his interlocutors' understanding of the virtues. It is not clear, however, that this examination will result in the interlocutor's coming to care about the state of his/her soul. This suggests that elenctic self-examination may not be sufficient for moral well-being.
  - There is a significant tension between Socrates' claim that virtue is knowledge, on the one hand, and his claim that he himself knows only that he knows nothing, on the other. If he truly knows nothing, then he cannot claim to know that virtue is knowledge. Worse, if knowledge is virtue, and if Socrates himself is ignorant, then he cannot be a virtuous man; yet he presents himself as such (in *Apology*, e.g.). Whether he is or is not himself virtuous, the question remains open what can be the intended, moral effect of self-examination if the best we can hope for is recognition of our ignorance.
  - Some maintain that Socrates' disavowal of knowledge is *ironical* – that he only says this to justify his elenctic examinations of others. It is difficult, however, to reconcile such a practice with virtuous behavior, as it is disingenuous if not outright dishonest. (In the context of *Apology*, this problem seems particularly acute.) More specifically, Socrates frequently seems to chide his interlocutors for their prideful ways. He seems to scorn their hubris; his sarcasm can seem sharp indeed. Such attitudes, however,

can be justified only assuming some understanding of moral truth, which Socrates officially disavows.

- Socrates within the development of Ancient Greek thought
    - We have seen various means by which ancient Greek thinkers sought to depict reality as a logical cosmos, and that the sophistication of these accounts increases during the period leading up to Socrates' time.
    - Socrates himself, as represented by Plato, deploys an impressive array of logical tools and extends the reach of logic specifically into the human realm. As we shall see, Socrates' argumentative skills are formidable and demonstrate a keen eye for logical detail. His pursuit of virtue manifests his conviction that our moral world is equally governed by logical law, though our access to these laws is imperfect.
    - Socrates and religion: Socrates clearly expresses belief in the Greek panoply of gods as well as in his own, private "*daimon*". On the other hand, Socrates rejects the traditional stories about the gods that represent them as morally defective. (See *Euthyphro* 6a and compare *Republic* II and III.) This represents an important development in ancient Greek thought, namely, the notion that the divine world is a world governed by moral laws *as understood by us*.[3] Where Hesiod evidently sees no tension in recounting the savage behavior of the divines, Socrates cannot reconcile *divine* with *immoral* conduct.
    - A further important aspect of Socrates' thought is the distinction he draws between divine and mortal knowledge (wisdom). See *Apology* 20d, 21b, 22a, 23a-b, 29a. It is "pretty certain," for Socrates, that it is only a god who is "really wise," whereas by comparison "human wisdom is worth little or nothing" (23a). Human wisdom, at best, consists in recognizing this, that we, like Socrates, are "truly worthless where wisdom's concerned" (23b). This calls into question the extent to which we may characterize Socrates as a rationalist. On the whole, we may say, Socrates asserts the logical structure of the universe. On the other hand, like some of the Pre-Socratics, he acknowledges significant limits to human access to this structure. At best, it would seem, we can make educated guesses, and remain ever-watchful lest our guesses turn out wrong. This would characterize human wisdom as a form of *practical reason*: as opposed to *theoretical reason*, whose object is truth, practical reason helps us to manage our lives. Knowing that we don't know will help us to avoid the errors of behavior that accompany errors of belief.

<u>The *Apology*</u>

- Note that 'apology' has more than one meaning. As used here, it does not mean an expression of regret at some harm caused. It means here a reasoned defense, particularly of some important and/or wrongly challenged principle or thing.
- Two sets of Accusations
    - Historical Accusations – i.e., that he is the worst kind of Sophist:

[3] For a Pre-Socratic anticipation of this view, see Xenophanes, §1/B1. Compare Heraclitus, §111/B15.

