Plato's *Republic*

An Introduction

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1. Fathers and Sons

Book I

Plato packs a lot into the *Republic*'s first book, so we will have an easier time of it if we break the discussion into two chapters. In this chapter we will examine Socrates' conversations with Cephalus and then with Cephalus' son, Polemarchus. In the next chapter we will explore Socrates' encounter with Thrasymachus.

The ever-curious Socrates wants to know what justice is not simply for its own sake but to determine whether a just life—a morally good life—is happier than an unjust one. As mentioned in the Introduction, the Greek word δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiosunê*) is broader in meaning than the English word 'justice', which often suggests fair distributions or the idea of rights. I will continue to use it, but I will often also use synonyms such as 'right' and 'moral goodness' and their ilk. 'Righteousness' seems a bit archaic and can have religious connotations that can be misleading. It is often thought that Book I of the *Republic* was initially a stand-alone dialogue as it ends, like so many of Plato's other dialogues do, without an answer to its central question. Most of these dialogues have Socrates asking, 'What is ____?' where an important notion like justice, knowledge, or courage fills in the blank. Socrates examines the answers his companions propose but typically finds them wanting, usually because they conflict with other beliefs held by the interlocutor. While not knowing what something is can be frustrating, knowing what it is not is often a helpful kind of knowledge, as it narrows the field and leaves us a bit closer to knowing what the thing—here, justice—is. Though Book I ends without a satisfactory answer to its central question, rather

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than the discussants going their separate ways, as usually happens in Plato's dialogues, two of the participants, Glaucon and Adeimantus (Plato's real-life brothers) insist that Socrates continues, that he shares his beliefs about the nature and value of justice, even if he cannot in good conscience claim to *know* its nature and value.

Polemarchus Wants You to Wait (1.327a–328c)

One of the many rewards of reading Plato is the literary quality of the dialogues, which are extraordinarily well crafted. That Plato writes dialogues rather than straightforward essays suggests that he regards philosophy as essentially conversational, that it involves back-and-forth, give-and-take, that two (or three) heads are better than one when addressing philosophical topics like the nature of justice. The dialogue form also invites us to be active rather than passive readers, to engage in the dialogue by thinking of responses and questions that the people on the page do not make. In addition to Plato's making a philosophical point by writing in dialogue form, his writing this way allows him to raise themes and issues that are at work in the background, where the conversation he is depicting is in the foreground. The opening lines of the *Republic* are an excellent example of this.

The *Republic* is Socrates' first-person account of a long conversation about the nature and value of justice that he has at the house of Cephalus, a wealthy merchant who lives in the Piraeus, the port of Athens. Plato's situating the conversation outside of Athens might be his way of suggesting that the ideal city Socrates and his friends will imaginatively construct is an alternative to Athens; he is not offering suggestions for ways in which Athens might change for the better but instead offers a different political arrangement entirely.

It is worth noting that the *Republic* is written around 380 BCE, in the shadow of Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War about twenty years previously. The conversation depicted takes place well before that, though scholars disagree about the dialogue's dramatic date. One likely candidate is 421 BCE, during 'the optimistic springtime Peace of Nicias', the truce marking the end of the first phase of the War; another is 411 BCE, after the War has resumed and is going quite badly for Athens, 'a

gloomy, violence-torn, pessimistic time'.[1] Plato's contemporaries would know—and many contemporary readers will know—that Socrates was tried, convicted, and executed in 399 BCE for corrupting the youth and introducing false gods. Few contemporary readers, by contrast, will know that Polemarchus, who features prominently in Book I, was executed by the so-called Thirty Tyrants, who, installed by Sparta at the War's end, ruled briefly and bloodily in 404 BCE.

Socrates' reason for venturing out of Athens—to attend a religious festival and 'offer up my prayers to the goddess' (1.327a)—is a good example of Plato's subtle authorial artistry. As we noted above, the historical Socrates was tried, convicted, and put to death by the citizens of Athens for impiety and corrupting the youth. Plato memorably recounts Socrates' defense speech in the *Apology* (a title that will seem odd, given how unapologetic Socrates is in it, until we realize that *apologia* is Greek for defense). So Plato's depiction of Socrates' conventional piety at the very outset of the *Republic* provides an ironic take on then-recent Athenian history that would not be lost on any of Plato's contemporaries.

Socrates' opening words, 'I went down', which translate the Greek κατέβην (*katabên*), seem an unremarkable way to begin a remarkable book. But we will appreciate their significance and Plato's subtle authorial artistry later in the *Republic,* when, in the famous Allegory of the Cave, Socrates insists that the enlightened philosophers 'go down again' into the cave to govern its benighted prisoners and free those who are capable of making it out. It is the same verb in both cases, and in subtly drawing this parallel Plato seems to be telling us that Socrates' interlocutors—and by extension, us, his readers, whatever our accomplishments and pretension—do indeed live in the darkness of the Cave. 'It's a strange image you are describing', says Glaucon, 'and strange prisoners'. 'They are like us', Socrates replies. (7.515a)

