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Reason and Persuasion
Three Dialogues By Plato: Euthyphro, Meno, Republic Book I

Non-cartoon illustrations are from H. Schliemann, **Mycenae, A Narrative of Researches and Discoveries at Mycenae and Tiryns** (Scribner, 1878).

Book designed by John Holbo.

The text is set in Hypatia Sans Pro.

Chapter 9 Republic: Conflicts & Harmonies, Us & Them

1

Our selection is Book 1 of 10. But before we get to that, Plato's **Republic** has the wrong title.

The dialogue blueprints an ideal state, but what Plato has in mind isn't a republic in our sense — that is, a constitutional, representative form of government. James Madison: "If we advert to the nature of republican government, we shall find that the censorial power is in the people over the government, and not in the government over the people." That is a very republican, **un**-Platonic thing to think. In political philosophy, republicanism goes with anti-monarchism, yet Plato, we learn, is prepared to support so-called philosopher-kings. Republicans like Madison distrust kings because they love liberty and fear exclusive, hence arbitrary exercise of political power. Nor is this a peculiarly modern concern. Here is J.S. Mill, from the opening of his essay, **On Liberty** (1859), tracing it back:

> The struggle between Liberty and Authority is the most conspicuous feature in the portions of history with which we are earliest familiar, particularly in that of Greece, Rome, and England. But in old times this contest was between subjects, or some classes of subjects, and the government. By liberty, was meant protection against the tyranny of the political rulers. The rulers were conceived (except in some of the popular governments of Greece) as in a necessarily antagonistic position to the people whom they ruled. They consisted of a governing One, or a governing tribe or caste, who derived their authority from inheritance or conquest; who, at all events, did not hold it at the pleasure of the governed, and whose supremacy men did not venture, perhaps did not desire, to contest, whatever precautions might be taken against its oppressive exercise. Their power was regarded as necessary, but also as highly dangerous; as a weapon which they would attempt to use against their subjects, no less than against external enemies. To prevent the weaker members of the community from being preyed upon by innumerable vultures, it was needful that there should be an animal of prey stronger than the rest, commissioned to keep them down. But as the king of the vultures would

be no less bent upon preying upon the flock than any of the minor harpies, it was indispensable to be in a perpetual attitude of defence against his beak and claws. The aim, therefore, of patriots, was to set limits to the power which the ruler should be suffered to exercise over the community; and this limitation was what they meant by liberty.[1]

Plato worries about monsters, too, we'll see. But first, sticking with more standard forms of republicanism, you deal with the monster like so: tell that big, bad bird to stay in its box!

But how is **that** supposed to work?

It's complicated. Lots of strategies, no guarantees. Partly you work to humanize the beast. Make him put on a tie. Partly you rely on the fact that there's a little beast in all of us, even if we are all dressed like proper gentlemen.

But if we're all just a bunch of vultures, behind the mask, doesn't that send us all back to savagery?

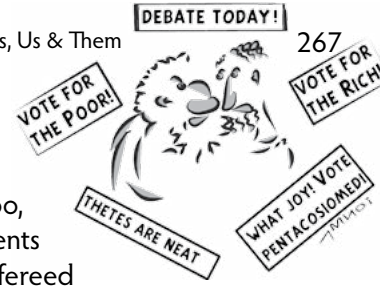
That's a worry! But maybe it can work. For starters, what stuff will make for a good vulture cage? We might try: **rights**. Traditional, republican construction material. We secure everyone's rights — the right of all citizens to speak in the ancient Athenian Assembly, for instance. This doesn't help women, children non-citizens or slaves, but it's a start.

But isn't that sort of … flimsy? What **is** a right, when you get down to it? Just a metaphysical dream, right? Some transcendentally-notarized contract or receipt, allegedly shelved in some cosmic file?

Maybe, but republicans can be more down-to-earth than that. What we are doing, in securing rights, may be nothing pie-in-the-sky. We are engineering a balance of power in which it works out to be to everyone's advantage to keep talking, rather than brawling in the street.

Look at it this way. At first you have a more or less naked power struggle — not between individuals but between classes, groups, blocs; tribes and powerful families, most likely. (You didn't think the ancient Greeks suffered from **literal** giant bird attacks, did you?) Unless the fighting just goes on, the result is some sort of equilibrium. If we are both strong, we will eventually acknowledge

1 J.S. Mill's text is available in many editions. The passage is from paragraph 2 of Chapter 1.

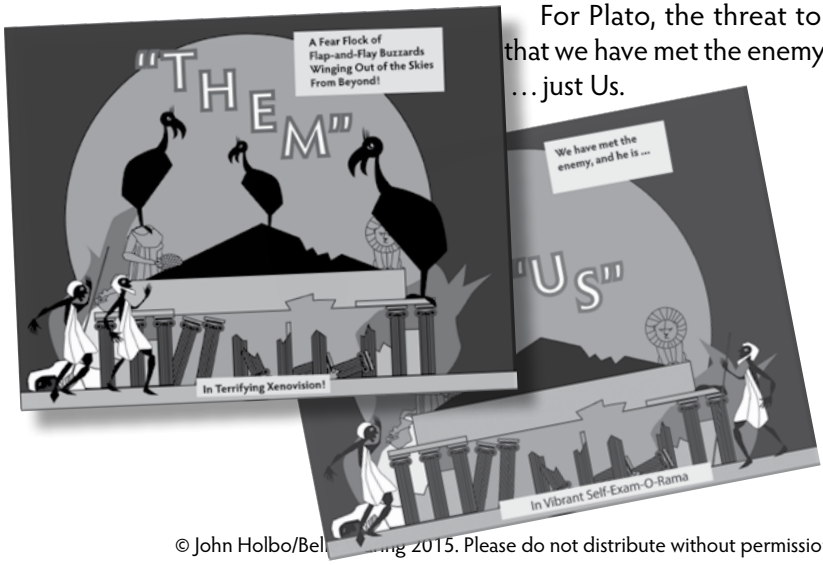


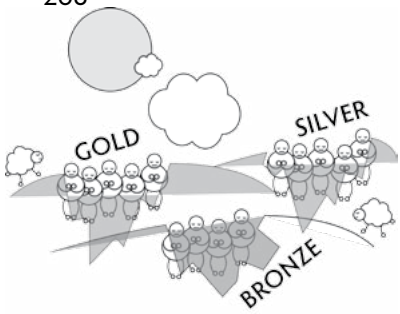
each other's strength, be motivated to come to some accommodation. If I am weak, you strong, or vice versa, someone ends up on top, someone ends up flat on his back. This, too, is equilibrium. Later constitutional developments and legal regimes of rights are, as it were, a refereed continuation of the fight, but by milder means. Arguing in the assembly is, if you like, fighting between roughly equal parties, only now we wear boxing gloves, consisting of norms and laws, procedures, so forth. You keep wearing the gloves because you want the other guy to keep wearing his gloves, too.

Where does Plato stand? He doesn't like tyrants; doesn't approve of arbitrary acts, by kings or anyone else. But it would not occur to him to combat these evils by constitutionally constraining rulers, mostly because of that crucial 'or anyone else' clause. Plato does not see the arbitrariness of **kings** as especially risky. Nothing is more arbitrary than a democratic jury of 500, putting Socrates to death. Politics, for Plato, needs to become reasonable — rational — not more popular and representative in the modern sense.

Plato's ideal political power players will not be constrained, externally, by checks and balances. They will be internally harmonized by rational dialectic. For Plato, healthy political order is, first and foremost, a function of correct **knowing**. You have to know what to want, ideally: harmony, not some second-best balance of power between antagonistic adversaries. This makes Plato much more utopian than your average republican; yet simultaneously more cynical. In the Mill passage, the danger tends to take on an Us vs. Them shape, with 'Them' assuming a monstrous aspect: Humans vs. Harpies!

For Plato, the threat to justice is that we have met the enemy, and he is … just Us.





2

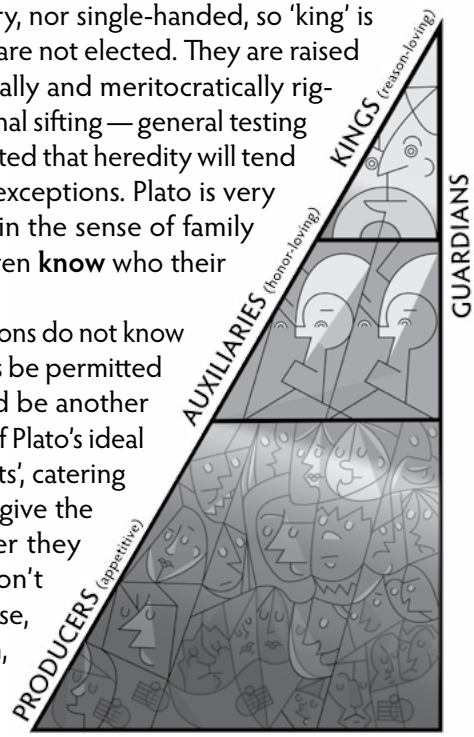
Let's take a quick tour of Plato's ideal state, as blueprinted in **Republic**. Plato envisions a ruling class of Guardians, which he splits in two.

Mostly they will be 'auxiliaries', members of the military class, under the command of 'philosophers turned kings'.

Socrates decrees an improving Myth be told (415a-c): all citizens of the **polis** spring from the same soil. All are brothers; but with different of proportions of precious metal admixed in their natures: gold for (reason-loving) kings; silver for (honor-loving) auxiliaries; bronze or iron for the (appetitive) mass of ordinary citizens, the producers.

Note how this tribalist, tri-metalist fable apparently undermines my claim, in the previous section that Plato is above mere Us vs. Them antagonisms. Yes, but no. The common people, even the auxiliaries, may need some sense of Us vs. Them, to serve as a heuristic moral compass. But we philosophers, students of justice, know better. (Us vs. Them is for them, not us!)

Rulership is not strictly hereditary, nor single-handed, so 'king' is doubly misleading. But these 'kings' are not elected. They are raised out of the population in educationally and meritocratically rigorous fashion. Plato envisions a rational sifting — general testing of aptitudes — after which it is expected that heredity will tend to track merit, going forward, with exceptions. Plato is very concerned not to allow monarchy in the sense of family dynasticism. These rulers will not even **know** who their biological parents and children are.



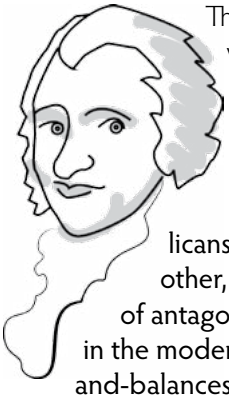
No Euthyphro-type problems, if sons do not know fathers! Nor will the golds and silvers be permitted to own gold and silver, which would be another source of corruption. But the rulers of Plato's ideal polis are not its citizens' 'first servants', catering to the peoples' desires. They won't give the people what they ask for, whatever they ask for. Plato thinks the people won't know what's good for them. Of course, everyone wants what's good for them, in a sense. (See **Meno**.) Plato's rulers will provide **that**.

3

So: Plato's **Republic**. Why the misleading title? In Greek it's **Politeia**, which means, roughly, **political matters**. Alternately: **form of government**, **civic stuff**. There is a work by Aristotle whose title is translated **The Athenian Constitution**. That is, Athenian **politeia**. Aristotle describes an Athenian politician, Cleisthenes, "giving **politeia** to the masses." Sometimes that gets translated "handing over power," sometimes "expanding the franchise". He did the latter, resulting in the former, so slice it how you like, semantically. The word isn't sure which part of the process **it** wants to name. Thus, there is going to be a problem settling on an English title for Plato.

But **Republic**? It's an accident. A Roman author, Cicero, wrote a Socratic dialogue, **De re publica**, meaning **of public matters**, which got abbreviated **De republica** which isn't quite the same (but close enough for government work.) **De republica** is a fine Latin translation of Plato's title. But add in modern shifts in meaning, due to increased enthusiasm for elections, and you end up in a situation in which, if someone translates Greek into English, with a touch of Latin flair, Plato comes out sounding like he likes aspects of electoral politics he wasn't interested in; indeed, that he opposed.

At this late date we seem stuck with the name, so we may as well make the most of it. Above I quoted James Madison, sounding anti-Platonic. But I could have quoted Thomas Paine, even more eminent republican philosopher, sounding Platonic:



> The sovereignty in a republic is exercised to keep right and wrong in their proper and distinct places, and never suffer the one to usurp the place of the other. A republic, properly understood, is a sovereignty of justice, in contradistinction to a sovereignty of will.[2]

It seems an ideal republic might **not** be that thing I said republicans want: mere system for setting struggling citizens against each other, in the hopes some balance of power emerges from exhaustion of antagonisms. At any rate, as you read, do think about republicanism in the modern sense: the idea that good government depends on checks-and-balances, not because it's best, just the best we can do. Think about how a sense of the harsh, dynamic logic of conflict — monster logic: politics as power, power as corruption — filters through the conversations Socrates has with his three debating partners: Cephalus, Polemarchus, Thrasymachus.

2 P. S. Foner (ed.), The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine (Citadel, 1945), vol. 2, p. 375..

4

Having hardly started, let me spoil the ending. Book 1 concludes:

> S: Just as gluttons snatch at every dish that is handed along, and taste it before they have properly enjoyed the one before, so I, before actually finding the first object of our investigation — what justice is — let that inquiry drop, and turned away to consider something about justice, namely whether it is vice and ignorance or wisdom and virtue; and when the further question burst in on us, about whether injustice is more profitable than justice, I could not refrain from moving on to that. And the result of the discussion right now is that I know nothing at all. For if I don't know what justice is, I am hardly likely to know whether it is or is not a virtue, nor can I say whether the just man is happy or unhappy. (354b)

Reversing the metaphor, why are **we** biting off just this bit — one book out of ten? Socrates himself seems to say Book 1 is not a well-balanced meal, by itself. I will now compensate for that by providing a preview of how the rest of **Republic** constitutes a long response to the concerns of Book 1. The distractions he complains about manifest mostly during the heavy third course, consisting of Thrasymachus' hard-to-stomach account of justice as the advantage of the stronger. Whereas Cephalus, the old man, hopes for harmony, or at least money; and Polemarchus, the son, draws up ideal battle-lines, with an eye for honor; Thrasymachus has gotten in touch with his inner vulture. What to make of this indigestible fowl?

Thrasymachus appears to offer two accounts of justice, not clearly consistent. The tenor of both is egoistic, hence immoralistic. Thrasymachus would say he is realistic. His slogan (which may or may not be a definition) is 'justice is the advantage of the stronger.' Pending fuller discussion, let me provide a crib sheet. When the time comes, this may help you see how Thrasymachus' two accounts may indeed be one, presented in two ways.

The sophist got a wonderful, **awful** idea:

1. **Justice is non-explanatory. (All preaching! no practice!)**
2. **Injustice is explanatory. (Everyone does it!)**
3. **Justice is personally non-advantageous.**
4. **Injustice is personally advantageous.**
5. **Call injustice 'justice' and justice 'injustice'.**

The first time Thrasymachus pushes this cluster of claims, he makes the mistake of trying to apply 5 to 1-5 themselves. This makes 1-4 unclear and generates contradiction when 5 is applied, recursively, to itself. (Try it at home. Write down what 1-5 say, while doing what 5 says!)

When Socrates trips Thrasymachus up by exploiting how hard it is to lie and speak truth simultaneously (even if it's true you should lie!) Thrasymachus does not repent. He lets the mask of 5 slip, to display the beast of 1-4 to true, naked advantage. **This** is his philosophy: be the beast behind the human mask!

Thrasymachus' view has a commonsensical down-to-earthiness, despite its secretive airs. If he adds anything that hasn't already occurred to your neighborhood bully, it's a refusal to make excuses, and a pedestal of Grand Politics. "Temple robbers, kidnappers, burglars, con-men and thieves" (344c). Nothing unprofitable about small-time crime! But such petty stuff lacks a critical, Big Picture sense of how, once you are in, you ought to go all-in.

For most of us, doing wrong is tempting at the petty end of the scale, practically and conceptually. We will fail to contribute to the coffee fund, not murder a man. We'll rationalize wrong as right, in our private case, rather than reasoning wrong **is** right, in public cases. Thrasymachus' contribution is to argue 'go big or go home!' when it comes to committing and conceptualizing injustice. And clothing it!

Thrasymachus can help you in that department, too. It's your Soul. But also Men's Clothing, since clothes make the man. We need to take you to his specialty section for Big and Tall Men. The finest in this line are a tyrant's robes. Once you have seized power, anyone who points out, quite correctly, that you are unjust can be 'corrected', quite effectively. Soon everyone in the city will be praising your injustice — excuse me, Your Tyrantship, your 'justice'!