        - ♣ That he philosophizes about "things beneath the earth and in the heavens;"
        - ♣ That he "makes the weaker argument the stronger;"
        - ♣ That he teaches the above to others.
    - Meletus' Accusations:
        - ♣ That he corrupts Athenian youth;
        - ♣ That he is an atheist;
        - ♣ That he acknowledges false deities.
- Response to the Historical Accusations
    - Socrates recognizes that he is unlikely to be able to change juror opinion of him, since his reputation is widespread and the result of learning from childhood.
    - Against the teaching claim, Socrates denies that he has ever charged a fee for his "services". (This would set him apart from the traditional Sophists, who claimed to educate, but only for a fee.)
    - Further, Socrates cannot properly be said a teacher, since he disavows knowledge of anything. Rather, in light of this ignorance, Socrates has sought (first) to determine his wisdom relative to others and (then) to attempt to show others their ignorance.
    - Anger resulting from his practices explains why he is associated with the Sophists, as one who attempts to subvert truth and the morality of youth (who imitate him).
- Response to Meletus: Socrates easily shows that Meletus' allegations are trivial, groundless.
    - Corruption of Youth charge: No one wishes to harm himself. (Cf. note above on weakness of will.) One is harmed by corrupt company. Hence, either Socrates is not corrupting the youth of Athens (because to do so would be intentionally to harm himself), or if he does so it is unintentionally. So Meletus' charge is either false or spurious (since the latter is not a criminal offense).
    - Atheist and False Deities charges: First, Socrates demonstrates that Meletus knows little of Socrates' actual views, since he attributes to him those of Anaxagoras. Second, Socrates demonstrates that Meletus' charges are contradictory. For to believe in daimons is to believe in demigods, and to believe in demigods is to believe in the gods who gave rise to them. Consequently, one cannot be both an atheist (believe in no gods) and believe in daimons ("false gods").
    - More specifically, a *reductio ad absurdum*:
      Meletus says:
        1. Socrates believes in no gods (26c, 26e)
        2. Socrates acknowledges daimonic activities (26b, 27c).
        3. No one acknowledges X-activity and denies the existence of X (27b).
        4. Hence, no one acknowledges daimon-activity and denies the existence of daimons (27b; from 3).
        5. Hence, Socrates acknowledges the existence of daimons (27c; from 2, 4)

6. Daimons are gods or children of gods (27c).
7. Hence, Socrates believes in gods (27d; from 5, 6).
8. Hence, Socrates believes in gods and believes in no gods (27d; from 1, 7).

I.e., Meletus' indictment is contradictory, absurd.

- Harm and Justice: the quintessential Socratic principle
  - Socrates maintains that "nothing bad can happen to a good man" (41c/d) and that it is better to suffer an injustice than to commit one (38e). He also says that it is not "lawful" for a "better man to be harmed by a worse" (30c) There he asserts that in killing him Athens will be harming itself far more than itharms him – i.e., by committing a gross injustice.
  - In general, Socrates believes that it is only by committing an injustice (or other moral wrong) that one comes to any significant harm.
  - See also *Republic* I for further expression of this view.
- Fear of Death: Socrates denies that death is to be feared and argues that it may well be a good.
  - 29a-b: It is irrational to fear death because we do not know what death holds. (We do know that injustice is bad, and so should certainly fear it.)
  - 40b-e: Socrates argues:
    1. Either death is complete loss of awareness, or in death one's awareness persists.
    2. If the former, then death is a benefit (like a good night's sleep).
    3. If the latter, then death is a benefit (because one can converse with the great dead).
    4. Hence, death is (likely) a benefit.

The *Euthyphro*

- Setting and cast
  - Socrates encounters Euthyphro as both proceed to court. Socrates is to hear whether he will be indicted. Euthyphro is prosecuting his father for murder.
  - Socrates, we think, is faithfully depicted by Plato, in this dialogue. *Euthyphro* is generally regarded as an "early" Platonic dialogue depicting the historical Socartes' views and methods.
  - Euthyphro himself is (evidently) a "mantis", a kind of prophet of conservative, traditional religious views. He takes the stories of the *Theogony* as literal truth, for example. See *RAGP*, p. 135, n. 1.
  - Euthyphro takes his task to be one of "piety", to prosecute a murder which the gods disapprove as unjust. It is unclear whether he is right to do so, given the circumstances: the murdered man is himself a murderer; Euthyphro's father has captured and bound the murderer, who subsequently dies accidentally, though owing also to the father's negligence. Is it truly pious to prosecute the father, in this situation?
  - Note the apparent tension between two sets of moral obligations – those to one's family and other intimates, and a more general, universal set (4b-c).