Socrates tells his unnamed audience that Polemarchus' slave tugged on his cloak and asked him to wait. The casual invocation of slavery may bring many contemporary readers up short. Slavery was a fact of life in the Greek world, and lovers of Plato and other great classical authors such as Aeschylus, Aristophanes, and Aristotle, to name just three near the beginning of the alphabet, should at the very least pause

1 Debra Nails, 'The Dramatic Date of Plato's *Republic*', *The Classical Journal,* 93.4 (1998), 383–96 (p. 385).

at the possibility that the cultural achievement of classical Athens was possible only because it was a slave society. Although the claim is not uncontroversial, the consensus of contemporary scholars is that there *is* slavery in Plato's ideal *polis*. We may have occasion to investigate this later, but for now we might just note the fact that Polemarchus' slave is the first person Socrates quotes in the *Republic.* Although Athenian slavery might partially frame the *Republic* for modern readers, Plato does not seem to raise it as a background issue worthy of philosophical attention and there is no explicit discussion of its nature or moral status. Plato seems to accept it as something natural (later, he suggests that an individual might be 'by nature suited to be a slave' (4.444b), an idea Aristotle develops in the first book of his *Politics*) but subject to moral constraint—for example, we are told that Greeks should not enslave other Greeks (5.469c) and that rather than being harsh with his slaves, a good and properly educated person will merely look down on them (8.549a).

When Polemarchus finally catches up to Socrates he tells him, 'You must either prove stronger than we are or you will have to stay here' (1.327c). This sounds ominous, but it is just an innocent pun on Socrates' name, the central element of which is κράτος (*cratos*), meaning 'strength' or 'power'. One suspects this is not the first time Socrates has endured this rather lame pun, but he replies graciously and without groaning, asking if there is not another alternative, 'that we persuade you to let us go' (1.327c). This little exchange is Plato's way of raising an important theme of the *Republic:* the opposition between force and persuasion, between the irrational and the rational. The conflict sometimes comes to the surface, for example, in the Cave Allegory mentioned above. Education, as Plato conceives of it, involves quite a bit of force: the freed prisoner is 'compelled to stand up, turn his head [...] and look up toward the light' (7.515c) and is 'dragged [...] from there by force, up the rough, steep path' and then 'dragged [...] into the sunlight' (7.515e). Though the enlightened philosophers would rather remain above, they return to the cave—not because they are physically or psychologically compelled to do so, but because they are persuaded to.

In response to Socrates' appeal to persuasion, Polemarchus jokingly plays a trump card: 'But could you persuade us, if we won't listen?' (1.327e). Here Plato is recognizing a practical limit to the power of

rational persuasion: people who refuse to listen cannot be persuaded. Most of us have probably encountered people who seem impervious to evidence and argument. More chillingly, the psychologists Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler have identified what they call the backfire effect: some of us are psychologically constituted so as to not merely remain unpersuaded by evidence and reasons that should lead us to give up certain beliefs, but actually tend to hold such beliefs even more strongly in the face of such evidence—so attempts to persuade the other by appeals to good evidence are likely to backfire.[2] Plato is reminding us that genuine discussion and dialogue, as opposed to dueling monologues, cannot occur when we refuse to entertain reasons and evidence that go against our views. He is raising an important theme that will be at work in the background of the *Republic*, and raising it in the subtle way skilled literary artists do.

There is more we could say about the subtleties of the *Republic*'s opening, however the goal was not an exhaustive—and exhausting—catalog and discussion of them but rather to help the reader begin to appreciate the literary quality of the *Republic* and how inseparable its literary and philosophical aspects are for Plato.

Cephalus: Justice is Paying Your Debts and Telling the Truth (1.328c–331d)

The entire conversation that *is* the *Republic* takes place at the suburban home of Cephalus, a wealthy merchant, whose son, Polemarchus, has a keen interest in philosophy. Cephalus likes Socrates, and Socrates clearly likes him. Nowadays telling someone that you enjoy talking to them because you 'enjoy talking with the very old' (1.328d) is unlikely to be well received, but Cephalus does not mind, in part because of the association of age and wisdom: since Cephalus is farther along the road of life, he might have some insight about whether that road is 'rough and difficult or smooth and easy' (1.328e). The metaphor of the road or path is one we will see elsewhere in the *Republic.*

2 Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, 'When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions', *Political Behavior,* 32 (2010), 303–30, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109–010–9112–2

Cephalus is a fine spokesperson for moral common sense; his idea of a good life is not a life of 'sex, drinking parties, [and] feasts' (1.329a) but rather one of moderation. Being wealthy does not hurt, he admits, but all by itself material comfort is not sufficient for living well. 'A good person would not easily bear old age if he were poor', he remarks, 'but a bad one would not be at peace with himself, even if he were wealthy' (1.330a). Despite his conventional decency, Cephalus is not especially reflective and when the discussion turns philosophical, he congenially excuses himself to take care of a religious sacrifice. Cephalus exhibits an attractive kind of humility, as he is sufficiently self-aware to recognize that external factors play an important role in his being morally decent and thus that he himself is not the sole cause of his goodness. Plato is deftly setting up a contrast between character and circumstance, between the inner and the outer, that will come into play later in the *Republic* as he addresses the question of whether one can cultivate one's soul in such a way that one is more or less impervious to external forces that can lead one to act unjustly.

