

## Lecture 4.2 Plato's *Republic*: Soul and State

I want to reserve discussion of the *Republic* books VI and VII (pp 269-281 in my text) until next Tuesday. I apologize for the vagueness of the 'preliminary syllabus' on these matters; because of my failure to have updated that syllabus, you may very well have not got to p. 268 in our text by this morning, and if not, it's my fault as much as yours. I would nonetheless like to talk about Plato's project in this text as if you have.

I gave you a mythic account of why he might have wanted to suggest an ideal society last Tuesday: a suggestion that he might have wondered in what kind of a polis, what society, his beloved Socrates might have escaped death (if not, perhaps, a fate worse than death). In our reading today, we see what that ideal society, that utopia, looks like.

Interpretations:

*Karl Popper's* suggestion: A famous philosopher of science of the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century took Plato at his word, and shortly after WWII argued that he was a straight-out proto-fascist. *Leo Strauss* and *Alan Bloom* are impressed by his elitism, among other things.

Another possibility: maybe it's an extended *reductio ad absurdum*, designed to suggest that this society, as the only one that wouldn't kill Socrates, might just come at too high a price; that however we may resent some of the results, a less perfect society may in the long run be more satisfactory than one which had as its main goal saving Our Hero.

*Randall's suggestion*

There is another possible explanation of what he is up to in this book, a suggestion pursued at great length by John Herman Randall Jr., professor of ancient philosophy at Columbia University in the first half of last century. Randall claimed that Plato did not give a fig for the construction of a *polis*; that his main concern was to sketch on this larger canvas a model for the nature, and proper education, proper understanding, of the individual soul. So, he would claim, the purpose is to say "as the guardians are to the state, so the reason is to the life of the individual; as temperance is a condition of stability in the society, so is it in the livability of a life; as justice in an ideal city would consist in each member-class of society minding his own business and doing it well, so must the life of a man ..." (picture of Plato puppet-master, laughing)

Now this thesis has something to be said for it. Consider 368e (p225 in my text): Socrates is asked to inquire into the "real nature of justice and injustice, and the truth about their respective advantages." His response: Well—we think of justice as a social virtue, as well as an individual one; "a quality that may exist in a whole community as well as in an individual" – and the community is the larger of the two. So we should begin by inquiring what justice means in a state, and then analogize to the soul.

Randall is saying that he's talking about the state to make clear a thesis about the nature of the soul and the proper relation between its parts; and it's OK if the state itself lacks a little bit of charm, because that wasn't what he was interested in anyway. (It does seem a lot of work to go through, though; and as Randall himself noticed, the city he creates for one part of his analogy is less charming than some other pictures he draws of the soul, which might make the same argument.)

I think we can go a little way toward Randall's view and connect what he's doing here with what I have been arguing all quarter is Plato's general method: Imagine him making one of his famous disclaimers: "I don't know if any sensible man would agree with the whole of what I have said; but I do think we will be better off if..." –and then fill in the blank with your favorite take-away message from the *Republic*.

And the *Republic* clearly is, among other things, an analogical project: comparing two things that are initially different, and by identifications or analogies between these things of different sorts, to draw conclusions about one or the other, or both, of them.

As reason to the soul, so the wisdom of the guardians to the state;

As courage to the soul, so the temperament of the auxiliaries to the state;

As temperance (self restraint) is valuable to the soul, so is harmonious agreement about who or what should rule to the state;

Justice consists of each faction or part doing its proper job and not meddling in the proper task of other factions or parts—in both the soul and the state.

A quick summary of the content of the various books:

The major characters: Thrasymachus, a noted sophist and teacher of oratory; Glaucon and Adeimantus are supposed to be Plato's brothers.

The setting: Socrates asks an older friend, Cephalus, what he has to convey to younger people about old age. Cephalus replies that it is a time when one reviews one's life, trying to decide if you have been just or unjust, and what rewards or punishment you face in the afterlife as a result. This introduces the topic of the dialogue.

**Book I** is generally classed as an 'early' dialogue: it consists of a typically elenctic exchange between Socrates and several interlocutors in which he refutes the suggestions offered by them for definitions of justice (which was, by the way, the subtitle of the book in ancient texts).

The dialogue actually begins at 327, and Book I features as the main interlocutor Thrasymachus, who has become proverbial because of his passion for power. He provides the definitions, and some lovely oratory around them.