    - The elements of the drama bring out the role of Socrates as moral gadfly. It is all too common for persons like Euthyphro to act on a presumed knowledge of piety (or justice, etc.), where their actions in fact reflect significant or even profound ignorance.
    - Moral Risk: In this connection, see 4e and 16d, where Socrates expresses the primary moral concern with respect to ignorance: if we do not know the moral truth, we risk committing an injustice. Compare *Apology* 28a, 30d, 36c, 38a, 38e, and esp. 39a; see also *RAGP*, p. 157, n. 10.
- The Form of Piety
    - Socrates appears to have believed that two things are alike if they share some one thing in common, namely a "form" (*eidos*). For instance, we may think of all triangles as sharing some one quality, "triangularity", in virtue of which they are all triangles. This view sets the agenda of the elenchus – arriving at an account (*logos*) of the given form.
    - 5c-d: Whatever the pious is, it will be something shared by all pious acts; similarly, the impious share "one single characteristic." Similarly for the impious, which is the "opposite" of the pious. (Note here the echo of Heraclitus, and the development of dialectical argumentation generally, wherein a thing is conceptually tied to its logical opposite.)
    - 6d-e: Socrates specifically requests "the form" of piety, the "one characteristic" shared by all pious things. Note the implication that a form can *be understood* and is the means by which we *recognize* piety and impiety in the world.
    - 11b: the form of a thing is not merely one of its relational properties ("affections"). I.e., being loved is a way in which a thing can be affected; but that status is not essential to it, ordinarily.
    - Notice too use of the term 'account', which translates *logos*, at, e.g., 9d and 15b.
    - A philosophical concern: Can *elenchus* yield a definition of a form? Any definition offered will be either trivial (analytic) or informative; but in this latter case, if we offer different concepts by which to define piety, we risk no longer talking about piety. I.e., the forms are one and all *primitives* which do not admit of informative analysis. We shall return to this problem when we get to Plato's epistemology.
- Two meanings of 'is'
    - The 'is' of predication:
        - ♣ Red *is* the color making bulls furious;

      or, more simply,
        - ♣ The ball is red.
    - The 'is' of definition:
        - ♣ Red is the phenomenal quality of light of a certain wavelength as perceived by sentient beings of a certain sort.
    - Definition is an *equivalence relation:* if Γ is the definition of term *p*, then:
        - ♣ *p* and Γ can be substituted for each other in any context without loss of change of meaning; or, in other words
        - ♣ Anything that is a *p* is Γ, and anything that is Γ is a *p*.

    - Note that Euthyphro typically mistakes Is_p for Is_d, in either of two ways:
        - ♣ Predicating piety of something: piety is prosecuting a wrongdoer (more clearly: prosecuting a wrongdoer is pious; 5d);
        - ♣ Predicating something of piety: piety is beloved by the gods (6e).
    - Euthyphro seems not to notice the distinction, which is an intellectual failure in itself.
    - This distinction reflects also the form/instance distinction. To confuse a form with its instance is to fail to recognize clearly the distinction between the general and the particular. The capacity to recognize and manipulate the abstract, general form is a hallmark of intelligence.
- Logical Technique
    - *Reductio ad absurdum:* to reduce to absurdity.
        - ♣ An absurdity is, technically, a contradiction, such as 'Oakes is blond and Oakes is not blond.' Such statements are "absurd" because they are nonsensical, or in any case cannot be true – or so logic-oriented beings like us believe.
        - ♣ If one can show that one's opponent's position entails a contradiction, then one has reduced that position to absurdity. Socrates employs this strategy both in the *Apology* (e.g., 26c-27c) and in the *Euthyphro* (7a-8a).
    - Dilemma: either of two choices is unacceptable.
        - ♣ A dilemma occurs when one is faced with only two alternatives where both are undesirable. (NB: this is the logical significance of the expression, "Damned if you do and damned if you don't.") In a logical setting, the ill consequence is falsehood: either way one proceeds with one's argument, one winds up with a falsehood.
        - ♣ Socrates uses this strategy in both *Apology* (25a-26a) and *Euthyphro* (10a-11a).
- *Elenchus* at work
    - Definition 1: Piety is prosecuting a wrong-doer. (5d-e)
        - ♣ Note the hubris of "piety is doing what I am doing now" (5d).
        - ♣ Note the confusion of two distinct principles: an egalitarian principle (wrongdoers should be punished regardless of personal relation) and the account of piety delivered here (piety is punishing wrongdoers).
        - ♣ Note, too, a measure of Euthyphro's logical sophistication: he reasons that the common person will contradict him/herself in allowing Zeus to punish his father, Kronos for crimes against his (K's) sons (and again in allowing Kronos to punish his own father, Ouranos for similar misdeeds), but not in allowing Euthyphro to punish his own father for murder. See *Theogony* lns. 165-187, 456-504, 715-725.
        - ♣ Note, too, the support provided Euthyphro's position by his appeal to the acts of Zeus, "the best and most just of the gods." (5e-6a) Socrates, on the other hand, disputes the truth of such stories about the gods. He finds it difficult to believe that any god is capable of