Before Cephalus leaves, Socrates pursues this question of wealth a bit further, asking Cephalus what the greatest good that his wealth has brought him is. Cephalus' answer is a bit surprising (and is no doubt part of why Socrates likes him). It is not that it enables a life of self-indulgence, cushy comfort, and lots of toys. Rather, it is that wealth is a kind of buffer against moral temptation: 'Wealth can do a lot to save us from having to cheat and deceive' (1.331b), Cephalus says, and thus it allows a person to face the afterlife without trepidation, since it enables one to live 'a just and pious life' (1.331a).

Most of us will agree that wealth is merely instrumentally and not intrinsically valuable—that it is not good in itself, but rather it is good as a means to something else. Cephalus is making a related but subtly different point about the sort of value wealth possesses, that wealth is conditionally good: its goodness depends not just upon the use to which it is put, but on who is doing the putting—on whose wealth it is. If my wealth enables my pursuing pleasures that are ultimately self-destructive, then my being wealthy is bad for me. A 'decent and orderly' (1.331a) person will benefit from their wealth, since they will use it well.

This distinction between conditional and unconditional value provides a nice segue to a distinctively philosophical turn in the conversation.

Though Cephalus has not himself offered a definition of justice, Socrates hears one lurking beneath the surface and asks, 'But speaking of this very thing itself, namely, justice, are we to say unconditionally that it is speaking the truth and paying whatever debts one has incurred? Or is doing these things sometimes just, sometimes unjust?' (1.331c) It is important to understand that Socrates is not looking for a *verbal* definition of 'justice' here, the sort of thing that one can look up in a dictionary or use to explain its meaning to someone learning one's language. He is looking for the *real* definition of justice, for an account of the thing itself. (Here 'real' does not contrast with 'fake' or 'imaginary' but with 'verbal'; etymologically 'real' derives from the Latin word '*res*', which means 'thing' or 'matter'.) There is no question about the verbal definition of *dikaiosunê,* the word we are translating 'justice': it means morally right conduct generally. But exactly what morally right conduct *is* is what Socrates wants to know. Trying to get clear about everyday concepts like justice, courage, knowledge, etc., by making explicit what is usually left implicit is one of philosophy's main tasks, for Plato. Plato's dialogues typically consist of Socrates encountering someone who claims to know the real definition of a virtue like justice or courage or temperance. But after some Socratic question and answer, it becomes clear that the proposed definition will not work, usually because it is inconsistent with other things his interlocutor believes, and that is what happens here. Most of the dialogues end without a definition being arrived at—they end in what scholars call ἀπορία (*aporia*) difficulty, perplexity.

On Cephalus' definition of justice (more accurately, the definition Socrates attributes to him) justice is telling the truth and paying one's debts. It is instructive to note what Socrates does *not* do here. He does not shrug and offer a relativistic platitude such as, 'well, everyone's got a right to their opinion'. Socrates does not think that questions like the one he is asking are mere matters of taste, and there would be little point in discussing them if they were. If you think broccoli is delicious and I cannot stand it, an argument about who is right is pointless, since there is no fact of the matter about whether broccoli is delicious—hence the maxim *de gustibus non est disputandem:* there is no disputing about matters of taste. If, by contrast, we disagree about the cube root of 729, at least one of us is wrong. Philosophical questions about the nature of

justice (and knowledge, courage, temperance, love, etc.) will seem to many thoughtful people to fall somewhere in between these extremes, not mere matters of taste but not as certain as truths of mathematics.

Socrates thinks that there *is* a correct answer to his question about the nature of justice (and about knowledge, courage, temperance, etc.), so in one sense of the term, he is a realist: he thinks there really is a fact of the matter of what justice is, a way things are that is independent of what we might think, which is the very thing the relativist denies. When Hamlet, by contrast, says that 'there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so' (*Hamlet*, II.2.244–45), he is expressing an antirealist view about the nature of goodness: things are not mind-independently good or bad; their being good or bad is determined by our attitudes toward them. Realism is not an all-or-nothing affair: one can be a realist about morality, thinking that there really are moral facts such as 'murder is wrong' and 'kindness is good', but an anti-realist about aesthetics, thinking that beauty really is just in the eye of the beholder. While many readers will be leery about Socrates' moral realism, an attractive feature of his method of rigorous cross-examination is that it does not depend on his realism, for it aims to discover whether someone's view is consistent with other things they believe. So the *elenchus* aims to lead the cross-examined party not to the unvarnished moral truth but rather to intellectual self-awareness—and, hopefully, to intellectual humility if, as is often the case, one recognizes that one's beliefs do not hang together consistently.

