

Plato I

PHIL301

The Task

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Republic I-II: The Task

pp. 369-407 (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 – and, we might say, their ignorance of their ignorance – makes them vulnerable to moral failing.¹
- 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.
 - o 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'.
 - o 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); it matters, in other words, to be precise. This prompts the (third) reformulation, "believed and actual friends or enemies" (334e).

¹ Compare Socrates' view of moral risk expressed in *Euthyphro* and *Apology*. Plato evidently holds a similar view

- 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-e):
 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.²
 3. An action resulting in greater injustice (less justice) is not a just act.
 4. Hence, it cannot be just to harm a human.
- Perhaps Polemarchus could object that “harm” to an enemy might mean to reduce the enemy's virtue in respect of being an *enemy*, rather than in respect of being a human. It's more likely, however, that he would have meant harm in respect of being human, Polemarchus not being notable for the precision of his thinking.
- 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 promoting 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 distinct from 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 – i.e., beyond the merely prudential. (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 moral life.)
 - Thrasymachus was evidently a *sophist*, something like a professional “philosopher for hire.” He will be a more skilled opponent for Socrates than are Cephalus and Polemarchus.
- Thrasymachus offers this definition of justice: Justice is the advantage of the stronger (338c). He develops this view in several ways.
 - First, Thrasymachus calls attention to the evident fact that systems of (civil) justice have beneficiaries. Where a state or social structure has a system of justice, there will be some political power benefitting from the maintenance of that system. See 338d-e, where Thrasymachus refers to different political systems.³ In this sense, justice implies the interest of some party – the political

² Note again the accord with Socrates' views in *Apology*.

³ Compare, e.g., the “justice” of laws protecting the rights of corporations to make unlimited political contributions. What entity or organization does this “make stronger”?

- power – and is thus a form of prudence, confirming Thrasymachus’ moral skeptical view.
- Second, Justice appears to be a kind of “zero-sum game,” as Thrasymachus understands it.⁴ Where human interests are concerned, they often involve the competition for resources – food, materials, mating privileges, etc. And typically the acquisition by one of such goods entails their loss by another – either outright or by loss of opportunity. See 343d-e: the just man gets less than the unjust in commercial exchanges, etc.
 - The optimal state, then, on Thrasymachus’ view, is that of the tyrant, who defines justice as that which benefits himself and who has the advantage of all others in access to goods. See 344a-c.
 - 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.⁵ (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)

⁴ A *zero-sum game* is an interaction between two or more parties in which any benefit to one entails a cost to another, and vice versa.

⁵ See “*pleonexia*”, below.

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 the fact that Thrasymachus' concept of injustice doesn't conform to the craft analogy for knowledge. Typically, a craft can be practiced equally by multiple practitioners, because the practice of the craft by one craftsman is independent of its practice by another. The typical craft can admit of cooperation among practitioners. But Thrasymachus' concept of injustice is precisely the concept of a practice in which one practitioner's success entails another's failure. It's a zero-sum game; cooperation isn't possible. Of course, Thrasymachus fails to defend his position effectively, allowing Socrates to get away with the misrepresentation.

Socrates' argument for the prudence of morality

- Socrates' argument for the prudence of morality is characteristic of the historical Socrates.
- 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)
 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 who shares Thrasymachus' views.
- 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

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.

- 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.