injustice. (6a; cf. books II and III of *Republic*) Moreover, of course, whereas Kronos' behavior was reprehensible, it is not so clear that Euthyphro's father's is.

- ♣ Socrates' elenctic destruction of this formulation: it *confuses predication with definition*. Euthyphro has only given an instance of a (putatively) pious act; he has not given an account (*logos*) of what all pious acts involve. (6d) See above for a discussion of the two is's.

- Definition 2: Piety is what is dear to, beloved by the gods; impiety is what is disliked by the gods. (7a)
  - ♣ Elenctic destruction of definition 2: this account entails that the same things are both pious and impious. (*Reductio ad absurdum*)
  1. Piety is what is beloved by the gods; impiety is what is hated by the gods. (Euthyphro's claim)
  2. Piety and impiety are opposites. (7a)
  3. The gods sometimes oppose one another. (7b)
  4. Such opposition is over moral and aesthetic matters. (7c-d)
  5. Hence, different gods judge different things good/bad, beautiful/ugly, etc. (7e)
  6. The beautiful and good are liked; the ugly and bad are hated. (7e)
  7. Hence (since the gods dis/like different things), the same one thing will be both pious and impious. (8a)
  - ♣ One and the same thing cannot both have and lack a given property, so since the definition entails such a contradiction, it cannot be correct. This is a hallmark of logic.
- Definition 3: Piety is what is loved by all gods; impiety is what is hated by all gods. (9d)
  - ♣ I.e., piety is_d being beloved by all of the gods; impiety is_d being hated by all of the gods.
  - ♣ This gives us **the Euthyphro Question**: "Is the pious loved by all of the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by all of the gods?" (10a)
  - ♣ Elenctic destruction of definition 3: this definition creates a *dilemma*. The dilemma is constructed on the meaning of 'Piety is what is loved by all the gods.'
  1. The pious is_d what is loved by all the gods ("god-loved"). (9e)

  What can this mean? It means:
  2. Either [a] the gods love *x* because *x* is pious, or [b] *x* is pious because *x* is loved by the gods. (10a)
  3. The property of being god-loved (loved by the gods) is an *external* or *extrinsic property*.[4] (10c)
  4. Piety is not an external property, but an *internal* or *intrinsic* property.[5] (10d)

[4] An extrinsic property is a property a thing has owing to the existence or action of another thing. E.g., being carried, to use Socrates' example, or being northwest of Lancaster.