So Thrasymachus thinks of himself as dispensing self-help for the strong. But, even if you are weak, his philosophy has a few pointed things to say; maybe a few pointers for self-improvement.

If your personal best is only perfect sheepishness, your best bet is being a **sheep** in shepherd's clothing. Tell everyone 'Justice is its own reward.' Maybe this will pull the wool over someone's eyes, maybe not; but wool is the weapon you've got. (Socrates strikes Thrasymachus as an extremely woolly thinker.)

5

Thrasymachus does not do well defending injustice; neither in disguise, nor in naked, natural glory. Then, after he slinks off at the end of Book 1, tail between his legs, Book 2 begins with Glaucon and Adeimantus stepping forward to demand a rematch.

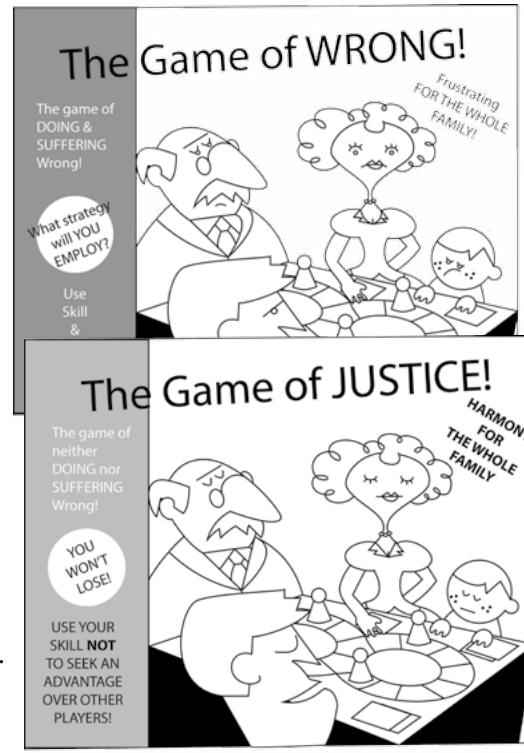
They do not approve of Thrasymachus' immoralism but are troubled by the thought that there is something to it. Glaucon offers a precise reformulation, in the hopes that Socrates can refute the most considered form of the thesis:

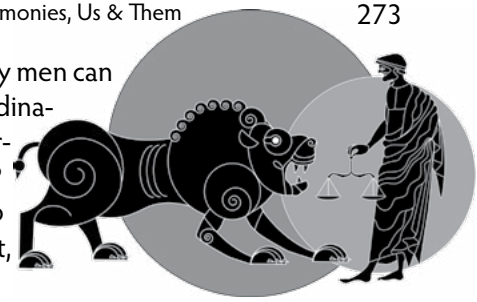
> They say to do wrong is naturally good, to be wronged is bad, but suffering injury so far exceeds in badness the good of inflicting it that when men have both done wrong and suffered it, have gotten a taste of both, those who are unable to avoid the latter and practice the former conclude it is profitable to come to an agreement with each other neither to inflict injury nor suffer it. As a result they begin to make laws and settlements, and the law's command they call lawful and just. This, so they say, is the origin and essence of justice. (358e-9b)

Ah, 'they' say! So often, they = us!

Think how harsh this is. Not that 'do wrong' might be for formula for profit, but that Wrong looks so Right! **That's** the one for me! You only quit because the game mechanics prove maddening. To win, you must sweep the table, getting Wrong just right! But how? Stumped for a strategy, it is rational to switch to an easier, cooperative, second-best option: Justice.

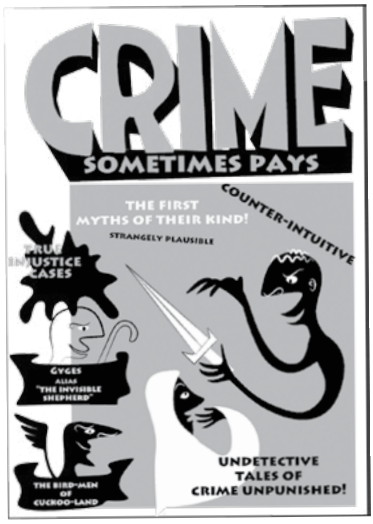
This thought simultaneously spikes, yet shores up, Thrasymachus' basic stance. Spikes it, insofar as he prides himself on clear-eyed realism. He sees how things are, not how dreamers wish them to be! But seeing justice through eyes that cold and calculating should make justice seem relatively winning. In a social sense, justice is some sort of harmony. That's a deadly weapon!





A man is no match for a lion, but many men can bring down a lion. It takes trust and coordination, which justice provides! Justice is harmony, is **strength**. Anything wrong here? Granted, no primitive man ever drew up an 'I agree not to murder if … ' contract, inaugurating civilization.

But that is not what worries Glaucon.



Rhetorically, it's a let down. If some epic poet sings to you the noble deeds of — oh, say, the Justice League! — you think: strong heroes! You don't think: what a bunch of weak, second-raters who didn't have what it takes to come out on top.

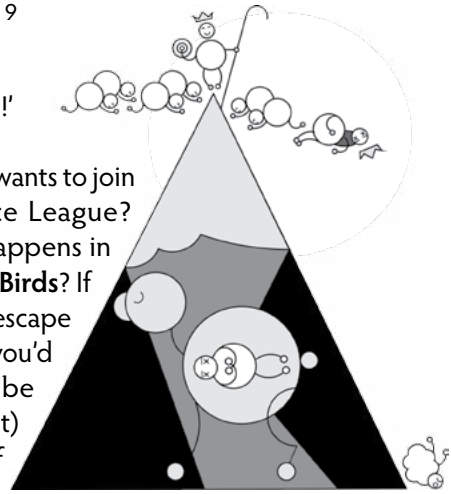
We need new entertainments, if we want true entertainments; if justice is truly second-best.

Conceptually, we've ceded key ground to Thrasymachus, on which he might rebuild, solidly. Justice is a powerful tool. He missed that. But is it necessarily always the best tool for me? We've granted wanting to play, and win, The Game of Wrong is rational. If The Game of Justice is chosen instead, strictly based on egoistic calculation that concedes the rightness of Wrong, what does that say about it, and us?

There is also a serious practical concern, even though the fable Glaucon goes on to narrate (359c), to make this vivid, doesn't sound especially realistic.

Once upon a time there was a shepherd, ancestor of a Lydian named Gyges.

There was a storm. The earth itself split open. The shepherd descended, discovering a cave. In the cave, a brass horse; in the horse, a dead giant with a golden ring. Ring of power, to turn the wearer invisible, so he becomes a superhero — The Invisible Shepherd! — guardian of the meek against all the wolves of the city!



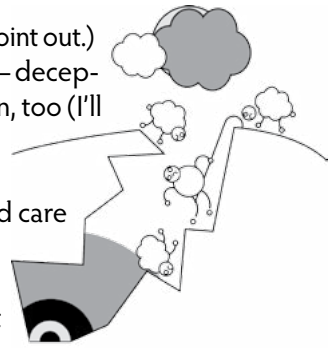
'Taste **crook** — crooks!'

No. Of course not!

Be realistic! Who wants to join some crummy Justice League? Do you know what happens in Aristophanes' play, **The Birds**? If you could fly, you could escape punishment for any crime, so you'd do what you liked. Which would be something bad, but (let's be honest) that wouldn't stop you. Likewise, if you could turn invisible you wouldn't fight crime, you'd commit it.

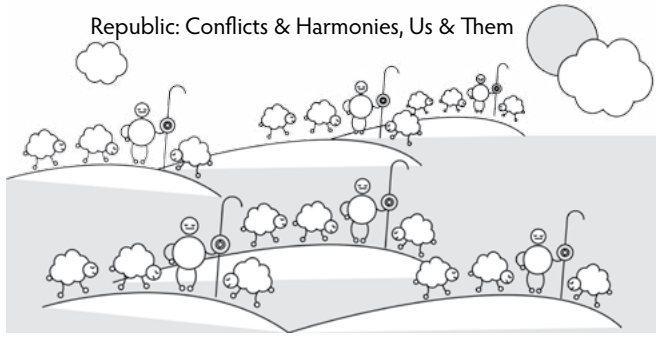
So this fairy tale has a realistic ending. Former shepherd seduces queen, murders king, sets himself up tidily as tyrant of Lydia.

Isn't this 'happier ever after', at least from the shepherd's point of view? Unjust, but what is justice? A tool. Why use it if you found a better tool in some weird tomb? Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Why would that be true unless ethical corruption were, essentially, rational, enlightened self-interest?



But invisibility rings don't exist (you reasonably point out.) Can we dismiss the myth? No, it takes a real thing — deception — to illustrative extremes. Earthquakes happen, too (I'll leave the bronze horse and dead giant for you to puzzle out.) Had there been no earthquake, Gyges might have lived and died a shepherd, taking good care of the sheep. But when cracks open, all bets are off. That's important to remember. When social life is safe and steady, lots of people **act** just. But how deep does that go?

While we are at it, since I mentioned the Justice League, let's think what sorts of superpowers might make for a real one. Suppose the shepherd found, not an invisibility ring but a whole box of … visibility rings, I guess you would call them. So long as you are wearing one, you have the superpower that everyone can see what you are up to. Gyges gets all his fellow shepherds to put them on. (It's impossible to take them off, let's add.) Crime is no longer a problem. Everyone does well and is very neighborly, as you can plainly see.

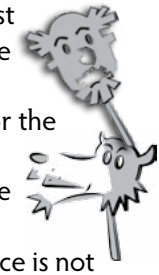


Call this harmonious pastoral scene: the Justice League! No heroes, no villains, but results as good as any comic book hero gets, punching villains.

Thinking about these extremes clarifies real situations, where things are in between. Injustice is typically too risky (no invisibility ring.) But sometimes you can get away with it (no visibility ring.) Then you would be **irrational** not to commit injustice, be it large or small. The lesson seems to be that Glaucon is right, so Thrasymachus was partly right. Glaucon polishes off the case for injustice by burnishing a pair of statues, as Socrates puts it (361d).

Behold the happy tyrant — perfectly unjust, yet praised for his 'justice'!

Or would you rather be **this** unhappy wretch: perfectly just but deprived of worldly goods, falsely accused of 'injustice', hence deprived even of the honor a reputation for justice brings?



What matters to us, as social beings: the truth about justice, or the label 'justice', true or not?

Wolf in shepherd's clothing? Or good shepherd with the extreme bad luck to get framed up in wolfskin?

You would rather be the happy tyrant, right? Conclusion: justice is not desirable in itself, only as a contingent means to selfish ends. Ergo, justice is only sometimes desirable; whereas, in a sense, injustice is always desirable (for you) insofar as you always want more than you can, justly, lay claim to. Right? The job of **Republic** is to argue: wrong.

6

Socrates' strategy for responding is as follows, starting in Book 2 (but really getting up to speed in Book 3.) You cannot understand what makes justice inherently advantageous until you understand what it **is**. First you should see the ideal city for what it might be. You can then see the validity of an analogy between City and Soul. It turns out, according to Socrates, that the three-level class-structure of the ideal city parallels proper order in the soul, which likewise has three parts — head, heart, and belly: a rational (philosophical) part; a spirited (honor-loving) part; an appetitive (desiring) part.

As usual, Socrates has a vivid image to illustrate. He asks us to imagine, "a sort of chimerical beast with many heads, a ring of them, taken from both tame and wild animals, able to change these and grow them out of itself" (588e). Those heads are your desires. You've got lots, pulling you in all directions. If you satisfy one (cut off a head) another grows to take its place.

Now, to go with this many-headed monster, another beast, a lion. It represents your 'spirit', your desire for honor and status. Beside the lion and the many-headed monster place a third figure: a man. He's your rational nature. Wrap them all up in one man-shaped package. You have: you!

Socrates explains that anyone who claims injustice **benefits** a man is recommending a policy of feeding the beast, starving the man. The unjust man does not "accustom one part to the other or make them friendly," but dooms them to conflict, biting and fighting. If there is an argument that the possessor of the Ring of Gyges **must** degenerate into Gollum — wracked by wretched, insatiable desire — this is it. Instead of being snug in some Trojan Shepherd, wheeled in amongst an unsuspecting flock, the tyrant finds himself trapped inside **himself** with the worst monsters: namely, the worst parts of himself, let loose.

Conversely, the just man, even if he seems to have been thrown to the wolves, is safe within himself, so long as he maintains that inner harmony.

That's the theory.

I expect the reader has doubts; yet it does sound plausible that tyrants, rather than living happy, self-satisfied lives, are typically isolated, lonely, fearful, frustrated and angry.

But we have skipped a rather critical step. What **is** justice, either in City or Soul? Interpreters of **Republic** sometimes wonder whether 'justice' is an adequate translation for the main term under investigation — **diakiosunē**. The Greek has a different — broader — semantic coverage than English. If we want to understand Plato, we do well to say 'justice' while understanding it in a Greek way. But, be it noted, this doesn't mean it's necessarily a good idea to think in this Greek way, past the point of coming to understand Plato. Maybe our English sense of 'justice' will turn out to be, after all, more sensible.

Greek has three cognate terms — **dikaiosunē**, **dikē**, **dikaios**.

Dikaiosunē refers to a character trait, implying a more or less stable disposition to behave. The least awkward English rendition is 'just' — as in, 'he is a just man.' But we need something like 'justiness'. Let's say 'righteousness'.

Dikē is more a feature of systems than persons (but people are just little systems, aren't they? And systems are just large-scale dispositions of things to behave certain ways.) Dikē **is** a person, a goddess. You might say she's the goddess of systems administration. She is responsible for the smooth rotation of the seasons, for cosmic order and proportion — for due process, to use a legalistic phrase. What law courts provide, ideally, is **dikē**. She is, accordingly, the goddess of **mortal** justice. Here is a well-known parable from Hesiod, **Works and Days** (6th Century, BCE). The narrator lectures his brother, Perses.

> And now I will tell a fable for princes who themselves understand. Thus said the hawk to the nightingale with speckled neck, while he carried her high up among the clouds, gripped fast in his talons; and she, pierced by his crooked talons, cried pitifully. To her he spoke disdainfully: "Miserable thing, why do you cry out? One far stronger than you now holds you fast, and you must go wherever I take you, songstress as you are. And if I please I will make my meal of you, or let you go. He is a fool who tries to withstand the stronger, for he does not get the mastery and suffers pain besides his shame." So said the swiftly flying hawk, the long-winged bird.
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>
> But you, Perses, listen to right and do not foster violence; for violence is bad for a poor man. Even the prosperous cannot easily bear its burden, but is weighed down under it when he has fallen into delusion. The better path is to go by on the other side towards justice; for Justice beats Outrage when she comes at length to the end of the race. But only when he has suffered does the fool learn this. For Oath keeps pace with wrong judgements. There is a noise when Justice [Dikē] is being dragged in the way where those who devour bribes and give sentence with crooked judgments, take her. And she, wrapped in mist, follows to the city and haunts of the people, weeping, and bringing mischief to men, even to such as have driven her forth in that they did not deal straightly with her. (I.ii.212-224)[3]

3 I like the antique style of this old translation, by Hugh G. Evelyn-White.

Hesiod is expressing the conventional moral notion that, in the long run, 'straight' pays. Anyway, incompetents like Perses should settle for a quiet, honest job where they can stay out of trouble. But suppose (just suppose!) the hawk is so strong he doesn't have to worry about Zeus striking him down?

Then, ideally, injustice is best? Hesiod would not **like** to be saying that. Still, isn't his hawk talking hard-headed, Thrasymachian/Glauconian sense?

Moving right along: **dikaios** (what Perses is being encouraged to exhibit) is to **dikaiosunē** as product to process. Actions are **dikaios**, as their doers are **dikaiosunē** (roughly). **Dikaios** is often linked to **hosiotes** (holiness), which facilitates expression of thoughts like, 'does right by men and gods alike.' This complementary yet contrastive construction encourages a sense of **dikaios** as something peculiarly mortal. But if it is good for me, won't it be good for gods? Obvious exceptions: sacrifices to the gods. Mortals should; gods needn't. (Think of Euthyphro's puzzles.) But, as a rule, being **dikaios** — through contrast with **hosiotes** — means doing the right thing, the **done** thing. In Greek **dikaios** denotes what your society expects of you.