Having noted what Socrates does not do in his conversation with Cephalus, let us look at what he does do. He argues that if Cephalus' definition of justice is correct, then it would be just to return a borrowed weapon when its now-deranged owner asks for it back. But Cephalus himself does not think this. Since his definition implies something that he thinks is false, Cephalus should think that his definition is false. This form of argument is as common in everyday life as it is in philosophy. If A implies B and B is false, A must be false too. Any argument that fits this pattern is valid: *if* its premises are true then its conclusion must be true. If it is true that the sidewalk gets wet if it rains and it is true that the sidewalk is not getting wet, then it must also be true that it is not raining—for if it *were* raining, the sidewalk would be getting wet, and it is not; thus, it cannot be raining. If my aggrieved friend says, 'if (A)

you were a good friend, then (B) you would have helped me move', I know how the rest of the argument goes even if they do not spell it out: (not-B) you did not help me move; therefore (not-A) you are not a good friend. I might reply by hanging my head in shame and conceding that I am not a good friend. That is, I take the argument to be not only logically valid (in other words, its conclusion must be true *if* its premises are true) but sound as well: it is valid *and* its premises are in fact true. But I might also reply by insisting that while the argument is logically valid, it is not sound, since its first premise is false. While it is *generally* true that a good friend will help one move, it is not true without exception. If I was in the hospital donating a kidney to another friend and was unable to help you move, my not helping does not imply that I am not a good friend. A more plausible version of the first premise would be 'if (A) you were a good friend *and* (C) were able to help me move, then (B) you would have done so.' On this more nuanced version of the argument, the conclusion to draw from the fact that I did not help is that *either* (not-A) I am not a good friend *or* (not-C) I was not able to help. I do not want us to get too bogged down in detail, but attention to the logic of the arguments offered is crucial to doing philosophy in general and to understanding the *Republic* in particular, especially Book I.

Now, just as I had some options in responding to my friend's argument, so too does Cephalus have options in responding to Socrates. Perhaps he should concede that his definition is false. But he could also change his mind about whether it would be wrong to return the weapon. This seems less plausible; most of us are surer of particular moral judgments we make than we are about more general moral principles. But if Cephalus is very confident in the truth of his definition, we might be willing to 'bite the bullet', as philosophers say, and accept an initially unpalatable claim. Another option would be to argue that the definition does not actually imply the problematic judgment, much as I did with my friend in the example above. Or he can challenge Socrates' unstated assumption that the definition of justice must be unconditional, never allowing any exceptions. Note that this is not a challenge to Socrates' definitional realism; Cephalus can still think that there is a uniquely correct definition while at the same time thinking that the correct definition is the sort of thing that holds only for the most part. In his imposingly titled *Groundwork of*

the Metaphysics of Morals, the great modern philosopher Immanuel Kant insisted that moral principles must hold universally and not merely generally,[3] while Plato's student Aristotle, by contrast, thought that moral truths hold only for the most part, and that we must not demand more rigor than a subject affords.[4] Plato is closer to Kant on this score than he is to Aristotle. We will not settle this dispute here (or anywhere in this book); I raise it not only to show that Cephalus has philosophical options he does not seem to be aware of, but also to show that an important task of philosophy is making the implicit explicit: Socrates assumes that real definitions must hold without exception. While he may be correct about this, he may not be: moral definitions and principles might lack the universality and precision we expect of their mathematical cousins.

A related assumption Socrates makes is that there really is one feature that all just things have in common, something in virtue of which they are all just. In other words, there must be an essence of justice—and similarly an essence of courage, wisdom, tree, table, etc. Plato has a surprising view about the nature of these essences, which he calls the Forms: he not only thinks that the Forms are mind-independently real, he thinks that they are *more real* than the particular things that are instances of them. We will get to that in Chapter Eight, when we will also query the assumption that there is an essence—a real definition—of justice and that the task of philosophy is to figure out what that essence is.

Polemarchus: Justice is Benefiting Friends and Harming Enemies (1.331d–336a)

Socrates thinks that the proposed definition of justice has been decisively refuted, but Polemarchus, Cephalus' son, disagrees, and for support he appeals to the poet Simonides. This appeal to poetic authority raises an important theme that will be explored later in the *Republic*: do poets—especially great poets such as Homer—have *knowledge* of things such as the nature of justice? Does the fact that Homer or Pindar or Simonides says something give us a good reason to think that it is true? Anyone who

3 Immanuel Kant, *Kant: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* trans. and ed. by Mary K. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 34 [*Ak.* 4:424].

4 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* I.3 1294b12–15.

has spent much time on Facebook and who has a philosophical bent has probably asked similar questions. Does the fact that George Clooney, for example, thinks drastic action needs to be taken to deal with climate change give me good reason to think so, too? It seems not, but many of us find the deliverances of celebrities persuasive nonetheless. Socrates plainly loves Homer; he quotes him and other poets throughout the *Republic.* He will reluctantly conclude in Book X that poets and artists generally do not possess the moral authority that the Polemarchuses of the world attribute to them. But for now, he sets this issue aside and queries the definition of justice Polemarchus appeals to.

Polemarchus first suggests that justice is giving to each what they are owed. While his father's definition was too specific, Polemarchus' is perhaps too general: what exactly are people owed? Polemarchus answers that we owe good to our friends and bad to our enemies. This is not an outlandish view; indeed, it is commonsense to Polemarchus and his contemporaries. The countervailing Christian idea that we should love our enemies would find few adherents in classical Athens.