Hence,

5. It is not the case that [2b] *x* is pious because *x* is loved by the gods. (10d)

Hence,

6. It is not the case that [1] the pious is$_d$ what is loved by all the gods ("god-loved"). (10d)

Socrates then repeats the above reasoning, in this form, beginning with a restatement of claim [2a]:

7. The gods love *x* because *x* is pious. (10e)

Then he restates claim [3]:

8. *x* is god-loved because the gods love *x*, and it is not the case that the gods love *x* because *x* is god-loved. (10d)

Hence,

9. If being god-loved is the same thing as piety (which is Euthyphro's definition; see [1]), then [i] if *x* is loved because *x* is pious, then the gods love *x* because *x* is god-loved (which makes no sense); and [ii] if [i], then *x* is pious because *x* is god-loved. (10e-11a)

But, this is false, as stated in [8]. (11a)

Hence,

10. It is not the case that [1]. (11a)

♣ I.e., at best, Euthyphro has again simply told us a feature of the pious – namely, that it is loved by the gods, a mere predication of piety – not what piety consists in, its definition.

- Definition 4: Piety is the part of justice concerned with "tending to" the gods (the rest of justice concerns care of other humans). (12e)

♣ Elenctic Destruction: ultimately, this leads back to the claim that piety is what is loved by the gods.

1. Tending to something aims at the benefit of that thing. (13b)
2. In the case of piety, then, the aim will be the improvement of the gods. (13c)
3. But humans cannot make the gods better. (13c)
4. So Euthyphro does not mean tending to in this sense. (A sub-destruction; 13c)
5. Tending to something is a kind of service to some end: it involves knowledge of how to produce some end. (A re-formulation; 13d)
6. In the case of piety, the end is "many fine things." (Euthyphro clearly doesn't know what to say; 13e)
7. I.e., piety is knowledge of how properly to sacrifice and pray to the gods. (14b-c)
8. Sacrifice is a form of gift-giving and prayer is a form of begging. (14c)
9. So, piety is knowledge of how to give to and beg from the gods. (Clearly, this is stated so as to make Euthyphro look foolish; 4c)

[5] An intrinsic property is a property a thing has independently of the existence or action of other things. E.g., being spherical.

10. In particular, piety is giving the gods honor, reverence, and gratitude. (15a)
11. Honor, reverence, and gratitude are beloved by the gods. (15b)
12. Hence, piety is doing what is beloved by the gods. (I.e., Euthyphro is back to an earlier, failed definition; 15b-c)

♣ We are to understand, by the end of this exchange, that Euthyphro has no clue as to what is the form of piety, though he is able to identify some acts as pious and some as impious.

- Irony
  - See 2c, 5a, 6c, 9b, 11a, 11d, 12e-13a, 13e, 14c, 15d, 16a, etc.
  - Socrates may be read as purely guileless or savagely ironical.
  - In either case, Euthyphro appears shallow, pompous, and disturbingly oblivious to the risk he runs of a substantial injustice.
  - It is a testament to Plato's literary skill that Euthyphro and Socrates remain such rich characters.
- Hubris
  - See 4b, 5a, 5e, 6d, 9b, 13e, etc.
  - Euthyphro regularly claims "exact knowledge" of piety, but as regularly is shown to be quite without that knowledge. The contrast between Euthyphro's claims to knowledge and his ignorance couldn't be stronger. He comes off as pompous and condescending – just the sort of character, ironically, to excite the gods' dislike – see again, *RAGP* p. 157, n. 10: the very temple walls at Delphi contain inscriptions indicating the gods' dislike of hubris.
  - Euthyphro also appears in places to be intellectually weak. See e.g., 10a and elsewhere, where he is slow to follow Socrates.

Republic I-II: The Task
pp. 331-369 (327a-367e)

- In this section, the subject of justice is broached; we see a Socratic-style elenctic exchange with Thrasymachus and others end in impasse; Glaucon and Adeimantus prevail upon Socrates to advance a positive account of justice.
- This section is significant for its presentation of the traditional Socratic style and for a general sense of disappointment with that method and subsequent intention to provide a positive account of justice. Note, as always, Plato's skill as a dramatist, and in particular the differences in Socrates' responses to his interlocutors as their attitudes towards him and justice vary.

Initial Discussion – Cephalus and Polemarchus

- Plainly, neither Cephalus nor Polemarchus knows what justice is. Moreover, their ignorance makes them vulnerable to moral failing.
- Socrates gets Cephalus to say that justice is paying debts and telling the truth. But Cephalus is evidently ignorant of moral truth or indifferent to it. He has little interest in a serious discussion of it, and excuses himself by saying, untruthfully, that he must attend to a religious ceremony. (Another interpretation: Cephalus

isn't willing to undergo a Socratic examination, and wisely, politely, excuses himself. Question: is Cephalus a sympathetic character, or not?)

