

Republic Book 1

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[These *Republic* lectures owe much of their lucidity, but none of their obscurity, to John Sallis, *Being and Logos: The Way of Platonic Dialogue*.]

The *Republic* is a fantastic work of art. As a dialogue, not just a treatise, it has **three interlocking levels**, of *mythos* [image], *ergon* [action], and *logos* [rational discussion]. On the level of *mythos*, or image, Plato both invokes traditional myths like Hades and his own images, like that of the cave. On the level of *ergon*, or action, Socrates will perform just the sort of taming of a spirited nature (Glaucou) as the education of the guardians requires. Finally, on the level of *logos*, or rational discussion, Plato will lay out several very complicated conceptual schemes. What's fascinating is that sometimes all three levels come together, as in the tour de force of the Cave, which echoes the myths of descent and ascent from Hades, performs a pedagogical action on Glaucou, and articulates the conceptual scheme of the relation of forms and things.

Starting with Book I, then, Socrates is telling the story, after the fact, of his night in the **Piraeus**, the port of Athens. To upper-crusties like Plato, going down to the Piraeus was **slumming**. Not only do adventurers, explorers, pirates, sailors, foreigners, decadents, democrats all hang out on the docks, it was the demands of the lower citizen class, essential to naval power as rowers that drove Athens to empire, democracy, and then defeat. Cultural mix, flowing waters, muck and mire, rampant democracy: just the sort of thing that needs to be cleaned up, and Socrates is just the guy to do it! So in one sense, Socrates is the philosophical gunslinger, armed with "irony and eyebrows," and he says implicitly to Thrasymachus, his most fierce opponent in Bk 1, "this town's not big enough for the both of us!" These are levels of image and action. On the level of *logos*, Socrates makes a tour of contemporary definitions of justice, and shows the problems with each.

1) Cephalus ("Mr. Head"), the old rich man, was historically a "metic," a resident alien w/ economic dealings but no political rights. He thinks justice is meeting obligations: telling the truth and paying your debts, in short, obeying the law and keeping your nose clean, so that your economic activities are not hindered. This is a cramped and private view of justice correlated with his metic position: economics, not politics. Glad to be rid of his bodily impulses, interested only in performing the rituals needed to assure his after-life reward, "Mr. Head" forgets passion and madness, so he's easily trapped by Socrates' counter-example of giving a sword back to a friend temporarily mad with anger.

2) Polemarchus ("Mr. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces" or more simply, "Mr. War Ruler"), the aggressive young man, was historically a leader of resistance against the Thirty, and ended up being killed by them. He follows the poet Simonides in thinking justice is doing good to friends and harm to enemies. Here we see a mini-Socratic dialogue, as Socrates gets Polemarchus to see the conflict hidden in his poetically-inspired opinions. (Conflict of phil and poetry.) Socrates gets him to admit that this sort of active justice seems only good in guarding things, not using them. This seems innocent enough, but now comes the reversal: the just man would have to be a good thief too then, for guarding something lets you know how to steal it too! In the classic Socratic way, Polemarchus must now admit "I don't any longer know what I mean, but I still believe what I believe" (334b)! After admitting that errors of judgment can occur, Polemarchus amends his theory so that harming bad people is okay. But this just makes them worse, Socrates shows, so the practice of justice is now in the uncomfortable position of making some people more unjust. (Here the modern problems of criminal justice: rehab v. revenge v. deterrance.) Having tied Polemarchus in knots Socrates is about to move on to lead him to a better conception of justice when ...

3) Thrasymachus ("Mr. Rash Fighter" or "Mr. Tough Guy"), the brutal sophist, suddenly breaks in. Although the exchange takes several twists and turns the basic conflict is as follows: Thrasymachus argues from the perspective of **non-shareable goods** or society as a zero-sum game (the more one person has, the less everyone else has), while Socrates argues from the perspective of a **common good** for the city, so that the better the city

is (the better the ruler), the better everyone will be, not just the ruler. We must also note a difference in the object of analysis: Thrasymachus examines the **actual behavior** of rulers w/ regard to physical necessities and luxuries, while Socrates examines how rulers **should** behave in order to produce justice. In other words, Thrasymachus describes **real** governments, while Socrates prescribes **ideal** governments. The real difference is that Socrates shows how physical necessities should be treated as mere **pre-requisites** for a communal good life, while Thrasymachus shows that most rulers squeeze the production and distribution of necessities to produce **luxuries** for themselves. The question is the **direction of desire**: across material goods to a common good or directly solely to material goods and (private) luxurious sensations.

Thrasymachus	Socrates
descriptive	prescriptive
real	ideal
private goods	common good
"zero sum game"	"win win"
production for luxury	production for necessity
instrumental reason (means/end)	prudential reason (evaluation of ends)
what is useful to obtain luxuries?	what is the Good of the whole?
how?	why?

The stages in the Socrates/Thrasymachus encounter.

- 1) Th: justice = advantage of stronger; S: possibility of errors by rulers.
- 2) Th answers that insofar as they are rulers, they don't make mistakes: when they screw up, they're not being rulers, but blunderers; Soc answers by showing that the true craftsman works to the advantage of the object of his craft, while it is only as a money-maker that he looks to himself. (conflict at heart of "professional ethics.")
- 3) Th answers that certainly the shepherd works for his own advantage, not that of the sheep! Soc insists on separating craft from the money-making that accompanies it.
- 4) Finally, Th listens as Soc elaborates a provisional statement of justice as wisdom and virtue, that is, orientation to the Good. As unity, the proper fit of part/whole enabling systematic functioning, orientation to the Good, or justice, is the possibility of communal action, even in the case of the band of thieves.

Book 1 previews the rest of the *Republic*. In terms of *mythos*, Socrates has descended into Hades to do battle for justice. In terms of *logos*, he has argued the proper conception of justice. In terms of *ergon*, Socrates has rescued Glaucon from Thrasymachus.

Mythos: Socrates has weathered the storm and defeated Cerebus (Thrasymachus). He can now begin his ascent with Glaucon in tow.

Logos: Cephalus and Polemarchus present behaviors appropriate to their class: meeting obligations for the artisans; helping friends and harming enemies for the warriors. Their problem comes when they present these partial views as justice itself. Justice must not be class-specific, but directed to the common good of the city. Thrasymachus sees that the ruler's craft (politics, not economics or warfare) must be the focus, but doesn't distinguish money-making from the other crafts, and so puts the city at war with itself, rich against poor, in pursuit of non-shareable goods.. Only the philosopher, the one who knows the Good, can direct a hierarchy of

crafts in city to avoid conflict between money-making, war, and common good, in other words, can separate and put private economics or dangerous war in the service of common good.

Ergon: Socrates has seen Cephalus drop out (private business not interested in politics), Polemarchus be converted (his honor/war-eroticized position taken by Glaucon and Adeimantus), and Thrasymachus (luxury-eros driven politics) sullenly co-operate. Can he maintain his hold on the warriors (Glaucon) and convert the politicians (Thrasymachus)?