In Book 1, Cephalus is a fine illustration. He is a 'just' man in part because he is presently conducting sacrifices in a dignified, orderly, appropriate, unstinting, non-excessive manner. He knows how he looks in the eyes of those around him: steady and proper. He **looks** just, hence **is** just.

Wanting things to have a steady evenness is a familiar preference, so it's not that we find Cephalus' attitude puzzling. But 'justice' is not the word **we** would choose. Think again of Gyges' earthquake. Due process of nature is the province of the goddess. So this tale starts with cosmic injustice, leading to human injustice (although storms are natural. I don't mean to tell the goddess her business.) It is only from odd angles that we are able to recover, in English, a sense of a conceptual linkage that seems stronger in Greek.

I have on my shelf a book about typography. It contains, as a bonus feature, an account of justice and its relationship to good and evil:

> JUSTIFIED
>
> The left and right edges are both even.
>
> When it is good: Justified text makes a clean, figural shape on the page. Its efficient use of space makes it the norm for newspapers and books of continuous text.
>
> When it is evil: Ugly gaps can occur as text is forced into lines of even measure.[4]

4 Ellen Lupton, Thinking with Type: A Critical Guide for Designers, Writers, Editors, & Students, 1st ed. (Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), p. 84.

You understand what she is talking about, right? On your word processor's tool bar is a button that looks something like that gentleman's shield: an icon for a setting allowing both sides to be equal.

Doesn't that look **just**, page-wise? Justice is: being justified, avoiding undue alignment with one side or the other, bias. When Confucius explains what it is to be righteous, saying 'if the mat is not straight, the master will not sit,' he could be talking typography.

Crude attempts to force such evenness (on the page, as in politics) are often very ugly. Someone is always pushing left, someone else right. How does **that** look, overall? **Justified**? No!

A typographical sophist might add that the most sophisticated systems do not opt for this sort of perfect justice. Letting little things exceed the margins can make the margins appear neater. (Look at the comma ending the first line of the next paragraph. See how it **slightly** overhangs? The whole page **looks** more even that way, even though it's uneven.)

So, per the terms of Glaucon's argument, it is indeed better to **appear**, not **be**, just. Negotiators, and judges know this, not just typographers.

'Justification' is mostly reserved for epistemological contexts in English. If someone tells you 'justify your claims', it won't cross your mind that you might press one word-processor button, tidying type, thereby fulfilling the letter of the requirement. Still, the semantic link is there Your conclusion is **justified** when it is proportional to your premises, does not exceed your evidence.

Failure to connect this tidying, visual balance 'mat is straight' sense of justice-as-evenness with the epistemology of justification makes it difficult to understand, among other things, Socrates' persistent use of craft analogies. He says a competent 'practitioner of justice' will not try to **exceed** another. He is preoccupied with excess — **pleonexia**. This does not seem intuitive.

First, we do not ordinarily speak of 'practicing justice' at all. Second, in cases where we do find it natural to talk about practicing a technical craft or skill, we find it natural to think of practitioners as in competition to be the best. But one typesetter would hardly try to make a **more** just margin than an already fully justified margin. 'My margin is even!' 'My margin is even **evener than even**!' Nonsense! Compare: one mathematician will not try to make a conclusion **more** proven, if it was fully justified to start with. These are the kinds of examples that will clue you in to how Plato is thinking when he says odd things about 'the craft of justice.'

8

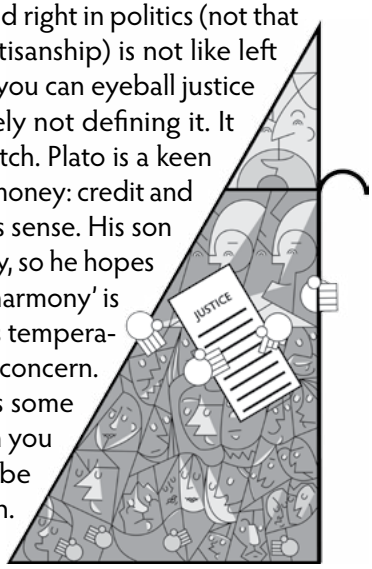
Here is a positive declaration (finally!) of what justice comes to, from Book 2. Justice is **winning friends with yourself and influencing people-parts**:

> It looks like justice really turned out to be something like the following. It consists not in a man's external actions, but in the way he acts within himself, strictly concerned with himself and his inner parts. He does not allow any part of himself to perform the work of another, or the parts of his soul to interfere with one another. He puts in good order what are in the true sense of the word his own affairs. He is master of himself, puts things in order, is his own friend, harmonizes the three parts like the limiting notes of a musical scale, high, low, and middle, and any that may lie between. He binds them together, and from a plurality becomes a unity in himself. (443d)

Book 2 is still the start of the story, but this passage is a keynote. It helps you get what Plato is getting at. But, of course, making sense of what he is saying is not the same as thinking it makes sense. You may decide, on reflection, that the narrower, more English sense of 'justice' is more sensible. Plato's may not even look like an answer to 'what is justice?' Never mind a **good** one.

First, it's too personal. If justice is an order in the soul, you could have justice with only one person. We may think being a hermit in a cave is fine, if you are happy with that lifestyle choice, but we hardly call it 'justice'.

Second, it is supposed to be functional, yet is highly aestheticized. A person is not a page of type to be tidied. Left and right in politics (not that Plato knew about that, but he knew about partisanship) is not like left and right margins. Encouraging people to think you can eyeball justice as harmony — looks even to me! — is not merely not defining it. It looks like a potentially self-serving bait-and-switch. Plato is a keen detector of such bias in others. Cephalus knows money: credit and debit. So he hopes justice can be good business sense. His son can prevail when it comes to friend against enemy, so he hopes justice is an even fight. Maybe Plato's notion of 'harmony' is a substitution, to suit an aristocrat-philosopher's temperament and preferences? This brings us to a third concern.



Plato offers an incomplete scheme. Justice is some kind of harmony, or balance, or order. But when you have order, you may have injustice. Plato may be mistaking a necessary for a sufficient condition. Still, as I said, Book 2 is not the end of the story.

9

Food for thought! But let's not bite off too much. Let's read from the start of Book 1.

Yesterday I went down to Piraeus …

Piraeus is the port. But this is no easy stroll down to some dock. Going down meant a 9 km hike, mostly between the Long Walls (fortifications to ensure Athens' access to sea and ships in time of war.) Piraeus is a rocky island with three deep-water harbors — Kantharus, Munychia, Zea — affording strategic access to sea routes.

… to offer up my prayers to the goddess and to see how they would celebrate the festival (327a

The goddess is Thracian Bendis, whom the Athenians are semi-identifying with Artemis, the huntress. The festival is taking place because Bendis has won official, civic recognition. After attending this public (daylight) event, Socrates is waylaid by a friendly force of Polemarchus and friends. Socrates must stay for the real fun, after the sun goes down! In the meantime, he must come home to visit old Cephalus, who will be glad to see him and talk with him! Eventually the full discussion circle rounds out to include:

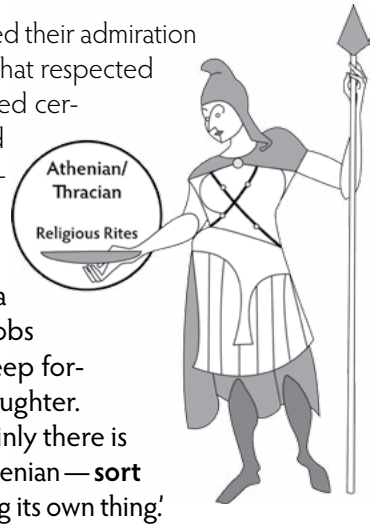
Glaucon, son of Ariston … Polemarchus, son of Cephalus, … Adeimantus, Glaucon's brother, Niceratus the son of Nicias, and several others … Lysias and Euthydemus … Thrasymachus the Chalcedonian, Charmantides the Paenian, and Cleitophon, son of Aristonymus. Polemarchus' father, Cephalus, was there too. (328c)

A full cast! Few have significant speaking parts, but the social circle is significant, so introductions all around are in order. Let's examine: setting, event, characters.

The history of the port seems significant. Themistocles was the Athenian leader who devised the city's anti-Persian naval strategy, thereby laying the foundations for Golden Age glory. Development of Piraeus made Athenian empire possible. Cephalus quotes Themistocles on this theme: the importance of knowing how to make use of what you've got (329e). Also, Piraeus is a hotbed of democratic political activism.

The festival seems significant, per this remark by the geographer, Strabo:

> As in other things the Athenians always showed their admiration of foreign customs, so they displayed it in what respected the gods. They adopted many foreign sacred ceremonies, particularly those of Thrace and Phrygia; for which they were ridiculed in comedies. Plato mentions the Bendidean … rites.[5]



But what's so bad about syncretism: fusion of traditions, cultures, religions. Isn't diversity a value? No doubt these comic writers were snobs and/or nativist xenophobes, concerned to keep foreigners in their place with a bit of targeted laughter.

There is also a rationalistic concern. (Certainly there is one for Plato!) Two groups — Thracian and Athenian — **sort of** participating in one thing, **sort of** each 'doing its own thing.' They don't even know quite **who** they are worshipping. One goddess or two? Representations of Bendis are a muddle. Her tunic is Greek; that mantle is Thracian. Socrates will argue that the 'democratic sort of man' is exactly like this, hence his city as well. The democratic city:

> may, I said, be the most beautiful of cities — like a cloak that has been embroidered with designs of every flower, in every color. So it too may well appear the loveliest, as it is embellished with every sort of colorful character. And perhaps, I said, many would judge it to be the most beautiful, much as women and children do when they see things worked in bright colors. (557c-d)

Plato complains that in a democratic city there is 'equality between equals and unequals alike.' This is respectful of the individual. But Plato sees a lack of **proper** order. But again, is this just an aesthetic complaint? Is Plato just substituting anti-democratic (and sexist) aristocratic aesthetic sensibilities for rational argument?

Back to Bendis. Why **did** Athens 'naturalize' her? Athens will put Socrates to death for worshipping gods other than those of the city. No doubt Plato means for us to see terrible hypocrisy. Athens invites in gods other than those of the city, throwing big parties for them, then executes Socrates on false charges of doing that.

5 Strabo, **Geography** (10.3.18), trans. Hamilton, H.C. and W. Falconer.

Strabo notwithstanding, religious tolerance was not automatic in ancient Athens, with Socrates somehow the luckless exception. The ground shifted back and forth. In **Apology** Socrates argues he can hardly be corrupting the young by teaching that the sun is a stone, because anyone curious about that can buy the book in the market. He does not mention that its author, Anaxagoras, left town in a hurry after a stringent anti-atheism law passed. From the 5th Century on, Athens had atheistic intellectuals — sophists, speculators, dramatists in whose comedies the gods look downright silly. When tolerance snapped, there was often a trigger. In Anaxagoras' case, he was a friend of Pericles, whose enemies got at the great man by targeting those close to him.

In Bendis' case, the city faced a foreign policy challenge, which had a domestic angle. Good timber in Thrace for ship-building! The King of Thrace will be pleased to hear Bendis is at home in Athens. Also, Piraeus had a large foreign worker [**metic**] population. They are not, properly, participants in the political life of the city. (The Greek title of Plato's dialogue is, you recall, **Politeia**, which could be **citizenship**.) Athens has an interest in instilling in its non-citizen yet semi-permanent residents a spirit of semi-civic attachment. Recognition of Bendis was, quite likely, a politic fudge, to finesse a delicate Us vs. Them balance. Blur lines in Olympus, as in Athens. Throw enough parties, people start seeing double. (If mortals love it, it must be holy!)

Every new social, cultural, political, religious form comes out of some human mix. It's just that not all such forms get big coming-out parties, like Athenian Bendis. You could say this civic festival is **realpolitik** in action, but that's just another way of saying: it's an expression of what life is like. In her Thracian mantle, Athenian Bendis exemplifies humanism: inevitable pluralism.

The most prominent 20th Century advocate of pluralism, as a key philosophical concept, is Isaiah Berlin. He targets Plato as the arch-enemy of pluralism. Plato, like all Rationalists, thinks all genuine questions must have true answers; there must be a (rational) path to their discovery; they must all be consistent. Berlin thinks Plato makes the Good the enemy of lots of goods that just don't happen to fit together coherently. Plato does seem determined to insist things should make sense, be logical. On the other hand:

> I was delighted with the procession the inhabitants put on, but the Thracians' was just as beautiful, maybe more. (327b)

Is it plausible Plato is expressing pure disapproval by having his teacher call this foreign spectacle delightful? Perhaps Plato is drawing attention to his teacher's unfortunate tendency not to notice how dangerous his environment may be. Or maybe Plato is counting on reader to know the show isn't over.

There's going to be an all-night festival, which will be worth seeing.

Torch-race on horseback! The festival has two faces — light and dark. Polemarchus and co. are insisting Socrates stay past the day. They retire to Cephalus' house for a lot of talk — Plato's **Republic**, we call it — waiting for nightfall.

Don't spoil the fun by leaving. (328a)

10

Time to consider the company we keep.

The speakers are Cephalus, retired businessman; his son, Polemarchus; and Thrasymachus, the sophist; all three are **metics**, not Athenian citizens.

Glaucon and Adeimantus step forth from the background after Thrasymachus retreats, in Book 2. You may be interested to learn that their father, Ariston, had a third son, Plato. Why does our author have his older brothers team-up with his teacher to discover the nature of justice? Plato himself would have been just a boy at the time of this dialogue. But why stage it so he himself is conspicuously absent? A similar self-exclusion occurs in another dialogue, **Phaedo**, which narrates the death of Socrates in prison. Many friends and followers are present, but notice is taken of the fact that Plato is ill and absent. (Possibly he wasn't ill, just too busy pulling strings on all these puppets?)

Lysias and Euthydemus are two more sons of Cephalus. Lysias will become a famous speech writer, although he gets no lines here. Socrates critiques one of his speeches at the start of another dialogue, **Phaedrus**. There is a also a dialogue, **Euthydemus** — but that's a different Euthydemus. Nicias' father, Niceratus, was an Athenian general. Socrates debates him about courage in **Laches**.

Next comes Cleitophon. He has a dialogue named after him, which concerns the question of whether Socrates or Thrasymachus is the better speaker.

In the dialogue, and briefly in our reading, Cleitophon takes Thrasymachus' side. He seems to have been a politician. The last name is Charmantides. He says nothing; nothing is known of such a person.

These men are from the world of Athenian wealth and influence, which is at once impressively cosmopolitan and rather small. You wield influence by speaking well, which invests these verbal sparring matches with extra status anxiety. Relations are competitive but cordial — delicate friend/enemy dynamic.

One last, **little** thing.

This is not the world in which Plato is living and writing but that of half a century earlier. The festival of Bendis took place near the start of the Peloponnesian War (428 BCE.) or somewhat later (circa 413) while a peace between Athens and Sparta briefly held. Either way, Plato's audience is supposed to realize night is falling on this little group in more than one sense.[6]

In a few years (give or take) the war will be lost. Athens will be stripped of her empire and her democracy. Sparta will impose the oligarchy of the so-called Thirty Tyrants (including Plato's great-uncle, Critias, who also has his own Platonic dialogue. Like I said: small world.) Cephalus will be dead, his family fortune expropriated by the new regime. Polemarchus: executed on trumped-up charges; Lysias: narrowly escaped into exile. (We know all of this thanks to a later speech by him, accusing his family's killers and despoilers, who sound like perfect Thrasymachians.) Niceratus, too, will be executed. And, of course, Socrates will be executed — but by the democrats restored to power after the Thirty are overthrown in their turn.

So all this talk about justice may seem like just talk; but it is talk of serious things. Killing time before a time of killing. Friendly party will break into warring parties.

Circling back to our starting point, 'going down to Piraeus' — which could have been translated 'going under' — seems to foreshadow Plato's Myth of the Cave. The setting, the festive enthusiasm, the unreflective ritualism, the spectacle, this cast of characters, can all be seen as conducive to the cognitive limitations Cave-dwellers suffer.

The philosopher descends into this darkness, where treatment at the hands of the natives might get rough.

6 For a discussion of the dating dispute, see Christopher Planeaux, "The Date of Bendis' Entry into Attica" **The Classical Journal** 96.2 (2000).165-192.

11

In what follows, I give more pages to the old man and his son than to Thrasymachus. I begin and end with Cephalus. This seems not to accord with the dialogue, in which he makes an early exit; in which Thrasymachus takes up twice the space of father and son combined. Thrasymachus makes the bold moves that call forth the most energetic, Socratic refutations. Thrasymachus, unlike the father and son, is self-consciously theoretical. His is the position Glaucon and Adeimantus want reconsidered, occasioning whole book-length discussion of **Republic**.