- Polemarchus is at least willing to examine his own beliefs, though whether from a proper understanding of the value of doing so, or from a sense of filial duty, is unclear. (As usual, Plato is making claims by means of subtle dramatic exchanges: properly cognizant of moral truth, one would know perfectly well that one should investigate such matters. In this, Plato agrees with Socrates.)
- Polemarchus' account of justice is worth examining for several reasons: it is relatively common, but trivial and unstable, and consequently liable to put one in the wrong.
    - His first formulation (331e): Justice is giving to each what is owed. But this formulation is trivial, since 'what is owed' has the same force as 'what is just'.
    - His second formulation (332a): Justice is giving what is owed, where the good is owed to one's friends, and the bad is owed to one's enemies. Problems encountered by Polemarchus here, include:
        - It's compatible with saying that Justice involves knowledge of larceny (332c-334b);
        - If one mistakes one's friends/enemies, then justice entails harming one's actual enemies and benefiting one's actual enemies (or, to avoid this, benefiting perceived enemies and harming perceived friends – 334b-e). This prompts the (third) reformulation, "believed and actual friends or enemies" (334e).
        - In other words, Polemarchus' knowledge is so weak as to permit his being led by the nose into simple confusions. See e.g. 334b, 335d.
    - Once equipped with a relatively coherent definition (the third), Socrates advances a counter-argument. He argues as follows (335b-d):
        1. To harm a thing is to make it worse.
        2. Harm to humans is harm in respect of their characteristic excellence – moral quality. So, to harm a human is to make him/her less just.
        3. An action resulting in greater injustice (less justice) is not a just act.
        4. Hence, it cannot be just to harm a human.
    - Here, Polemarchus might object that Socrates has misconstrued the sense of 'enemy' and 'harm'. As a true enemy, a human must be understood to be antagonistic towards the good of another human. Harm to an enemy, then, could be to decrease it in respect of this antagonism. There may be different ways of doing this. One is to make the enemy morally better, more just, and thus less antagonistic towards human good. Another is to reduce the antagonism by weakening or destroying its force (e.g., by imprisonment, punishment). Either will not make the enemy worse in respect of justice, but worse in respect of capacity to carry out injustice. Socrates, thus, equivocates on 'harm'.

- Note, in any case, the failure of Polemarchus to defend his position, indicating the instability of his views in the face of his ignorance about them. If Socrates argues unfairly, Polemarchus is nonetheless culpable for failure to recognize and defend proper justice. Part of Socrates' traditional role, after all, is to demonstrate to his interlocutors their ignorance.

Thrasymachus

- Thrasymachus is an important and vivid character in *Republic*. He is important for his defense of moral skepticism, which prompts the later call (Book II) for Socrates to develop a positive account of justice, one demonstrating that justice is not only "finest" but also most beneficial (prudent).
  - *Moral skepticism:* there are no moral truths (or, in any case, we have no reason to believe that there are – skepticism proper).
  - *Prudence:* as opposed to moral good, that which is of benefit, satisfying some interest (desire, need, wish, etc.); e.g., it is good (prudent) to look both ways before crossing the street.
  - Moral skeptics typically maintain that the only kind of *good* is prudential.
  - *Moral Realism:* there are moral truths. (Socrates' and Plato's position.)
- Thrasymachus bursts on the scene to denounce Socrates' tactics against Cephalus and Polemarchus. (But as above, Socrates has his reasons for his tactics. Where Socrates is more gentle if remonstrating with Cephalus and Polemarchus, he shows little mercy for those like Thrasymachus who disdain morality.)
- Thrasymachus offers this definition of justice: Justice is the advantage of the stronger (338c). He develops this view in several ways.
  - One theme is this: Insofar as justice is simply conformity to civil law, and insofar as civil law is tends to preserve the political power of a certain class, justice in this sense will be to the advantage of that stronger group. In a democracy, conformity to law benefits the general public; in an oligarchy, it benefits a few rulers; in a tyranny, it benefits the tyrant. And in this sense, it will be prudent (of benefit to oneself) to be just only insofar as (a) one is a member of the benefited group or in any case (b) observing the civic laws does in fact serve one's own interests. Consider, e.g., the "justice" of laws protecting the rights of corporations to make unlimited political contributions. What entity or organization does this "make stronger"?
  - Another general theme is this: In addition to its laws, a society possesses well-known standards of morality that include especially standards of fairness, honesty, etc. The question is, what is the objective status of these standards? Do they represent "higher moral truth" or are they merely agreed-upon conveniences, observed only for self-protection? Thrasymachus' position is the latter: moral codes are *conventional.* They do not reflect cosmic truth, but are rules of behavior that one agrees to only for prudential reasons. Aside from their prudential outcome, we have no reason to observe them. E.g., I might call theft "unjust" if it will help to prevent your stealing from me.