Socrates makes two arguments against Polemarchus' definition of justice as benefiting one's friends and harming one's enemies, but before looking at them, we should attend to a problematic feature of his definition: it divides the moral world into *friends* and *enemies*—but surely that does not exhaust the possibilities. It is likely that most of the people one encounters on any given day do not fall into either category. And though I am lucky enough to have some people I consider genuine friends, my life is not interesting enough for me to have any enemies, alas. A central moral question most thoughtful people ask is what if any moral duties they have toward strangers, especially strangers halfway around the world, who do not fit into either camp. Polemarchus' definition of justice gives us no help in answering that question.

As with his argument against Cephalus, Socrates' argument against Polemarchus' account of justice is an indirect argument, aiming to show that the definition implies things that Polemarchus himself thinks are false. Socrates argues that Polemarchus' account of justice implies that justice is not especially valuable and moreover that it is a craft of stealing. Since Polemarchus does not think either of those implications is true, Socrates argues, his definition must be false. The pattern is the

same one we saw above: A implies B, B is not true, so A must not be true. Here, B has two parts, the sub-claims that justice is not valuable and that justice is a craft of stealing, so the argument is a slightly more complex variation on the argument Socrates made against Polemarchus, but they exhibit essentially the same pattern.

P1	If Polemarchus' definition of justice is correct, then justice is not valuable and it is a craft of stealing.
P2	But it is false that justice is not valuable and that it is a craft of stealing.
C	Therefore, Polemarchus' definition of justice is not correct.

As with the argument above, this one is valid: if its premises are true, its conclusion—that Polemarchus' definition is mistaken—must be true. Since the argument is valid, the only way to avoid the truth of the conclusion is to find at least one of the premises to be false. Polemarchus feels himself in a bind because he thinks that his definition is true (and thus that the conclusion of Socrates' argument is false), and also that both premises seem true. He does not seem to know how to respond: 'I do not know any more what I did mean, but I still believe that to benefit friends and harm one's enemies is justice' (1.334b).

Polemarchus' plight is not uncommon among Plato's characters: they recognize that Socrates has them intellectually cornered but they do not seem to know what to do. Adeimantus describes the experience of many of Socrates' interlocutors a bit later in the *Republic:* 'Just as inexperienced checkers players are trapped by the experts in the end and cannot make a move, so [your interlocutors] too are trapped in the end and have nothing to say in this different kind of checkers, which is played not with discs but with words' (6.487b).

I think that Plato puts Polemarchus in this predicament because he wants us, his readers, to engage philosophically in the discussion by doing for ourselves what Polemarchus is not able to do: to carefully scrutinize Socrates' reasoning and to think through his assumptions. Perhaps we can help Polemarchus out. Since Socrates' argument is valid, the main issue is whether it is sound. Why should we think that its first premise is true?

Is Justice a Craft? (1.332c–334b)

Socrates' argument that P1 is true (and notice that he offers an argument for a premise that itself is part of a larger argument) turns on the idea of a craft—τέχνη (*technê*), in Greek, from which words like 'technique' and 'technology' derive. A doctor is a person skilled in the craft of medicine; they know how to use their skill to benefit their friends by healing them and harm their enemies by poisoning them. Similarly, the person skilled in the craft of cooking can use that skill to benefit their friends and harm their enemies via the food they cook. (Readers who have seen the film *The Help* might think of Minny's special chocolate pie as an example.)

The crucial move takes place when Socrates says, 'Now, what does the craft we call justice give, and to whom or what does it give it?' (1.332d) If justice is a craft in the same way that medicine, cooking, navigation, and the like are crafts, then like them it will have its own special sphere in which it operates to benefit friends and harm enemies. Medicine's sphere or domain is health; it is there that its skilled practitioner can benefit friends and harm enemies. Medicine is not useful outside its sphere—for example, the person skilled in navigation can benefit friends and harm enemies at sea, not the person skilled in medicine. This is not to say that these spheres do not overlap: there is a sense in which a doctor can benefit and harm passengers on a ship, but their being at sea is irrelevant to the doctor benefiting and harming them.

Polemarchus does not challenge the assumption that justice is a craft; indeed, he agrees that partnerships are the sphere of the craft of justice. But, Socrates argues, when choosing a partner for checkers we want a skillful checkers player, not someone skilled in the craft of justice. The same can be said for other crafts such as house-building and horse-breeding. When we form a partnership to build a house or buy a horse, we want someone skilled in those crafts, and being just does not make anyone a better builder or breeder. It is when we are not using something and want to safeguard it, Socrates argues, that we choose the person skilled in justice, who will not steal our money or our horse or our prized violin. So, Socrates concludes, 'justice is not worth very much, since it is only useful for useless things' (1.333e).