In part, these very factors explain my approach. Thrasymachus! You can't miss him! It's obvious he's a provocative challenger of conventional notions. The father and son are another story. Their tag-team effort may look like a lackluster undercard fight, warming us up for the main event. But this undersells Plato's rhetorical ingenuity as fight promoter. Worse, it risks misconstruing the subject matter of **Republic**.

Here we stand at the Gates of Utopia! **Republic** will blueprint an ideal city-state. Not a place you visit every day!

If **you** were standing at the gates of Heaven — or Hades (your mileage may vary); if you found yourself on the liminal verge of a new world, in an ethical sense, who or what would you expect to meet at the very threshold?

Probably some sort of guardian, right?

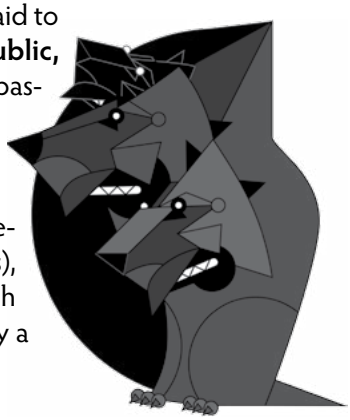
Angel with a flaming sword?

Dog with three-heads?

Here's my counter-offer. A retired businessman who tends to rattle on about the value of money.

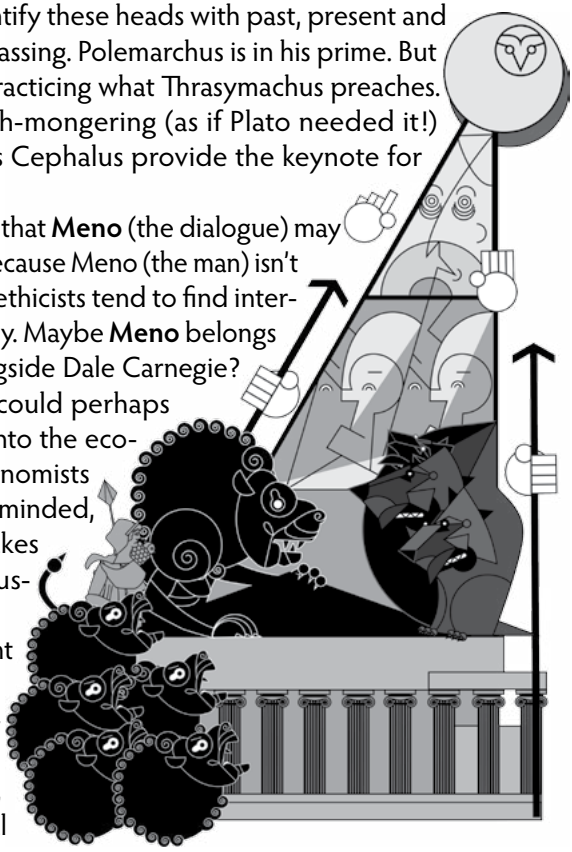
How's that for casting against (justified?) type.

Think of it as an urbane variant on the traditional underworld guard dog of Greek myth, Cerberus, whose heads are said to stand for the past, present and future. **Republic,** Book 1, is a three-headed monster, barring passage into the other-world beyond: one head, that of a savage lion (Thrasymachus); next, the head of a hound (Polemarchus), friendly to those it knows, savage to strangers and enemies; first, but not least, the old man (Cephalus), a veritable Charon of preoccupation with accounts payable. (Every dead soul must pay a coin to cross over!)



Perhaps we can even identify these heads with past, present and future. Cephalus is old and passing. Polemarchus is in his prime. But he will be killed by tyrants practicing what Thrasymachus preaches.

But how does more myth-mongering (as if Plato needed it!) clarify **Republic**? How does Cephalus provide the keynote for what follows?



In Chapter 7, I mentioned that **Meno** (the dialogue) may confuse even philosophers, because Meno (the man) isn't interested in what academic ethicists tend to find interesting: normative moral theory. Maybe **Meno** belongs in the self-help section, alongside Dale Carnegie? In a similar spirit, **Republic** could perhaps do with creative reshelving into the economics section — if only economists weren't so infernally money-minded, like old Cephalus. He mistakes money for debt, debt for justice, justice for money.

Let me quote from a recent history, not of money (mind you!) but debt, by the anthropologist (anarchist/activist) David Graeber. He begins, as Plato does, with a personal conversation. Graeber was at a Westminster Abbey garden party (not quite a festival for a hybrid hunt goddess, but close enough.) He met, not a nice old businessman, but a nice lawyer, with whom, he had it on priestly authority, he could enjoy a pleasant conversation.

The subject was justice and financial crisis, but there came a hitch:

> "But," she objected, as if this were self-evident, "they'd borrowed the money! Surely one has to pay one's debts."
>
> It was at this point that I realized this was going to be a very different sort of conversation than I had originally anticipated.
>
> Where to start?[7]

Perhaps with the observation that unpaid debts are the soul of banking: no risk, no risk-management, no business model, no business.

Zeus forbid it should be impossible not to pay your debts!

7 David Graeber, **Debt: The First 5000 Years** (Melville, 2012), p. 2.

In a broader economic sense, debt-forgiveness is but one of a number of macroeconomic levers. But that does not ethically satisfy.

> For several days afterward, that phrase kept resonating in my head. "Surely one has to pay one's debts."
>
> The reason it's so powerful is that it's not actually an economic statement: it's a moral statement. After all, isn't paying one's debts what morality is supposed to be all about? Giving people what is due them. Accepting one's responsibilities. Fulfilling one's obligations to others, just as one would expect them to fulfill their obligations to you. What could be a more obvious example of shirking one's responsibilities than reneging on a promise, or refusing to pay a debt?
>
> It was that very apparent self-evidence, I realized, that made the statement so insidious. (3)

Graeber concludes:

> The very fact that we don't know what debt is, the very flexibility of the concept, is the basis of its power. If history shows anything, it is that there's no better way to justify relations founded on violence, to make such relations seem moral, than by reframing them in the language of debt — above all, because it immediately makes it seem that it's the victim who's doing something wrong. (5)

This could be a blurb for Plato's **Republic**; for Book 1, anyway.

On this view, Thrasymachus is not the problem. He's a symptom of Cephalus' problem. Cephalus-style money theory devolves into Thrasymachus-style violent practice. Graeber duly notes he is following in Plato's footsteps, without being inclined to dog Socrates' steps too far along **Republic**'s path:

> Socrates eventually gets around to offering some political proposals of his own, involving philosopher kings; the abolition of marriage, the family, and private property; selective human breeding boards. (Clearly, the book was meant to annoy its readers, and for more than two thousand years, it has succeeded brilliantly.) What I want to emphasize, though, is the degree to which what we consider our core tradition of moral and political theory today springs from this question: What does it mean to pay one's debts? (197)

Set this 'debt' frame, which places Cephalus first, beside the other, which puts Thrasymachus front and center. You needn't make any final choice between them.

12

Socrates' discussion with Cephalus begins with polite pleasantries. He respectfully inquires how old age is treating the old man, who takes a dignified stand, but there are darker hints. If Piraeus is the Cave, this resident is too old and creaky to get up and leave. Still, he seems content with slackening faculties. As he weakens, the beasts in him are getting lazy. He quotes the aged playwright Sophocles, concerning the joy of no-sex:

> "I'm glad to be done with all that. I'm like a slave who has escaped from a crazy, brutal master." I thought he was right then, and I still think so today. Because old age certainly does bring with it great tranquility and freedom. (329d)

No more parties or drinking! His old friends bemoan losses, but Cephalus is happy to be able to take it or leave it, hence leave it. Such stoical sentiments are common, conventional. The thought that you have desires you would like to discipline or eliminate is not mind-bending. But how can attempts to theorize this alleged state of affairs fail to be soul-splitting? You must have a true, better self, with **desired** desires; an untrue, worse self with **undesired** ones.

One of you is **really** you. So at least one of me is … Them? Which one(s)?

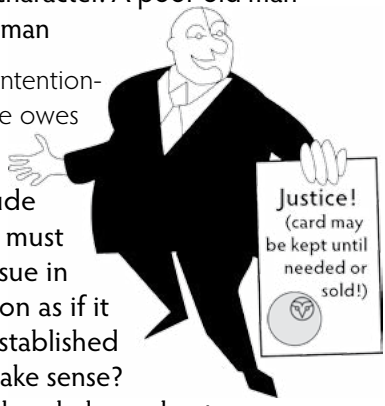
Plato, I said, will have a complex story to tell about tripartite division in the soul. Each of us is three selves in one: head, heart, belly. Cephalus is, literally, the head in this debate (English 'cephalic', from the Greek: of or pertaining to the head.) The son, Polemarchus, is spirited and honor-loving; Thrasymachus plays the greedy belly.

So, be it noted, with 'I'm like a slave,' Cephalus is pre-subscribing to perhaps the most cognitively controversial aspect of Plato's picture of the Soul: 'mostly, I'm not me!' So this might be a preliminary advertisement. Divisions in the soul sounds kind of metaphysical, but even sturdy old respectable types believe something of the sort instinctively! On the other hand, this could be flipped into an argument against Plato. Is he just giving us rationalist repackaging of common cultural attitudes and stereotypes: women and wine the downfall of many a man. (Odysseus tied to the mast. Old, old story.)

Socrates responds to Cephalus' speech about the value of good character, of **his** good character, by provoking him. Is Cephalus' account of the source of his contentment credible? When Socrates flips it, this 'head' comes up … coins!

> Most people wouldn't buy it, coming from you. They would say you bear your old age well not because of your character but because of your money. For, they say, it's easy being rich. (330d)

Cephalus denies it, yet concedes money may be necessary for the maintenance not just of his good life but of his good character. A poor old man can hardly be comfortable. More crucially, a rich man



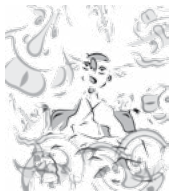
> need not deceive or defraud anyone, even unintentionally. Nor does he leave this world afraid that he owes sacrifices to the gods or debts to men. (331b)

We see here the blank obverse of the attitude Graeber grapples with in the garden. Not only must debts be paid; that is **all** you need. This is an issue in **Euthyphro**, recall. It is easy to talk about religion as if it were some sort of favorable balance of trade established between mortals and gods (14d). But can that make sense? How can religion be trade policy? How can ethics be a balance sheet of credits and debits? If right and wrong is, effectively, money, is it a unit of account, medium of exchange, or store of value? Is it easier to be a good man — just man — if you are rich? Poverty is a leading cause of crime. Ergo, wealth is a leading cause of **not**-crime? Can it be that ethical merit is heritable, not personally earned? My father passes on a pile of cash when he passes, perhaps. But can you set up a **moral** trust fund for your kids?

We are moving too quickly. The old man did not say all that. He's a businessman. As Socrates remarks in **Apology**, every tradesman thinks his trade affords insight. Ask a shoemaker about the meaning of life. He'll get a shrewd expression on his face: 'Life … is like a well-made pair of shoes.' Cephalus understands money so he tries to think through justice in terms he understands. Let's back up. We passed over what looks like a weakness in the old man's business-like exterior. Not quite a crack in the facade; more like structural subsidence — a sinking feeling.

> All those stories about Hades he used to laugh at, about how the dead are made to pay for all the wrongs they committed in life. Now the stories torment him with the thought that maybe it's all true …

'He'? (He's like 'they', right? Them = Us = Me.)



> The man who finds he has committed many unjust deeds in life both wakes from his sleep with a frightened start, as children do, and lives with despair by day. (330e-331a)

How would a placid old guy like Cephalus know a thing like that? The smooth surface of his character conceals dark depths.

Surprising? You don't get ahead in business by being everyone's best friend every day of your life, surely. To climb to the top of the Athenian arms industry, all the way from Syracuse, does not sound like an easy trip. Yes, it turns out Cephalus is an arms merchant, a beneficiary of Pericles' generous policy of encouraging foreign craftsmen to immigrate to Athens. Cephalus and sons own a profitable shield workshop in Piraeus. (We don't know this from the dialogue but from other sources.)

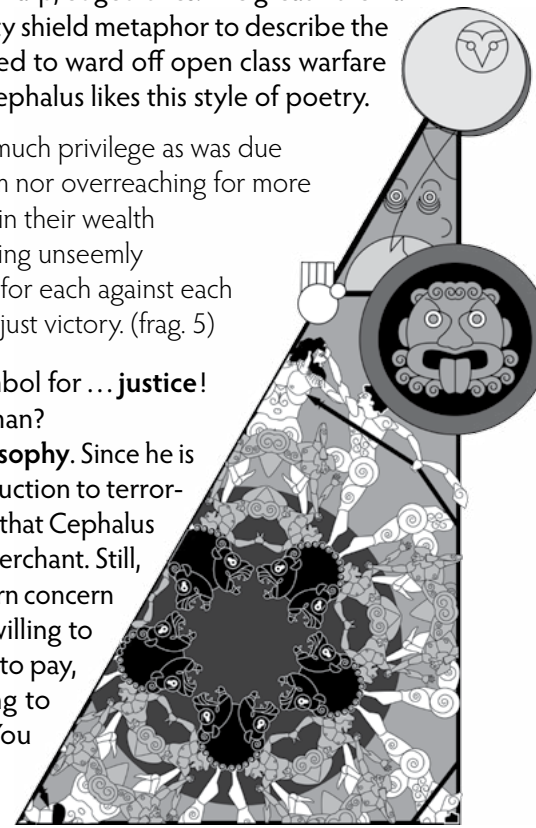
Here is a man who has spent his life making war material, but that you can feel **good** about, relatively. Weapons to **stop** harm. Cephalus like round metal objects — coins and shields — not sharp, edged ones. The great Athenian law-giver Solon deployed a mighty shield metaphor to describe the constitutional reforms he instituted to ward off open class warfare between rich and poor. I'll bet Cephalus likes this style of poetry.

> I gave the common people as much privilege as was due
> Neither taking honor from them nor overreaching for more
> And to the powerful, splendid in their wealth
> I arranged that they suffer nothing unseemly
> And I stood up a strong shield, for each against each
> So that neither could win an unjust victory. (frag. 5)

A good shield is a perfect symbol for … **justice**!

So why the bad dreams, old man?

Let's turn from anxiety to **philosophy**. Since he is not selling weapons of mass destruction to terrorists, it may be anachronistic to hint that Cephalus feels guilty about being an arms merchant. Still, Socrates raises the standard, modern concern about this profession. If you are willing to sell weapons to anyone with coin to pay, eventually you will end up selling to someone bad, some madman. You will have blood on your hands.



> If you have a friend who leaves weapons with you, when he is of sound mind, then asks for them back after he goes mad, no one would say that you should give them back, or that someone who did return them was a just man; no more than you would say you should always speak the truth to someone in such a seriously disturbed frame of mind. (331c)

Addressed to Cephalus, this far-fetched scenario is just business as usual. At some point some drunk hammered on the door, bellowing about needing to pick up that shield he paid for. Cephalus had to decide whether to hand over or tell the man to sleep it off. In a civic sense, Cephalus is aiding and abetting his 'friend', Athens, who will presently lose everything, militarily, with the 'help' of all his fine, well-balanced shields.

Quite apart from personal or civic relevance, the features of the case carry us back to the issue of bad desire. The madman — 'not himself' — is an intensification of the possibility that I may want bad things, or at least things that are not good for me. Would you let someone do the wrong thing, just because they want to, and can pay for the privilege? We also see Socrates planting the thin-edge of a definitional wedge, by means of the madman case

> But then, I said, speaking truth and returning what is owed is not a correct definition of justice. (331d)

As an objection this is plain unjust, since Socrates uncharacteristically did not **ask** for a definition of justice. He asked the old man what money is good for. There is no reason a true answer to **this** question, even if it turns out to have something to do with justice, should automatically amount to a correct definition of 'justice'. Still, if something's worth doing well, it's worth doing **at all**. Cephalus thinks justice is important. But if you want to talk justice, you should be prepared for hard thinking. Cephalus enjoys philosophy, yet his interest is superficial. This is in character. One of the comforting features of tending sacrifices for the goddess Bendis, of making sure your credits and debits balance, is a sense of 'rightness', of security. Cephalus doesn't want critical philosophy. He wants consolation from philosophy.

Let me give you some backstory for that Solon poem.