- It is thus in one's best-interest (i.e., prudent) to be unjust (if one can get away with it) in terms of both of these themes.
    - In political terms, it is in one's interest to be unjust, and a violation of one's interests to be just, for in being just, one weakens one's social position relative to the ruler/s and in being unjust, one strengthens that position. Thrasymachus can thus refer to a complete form of injustice in which one exerts his/her control over all others in the society. This is best for one's interests; anything less grants authority over oneself to another. Of course, once one gains ascendancy over the whole of society, then one's interests (advantage) re-define "justice" – that set of rules promoting one's own benefit. Socrates tries to trip up Thrasymachus over these different, relative meanings of 'justice', but Thrasymachus is generally able to avoid these traps.
    - And more generally, justice will be a disadvantage and injustice an advantage in this sense: Being just – i.e., fair, honest, etc. – prevents one from taking optimal advantage of others. I.e., in strict terms of self-interest, the more one can get out of one's material interactions with others (business deals, affairs of the heart, etc.) the better. It is better to cheat. Best of all, notice, is to cheat without being caught; for society punishes and is in any case wary of the unjust (those violating its rules of fairness). If one can maintain a reputation for justice, one will gain the benefits of good-social standing along with the benefits of cheating others.
- Thrasymachus thus identifies injustice as a virtue, since it improves one's life; justice, he calls "high-minded foolishness" (348c).

Socrates' argument against Thrasymachus

- In general, while Thrasymachus falls into various minor traps laid by Socrates, he is better able to defend his position, and cries foul when Socrates misconstrues his claims. Socrates does trick Thrasymachus, in the end, however, much to Thrasymachus' chagrin (350d).
- Socrates' primary argument against Thrasymachus' account of justice may be understood as follows:
    1. The unjust seek to outdo the just and the unjust alike; the just seek to outdo the unjust but not the just. (349b-c)
    2. If we think of injustice and justice as kinds of expertise, then (1) implies that the injustice expert seeks to outdo both those who are expert at injustice and those who are less than expert at injustice, while the justice expert seeks to outdo those who are not expert at justice but not those who are expert at justice. (350a-b)
    3. But in general, the expert in a given field is one who seeks to outdo those who are inexpert, but not those who are expert in that given field. (See Socrates' musician example, 349e.)
    4. This implies, for Socrates, that the expert at injustice is really no expert at all. (This makes a certain sense, given that justice and injustice are contraries. If injustice is simply the negation of justice, then it is justice that is the "positive" field of knowledge. It would thus make sense to

speak of experts in respect of justice, but not in respect of injustice: justice would be a field of knowledge, injustice a field of ignorance, so to speak. The "expert" at injustice will simply be someone who is ignorant about justice – compare being an expert in musical ignorance.[6] As we shall see, however, this begs an important question against Thrasymachus.)