First definition: speaking the truth and paying one's debts.

But: you wouldn't give his own weapons back to a madman, or speak the truth to him (eg if he asked you whether a man he intended to kill was harbored in your house...)

Second definition: give to each what is owed to him; benefit to friends and harm to enemies.

But: harming people makes them bad; so can a just man justly make people worse? Isn't that rather the job of an unjust man, to harm others?

At this point, (39b) Thrasymachus can no longer restrain himself, and that is where our excerpt begins. Thrasymachus offers the

Third definition: justice is the advantage of the stronger.

Or: justice is what the stronger believes to be to his advantage?

No: insofar as he is a ruler, the stronger never mistakes his advantage.

Socrates pursues this definition in a rather round-about way.

(1) First, he assumes the ruler is exercising a craft, and explores what it is to have one:

Is what we mean by the captain of a ship the guy who sails it—or the one who knows how to sail it? (expertise = a form of knowledge)

In exercising his craft (sailing, or doctoring, or shepherding) is he seeking his own advantage, or the advantage of the subjects of his craft? (how we recognize expertise: the excellent doctor heals, the excellent shepherd has healthy happy sheep...)

(2) Second, he falls into a really interesting little digression..

One way of reading this passage is to say that Thrasymachus makes his definition of justice analytic, trivially true. He has said that: justice is all and only what the ruler says; to be just is to do what the ruler tells his people they have to do.

(Recall here the Euthyphro discussion. At some point Euthyphro

could have made his definition of piety like this: he could have said "what is pious is all and only what the gods say they love; and it has no characteristic other than their claiming it as beloved." This is like saying "a bachelor is a married man;" what it means to be a bachelor IS to be a married man, and there is nothing left over. There's nothing else to argue about.

He then says: and since just citizens have to do what he says, he can make out like a bandit. What you, Socrates, call injustice, according to some kind of stupid principles about what a man, even a ruler, should and should not do, are irrelevant if you accept my definition; and what [you and convention] falsely call injustice, is justice by my definition, and greatly to the advantage of the guy with the most power, the guy who can make himself the ruler and force his will on his subjects.

Socrates can (and does) point out that this view contradicts T's claim about what the nature of a craft, including the craft of ruling (see 1, where crafts are defined by the advantage to the subjects on which the craft is exercised—the patient, the sheep); but T is not particularly moved by inconsistencies.

So S takes another tack. If ruling is an art/craft, it must be like other crafts. And for all of them, it's not the exercise of the craft that is productive of advantage to the craftsman: it is the wages (or respect and honor—and no doubt, satisfaction) that he gets from doing it well. You pay good doctors more.

The craft of ruling is different, though—GOOD men, who would make the best rulers, wouldn't do it for money, or even for honor, for they are modest types, I guess. Their only recompense is avoiding the punishment that comes from being ruled by lesser men.

[the mention of punishment here foreshadows the claim in bk VII (519 d-520a) that the philosopher can be compelled to return to the cave]

Thrasymachus then pretty much admits he's transvalued values, and that he will agree that what he has defined as justice, since it has the consequences he admits it has, is indeed what S and everyone else would call injustice; but he continues to claim that, on the basis of the good consequences it produces for the agent, it is better, and the unjust man is "superior in character and intelligence" to the just man (349e).

Socrates turns that inside out in a passage that is not included in our text.

After the elapses, Socrates begins making the analogy between state and soul more and more explicit. In 352 e, as part of an argument to prove that the life of justice is the better and happier life, Socrates defines a thing's function as "the work for which that thing is the only instrument, or the best one" -- the thing it alone can do, or what it can do better than anything else can do it. Examples: eye sees, ear hears.... And the soul has various functions as well, and 'a specific excellence or virtue' (354d) --and 'we agree' that is justice.

But what IS justice?

After this point in the dialogue, Socrates starts suggesting, instead of just asking.

**Book II:** If we want to figure out what justice is, instead of starting in the soul, we should start in the state, which is a larger canvas; perhaps it will be more visible and easier to understand there. So: let us build an imaginary state, and see in it where to find justice.

Build up from basic needs, and how to provide them, to more sophisticated ones; and as we go, the state gets larger.

Each group we add to our state has a specific role in it: farmers, builders, weavers, other craftsmen, eventually herdsmen (for meat is a luxury, but we might want it anyway); traders, merchants, shopkeepers; and eventually, artists, poets, actors, jewelers. Professionals —certainly physicians, but also practitioners of the art of war. And the state will function best if everyone does what they do best, most naturally, what they are fitted for—and doesn't meddle in jobs for which they are not fitted.