This conclusion is an embarrassing one for Polemarchus' view, but it is not fatal to it. The fatal blow comes next. The person most skilled at protecting a computer network, to use an anachronistic example, is the person most skilled at hacking into networks; since they know where the weak spots are, they will know how to patch them. At the end of the film *Catch Me If You Can*,[5] master forger Frank Abagnale goes to work for the FBI, teaching agents how to spot forgeries. Socrates' general point is this: 'Whenever someone is a clever guardian, then, he is also a clever thief' (1.334a). But since the person skilled in the craft of justice is the best guardian of an item, they will also be best able to steal it and presumably avoid detection. Thus the just person is a kind of thief, and justice, by being a craft of guarding what is valuable, turns out to be a craft of stealing. Polemarchus is flummoxed. He does not think that justice is useless or a craft of stealing, but he has been led to the view that justice is useless and a craft of stealing by a series of steps that he agreed to.

I think that Polemarchus should, but does not, question the assumption driving the argument: that justice is a craft. Certainly, character virtues like justice are similar to crafts in interesting and important ways. For example, both are practical, involving know-how. Both are acquired by practice, by doing. Both are desirable to possess and objects of praise. But the (or at least a) crucial difference between them is that crafts are morally neutral, while character virtues—moral virtues—are not. As Socrates points out, the doctor, who possesses the craft of medicine, can use their craft for good or ill, to benefit and harm. If Polemarchus' definition of justice is correct, the doctor uses their craft to benefit their friends and harm their enemies and thereby exhibits justice. But a doctor who uses the craft of medicine to harm their friends is acting unjustly, on Polemarchus' view. Whether the doctor acts justly depends upon how they use their craft. Crafts are good—but they are *conditionally* good, good only if used appropriately; their moral goodness is not intrinsic. Virtues, by contrast, seem to be unconditionally, intrinsically good. Possessing them makes their possessor morally better off, even if it makes them, say, financially worse off. (Courage might seem to pose a problem for this claim, but

5 *Catch Me If You Can*, dir. by Stephen Spielberg (DreamWorks Pictures, 2002).

we can set that worry aside for now.) When Socrates asks, 'Is someone a good and useful partner in a game of checkers because he is just or because he is a checkers player?' (1.333a), he is treating the craft and the virtue as the same kind of thing. Instead of agreeing, Polemarchus should say, 'That is a false dilemma, Socrates. You are assuming that someone cannot be both just and a good checkers player—because you are assuming that justice is a craft, and it is not. I want to play against someone who is good at checkers—the challenge makes the game more fun—*and* someone who is not going to cheat.' Being just does not make anyone a better builder or breeder or checkers player, but it *does* make someone a better partner to engage in those crafts with, since it makes her less likely to take unfair advantage or cheat. Perhaps Polemarchus has some implicit grasp of this point, which may be one reason why he remains unconvinced by Socrates' argument against his definition.

It turns out that the first premise of Socrates' argument against Polemarchus' definition is more complex than it initially seemed. It is not

P1 If (A) Polemarchus' definition of justice is correct, then (C) justice is not valuable and (D) justice is a craft of stealing

but rather

P1* If (A) Polemarchus' definition of justice is correct *and* (B) justice is a craft, then (C) justice is not valuable and (D) justice is a craft of stealing.

With the structure of P1 thus clarified, Polemarchus has a good response to Socrates. His conceding that C and D are both false no longer entails that A is false (i.e., that his definition of justice is not correct). Instead, the falsity of C and D entail that *either* A is false *or* B is false (and maybe both). And we have independent reasons for thinking B is false: character virtues such as justice are like crafts in many ways, but they are not crafts, since crafts are morally neutral while character virtues (and vices) are morally loaded.

Speaking of Friends... (1.334c–335a)

The next argument has the same structure as the first: the definition implies something that is false, so it must be false—or at least Polemarchus ought to think it is false. In fact, Socrates seems to show that Polemarchus' definition implies that it is just to harm people who have done us no injustice—i.e., who are not our enemies: 'Then, according to your account, it is just to do bad things to those who do no injustice' (1.334d). Here the culprit is Polemarchus' mistaken account of who a friend is. Socrates distinguishes between subjective and objective accounts of friendship. On a subjective view, you are my friend if I think you are good and useful; what matters are my beliefs about you. On the objective view, you are my friend if in fact you are good and useful, regardless of whether I think so. Polemarchus opts for the first, subjective option, but Socrates points out that we are often mistaken about this sort of thing, which can lead to harming our friends and benefitting our enemies.

Notice that here Polemarchus recognizes that his view is defective, since it implies something he knows to be false. 'My account (λόγος [*logos*]) must be a bad one' (1.334d), he says, proposing that they modify the subjective account of friendship, opting for a hybrid account that combines the objective and subjective accounts: 'Someone who is both believed to be useful and is useful is a friend; someone who is believed to be useful but is not, is believed to be a friend but is not' (1.334e).

This exchange shows Polemarchus in a better light than the first. He is much more active than in the first argument, where for the most part he limited himself to one-word replies to Socrates' somewhat leading questions. At the conclusion of the first argument he seemed helplessly befuddled, vaguely recognizing that there was some problem with his view but sticking to it nonetheless: 'I do not know any more what I did mean, but I still believe that to benefit one's friends and harm one's enemies is justice' (1.334b). In this exchange he not only clearly recognizes the problem (his subjective account of friendship) but articulates the solution: 'let us change our definition' (1.334e) of friendship. He is more rationally engaged in this exchange and provides a pretty good model for thinking philosophically—which, in the end, really just comes down to thinking clearly. It may be that his rational

vision is sharper in this exchange, however I suspect it is not that his vision has improved, but rather that the problem is more visible in this exchange than in the first.