The historical record is thin, but Solon was a 6th Century (BCE) Athenian politician (statesman/poet), famed for having saved Athens in a constitutional crisis. No doubt there was more, but this much seems clear. Athenian farmers were falling, more and more, into debt-slavery. The Athenians didn't object to slavery. But it was

intolerable for there to be such evident, evil gaps opening between rich and poor citizens. In the crisis, Solon was granted extraordinary executive powers to wipe slate cleans, as it were; to re-inscribe the page of the polis 'evenly'. He wiped some slates, freed the debt-slaves, eliminating glaring inequalities, yet left the rich substantially secure in their possessions and traditional privileges.

What definition of 'justice' did Solon work from? He had a free hand, such as would-be tyrants and political philosophers mostly only exercise in dreams. He didn't have to defer to any 'but one **has** to pay one's debts!' knee-jerks, since stubborn insistence on that was the root cause of the crisis. He was no Cephalus, then. Or was he? In this moment of freedom to play Philosopher-King, Solon seems to have been prudent enough to play-act the mere moderate, lest he be denounced for playing tyrant. Solon relied on the ambiguities of 'equal' and 'balance' to muddle through, while stamping a proud, poetic face on the product, shielding it from doubt. He split differences, relying on customary notions of what is 'due', in the hopes of securing social stability. He projected an **appearance** of 'evenness' to Athenian eyes. Then, so the story goes, he left town so no one could raise objections. Just as Cephalus has enough sense to get up and leave, brushing Socrates off when he starts making uncomfortable trouble for an old man's superficial account of 'what is due'. Smart old man!

Solon is a fascinating figure for republicans like Madison (as I am sure he must have been for the author of **Republic**.) Why would, "a people, jealous as the Greeks [Athenians] were of their liberty … so far abandon the rules of caution as to place their destiny in the hands of a single citizen?" Should Solon be seen as a moral hazard; or an opportunity missed? "Solon … confessed that he had not given to his countrymen the government best suited to their happiness, but most tolerable to their prejudices."[8] Yet perhaps that was for the best — the second-best. Some constitution is better than none.

If Cephalus is only as wise as Solon, he's no weak head. So what's wrong with him? **Republic**, Book 1, deploys a rhetoric of decay. There is nothing to keep Cephalus' line from devolving into Polemarchus', then into Thrasymachus'; so the argument against the last scores against the first. Then again, maybe sometimes things run the other way? If Solon had been like Socrates, wouldn't that have led to civil war in the streets, likely as not?

8 James Madison, Federalist 38. For more on Solon, see John David Lewis, Solon the Thinker: Political Thought In Archaic Athens (Bloomsbury, 2006).

13

If Solon's metaphor of a shield is a symbol for old Cephalus' all-around ethical preference for customary norms and forms, the son is not far from the father. A shield is a **weapon**, as is every ready-to-hand implement, to the eye that sees the world in terms of conflict between Us and Them. A fable explains:

> Once upon a time all the animals in the Zoo decided that they would disarm, and they arranged to have a conference to arrange the matter. So the Rhinoceros said when he opened the proceedings that the use of teeth was barbarous and horrible and ought to be strictly prohibited by general consent. Horns, which were mainly defensive weapons, would, of course, have to be allowed. The Buffalo, the Stag, the Porcupine, and even the little Hedgehog all said they would vote with the Rhino, but the Lion and the Tiger took a different view. They defended teeth and even claws, which they described as honourable weapons of immemorial antiquity … Then the Bear spoke. He proposed that both teeth and horns should be banned and never used again for fighting by any animal. It would be quite enough if animals were allowed to give each other a good hug when they quarreled …
>
> The discussion got so hot and angry, and all those animals began thinking so much about horns and teeth and hugging when they argued about the peaceful intentions that had brought them together that they began to look at one another in a very nasty way. Luckily the keepers were able to calm them down and persuade them to go back quietly to their cages, and they began to feel quite friendly with one another again.[9]

The Solonic aim of a disarmament conference is to erect a shield 'for each against each', effecting escape from a Hobbesian State of Nature. But how to aim for an overall state of affairs in which no party enjoys an advantage, when each party is — who are we kidding? — angling for advantage?

9 Winston Churchill, speech at Aldersbrook, 24 October, 1928.

Everyone talks 'custom', 'defense', 'friend'. Everyone sees: enemies. It might seem Churchill is saying disarmament efforts are doomed to failure (barring divine interventions by Philosopher-Zookeepers.) In fact, his point was more moderate. At the conclusion of some actual negotiations he gave this speech, defending the wisdom of having kept details under wraps until a deal was done, lest popular antagonisms be inflamed.

What does this have to do with Polemarchus? Standard hoplite tactics: lock shields, crash through the enemy line. If justice is a shield, then, pushing this thought to its logical conclusion, justice is a weapon for pushing … so long as you've got friends. Polemarchus:

> A friend ought to do good to a friend, never evil … An enemy owes an enemy that which is due or proper to him — namely, something bad. (332c)

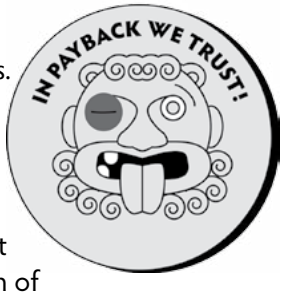
Churchill is glad to have men like Polemarchus on his side. But they aren't much use at the negotiating table. (Bunch of hot-heads!)

But wait, wasn't there a pile of money lying around here somewhere? Polemarchus is 'heir to' Cephalus' argument — as to his fortune — and Cephalus says justice is mostly 'paying debts'. Somehow money turned into a shield, now a sword? Polemarchus thinks he's defending dad's account, waving this sword? What's the connection? It is the **talion**. The term does not occur in Plato, but a scholarly account opens like so:

> The talion (the same Latin root supplies us with **retaliate**) indicates a repayment in kind. It is not a talon — not an eagle's claw — of which I must inform my students and even remind an occasional colleague. It is easy to excuse the misunderstanding. After all, the difference between talion and talon is but the difference of an **i**. And then one has to try hard not to imagine a bird of prey or carrion-eater swooping down … [10]

Any chapter that begins with bird attacks, as this one did, can do with a similar, explicit warning against linguistic misunderstanding. No vultures, just the simple, intuitive logic of equal repayment in kind. **Lex talionis**, the law of retaliation: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a dollar for a dollar, a favor for a favor.

10 William Ian Miller, Eye For An Eye (Cambridge 2005), ix-x.



I trust you are struck by the incongruity of the series.

Surely all 'repayment' is not morally equivalent. No one says double-entry bookkeeping is vengeful and bloody-minded. We do not feel finance is a form of feud. Why do we talk as if 'trading' punches is balancing accounts, to the point where we have one idiom that covers both cases: payback! Is banking the civilization of something that starts as a brawl? Is brawling a primitive urge to bank — to bring credits and debits into line? All this sounds weird. So, again, why does it feel right to **talk** as if banking and brawling have some common denominator: debt?

Plain old good neighborliness — favor for a favor — seems like yet a third thing. Is there some fourth thing — justice, maybe? — that all these reciprocal impulses aspire to express, each in its way? Is one of them already the true root of all?

The scholarly book cited above is substantially devoted to alleviating an erroneous sense that revenge cultures are savage, just because they sound quick to resort to dismemberment as a solution to life's problems. Often, on examination, **lex talionis** aspires to finely-graded measurement of man — that proverbial measure of all things! Any honor culture (revenge cultures always are!) will evolve a branch of accountancy nominally pegged to the common currency of the body. The goal is not mutually assured mutilation but stability, balance (equality), security. Payback is: harmony. But can a gouged eye be a symbol of harmony? It hardly looks neighborly!

Our thoughts about justice are spreading in puzzling ways: payback, loyalty, reciprocity, harmony? Yet we've been here before. The first thought that pops into Meno's head: "a man's virtue consists in being able to manage public affairs and thereby help his friends and harm his enemies" (71e). Euthyphro's first impulse is the opposite. It is absurd to say it would be just for him to side with dad **just** because he's dad (4b). But then, of course, he takes Zeus' side, just because he's Zeus. Can we crawl from this Cave of conventional notions, escape its close air of blood — pollution, miasma? Can we see the sun of the Good, limning the form of Justice? Speaking of which: what sort of good son and heir does Polemarchus shape up to be?

Cephalus emphasizes 'paying debts'. Polemarchus says this comes to 'giving back to each what is owed,' per the wise words of the poet Simonides. Friends owe friends good, enemies ill. **That's** paying debts. Socrates glosses this as 'giving to each man what befits him'. Polemarchus agrees that sounds just fine (331d-2c).

14

It is fairly obvious how this will fall apart. Think again of Solon. If Polemarchus is to be believed, justice is fighting side-by-side with your 'friends' — fellow farmers, if you are a poor farmer; fellow land-owners, if you are a rich aristocrat; and setting up a shield between both, to give each 'what befits them', if you are lucky enough to be Solon. Not only is this an inconsistent result; it misses that the three parties here are playing different 'justice' games. The rich and the poor are fighting. Solon is straining to be above that. Polemarchus, because his instinct is to reach for a weapon that will afford him some advantage, misses the advantages of a shield wielded to no one's advantage. Hence we get Socrates' rather puzzling (to most readers) craft analogies.

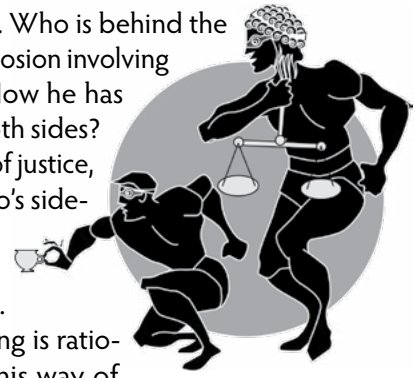
> And what if someone were to ask him, "Simonides! What due or proper thing is provided by the craft of medicine, and to whom?" (332c)

Here Socrates picks up a thread he won't drop throughout Book 1. Justice is like medicine (like piloting a ship, like shepherding sheep.) It's a craft [**technē**]. English words (technical, technology) are suggestive of what he is getting at. But in a sense that's the problem. What is 'practicing the craft of justice'? That's an **odd** phrase. Socrates is playing it as a bit of a trick question.

> S: Then justice will be useless to men who aren't at war? (332e)

Polemarchus can hardly say yes, but his tendency to think in fighting terms means he has trouble articulating **how** justice could be of use **except** to take sides in some fight. Every craft means getting some advantage, doesn't it? Why bother mastering a craft unless there's an advantage to doing it right? But what is the advantage of justice? Proverbially, justice means: not taking advantage. But foregoing an advantage sounds plain imprudent — not crafty in the least. Polemarchus tries to wriggle out like so: justice is useful in making contracts. Practicing law indeed sounds like a promising candidate for technical 'practice of the craft of justice'. There is a problem, however. Departing from the text, for the sake of making Polemarchus' difficulty clearer: a lawyer is an **advocate** — hired gun in a legal battle. We're right back to fighting.

We might shift to consider the role of judge, like Solon. But even a judge is only useful in a fight — if only to settle it. Also, the judge's role tends to be constrained along a crucial axis. The Greek for just action, **dikaios**, carries the implication 'do the **right** thing', but also 'the **done** thing': follow precedent. In some traditions, follow the black letter. Even Solon, rewriting the constitution, is careful not to play the unprecedented utopian. He defers to a sense of each side's prejudices. That is not the same as justice, is it?



Let's try on a cruder costume for size. Who is behind the mask of — **the Justifier**! Was there an explosion involving an experimental typesetting system? Now he has the power of making margins even on both sides? Hardly! But since this is the Greek notion of justice, the **dikaiosunic duo** can include our hero's sidekick, Appropriateness Lad! (Neat fellow!)

Too cartoonish?

But Polemarchus is not sophisticated. He is not here because his way of thinking is rationally formidable. He is here because his way of feeling is typical. He wants to **do good**. He thinks in terms of **fighting**. To see what is inadequate about this, we need a simple, sample **fighting do-gooder** as exhibit A.

What holds this picture together is not a rational argument but a wishful hope that strength and power, conventional manliness and justice shall not come apart.

Perhaps you have heard that 'with great power comes great responsibility.' That is a statement of how things **ought to b**e. But, in popular literature, it can be more like a comforting **stipulation** of how things **are**. If your head is stuffed with epics tales of heroes, in which it is treated as a matter of course that power and virtue go naturally together — might makes right! Good guys win! Bad guys lose! — you keep revolving back to the same simple thought, over and over.

> I still say justice is helping friends and harming enemies. (334c)

Why doesn't any member of the Justice League have the power of — oh, just for example: Justice? Why only powers for fighting? Strength, speed, flight. Why doesn't anyone tell stories about the ordinary man who was bitten by a radioactive philosopher and acquired a tingling 'justice sense'?

This man acquired the ability to find genuine solutions to ethical problems the ordinary man on the street regards as hopeless and insoluble! But how do you tell that as a human story? Perhaps people don't tell stories about a super-human justice sense because they can't conceive of **true** justice as some esoteric subject, which only a few super humans expertly grasp. Or maybe they just can't feed an appetite for honor on such abstract fare. No fight, no glory in victory. No glory? How can there be virtue? No virtue? How can there be justice? Good, without good guys and bad guys? What would that look like?

Why doesn't the fact that no one in the Justice League has justice powers, **per se**, strike us as an ironic omission, while we are reading the comic book? Probably because you can tell who the bad guy is just by looking at him. Who needs a 'justice sense' when the stories are all so simple and the characters are so luridly color-coded in the hero-villain department.

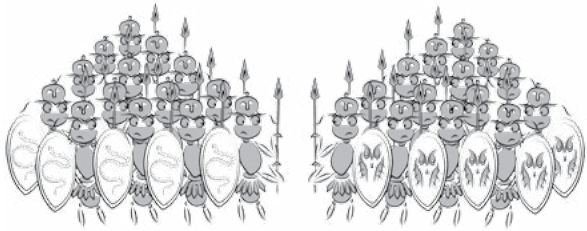
Which brings us back to Polemarchus. He's combative, not an utter fool. Obvious considerations allow Socrates to nudge him into modifying a definition that might work in a world of clear heroes and villains, but will predictably fail the politically complex context of real life.

> We should say instead that he is a friend who doesn't merely seem, but truly is, good. One who only seems good, but isn't, only seems a friend, but isn't. The same goes for enemies. (335a)

Obviously so! But his only highlights further problems. First, how to tell?

> Probably people become friends with those they think are good, and grow to hate the ones they judge evil. (334c)

This is interesting because it is so obviously upside down and backwards. By and large, in-group relations are inherited, not deliberately (let alone rationally) selected. You come to think people are 'good' because they are **your** people. Red ant fights black, not because any ant has a good argument about which sort of ant is truly good. We humans see to it that tribal life seems almost as simple as it is for those ants. A shield, for example, can serve not just for defense but to make things seem clear, which — if everyone just threw away their weapons — might be harder to make out.



Thus:

> Don't people often make mistakes about this, so that many of those they believe are good aren't, and vice versa? (334c)

Again, perfectly obvious. But this only makes a further problem more acute: if tribalism isn't a good heuristic, then we aren't refining Polemarchus' friend-enemy binary but bypassing it, trading it for something different and better? To recap:

Polemarchus inherits a money-based account, which he trades for **payback**.

This feeds into an intuitive, if underspecified tribalism:

Which gives way to an as-yet undeveloped moralism.

Which leads, ultimately, to doubts as to whether the consistently combative incidentals make sense, through these changes. No one wants what is bad, so bad people obviously need to be helped, not harmed (335b-e). We need a doctor, not a soldier.

So put down that spear and you've got it!

This is more or less the point at which Thrasymachus loses containment. But before we usher him onstage, let us consider more closely how things stand — or break — at this point.

15

"You and I are prepared to fight side by side against any who attributes such a saying [justice is helping friends and harming enemies] to Simonides or Bias or Pittacus, or any other wise man or prophet?" (335e). Polemarchus agrees, but Socrates is obviously ironizing about how he leaps at the prospect of any fight. (It's there in his name! **Polemos** means battle!) How likely is he to give up fighting, to be permanently argued out of his personal brand of idealism — his image of the virtuous man as fighter — and also his sense of realism?

Consider a pair of poems by Tyrtaeus (5th Century BCE Spartan poet):

> It is noble for a good man to die, falling in the forefront
> Of battle, fighting for his fatherland.
> But there is nothing more wretched than leaving
> One's city and rich fields to beg,
> And wander with his dear mother, his old father,
> His little children and wedded wife …
> Let us die with no thought for our own lives.

