

Notes on Book One of Republic

Justice is something we ordinarily think is important but also something relatively easy to satisfy. But when asked to explain it or define it, we typically can't do so in a satisfactory way, despite the fact that we believe we are just and it is not hard for us to be just. The characters below offer views that Plato thinks are representative of the person on the street.

Cephalus:

Definition (331b-c): Justice is telling the truth and paying one's debts. Notice that his approach to defining a crucially important value is to give a list of actions one needs to perform to be just; it is not about being a certain kind of person or having a certain kind of character. This might be an example of how simple ordinary conceptions of justice/morality are: comply with a list of rules and, bingo, you're just or moral. But at least Cephalus does think that the way one has lived is important as to whether his life goes well.

Socrates's Reply: argument by counterexample—returning the sword to the madman. The definition offered by Cephalus is inadequate because returning the sword fits the proposed definition but it is clearly not the right thing to do.

Cephalus' reaction is to run away from the argument once his commonsense view is seen to be inadequate; he's got nothing further to say (to think?) about justice.

Polemarchus:

Definition: (First at 331e) Justice is to give to each what is owed to him. Then, a bit later on (more specifically at 332a-b) he offers a refined definition: Justice is to benefit one's friends and harm one's enemies.

Plato inserts (at 332c-d) the first of two important **presuppositions**, one for which he offers no argument but also one that is not challenged by his interlocutors. He suggests that justice is a craft (*technē*), the practice of which requires some kind of expert knowledge. This will figure heavily in the arguments of Book I and later books.

The second presupposition (at 335b-c) is that justice is a **virtue** (see other handout, and footnote 12 on page 10). This second presupposition figures in undermining Polemarchus' definition because the practice of justice as a virtue is for a person is to do good; but a good person practicing virtue cannot make another person worse off. It aims to undermine the claim that doing justice involves harming another (making someone worse). [Even when we penalize someone as punishment, it is with an eye towards his or her good.]

Thrasymachus

Thrasymachus is associated with sophism: the teaching of arguing, rhetoric, and oratory for money (as opposed to doing these things in the search for truth alone, the Socratic ideal). Sophism was particularly important in Greek life because of the way in which lawsuits worked. In the absence of any professional lawyers serving as either defense or prosecution, conflicts requiring civil resolution required opposing citizens to make their own cases before a jury. Those with much to lose would have to invest in acquiring the ability to argue. Importantly, there is a mercenary nature to sophism, the general skills being marshaled for either competing position even when one knows the position one is defending is false.

Socrates indicates his motivation is to ascertain the truth, but he is willing to acknowledge that he may be incapable of finding the truth. Socrates famously professes an open mind, eager to learn from others who might (and who claim to) know.

Definition (338c): Justice is the advantage of the stronger. Further explained, the idea is that those in power are those who make the rules and when they do they always make the rules in their own interests; justice (for the subjects) at least is to obey the rules that the powerful establish, and hence to advance the interests of the ruled. He is forced by an initial line of questioning by Socrates to refine his claim (at 340e-341a) that rulers in the precise sense never err (that is never mistake their own interests). The significance of this is that they are experts, who have craft knowledge regarding ruling and, in the ideal, never make mistakes in converting their knowledge to rules.

Socrates' attack on Thrasymachus' understanding of justice begins at 341c, with the question about the subject of knowledge that a doctor, ship's captain, ruler or any other practitioner of a craft possesses. The intention is to show that anyone who practices a craft does so to improve the situation or condition of that object over which he practices the craft knowledge (sick bodies, sailors/crew, subjects of rule). It is the knowledge of the body that gives the doctor authority to prescribe or direct the conduct of the patient. By analogy, it is the knowledge of the good of the city that gives the expert ruler in the precise sense the authority to rule over them. So, insofar as justice is connected to ruling by the stronger, the expert rulers' strength lies in his or her superior knowledge of the good of the citizens—the advantage not of him or herself but of his or her subjects.

Thrasymachus' Reply: Shepherds raise and tend to the wellbeing of their sheep NOT in order to advance the sheep's good but instead rule the herd in order to fatten them up and earn a profit for their (shepherds') own good. So too for the expert ruler, says Thrasymachus (at 343b).

In addition to making this reply to Socrates, Thrasymachus also CHANGES TOPICS: he moves from (a) the question of what justice is to (b) the question of whether being just is more beneficial to one than being unjust. Thrasymachus argues that it is better to be unjust than just (343d). His initial description of unrestrained injustice is 343d-344c.

Socrates makes a counterargument to Thrasymachus's point about the shepherd, but also makes several interesting points before he does. Socrates professes that in this matter of which whole way of life would make living most worthwhile for each of us, he may not know the answer (again the profession of ignorance), but he confesses he does not think that injustice is more profitable than justice, not even if injustice faces no obstacles and is given full scope (345a). There is an interesting remark that foreshadows his later discussion in Book VII about education—arguments or knowledge are not merely to be poured into one's soul.

The basic reply to the shepherd point is that Thrasymachus has switched from talking about the ruler or shepherd as a craftsman (exercising craft knowledge of what is best for those over whom he rules) to talking about the shepherd as a money maker or profit seeker. There would be no way to distinguish between a shepherd and a doctor if their identities as craftsmen (i.e., as experts) were about advancing their self-interest.

And once again he makes an interesting side point, about the motivation of rulers. To illustrate the point about rulers being properly concerned with the interests of others, Socrates points out that good persons must be led by promises of compensation to rule, as they can expect their own interests to suffer while they look out for others' good. While money and reputation/honor are typical forms of compensation, Socrates cryptically remarks that the incentive that makes the best persons accept the responsibility of ruling is the need to avoid being ruled by those who are worse (less qualified or equipped). [347a-d]

He then returns (348a) to the second question Thrasymachus addressed—whether injustice is better than justice. Socrates offers three arguments against Thrasymachus.

First Argument (349b): In the exercise of any kind of expert knowledge, the person who knows is better than the person who is ignorant. And the person with expert knowledge doesn't aim to get a 'better' answer to questions about what he has knowledge of than other experts. He rather tries to get the same answer as--tries to be in agreement with--other experts. He will get answers that differ from those who are ignorant. Someone who is ignorant of the relevant facts, will try to outdo both those with knowledge and other ignorant persons. Now think of just and unjust persons. Just persons will strive to be in agreement with, or not outdo, those who are also just, but will aim to be better than those who are unjust. An unjust person (think of the Thrasymachan ruler here) will try to be better than both just and unjust persons. So, the just person will more closely resemble the person with knowledge, the better person and the unjust person will resemble the ignorant person. Thus, the just person will resemble the clever and the good insofar as these types of people have knowledge.

Second Argument (350c): Injustice is not stronger than justice, since justice between the parts of a city is necessary for the city to act as one in the achievement of its goals, even if the goal is to conquer other cities.

Third Argument (352d): Justice is a virtue, and hence makes those things that possess it perform their functions well. This last argument is what will be developed further in the book.