5. To be expert is to be knowledgeable, and to be knowledgeable is to be wise. (350b)
6. To be wise is to be good. (350b)
7. So, if the unjust seek to outdo both just and unjust alike, then they are not experts; they are unwise and bad. (350c)

- The mistake in Socrates' reasoning lies in an equivocation – he means one thing by 'justice' where Thrasymachus means something else – and what Thrasymachus means is not the contrary of Socrates' idea of injustice.
    - For Socrates, justice is a virtue. A virtue is a quality making humans *good* humans – i.e., a virtue is a behavior trait that makes an individual a higher-quality instance of the human type. The human virtues, moreover, a forms of wisdom, knowledge (as per the craft analogy). So it is axiomatic, for Socrates, that being just is "excellent" and a kind of expertise. (Recall that for Socrates, the virtues are *noetic* qualities – meaning that they constitute knowledge of something, specifically, the form of the given virtue, where forms are themselves logical in nature.)
    - But it is precisely this understanding of justice as a virtue that Thrasymachus challenges. For Thrasymachus, justice is a form of ignorance, ignorance of what is prudent (in one's best interest). Thrasymachus maintains that injustice is, in fact, a kind of knowledge, knowledge of how to get ahead in life – how to outdo others. In its strongest form, this amounts to what the Greeks called *pleonexia* – the unremitting impulse to outdo others.
    - Thus, where justice involves certain social behaviors (honesty, fairness, etc.), the dispute is over whether this is behavior that involves knowledge of what is good for humans, or the reverse. Socrates' response, here, effectively begs that question. (I.e., he assumes the very point in contention – a major argumentative no-no.)

Socrates' argument for the prudence of morality

- Socrates' argument for the prudence of morality is not persuasive.
- His argument:
    1. Living is the function of the soul. (353d)
    2. The excellence of the soul is that which enables it to perform its function well. (353d)
    3. The bad soul rules (lives) poorly; the good soul lives well. (353e)

[6] Conceiving justice as a form of knowledge and injustice as a form of ignorance is a consequence of Socrates' "craft analogy". 'Craft' is a translation of *techne*, which has the significance of our contemporary term 'science'. See p. 336, n. 6.

4. Justice is the excellence of the soul. (From above: it is the wise and good, 350b-c)
5. Hence, the just live well, the unjust live poorly. (353e)

- Note, however, that this argument can scarcely be said to be convincing. I.e., as an argument to the effect that it is better to be just than unjust, it will hardly convince anyone to change his/her ways.
- Moreover, this account fails to identify the nature of justice. It could equally apply to Thrasymachus' definition of justice (where it would be injustice that is the excellence of the soul).

Glaucon and Adeimantus

- Glaucon revives Thrasymachus' argument. This is warranted, given the weakness of Socrates' argument against Thrasymachus and of his argument for the prudence of justice. See 358b, 367b, and 367e for statements of dissatisfaction with Socrates' arguments in Book I.
- Glaucon expresses the point more elegantly: justice is a necessary evil, a middle ground between the most desirable (complete freedom to act as one chooses) and least desirable (complete submission to the will of others). It is welcomed, respected, only for its capacity to secure us from the harms of others.
- Glaucon advances the thesis that we are naturally inclined to wrong others: wronging others is naturally good (prudential); and being wronged is what is bad (for us). Since suffering wrong exceeds in badness the lost good of harming others, we accept the middle position of civil and societal moral law – justice. But, in fact, justice is a sacrifice of our best interests; injustice is in our best interests.
- Glaucon relates the story of the Ring of Gyges in order to substantiate his claim that we are naturally unjust. (359c-360d)
- Note, too, Adeimantus' reminders that even the gods seem to admire and reward injustice, as represented by the poets (Homer, Hesiod). Virtue is difficult to achieve (Hesiod) and the gods may be swayed to favor the unjust (Homer; 364d-e, 365e).[7]
- Glaucon and Adeimantus's challenge to Socrates: To show that it is better (more prudent) to be just than unjust. In order to make clear that this is so, they ask Socrates to show that the just man who appears to be unjust is happier than the unjust man who appears to be just. Without these appearances, it will not be clear that the just man's happiness is not owing to the social profit of a just reputation, nor the unjust man unhappy because of the social cost of injustice. (367a-e)
- We should consider, when we have the whole of Plato's account before us, whether it meets this strict condition.

[7] This of course is part of the reason why Plato, like Socrates before him, is dubious of these tales of the gods.