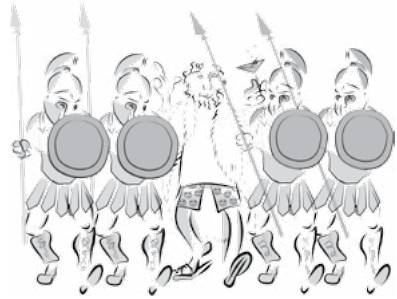
There you have it! Idealism meets realism. Giving too many thoughts to your own life is going to be too **personally** costly in the long run. And again:

> This is the common good, for the polis and the whole demos
> When a man stands firm on the front ranks
> Without flinching and puts disgraceful flight completely from his mind
> Making his soul and spirit endure
> And with his words encourages the man stationed next to him.[11]

Fighting is the noblest way. Also, the only way.

Another poet, Archilochus, wrote about dropping his shield and running — **what the hell, I can get a new one! At least I'm alive**! Reportedly, he was banned in Sparta. You want soldiers to think fighting is to their personal advantage. But, then again, you don't want them thinking too hard about payout matrices for fight-or-flight prisoner's dilemma-type situations. If every shield holds, everyone will probably be fine. If one man breaks, the formation collapses. Everyone is probably dead — with the exception of that one coward, who gets a healthy headstart for the hills.

11 Quoted in M. Gagarin and P. Woodruff (eds) Early Greek Political Thought From Homer to the Sophists (Cambridge UP 1995), 24-5.



If even **thinking** about dropping your guard is too dangerous to be permitted, what are the odds that Polemarchus will be able to hold on to a dialectically innovative argument to the denial of the proposition that "the just man owes a debt of harm to his enemies and one of aid to his friends" (335e)?

What is he going to sound like? — look like? — to his friends and his enemies? Wise philosopher or idiot? There's a reason why this is the point at which Thrasymachus, who prides himself on his realism and his capacity for self-preservation, just can't take it any more.

16

But we will hold that beast at bay for one last section. Polemarchus, as I said, is no theorist, just a tribalist. We are interested in him more for his heart than his head. But suppose — just suppose! — he had a better head for tribalism? What sorts of thoughts might he have thought through?

Aristotle famously declares, 'man is a political animal [**politikon zōon**]'.[12] This thesis about the human zoo is more aspirational, less descriptively self-evident, than we may take it to be. We tend to hear him saying, simply: humans are social. Indeed, this is the core of Aristotle's case, but his conclusion is narrower: man is suited by nature to live in a **polis**, a city-state in the Greek sense. Man lives up to his potential only by living as a citizen, partaking of public affairs — something that, obviously, very few human beings actually do.

A more realistic counter-conclusion, from the same premises about sociality, might then be this: mankind is tribal. The Greek for **tribe** is **ethnos**, corresponding to 'ethnocentric', an early 20th century coinage of the sociologist William Graham Sumner:

> Ethnocentrism is the technical name for this view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it.

Unpacking 'group' more fully:

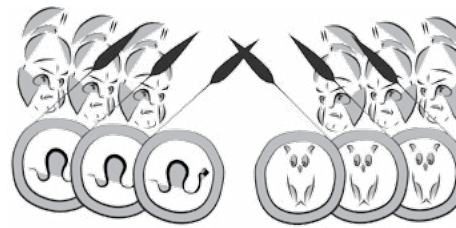
12 Aristotle, **Politics** (1253a). Even while arguing with reference to lines from Homer about 'clanless, lawless, homeless' men, i.e. utterly anti-social, 'fight-loving' specimens of our species, Aristotle makes clear he does not think bare sociality suffices for proper 'politics'. Our nature calls for civic community [**hoi politai**], a concept that contrasts with, rather than encompassing, mere allies [**hoi summakhoi**] who will have our back in a fight.

> The relation of comradeship and peace in the we-group and that of hostility and war towards others-groups are correlative to each other. The exigencies of war with outsiders are what make peace inside, lest internal discord should weaken the we-group for war. These exigencies also make government and law in the in-group, in order to prevent quarrels and enforce discipline. Thus war and peace have reacted on each other and developed each other, one within the group, the other in the intergroup relation. The closer the neighbors, and the stronger they are, the intenser is the warfare, and then the intenser is the internal organization and discipline of each. Sentiments are produced to correspond. Loyalty to the group, sacrifice for it, hatred and contempt for outsiders, brotherhood within, warlikeness without, — all grow together, common products of the same situation. These relations and sentiments constitute a social philosophy[13]

But not a self-critical one, hence the ease with which Polemarchus is drawn into debate, then routed. But if Sumner is right that all humans are ethnocentric, that in itself is some sort of argument for tribalism. Can't ask people to go against nature. At any rate, we now have an answer to that puzzling question we started with: how can a fight be a symbol of harmony and balance? Obviously it can if peace is, as Sumner suggests, a condition generated by 'the exigencies of war'. Peace itself turns out to be a fighting stance!

Having introduced Polemarchus with a quote from one conservative statesman, Churchill, on the subject of disarmament, let me close with another, from US President Ronald Reagan, on the subject of private peace talks he had with Soviet General Secretary Michail Gorbachev:

> When you stop to think that we're all God's children, wherever we may live in the world, I couldn't help but say to him, just think how easy his task and mine might be in these meetings that we held if suddenly there was a threat to this world from some other species, from another planet, outside in the universe. We'd forget all the little local differences that we have between our countries, and we would find out once and for all that we really are all human beings here on this Earth together.



13 William Graham Sumner, **Folkways: A Study of mores, manners, customs, and morals** (Dover, 2002), 13, 12.

> Well, I don't suppose we can wait for some alien race to come down and threaten us, but I think that between us we can bring about that realization.[14]

Note the irony: good things come from having friends, but having friends comes from having enemies. So having enemies is good? But the good of having enemies — so you can have friends — only alleviates problems that were caused by having enemies in the first place! Reagan **hopes** we can escape an absurd circle.

In **The Concept of the Political**, the 20th Century political philosopher Carl Schmitt argues that we cannot, unless we can escape from politics (understood now in a sense that stands Aristotle on his head.) "The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy." This antithesis is "relatively independent" of others: good and evil, beautiful and ugly (all the things Aristotle hopes we citizens can debate in a public way.) In **Euthyphro** (7d) Socrates suggests that if the gods fight, it must be because they have disputes about good and evil, beautiful and ugly. Schmitt would say: it's because they are **political**. Not so much when they squabble; rather, when a group or generation of gods wars with another. Right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, all the rest will get dragged in, but friend/enemy is the true root.

> The distinction of friend and enemy denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation … The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible. These can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm nor by the judgment of a disinterested and therefore neutral party.

Note the specific hint that no wise Solon can interpose a shield to give everyone 'their due'. It just isn't that **sort** of problem. Schmitt even makes Reagan's point about the aliens — up to a point.

14 Ronald Reagan, speech at Fallston, Maryland, 1985.

Humanity as such cannot wage war because it has no enemy, at least not on this planet. The concept of humanity excludes the concept of the enemy, because the enemy does not cease to be a human being.[15]

17

But do we need to be spiraling off into alien thoughts? Alien to the text of Plato's **Republic**, Book I, that is? Here's the point. Polemarchus is unlikely to convert permanently to the view Socrates is pushing. He will fall back into his old ways of thinking — but maybe more thoughtfully. He might get crafty about friend/enemy. But, once you have gotten to the point of thinking like Schmitt, you are working free of conventional moral notions. The arc of real politics is long but it bends towards injustice: disharmony!

Unleash the beast! Thrasymachus! His notorious definition of justice looks simple enough: 1) **justice is the advantage of the stronger** (338c). Later, however, he shifts to: 2) **justice is another's advantage** (343b). Do those come to the same? Let's sort it out.

First, I recommend the reader flip back to section 4; review my crib sheet for Thrasymachian lies. Why lie? Because he's cynical; also, a good speaker. Philosophers — simple creatures — couch claims in abstract, impersonal terms, even going so far as to peddle definitions. Sophists — shrewd beasts — tailor words to audiences. Thrasymachus will play the definition game, to show he can win it. But he keeps his eyes on the real prize. Present company in the house of Cephalus is all adult males, all rich and/or politically influential. 1) is thus an invitation. Go ahead! Take it all! (As Carnegie says, a speaker **sells** by giving an audience what it wants.) But then with 2) Thrasymachus speaks as if addressing the weak. There is a theoretical reason. He has defined 'strong' so strongly that present company is excepted. But he is also trying to denigrate Socrates as pathetic. No one likes a weakling.

In shifting between 1) and 2) Thrasymachus sometimes poses as a speaker of plain truth. Athenian justice is one thing; Spartan justice something else. No contradiction, just relative, local variability. But sometimes his craft of justice seems to be, as Socrates consistently suggests it should be, like medicine — well, like spin-doctoring. Rulers are unwise to speak the same language of 'justice' in public and private, even in the privacy of their heads. So hire Thrasymachus to run your PR! But does this mean his truth-telling was pure PR from the start? Anyway, do I need to spin doctor my soul? Now it gets tricky.

15 Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition, Expanded. (University Of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 27, 56.

In a well-known passage in **The Prince**, Machiavelli reads allegorical wisdom into an ancient myth concerning the education of Achilles and other Greek princelings by the centaur Chiron. A ruler must know the ways of beast and man alike. Justice **is** this crafty hybrid, Thrasymachus would add. And, just as a good ruler will betray his species, at need, Thrasymachus could turn traitor to his class. When he isn't advertising his services as advisor to insiders, he could be auditioning for the role of demagogue, drawing back the curtain of 'justice' from outside, exposing these sordid, self-serving schemes of the rich and powerful!

All in all, it makes quite a difference whether claims about 'justice' are relativistic, many-faceted truths or cynical, two-faced falsehoods. But Thrasymachus can keep up a good 'heads I win, tails you lose' game. This is how and why he comes off as a hard-headed, clear-eyed debunker of any ideal scheme (naive dream of proving what's Right everywhere, at all times.) Then, a moment later, there he goes, peddling his ideal portrait of a perfect Ruler, who has never existed outside Thrasymachus' wildest dreams.

He equivocates between **is** and **ought**; between realism and a kind of idealism. Does the study of justice properly entail studying how things are — existing order — or how they should be? Both, probably. A good philosopher will be careful; an effective speaker, opportunistic. When you are weak on **is**, shift to **ought,** and vice versa. Know the weak spots in your theory, not so you can repair them; so you can conceal them; so you can sell this stuff.

But what, then, do you believe, if you believe in the power of double-talk? One point on which Thrasymachus is quite consistent (until he starts sulking, saying 'yes, Socrates' to everything), is his **ethical egoism**. He is sure it is always rational, hence right, to pursue one's self-interest. But the subject under debate is justice, not egoism, and the relationship between the two is more strained than Thrasymachus sees, even if there is wisdom in egoism. But before we get to that complication, one last simple question.

What does Thrasymachus want from Socrates? To humiliate him? To teach him how to take over the **polis**? Is he competing with him for customers? Does he think the lure of strength will draw Socrates over to the Dark Side? What might the fantasy of total, philosophical victory look like, in the Cave of this sophist's head? He promises results, but the self-help ads might get a bit cartoonish.

18

One of the frustrations of Plato, for many readers, is the incompetence of Socratic interlocutors. Cephalus and Polemarchus are cases in point. Earlier I said we may see them as undercards before the Big Fight. If so: what a pair of palookas! They throw one punch each, then fold. With Thrasymachus, we get a fighter who gets that advancing a general proposition means opening yourself up. So change up! Anticipate that counter-example counter-punch!

Then again, Thrasymachus doesn't have **a** theory of justice; at most a couple proto-theoretic combos that don't serve him as consistently as he expects. He starts precise; blocks a few shots, tries fancy footwork; takes hits, loses focus, starts swinging wildly. In the end, Socrates is playing his signature style of chin music once again. Glaucon's desire to see someone fight in the Thrasymachian style, but better, is thus understandable. So let me summarize that as an overlay of four distinct theories. The reader can judge for herself how best to synthesize these elements, locate them in specific passages, and/or evaluate their potential merit.

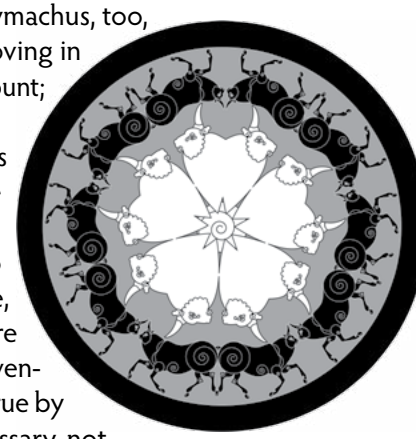
Conventionalism

Sometimes it is said that Thrasymachus is like an anthropologist, or student of comparative politics. No doubt he has read Herodotus' **Histories** (5th Century BCE), in which readers hear the tale of Gyges, and also learn lessons about how differently people do things in different places. Callatians (it is said) eat of the flesh of their dead and are horrified by the prospect of cremation. Greeks feel the opposite way. So honor has a socially conventional character. By saying 'we hereby honor the dead', we make it so; not as individuals, but collectively, in our tribes and cities.

Thrasymachus' opening gambit — justice one thing in a democracy, something else under monarchy, etc. (338e) — seems to fit in here. By declaring 'this is just', we make it so. Not naturally, but by convention, like 'pawns move this way' in chess. This makes all the more sense when we recall that **dikaiosunē** connotes regular order, the way it goes, the **done** thing. The goddess of justice is also a goddess of seasons, recall. If foreign justice is strange, that is no stranger than if winter is colder or summer hotter abroad. (Dress accordingly. What more can you say?) But there is a difference, and it has to do with the unsteady opposition between convention and nature. The sun doesn't shine, the rain doesn't fall, by convention.

It also has to do with the fact that Thrasymachus isn't hinting at the wisdom or correctness of any tolerant norm, based on recognition of the arbitrary character of conventional differences. Thrasymachus is a cosmopolitan character. For sophists, that's a professional prerequisite. 'When in Rome' and all that. But the fact that aristocratic laws favor aristocrats, whereas the **demos** — the people — say democracy is just, is not like that. These are not arbitrary points of etiquette. Thus one element we associate with ethical relativism — a characteristic 'who is to say?' gesture — is mostly absent.

Different strokes for different folks. This might become a perfectly particularized Protagoreanism: each man the measure of all things to do with him. (Women, too!) Or we might get a muddle of commonsense notions. Euthyphro's first thought is that there are many holy things. Meno's first impulse is to list all the things that make virtuous people different, rather than seeking one thing that makes them the same. Thrasymachus, too, starts with the many. But we are quickly moving in the opposite direction: towards a unified account; universal benchmark. One justice for all!



Remember Xenophanes? If cows had gods they would look like cows. That's because everyone is so self-regarding. Thrasymachus is just taking the next step: everyone is so self-interested. If cows had a sense of justice, count on that being good for cows. These are thoughts about what gets made true, by convention. But these thoughts are not themselves true by convention. The pattern is natural and necessary, not subject to change or reform, much less to 'make it so!' stipulative alteration. If everyone is self-interested; if 'justice' is conventional; then, naturally, the strong suit themselves. 'Justice' tracks the self-interest of the ruling class or power. Of course, this is not at all what most people think justice is. But that just goes to show that, far from being all true, by convention, all these substantially divergent, merely conventional local justices are all false … by nature.

Naturalism

But is this skeptical truth truly natural? If so, is it normative? Also, does justice turn out to be many or one?

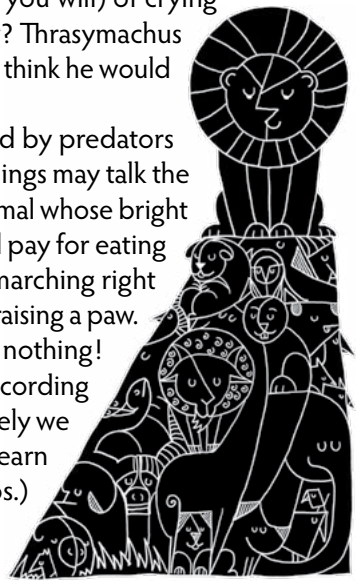
Imagine that, instead of making trouble for Socrates, Thrasymachus finds work providing voiceover commentary for a nature documentary. Wouldn't that be more honest work, more scientific and educational to youth?

