

Name:

Course: Phil (number)

Date:

Assigned reading: Plato, *Republic* Book 1

Questions

Usually, the setting at the start of a Platonic dialogue is key to understanding the whole. Is this the case for Book 1 alone or is it the case for the whole 10 books of the *Republic*? And what is the key or are the keys?

What are the understandings of justice according to Cephalus, Polemarchus and Thrasymachus?

(Any questions on particular parts of the reasoning?)

How does Socrates handle the arguments and position of Thrasymachus?

(Any more questions?)

Notes

1. Context

Socrates (Soc) and his group are asked to wait for another other group of friends can catch up to them and walk with them to the home of elderly Cephalus after attending a religious festival. Jostling with them, Soc suggest that his group might persuade the other to let them proceed and not wait, but enthusiastic and engaging Polemarchus, son of Cephalus, says, "But could you persuade us, if we won't listen?" (328e) Could this be a key? Could it be that Socrates will explain his outlook (his understanding of a proper life journey in matters of justice) but others will refuse to listen?

2.Topic: What is justice (Ju)?

2.1 For wealthy Cephalus, ju is speaking the truth and paying one's debts. "The possession of wealth is most valuable, not for every man, but for a good and orderly one." Soc: Could paying debts or giving back something lent sometimes be both just and unjust, as in returning a weapon to a madman?

2.2 Son Polemarchus inherits the argument, youthful vigor very evident. Ju is to give to enemies what is owed, which is harm and to friends what is beneficial to them. What is justice useful for? Contracts to keep agreements firm and stable. Does that mean that justice is most useful (in contracts) when it is useless (no one breaking contracts)?

2.3 Thrasymachus has had enough of the Soc's prattle and bursts out with his own views. Ju is nothing other than what is advantageous for the stronger. 336d, 338b. Each form of government favors itself: Ju is what is not advantageous for those ruled (citizens) and is advantageous for the established rulers.

Soc: It's too simple to say it is whatever the rulers want since they can make mistakes about what they want and could harm themselves. A grammarian or ruler, "to the extent that he is what we call him, never makes errors." (340d-342a). The natural aim of every craft is not to further itself but to improve others, as the grammarian seeks to improve her students. No ruler, as ruler, considers himself first but rather **by his definition** considers his subjects and their improvement. The shepherd seeks the health of his sheep.

Thrasymachus: Justice is the good of the ruler who is stronger and harmful for the one who obeys and serves. The life of the unjust person is better than that of the just person.

2.4 refutation by Soc: The function argument and the proper virtue or excellence of a thing. Justice is a soul's virtue and injustice is vice. "So a just soul and a just man will live well and an unjust one badly." "So then, blessed Thrasymachus, injustice is never more profitable than justice."

Relevance today?

In *Republic* Book 1, Thrasymachus — the most powerful advocate of a *Realpolitik* (see <https://www.britannica.com/topic/realpolitik> and <https://www.istor.org/stable/2376875>) — provides an unapologetic account of justice as "nothing other than what is advantageous for the stronger." Thrasymachus is unrestrained and says exactly what he holds to be the real nature of justice and does so with great vigor. Socrates subjects this to his usual careful critical analysis and argues this is incoherent and self-contradictory with several arguments. But in the end Thrasymachus no longer cares and is no longer seriously engages with Socrates. The reasoning is at times like that of the Platonic dialogue *Gorgias* where rhetoric is for persuasion (Gorgias), then for power (Polemarchus), then for whatever pleases one (Callicles).

See two links at <https://richardctaylor.info/phil-1001-varia/> on Stephen Miller and on Thrasymachus today.