But Does the Just Person Harm Anyone? (1.335b–336a)

Where Socrates' first criticisms of Polemarchus' definition are indirect, aiming to show that it implies things that Polemarchus himself rejects, the last criticism is more direct, challenging the definition itself—and, indeed, is a direct challenge to an element of Greek commonsense morality that would seem to most Athenians to be unassailable. The proposed definition cannot be right, Socrates argues, because 'it is never just to harm anyone' (1.335e). It is an argument that is important both to the scheme of Book I of the *Republic* and to moral philosophy generally.

One of the argument's key elements is the concept of a virtue, which we employed without exploring whether a virtue such as justice is a craft. While we are perhaps likelier to think of virtue in the singular, referring to someone's character in general (or, anachronistically, to sexual chastity), it is usually plural in the *Republic.* Indeed, in Book IV we will find Socrates giving accounts of the four cardinal virtues: justice, moderation, courage, and wisdom. The Greek word is ἀρετή (*aretê*), which does not have the necessarily moral connotation that the English word 'virtue' possesses. The word 'virtuoso' retains this non-moral sense; it is still an evaluative term, but not a *morally* evaluative one. The word 'good' often functions this way. When you call someone a good person, you are morally evaluating and praising them; when you call them a good dancer or a good mechanic or a good thief, you are evaluating them, but you are not evaluating them morally; you are saying that they are good at a particular craft or activity. Some translators try to remind their readers of this non-moral aspect by opting for 'excellence' instead of 'virtue' in translating *aretê.* This makes sense, since if things like dogs and knives have virtues—which they do, as Plato understands the concept—it must have a non-moral dimension. But our translator opts for 'virtue', so to avoid confusion we will follow his lead.

The concept of a virtue is best understood in terms of the concept of a function. A thing's function is the work it does, its goal-directed purpose. The Greek word for function is ἔργον (*ergon*), which is the root of the

English word 'ergonomic'. Some readers have 'ergonomic' computer keyboards that are wedge-shaped or chairs that are 'ergonomically designed', which means that they are designed to enable their users to work more efficiently as they carry out the object's function. More technically, the function is the goal-directed activity characteristic of the kind of thing in question. Artifacts like knives and cars have functions, but so too do natural objects. The function of a knife is to cut; the function of a heart is to pump blood. In one sense, a thing's function is what makes it what it is. Understood in terms of function, a plastic knife and a metal knife have more in common with each other than a plastic knife and a plastic fork do. Understood materially rather than functionally—that is, understood in terms of the matter they are composed of rather than their tasks—the plastic knife and plastic fork are more similar to each other than either is to the metal knife. A hallmark of modern science since Galileo and Newton is jettisoning functional or teleological (that is, goal-directed) explanations of natural phenomena in favor of material and mechanistic explanations. Rain does not have a purpose in the modern worldview; that rain waters crops and thus enables life is a welcome side-effect of rain. A scientific account of why it rained this morning will appeal to various meteorological facts, not to the function or purpose of rain. But these functional or teleological explanations, while out of place in physics and chemistry, still find a home in biology and psychology, for example, and in ordinary life. When in *The Silence of the Lambs* Clarice seeks Hannibal's help in catching Buffalo Bill, he encourages her to think teleologically: 'What does he do, this man you seek?' When she answers, 'He kills women', Hannibal replies in his eerie, sing-song voice, 'No! That is incidental'. He is telling her that until she understands the goal around which he organizes his murderous activity—i.e., until she understands Bill's function—she will not be able to understand him, much less to catch him.[6] A virtue, then, is the state that enables the thing to perform its function well, and a vice, by contrast, is the state that prevents the thing from performing its function well. Sharpness is the virtue of a knife, since sharpness is what enables the knife to cut well, and dullness is a knife's vice, since it prevents the knife from cutting well. A dull knife still might cut, but it will not cut

6 *The Silence of the Lambs*, dir. by Jonathan Demme (Orion Pictures, 1991).

well. So a virtue is a good-making feature of thing: sharpness makes for a good knife, since a sharp knife cuts well. If it sounds odd to talk of a knife's virtue, keep in mind that 'excellence' is another way to translate *aretê*. The virtue of a heart is a bit more complicated, which makes sense, given how complicated hearts are, but the basic idea is the same: the heart's virtue is the condition that enables it to pump blood well.

Now that we have explored the concept of a virtue, let us see how Socrates puts it to work in his third, direct argument against Polemarchus' definition of justice. Since possessing the relevant virtue makes something good, you make something worse by depriving it of its virtue. Thus, making a knife duller makes it worse. Now of course there may be times when a dull knife is preferable to a sharp one: one does not use a sharp knife as a prop in a movie or play, because it is too dangerous. But notice how the knife's function has quietly changed: as a prop, its function is not to cut but to *appear to* do so. You do not give scalpel-sharp scissors to a kindergartener but instead scissors that do not cut as well, since we will sacrifice cutting capacity in favor of safety. The upshot of all this is that to harm something is to make it worse off with respect to the relevant virtue.