But I forgot to add: in this documentary the animals whose lives and deaths are recorded are human beings. Humans are animals, you may recall. See the great cat hunt the tiny deer! The mighty tyrant persecutes the democrats! 'If the coup is successful, the tyrant will eat well tonight! If not, he may slink off into the high grass of exile, living to overthrow another day.' As a scientific observer, you know better than to take sides. That would be sentimental foolishness. Neither predator or prey is right or wrong. Just eat or be eaten.

If there **is** an **ought**, it can only be that what there ought to be is: balance. If the regular turn of the seasons is justice, ecology is, too. Due process! The circle of life! Lions have their place in the food chain. **Pleonexia** — excess! — would be the opposite: preaching lions should lie with lambs. No biologist would recommend it.

I am getting mixed up, talking lions in one sentence, tyrants in the next. But does it matter? To repeat: humans are animals. Of course, one thing that makes humans unique, among animals, is that they think they know of a thing they call 'justice'. You never hear a deer cry 'injustice!' before a lion tears out its throat. But how does 'justice' operate, in the throat of a human?

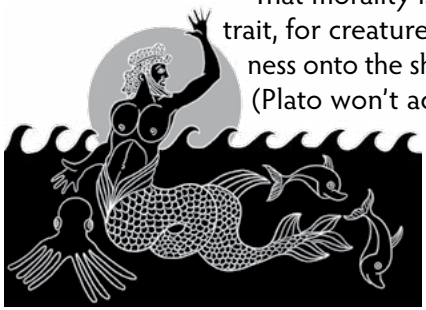
I don't want to push Thrasymachus too far in a naturalist direction. (I predict he would endorse my documentary scheme, but if you want a more full-throated spokesman for 'nature', call Callicles, from Plato's **Gorgias**.) But let me take one last step on Thrasymachus' behalf. Teeth bite; claws rake; legs are for chasing and escaping. What is justice for, by nature? What advantage does the craft (adaptive trait, call it what you will) of crying 'justice!' confer in nature, red in tooth and claw? Thrasymachus does not pose the question in these terms, but I think he would understand, and have an eager, easy answer.



Justice is for fooling! It's a device, employed by predators and prey alike, to disorient and deceive. Weaklings may talk the strong out of preying on them. This is like an animal whose bright coloration mimics something poisonous. 'You'll pay for eating me!' A leader may hypnotize the masses into marching right into his greedy maw, sparing him the trouble of raising a paw. They don't call 'em 'charismatic megafauna' for nothing!

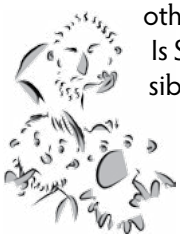
This explains why justice is one-yet-many, according to Thrasymachus. Illusions are like that. And surely we get what he is getting at. (Nothing you didn't learn from Churchill's field trip to the zoo, perhaps.)

People always seek some advantage. Still, this camoflage-and-dazzle conception of justice suffers from a glaring omission. If you ask an evolutionary psychologist what the use of a sense of justice is, in a moral animal, the answer won't be: to lie. Yes, humans **are** liars — and detectors of liars. Our capacity to concoct — and debunk — self-serving moral rationalizations goes with that. Still, our human sense of justice functions, first and foremost, to make us **harmonious**, i.e. willing to forego advantage. "Morality is a set of psychological adaptations that allow otherwise selfish individuals to reap the benefits of cooperation." Morality in what sense? "The essence of morality is altruism, unselfishness, a willingness to pay a personal cost to benefit others."[16]



That morality is, as it were, an amphibious adaptive trait, for creatures washing up from the seas of selfishness onto the shores of sociality, is hardly self-evident. (Plato won't admit justice is just a fish out of water, but he knows the feeling. He tells the Myth of Glaucus, per Chapter 7.) But this may be a more explanatory naturalism than Thrasymachus'. How long can horns grow before they are more tangled trouble than they're worth? How altruistic can we get, collectively, before all that collapses under the weight of our selfishness? Thrasymachus has not a wise word to say about any such functional trade-offs. So 'justice is the advantage of the stronger' doesn't just miss **justice** in a conventional sense. (Thrasymachus will wear that with pride.) It misses **advantage** and **stronger**, even in a natural sense.

Thrasymachus is bored by the idealistic tone of the debate; then irritated, in the end, by what must seem like pseudo-pragmatism. Socrates points out that a gang of thieves, who cannot trust each other, will hardly be strong (351e). Seriously? Is Socrates trying to provide a disproof of the possibility of criminal conspiracy? Preposterous! Naive! But that isn't his point. A theory that it is rational to exploit a system is not a rational theory of that system — of what functions it may have, actually and ideally. Thrasymachus has schemed how to work justice, but not explained how **it** works. **That's** Socrates' point.



16 Joshua Greene, Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason and the Gap Between Us and Them (Penguin, 2013), p. 23.

Egoism

Let turn back to Glaucon's point, per section 5. If justice is a second-best solution to a social coordination problem among egoists, Thrasymachus might be right about the egoism, even if he's wrong about justice.

Ethical egoism is the view that, for an action to be right, it must be self-interested. **Rational egoism** is the view that, for an action to be rational, it must be self-interested. Doing the just thing, in conventional terms, will often be neither rational nor right, on these views. Thrasymachus seems to think his collection of cynical observations about real politics amounts to an empirical proof of psychological egoism, from which the other two views follow. (**Psychological egoism** says that, in fact, everyone is self-interested.) But we seem to be skipping a few steps. Thrasymachus really just seems to find all three forms of egoism intuitive and obvious. So running them together feels right. He does not consistently distinguish them, although constructions like his 'ideal ruler' — we're getting to that! — show awareness that some such distinctions are needed.

Opponents like Glaucon share Thrasymachus' moderately undifferentiated egoistic outlook, if weakly. (Who among us isn't a bit self-centered?) The Glauconian theory that justice is a second-best stability point for the selfish is fatal to Thrasymachus' theory. Yet Glaucon's view is also fatal to Socrates' idealism. He wouldn't like justice-as-stable-side-effect-of-egoism any more than he likes the view that, if sea air makes you healthy, navigation is the craft of medicine (346b).

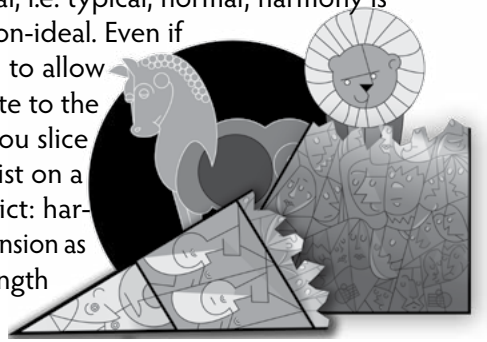
Let's go back to my earlier, simple question: what does Thrasymachus want? I hinted it's a bit unclear what his dream of victory looks like, here in the house of Cephalus. Does he want to save Socrates or destroy him? G.K. Chesterton: "To preach egoism is to practice altruism." Thrasymachus tries to force Socrates to pay to hear him teach (337d), not just because he likes money; also, because being seen giving away teaser samples is undignified.

Real tyrants don't hand out freebies!

Still, it's not hard to get where Thrasymachus is coming from, intuitively. The value of knowing 'justice' is different in different places is so when you look around Athens, you don't mistake appearance for reality. All this could change! Sure, it looks stable, harmonious, natural, hence necessary. Surely the Athenian Empire shall endure! Just look at everyone speaking truth, paying debts, friends walking and talking, not a drawn sword in sight! Look at that old man, tending the sacrifices. Clearly, all is in order on earth, under Olympus. But the ground could shift, collapsing all that. If it comes to that, the worst thing I can do will be to cling to old 'justice' — now just some sorry,

souvenir scrap. The best I can do will be to keep my mind open, my eyes clear. Maybe this sudden crack in the earth will open opportunities to take what I want, in the midst of chaos. Stranger things have happened.

Chance favors the prepared mind. Philosophy should prepare my mind, accustoming me always to penetrate polite veils. Politics is an armistice, like the peace temporarily holding in the long war between Athens and Sparta (if that theory of the dating of the dialogue's drama is correct.) Conflict is natural, hence (in one sense) ideal, i.e. typical, normal; harmony is the exception, hence (in a sense) non-ideal. Even if it turns out justice is an adaptation to allow cooperation, that's just another route to the same conclusion. No matter how you slice it, justice comes up a functional twist on a more fundamental theory of conflict: harmony as dynamic tension; dynamic tension as a method for building strength. Strength to serve self-interest.



Realism

Is there a theory of politics that goes with this way of seeing? Yes!

Early on, Socrates throws Thrasymachus off balance by pointing out that rulers sometimes miscalculate (339c). This raises an interpretive issue regarding 'justice is the advantage of the stronger' and 'it is just for subjects to do what rulers command.' Is justice, in such a case, what the ruler **does** command, or what he **should**, ideally? Thrasymachus opts for the latter, introducing the notion of a perfect ruler — one who never missteps in the rigorous pursuit of rational self-interest (340d).

This is flagrantly unreal. Feel admiration or horror, as you are inclined. No such Ruler will be found. He's unnatural!

Does this mean Thrasymachus answered wrongly, by his own lights? Not necessarily. He is abstracting and simplifying as physicists do when, for example, they model planets as perfect spheres, or surfaces as frictionless. Some models are elegant, simple and give answers that are approximately correct. Idealization is not make-believe. It does not preclude shrewd, albeit stylized contact with reality. Indeed, such 'ideal' theories may presume to penetrate, not merely approximate, the rough ground of phenomena — of power politics, for example.

Consider how Platonic the following passage sounds — how Thrasymachian. It is Hans Morgenthau, expounding what IR (international relations) theorists call 'realism'.

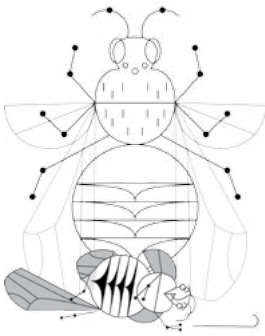
> The difference between international politics as it actually is and a rational theory derived from it is like the difference between a photograph and a painted portrait. The photograph shows everything that can be seen by the naked eye; the painted portrait does not show everything that can be seen by the naked eye, but it shows, or at least seeks to show, one thing that the naked eye cannot see: the human essence of the person portrayed.
>
> Political realism contains not only a theoretical but also a normative element. It knows that political reality is replete with contingencies and systemic irrationalities … Yet it shares with all social theory the need, for the sake of theoretical understanding, to stress the rational elements of political reality; for it is these rational elements that make reality intelligible for theory. Political realism presents the theoretical construct of a rational foreign policy which experience can never completely achieve.
>
> At the same time political realism considers a rational foreign policy to be good foreign policy; for only a rational foreign policy minimizes risks and maximizes benefits and, hence, complies both with the moral precept of prudence and the political requirement of success. Political realism wants the photographic picture of the political world to resemble as much as possible its painted portrait. Aware of the inevitable gap between good — that is, rational — foreign policy and foreign policy as it actually is, political realism maintains not only that theory must focus upon the rational elements of political reality, but also that foreign policy ought to be rational in view of its own moral and practical purposes.[17]

This is as cogent a rationale for Thrasymachus' ideal Ruler model as one is likely to find. Morgenthau's realism-as-rationalism turns out to be, basically, egoism at the state level. ('Interest', understood as power. Not quite 'justice' as strength, but, once again, close enough for government work.)

I hope it is also apparent why I call this picture Platonic. The irrational world of experience around us is trying, semi-failing, to be like a simpler, more rational world, behind it. The judicious theorist therefore massages the data, **pour encourager les autres**.

But when is it reasonable to reason this way? Astrophysicists may model planets as spheres, but do not conclude, therefore, that these objects of study **ought** to be perfect spheres, so that data fudging is helpful nudging.

17 Hans Morgenthau, "Six Principles of Political Realism, in Morgenthau, Thompson, and Clinton, **Politics Among Nations** (McGraw-Hill, 1992), p. 10..



We don't think the universe suffers from what linguists call a competence/performance gap.[18] But speakers do. A theory of English syntax need not accommodate every mangled utterance by any native speaker. Or take an example from Chapter 7. If one biologist is puzzling over the function of a mysterious aspect of insect anatomy, and her colleague helpfully informs her it's not 'supposed to be' that way — leg's broken — this deletion of bad data from the set is sensible. Extending Morgenthau's metaphor: if you are commissioned to produce a scientific illustration of a type of insect, but the subject you can find to sit for its portrait suffers from a broken leg, feel free to repair the defect, imaginatively, for 'ideal' illustration purposes.

What if you are an economist, modeling agents as egoistic, rational actors, yet behavioral economists persist in informing you real subjects don't obey your model? When do you abandon your theory as falsified; when defend it weakly, as approximate; when defend it strongly, on the grounds that you have penetrated to a deeper, truer level? Morgenthau: "reality, being deficient in this respect, must be understood and evaluated as an approximation to an ideal system." How can you **know** a thing like that? Let's get back to the case at hand: justice. Gaze out over the polis. What do you see?

Bunch of moral animals.

Healthy specimens?

Nothing to write home to the Form of the Good about.

Second-best?

Most of them. If they are lucky.

But are they second-best first-best, or second-best second-best?

Come again?

I thought I had! Are they trying, but failing, to be optimal Glauconians? Or trying, but failing, to be perfect Thrasymachians? Or trying, but failing, to be perfect Platonists? Which target are they trying to hit, by nature, in theory, 'ideally', but missing, sadly, in real politics, in practice?

18 Ironically, this is close to Plato's actual view of astronomy and empirical science generally. Since the objects around us are imperfect copies of ideal Forms, we ought to treat empirical data points as 'trying' to be where the elegant math says they ought to be. (See **Republic**, 529b-530c).

'Trying' makes it sound like a psychological question, but the aspirational norm is more complicated. Think about the broken leg case. It's easy to say a bug leg is for walking. Mother Nature was 'trying' to build a bug that could walk. That's informal shorthand for a long story about selective pressure and normal, biological function; one that doesn't involve attributions of motive or deliberate design, strictly.

Even so, note how complicated such a case can get. Suppose these legs are in process of evolving into wings (maybe we are studying fossils, so we know this future.) Our pedestrian insect species is taking to the air! Suppose you confront a broken, intermediate form, along this upward-bound path. What do you call it, this battered, betwixt-and-between leg-wing? What is it 'for': earth or air? I'm drawing an analogy with the human moral sense which, as noted, might be modeled as an amphibious affair: suspension between selfishness and sociality. Think of Glaucus, half-fish, half-god. Think of Plato's chariot team: winged and well-trained on one side; digging in asinine heels on the other. Thrasymachus might prefer a different figure. Keen, obedient steed, four strong feet on the ground; but, on the other side, foolish, disobedient Pegasus, unbalancing things uselessly, in defiance of gravity and common sense. Is morality 'for' raising ourselves, idealistically, or keeping us grounded, practically? Do you train such a creature to 'be itself' by clipping its wings or by growing them, so eventually it can wing somewhere better, even if it will be awkward for now?

19

Getting back to Thrasymachus, the following, Morgenthau-inspired argument is no good, hence no good for settling such issues:

P1: A rational theory says people are ideally egoistic.

P2: I am a person.

C: It is ideal for me to be rationally egoistic.

In P1, 'ideal' means **approximately**. By C, it means: **best**. We are equivocating between good theories and good people, via erroneous hints that the mark of the latter is to make for the former. (And should it turn out I am more than one person in one … ?) If something like this simple argument still sounds plausible — many find it so — consider whether you are crossing it with a different class of shrewdness: if the other guy has a knife, get a knife. Better: a gun. In soul terms, if everyone is a bit of a beast, grow your beast.

Nothing less would be safe. Prudence is rational. But it hardly follows being a beast is ideal, much less that things will go best if everyone is beastly; or that our measuring stick for rationality must be maximal beastliness. That it makes sense that beasts exist does not imply only beasts have made sense of existence.

It is a superficially curious fact that 'realism' is used as a term both for Platonism that credits the existence of abstract objects and for cynical, **realpolitik**-style theories of political dynamics. Then again, not so surprising. Reality is as reality does! Or might do. Plato is forever seeking an eternal, unchanging order of Being behind the superficial shadowplay of Becoming. Thrasymachus seeks to ground superficial patterns of disorder-masked-as-order in a deeper, permanent disorder-as-order. There are laws governing all the moving and shaking. Thrasymachus has a logical, theoretical mind; at least a limber, theoretical stance. He is prepared to revise or disregard received, conventional notions of justice, of right and wrong, to fit the pieces into a simpler, more explanatory pattern.