There is one group to which we must pay special attention, as to how they are educated, and how they should live: the guardians. They should be swift, and strong, spirited and philosophic. (376c)

How should they be educated? (see book V)

**Book III:** the education of the guardians sounds like your worst nightmare combination of basic training plus SATs. The object is to select those who are completely devoted to the welfare of those they rule (cf. the definition of statesmanship as a craft in bk I).

By this time several things are clear.

This is a class society.

The classes are hierarchically ordered: the guardians on top, then the auxiliaries, then the tradesmen and professionals, then the workers and the peasants.

The inegalitarian class structure is maintained in several ways.

--the Noble Lie: you tell them that all human beings are NOT created equal; that your place in society is determined by your metal (gold v silver v bronze v lead...) and the guardians are tasked with peeking into the cradles of the society and determining what class the children will be in, how they will be educated and trained. (Like tracking in schools)

--also, it is maintained by a rather incongruous system of rewards, which would drive Thrasymachus crazy, if he were still around to listen: the best, the highest class, the guardians, have the least of what most people think of as goods. There is a rather neat inversion, really, between the traditional understanding of what "the best" need or get, and what they get in Plato's *Republic*: instead of having the most of comfort, wealth, leisure and luxury, The Best are distinguished by their poverty, the intensity of their labors and hardships, their absence of property, their asceticism. (416d-e, p. 233 in my book )

--there is a third way of maintaining order in the state: although it is not in our passages, there is a strong suggestion elsewhere that the auxiliaries, the sword of the guardians, not only defend the city, facing outward toward all enemies; they may have some inward-facing functions as well. They peek in cradles to determine the proper class of the children, for instance; and are probably prepared to carry them off by force, if necessary...

In **Book IV** we return to the question of justice: where in the state is it to be found (on the assumption that if we can find it in the state, we will also be able to find it in the soul.)

The state is wise, brave, temperate and just.

Its wisdom resides in, is the prerogative of, the guardians, who rule the state in the best possible way in its internal and external relations.

Its bravery/courage lies in the selection and training of its fighting men (the auxiliaries).

Temperance/self-mastery is found where the better part rules the worse. (431b) It is a kind of harmony, and extends throughout the state, in the form of agreement about who should rule, and who should be ruled.

Justice (433a) is present when everyone performs the one function in the community for which his nature best suits him—minding his own business, and not meddling in things for which he is not suited. Do your proper work without interfering with others.

AND: as it is with the state, so it is with our soul (435, p. 239 in my text): accordingly, if we are to be justified in attributing the same virtues to the individual, we will find that the soul contains three elements, structured as they are in the state.

Nature of the soul: three parts. With one, we gain knowledge; with another, feel anger; with a third desire the pleasures of food, sex, etc.—analogous to the guardians, the auxiliaries, and everyone else.

Justice in the soul: The just man does not allow the several elements in his soul to usurp one another's function; he sets his house in order by self-mastery and discipline (=temperance). (443d)

**Book V** goes into great detail about how the guardians, our golden rulers, should live and be educated.

Plato does argue that the class society should not be sexist: women can serve in the military and pursue any craft, trade or profession for which they are suited—a rather revolutionary recommendation.

The lives of the guardians are proto-communistic: they have all things in common, including their women; they do not have property, but share everything; the children are children of the class, not of individual parents.

On p. 255 Plato gently suggests that the class of guardians should be encouraged to spread their genes around and produce as many children among themselves as they can, although being prepared to have some of them kicked out into other classes, depending upon their talents. (So it is not a hereditary class system, but to some extent a meritocratic one.) [I suspect the term 'wife' in these pages is a mis-translation.]

On p. 262 Plato discusses what constitutes honorable conduct of war.

So: now we have figured out what the ideal state looks like. Now all we have to do is to figure out how to bring it into existence! But wait—that is not necessary! For Socrates says (473, p. 264) -- a good state is none the worse for not being possible.

The "third wave": (473d) There is one small change, which might make it possible to actually found such a state: if philosophers were to become kings. [Q]

Book V closes with a little argument from Forms, and with a discussion of what looks like a faculty-psychology associated with the distinction between belief and knowledge. (265-9)