Some Background on Ancient Greek Ethics

The ancient Greeks approached the matter of morality differently than modern philosophers. Whereas we tend to ask questions like, *What ought I to do in a given situation?* and *What actions are right and what actions are wrong?*, the most important ethical question considered by the ancient Greeks was, *How ought I to live?* or *What sort of person ought I to be?*. This approach centers on a flourishing human life, or a life that is choiceworthy for humans. The Greek word for the central ethical concept is *eudaimonia* and is not easily translated into modern English. It is frequently translated as 'happiness' but this is misleading since, as we saw, Mill thought happiness was the central moral notion but he identified happiness with pleasure. Perhaps a better translation of *eudaimonia* is flourishing—a truly well-lived life.

A flourishing life is the end of each individual person. But what does a well-lived life look like? To answer this question, many Greek thinkers turned to human nature—what a good life looks like will depend on what sort of creatures we are. This involves looking at human beings as having a characteristic way of going about living. It is useful here to introduce some further details of at least one major strand of ancient Greek ethical thought.

If something has a characteristic way of doing something, this is referred to as its *ergon*, or its *function*. (This applies to both artificial objects—scissors, knives, bicycles, etc—and to natural objects—plants, animals, and humans in particular.) An object that flourishes is one that does its characteristic thing well. But in order for any object to perform its function well, it must possess certain qualities and avoid others. So a knife, whose characteristic activity is to cut, must be sharp and made of a durable material, if it is to cut well, and avoid rust and dullness. A property or quality that allows an object to do its characteristic activity well is an *arete*, frequently translated as *virtue* or *excellence*. For a person to be virtuous is for that person to possess those virtues (generally virtues of character and virtues of intellect) that allow the person to live a eudaimon or flourishing life. So the question as to how one ought to live is answered by reference to the virtues—one ought to be a virtuous person, one ought to live a virtuous life. Such a life is one of genuine happiness or wellbeing—it is a truly choiceworthy life.

But this is merely an outline. What are the virtues and could one be happy without being virtuous? If one were successful in fooling everyone else about one's own character, would it be better to be vicious? *The Republic* is Plato's reply to these questions. He sets for himself two central questions: *What is Justice?* and *Is a life of justice or a life of injustice happier or better or more flourishing?*. Here are some important points that you should look for while reading and discussing *The Republic*.

1. What are the various accounts of justice proposed by the persons who engage Socrates in Book One, and why does Plato reject these accounts? (You should be able to recite the definitions of Cephalus, Polemarchus—both his broad statement of justice and his narrower one, and Thrasymachus.) What do these attempts to describe justice reveal about the way in which ordinary persons understand justice or morality?

2. What two presuppositions about justice does Socrates rely upon in his examination of the accounts of justice offered in the first book? (One is introduced at 332 and the other introduced at 335.)

3. The just person, according to Socrates, does not want to rule. What three sorts of things will lead him to rule? Which is the best incentive for the just person to rule?

4. In Book II, Glaucon claims that goods can be divided up into three classes according to how they are valued. What are these three classes of value (be able to provide an example of each) and in which class does Plato place justice?

5. Glaucon explains in general that most people consider justice be good only as an instrument. Explain how the Ring of Gyges story illustrates this point.

6. What is Glaucon's challenge to Socrates? (In other words, what is it that Glaucon wants Socrates to show about justice?)

7. Socrates' strategy in explaining the value of justice is to begin by showing what a just city would be like. He starts this project by talking about how a city comes to be. It begins because persons are not self-sufficient, and so people come together to satisfy their needs. In order to provide for the members of the city more efficiently,
Socrates endorses the principle of specialization. What is this principle? (Look in your notes for the two components of the principle of specialization.)

8. What is the distinction between the healthy city and what Socrates calls the 'fevered' city?

9. What is the nature of the persons suited to be guardians? How are they compared to pedigree guard dogs?

10. In Book III, Socrates divides the Guardian class into Rulers and Auxiliaries. What distinguishes the genuine rulers from the auxiliaries? There are two conditions—one having to do with knowledge, the other having to do with attitude toward the city (compare this last item with Mill).

11. At the very end of Book III (just after the myth of the metals), Socrates describes the lifestyle of the Guardians. What restrictions do they face?

12. In the very beginning of Book IV, Adeimantus objects that the guardians, who are naturally stronger and naturally more intelligent, are forced to sacrifice their own happiness, and they fail to be as happy as they could in fact make themselves if they decided to be. What is Socrates' reply to this?

13. Once the kallipolis (the fine city) is founded, it is possible to identify and explain the four virtues of wisdom, courage, moderation and justice. (What is Socrates' argument for this?—He says that the kallipolis, if founded in the way he outlines, will be completely good. This means that it will be serving its purposes of allowing the individual inhabitants of the city live well, hence it will be performing its function. But if it is performing its function well, then it will possess all the virtues.) You should be able to define precisely just what each of these virtues is and how it is present in the kallipolis.

14. Why might it be said that justice is the most important virtue in the completely good city?

15. Socrates' next argumentative step is to explain personal justice (i.e., justice in the individual person) by analogy with political justice (i.e., justice in the city). His first step is to show that just as there are three identifiable classes in the just city, there are likewise three parts of the soul. First, what is the soul in Plato's theory? Second, how are the three different parts of the soul individuated? (That is, how does Socrates show that they are, in fact, distinct parts of the soul?)

16. What are justice in the soul and injustice in the soul? (from lecture notes, you should be able to contrast Plato's account of justice in the soul to the doctrine of instrumental reason as it was endorsed by Mill.)

17. Socrates claims that the kallipolis could only come about if rulers became like philosophers. This is because proper rulers are ones who are wise, and hence ones who exercise good judgment. But this good judgment must be grounded on genuine knowledge of what is good for the entire city. (Recall, of course, that the same will hold true of the individual's rational part of the soul.) But knowledge of what is good for the city requires acquaintance with what Plato calls The Form of the Good. (Note that Socrates says that he himself doesn't have genuine knowledge of the Form of the Good, but has merely an opinion about it—506c & 509c.) How does Socrates distinguish between many good (or many beautiful) things and the Forms of Goodness and the form of beauty?

18. What is the moral of the Allegory of the Cave in Book VII? (You should be able to present the Cave allegory, connecting it to the acquisition of virtue in the soul.)

19. What are the three arguments that Plato makes in Book IX in response to Glaucon's challenge? (Actually, we'll only cover the second and third arguments, and not the first.)

20. In addition to giving the arguments referred to in the question immediately above, Socrates provides a story describing the condition of just persons versus unjust persons to give a graphic illustration of why justice is better than injustice. This is the story that talks about the three creatures linked together (beginning at 588c). Explain what Socrates says here.