The key move in the argument occurs when Polemarchus agrees with Socrates' suggestion that justice is the human virtue (1.335c). There is no mention of the human function here—something that Plato's student Aristotle will make the centerpiece of his ethics—but we can reason backwards to it, if we are so inclined. Perhaps our function is, at least in part, to live peacefully in communities; if so, then justice will be the trait, or surely among the traits, that will enable us to do so. When speaking of making objects worse, we tend to reserve 'harm' for animate objects and employ 'damage' for inanimate ones. It sounds odd to say that I harmed the lawnmower by not putting oil in the engine. But harm and damage are both ways to make something worse, and in both cases I make the thing worse by depriving it of the relevant virtue. So, just as I would damage the knife by depriving it of its characteristic virtue, sharpness, I would harm a person by depriving them of the characteristic human virtue, justice: 'people who are harmed must become more unjust' (1.335c).

But, Socrates asks, how could a just person, acting justly, make someone else less just? A musician cannot by exhibiting musical

excellence make others less musical, he thinks, any more than an excellent parent or teacher can make someone else a worse parent or teacher through the very exercise of their excellence. The very idea is incoherent, Socrates thinks. Thus the proposed definition is intrinsically, rather than extrinsically, flawed: the problem is not that the definition has false or undesirable implications; the problem is that its core idea, that justice involves harming those who deserve it, makes no sense.

This conclusion has fascinating implications for theories of punishment—though this is not something that Socrates pursues here. If Socrates is correct, then retributivist accounts of punishment are deeply morally mistaken. Only punishment aiming at the wrongdoer's moral improvement would be justified; retributive punishments, which seek to inflict harm because the wrongdoer deserves to suffer, would not be justifiable. Here it is important to remember that not all pain is harmful; we often inflict pain on ourselves and others for our and their own good—and it is especially heart-rending when that other is a small child or companion animal with whom we cannot communicate our reasons for inflicting pain.

We will see in the next chapter that Thrasymachus, who bursts on the scene at this argument's conclusion, has a lot to say in opposition to this argument's key premise, that justice is the human virtue, so we will not explore the argument in great detail here. One might wonder, though, about Socrates' point that a person or thing possessing virtue V cannot, by exercising V, make other things un-V or less V. Sharp knives become dull by their repeated use, after all—though the great Daoist Zhuangzi (aka Chuang Tzu) might attribute this to a lack of excellence in the person wielding the knife, since Cook Ding's knife finds the empty spaces between the joints and thus 'is still as sharp as if it had just come off the whetstone, even after nineteen years'.[7] But let us set this aside and attend to how differently Polemarchus reacts to this Socratic refutation. After the first argument, he still stuck to his definition, insisting that justice was benefiting friends and harming enemies, even though he sensed something was amiss. Here, by contrast, he is completely convinced that his definition is mistaken, and profoundly so.

7 *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings,* trans. by Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2020), p. 30.

Moreover, he agrees to be Socrates' 'partner in battle' (1.335e) against those who advocate it.

It is worth noting, as we wind down this chapter, how Socrates seeks to preserve the moral authority of the poet Simonides, to whose definition Polemarchus appealed when entering the conversation. When Polemarchus first jumps into the argument, Socrates describes Simonides as 'a wise and godlike man' (1.333e)—though perhaps a bit ironically. A few pages later, having, he thinks, decisively refuted the definition, he suggests that the definition could not be Simonides' after all, since no wise and godlike person could be so mistaken about the nature of justice. Instead, it must be the definition of a wealthy and powerful person seeking to cloak their bad conduct in the mantle of justice. This is yet another of the subtle ways in which Plato works important themes into the argument. As noted above, whether poets have the moral authority customarily ascribed to them will be explored later in the *Republic.*

We have covered a lot of ground in this chapter. Hopefully readers have a good grasp of some of the key concepts that will be explored in the remainder of the *Republic* and especially of the give-and-take that characterizes philosophical conversation.

Some Suggestions for Further Reading

Kenneth Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), is a rich source for the shared morality of the day.

Gregory Vlastos, 'Socrates' Rejection of Retaliation', in *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 179–99, investigates the radical nature of Socrates' separating justice and retaliation. Vlastos was one of the preeminent Plato scholars of the twentieth century.

Interested readers with a fondness for Greek tragedy will want to see Mary Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

M.I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery, Modern Ideology* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983) is a classic historical study of slavery both ancient and modern. A revised version, edited by Brent Shaw, which includes a long essay by Shaw on the responses to Finley's arguments, was published by Markus Weiner Publishers in 2017.

Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings, trans. by Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009), will interest readers intrigued by the story of Cook Ding. It and the *Dao De Jing*, which appears in several translations, are foundational texts of philosophical Daoism and present a stark contrast with Plato's intellectualism and rationalism.

Readers interested in the historical persons depicted in the *Republic* and the other dialogues will find Debra Nails, *The People of Plato* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002) a fascinating and valuable resource.