Two very different styles of drawing a sharp appearance/reality distinction, in a highly aspirational ethical spirit, make for an odd team, pulling the chariot of the Real in different directions. Pity the charioteer! Or maybe there's a crafty way to steer this team, after all?

By way of pulling thoughts together, one final theoretical complication is worth going over, concerning that puzzling and elusive, alleged **technē** of justice — the craft of 'practicing justice'. Whatever could it be?

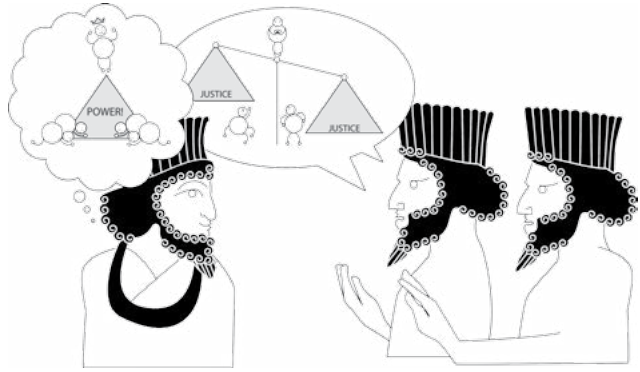
Rather than tracing a tangled thread (which starts at 340d and really continues, with intermittent disappearances, until the end) let me tell another tale. This one is also from Herodotus' **Histories** (I.96-100). Once upon a time there was a Persian named Deioces, who coveted political power and set out to get it. He 'practiced justice' constantly and zealously, though the country was lawless, and though injustice is ever the enemy of justice.

Does that mean he wore a mask and jumped around on rooftops after dark?

Not in the least! He was a freelance judge and mediator.

Did he charge a lot?

No, he gave out freebies.



His fellow countrymen, seeing his justice was just, brought their cases to him. He, craving power, kept right on being honest and right. Thus he won praise, word spread and market-share increased. Men learned Deioces alone always gave fair judgment. Men appreciated the unprecedented level of customer service. Also, you can't argue with the price. More and more cases came to Deioces, since each turned out in accord with truth and fairness.

Finally, having completely cornered the market for justice by this innovative strategy of just plain being just, Deioces jacked up prices. He would judge no more — it was not to his advantage to neglect his private interests in such a fashion. The crime rate shot up. Persians gathered, conferred and a proposal was made (here one suspects a strategic scattering of Deioces' friends in the audience, amplifying the chorus): "We can't go on living this way. Let's set up a king! The land will then be justly governed and we can tend to our private affairs without being eaten up by injustice!"

And **that's** how King Deioces won his crown. How do you suppose he ruled? Happily ever after? Justly ever after. Justly ever happily? How to you suppose his son turns out? The fable is provocative in that it lends support to Socrates **and** Thrasymachus. So it can also be read as a challenge to both.

The fact that we can even make sense of the story shows we believe there is such a thing as justice, apart from any advantage the zealous and constant practice of this 'craft' may or may not bring its 'practitioner'. There is such a thing as giving fair judgment, whether it is to your advantage or not. Just as there is such a thing as being a good doctor, or a competent musician, whether or not you get paid for your services. Conceding even this much is a fatal blow to Thrasymachus' theory. If there is such a thing as fair judgment, in the abstract, it is simply false that justice is the advantage of the stronger, as Socrates forces him to concede.

All the same, there is not much comfort for Socrates if the engine will only run on the fuel of egoistic desire for power by any means necessary. And if justice itself is, at best, a by-product. This mix seems explosive, unstable.

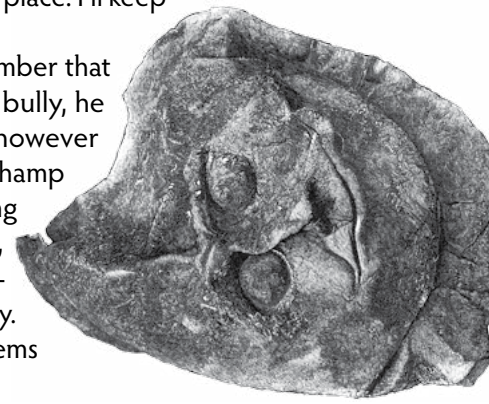
We seem threatened, not with the worst of all worlds, exactly, but perhaps with being stuck in the worse of two possible worlds. It is possible to imagine a harmonious, just order. We **could** live well there. Still, we may not be able to realize the ideal, people being the beasts they are. Can't get there from here, maybe. (We can only visit on utopian holiday, in our minds.)

20

Let me conclude this chapter in a way that may pull all three dialogues in this book together. It is appropriate that Thrasymachus comes last. He is, in a sense, the embodiment of everything Plato hates. He's a standing temptation. Yet Thrasymachus is not so personally attractive. (I don't deny he's fun to watch!)

What does he lack? He's no Romantic. By which I mean: he may be 'mad, bad and dangerous to know,' but he doesn't put that on a business card he hands you, with a Byronic flourish. There no whiff of brimstone coming off him. No Faustian thrill of forbidden knowledge, for which he sold his soul. Thrasymachus isn't Nietzsche, sailing out of sight of moral land, beyond good and evil, seeking new spiritual shores. He isn't one of those fascinating, Hollywood-style psychos, with all the extra twists. He wants to 'stand tall' (338b). He wants **stuff**: money, sex, fast chariots, one presumes. For someone with the vision to penetrate the conventional veil of morality, he isn't all that visionary about values. When push comes to shove, it's pushing and shoving all the way down. He's a greedy bully.

Even the mafia has got family values. Which brings me to another thing Thrasymachus isn't: an apologist for egoism on the grounds that it's a disguised form of family values, or altruism. 'Greed is good,' announces the capitalist. Adam Smith's invisible hand means me, looking out for #1, helps everyone. Practicing egoism is, on this theory, more altruistic than preaching altruism (which never gets results.) Good argument or not, Thrasymachus doesn't bother. Here are some things he might say, except he doesn't care. Destruction stimulates the economy and provides a pleasing spectacle to the gods. When I'm tyrant, there will be good jobs in the palace for people to say I'm 'just'. (You want the youth of today to have good jobs in tomorrow's disinformation economy, don't you, Socrates?) A tyrant with the know-how to seize power knows how to run the place. I'll keep the other harpies away.



No one **wants** to be bad. (Remember that argument from **Meno**?) Your basic bully, he has some self-serving story to tell, however ridiculous, about how he's the true champ of the little guy! Thrasymachus, lacking any such impulse to excuse himself, seems more like a personified person-part than a complete moral personality. Cephalus, on the other hand! **He** seems like a real guy, waiting to die.

21

I've said a lot about Cephalus, I know, but I think there's a tendency not to say enough. Here are two typical enough views of the old man. Basically, he's a hollow shell of conventionality. Crack him; there's no **there** there. Julia Annas writes:

> What is wrong with this view [Cephalus'] … First, it leads to complacency … justice is not perceived as something difficult, which might involve effort, and which you might not be sure you had achieved. Secondly, precisely because justice is not thought of as needing much effort, no need is felt to think about it much, and so people like this are very quickly reduced to silence by Socrates; their beliefs have no intellectual backing. Once complacency is shaken, it leaves a void. And thirdly, that void is all too plausibly filled by skepticism … Once your confidence is shaken that justice is sticking to a few simple rules, there is nothing to put in its place except the skeptical view that justice is nothing but a racket.[19]

Nickolas Pappas puts the same point, even more harshly:

> [Cephalus] has absorbed his society's rules of good behavior to such an extent that he genuinely seems to feel happiest when acting rightly, but without being able to explain why … When we hear him speak of following religious customs as if he were buying insurance, and quote Sophocles, Themistocles, and Pindar rather than think for himself, we yearn for something more substantial. No reader misses Cephalus after he goes off to make his sacrifice; and he would not miss the discussion that follows, since it could only confuse him … In modern parlance, he is a bourgeois philistine.[20]

I don't wholly disagree, but I like to think there's more going on.

Is it really plausible that Cephalus could emigrate from his home city, live as a non-citizen in a complex, sophisticated foreign society for decades, negotiating all the political, cultural and economic difficulties in time of major war, without it occurring to him that 'just do the customary thing' might, in some circumstances, be a less than utterly satisfactory rule for living?

That would be naive. He **can't** be so empty after all these years, can he?

19 Julia Annas, An Introduction to Plato's Republic (Oxford University Press, USA, 1981), p. 21.

20 Nickolas Pappas, Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Plato and the Republic, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2003), p. 31.

22

At the risk of spiraling loose from **Republic** again, let me venture a speculative, extended comparison with Alfred Nobel — of Nobel Prize fame. He invented dynamite, among other, often explosive devices. ('Dynamite' from the Greek for power, but the full, original trademark adds '**safety** powder'. Power plus stability: elusive, beguiling synthetic compound!) Cephalus is a **metic**; that is, a non-citizen in Athens. Nobel, too, was a **metic** in the arms industry. You go abroad to supply weapons to foreigners. (It pays the bills.)

Like Cephalus, whose says his father wasted away much of the family fortune before Cephalus managed to earn it back, Nobel knew what the turning wheel of fortune feels like. His father got rich and went bankrupt. Twice. His nephew would lose an oil fortune after the Russian Revolution and have to sneak into exile, literally in disguise (as Cephalus' son, Lysias, would do after Athenian democracy falls and Polemarchus is put to death.) Like Cephalus, Nobel was scrupulous — to the point of obsession — about debt payment. When asked to write a short autobiography, he listed his greatest virtue as "keeping my nails clean, never being a burden;" his greatest sin, "not worshipping mammon." His biographer writes:

> The writer Robert Musil once declared that some wealthy people experience their fortune as an extension of themselves. Nothing could have been more foreign to Alfred. Each new million contributed not one inch to his mental and spiritual growth. Clichéd though it might sound, what he was seeking could not be bought for money. The letters he wrote late in life bear the imprint of a severely — even clinically — depressed human being. In his solitude he counted how many real friends he had. Every year, their number declined in his calculations. He felt nothing but loneliness was waiting for him at the end of the road.[21]

Socrates notes that Cephalus, too, does not seem to be one of those rich people who regard their wealth as noble extensions of their own persons. He compliments him on this, apparently un-ironically. Nobel said his one request was "not to be buried alive." Important events in his life: "none." He was afraid no would miss him when he went away and, like Cephalus, was subject to uncomfortable glimpses of the afterlife. He didn't much care for the looks of the place and set out to shore up his character by buying as much justice as he could find for sale on the open market.

21 Kenne Fant, **Alfred Nobel: A Biography** (Arcade Publishing, 1993), p. 157.

Cephalus is not sure whether an old man's other-worldly nightmares are due to bodily weakness, but, in Nobel's case, the cause was shoddy journalism. His brother died; a French newspaper wrote an obituary for Alfred, by mistake. He got to read in the paper about the death of the "merchant of death," who spent his life discovering new ways "to mutilate and kill." He had read this sort of thing before and been stung. He was a man of conscience and peace; his inventions had civilian and defensive uses (which was true.) But this time "the spirits of Niflheim" [Norse land of the dead] would not be appeased. He rewrote his will in secret, leaving little to his family. The rest endowed the prizes that bear his name — for Peace, Literature, Physics, Chemistry and Medicine.

Cephalus says he likes philosophy, but doesn't have much to say, does he? What sort of philosophy did Nobel espouse? The Nobel Foundation has a selection of his aphorisms on their official site. You might expect these to be culled with an eye for the cloudy but heavily silver-lined — hope, truth, justice, idealism, solid foundations. You would be **half** right. Here are some:

Hope is nature's veil for hiding truth's nakedness.

Lying is the greatest of all sins.

The truthful man is usually defeated by the liar.

We build upon the sand, and the older we become, the more unstable this foundation becomes.

Justice is to be found only in the imagination.

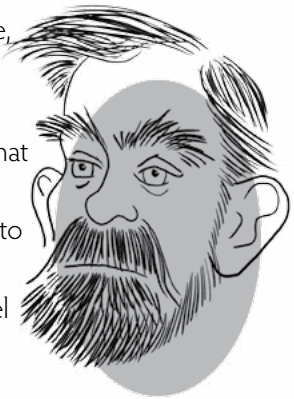
The best excuse for the fallen ones [prostitutes] is that Justice herself is one of them.

It is not sufficient to be worthy of respect in order to be respected.

Self-respect without the respect of others is like a jewel which will not stand the daylight.

Worry is the stomach's worst poison.

Contentment is the only real wealth.[22]

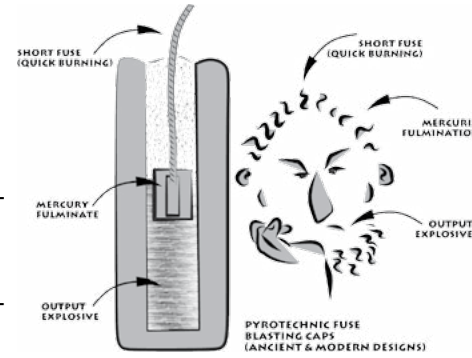


It's pessimistic, verging on nihilistic, but tempered with business-like nods to the importance of effective public relations and not worrying too much. Why would a man who believes this sort of thing think it worthwhile to endow an intellectually idealistic foundation? There is a notorious clause in Nobel's will. The prize for literature goes to "an outstanding work of literature in an

22 http://www.nobelprize.org/alfred_nobel/biographical/aphorisms.html

ideal direction." You can imagine what headache that has caused. (What a phrase to be the hinge of a legal instrument. Yet what other phrase could express the desire that the money be spent to figure out what the ideal thing **is**, ideally?) Nobel seems to have been aware of the tensions: "I am a misanthrope and yet utterly benevolent, have more than one screw loose yet am a super-idealist who digests philosophy more efficiently than food"(2). In public what people got out of him was: "pay me the money you owe when it is due, sir." But rattling around, under cover of this philistine exterior we find not just an ambitious Polemarchus, cynical Meno, corrosively skeptical Thrasymachus, and prudent Carnegie, but an implausibly idealistic Plato. (If you read his biography there is plenty about religion, too.) It is speculation to lay Alfred Nobel's temperament as a template over Cephalus, just because he too is a rich old arms manufacturer who says philosophy is the only appetite he has left; who has bad dreams, emphasizes the values of truth, is punctilious about debts, and seems to think the best use for money is to buy justice. But I think it is important not to assume outwardly conventional morality is indicative of psychological dullness or intellectual simplicity. There are obvious reasons why Cephalus **looks** simple. He wants to win friends and avoid worries. The Athenians disapprove of resident foreigners expressing loud opinions about politics. He is not a citizen — not a partaker in **politeia**. If speaking the truth, by his lights, might make Athenians dislike him, he is likely to keep his thoughts to himself. That doesn't mean he has none.

23



Alfred Nobel is exceptional on account of what he did with his money. But thoughts like his — alternating, violent flashes of cynicism and idealism, padded out with prudence and common sense — are perfectly normal. That the day-tight compartments of conventional morality contain such a volatile mix is remarkable, noteworthy.

It doesn't seem **safe**. And when you put so many volatile day-tight compartments together ...? I quoted C. Wright Mills, near the end of Chapter 7, emphasizing Plato's 'sociological imagination'. Let me quote Mills at the end again. He is, it seems to me, a fine foil for Plato because he sees it will never do, while seeing as well why something of the sort might have to do.

Our problem, he begins, begins in private life, and that, in a sense **is** the problem:

> Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct: what ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live. [23]

He moves on to consider conflict, how the self-interested, merely personal angles on conflict are real, but insufficient:

> Consider war. The personal problem of war, when it occurs, may be how to survive it or how to die in it with honour: how to make money out of it; how to climb into the higher safety of the military apparatus … But the structural issues of war have to do with its causes; with what types of men it throws up into command; with its effects upon economic and political, family and religious institutions, with the unorganized irresponsibility of a world of nation-states. (16)

And the city — the **polis**. "Consider the metropolis — the horrible, beautiful, ugly, magnificent sprawl of the great city." (Very like a soul, is the city.) Rich people may deal with the problem by walling themselves off, tending private gardens and conducting private rituals.

> But all this, however splendid, does not solve the public issues that the structural fact of the city poses. What should be done with this wonderful monstrosity? Break it all up into scattered units, combining residence and work? Refurbish it as it stands? Or, after evacuation, dynamite it and build new cities according to new plans in new places? What should those plans be? And who is to decide and to accomplish whatever choice is made? (16)

You see, I just wanted to get that last charge of dynamite laid, for better and worse, potentially.

At least I **hope** you see.

23 C. Wright Mills, **The Sociological Imagination** (Oxford University Press, USA, 2000), p. 1.