

**Western Heritage in a Global Context**  
*Plato's Republic Books I, II*  
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**Section A: Intellectual Background**

Given our readings of the *Odyssey* and *Antigone* for this course, it may be fruitful to place the central character of the *Republic*, Socrates (470-399 B.C.E), in the heroic tradition. Plato (428-348 B.C.E.) creates the philosophic hero and contrasts him with the epic and tragic heroes of the poets. The values of the epic hero are primarily competitive because the success or failure of his characteristic activities is of paramount importance. His intentions are insignificant in estimating his importance; what matters are the physical and mental traits that lead to the epic hero's success. However, the philosophic hero shares with his tragic counterpart those values necessary to cooperation within civilized society where intentions do matter.<sup>1</sup> As a result, Plato emphasizes inner states such as reason and the harmony of the emotions when characterizing Socrates and the virtues. He redefines virtues such as justice and courage as inward qualities of the *psyche* that the philosopher spends his life cultivating.

Plato opposes philosophy to tragedy and comedy in light of the distinction between reason and emotion. The former is the result of examination while the latter are often divinely or emotionally inspired. Socrates' privileging of the philosophic life over the poetic life actually leads to his demise. Traditional education involved daily association between adolescents and their elders. Homer, Hesiod and the dramatic poets were used for the purpose of explaining the virtues of an Athenian citizen. Socrates proposes that education be professionalized; its context no longer set by poetic tradition and practice but by critical examination of ideas.

Socrates' influence leads to Plato's establishing the Academy, but the specific form that professional education takes there has its antecedents not only in Socratic teaching, but also in that of Pythagoras and the Sophists. What follows is a basic outline of these two schools of thought:

*Pythagoras (571-496 B.C.E.)*

Pythagoras established the first known philosophical school in the ancient world. He considered philosophy not just a theoretical enterprise but also *a way of life* that should be in harmony with the larger harmony of nature. Pythagoras is the first to refer to the universe as *kosmos* (conveying beauty, harmony and order).

*Transmigration of souls*

The Pythagoreans believed that the body is a prison house of the soul. At death we leave the body and are reincarnated. The premise here is that of the kinship of all beings and the need to ascend by means of purification and leading an ethical life.

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<sup>1</sup> See Arthur W.H. Adkins' *Merit and Responsibility*

### *The Panegyric Analogy*

Pythagoras is said to have coined the term “philosopher” (lover of wisdom) in response to Leon, the tyrant of Phlius. When asked by his host in what particular ‘art’ or skill he excelled, Pythagoras replied that he was a ‘philosopher’ and, as a result, did not possess any particular practical skill. Philosophy involves inquiring into the nature of things and because we are rational by nature, it is the highest of all pursuits.

### *Sophists (Protagoras, Gorgias, Thrasymachus)*

- ~traveling teachers
- ~taught rhetoric and oratory
- ~charged a fee
- ~preached conventionalism
- ~were skeptical of the possibility of knowledge
- ~were, like their predecessors, generally skeptical of mythical explanations and sought to explain worldly occurrences by appealing to natural phenomena
- ~shifted the focus of philosophy from metaphysics and physics to ethics and politics, i.e. from natural phenomena to human affairs

### **Section B: Major Themes of the Republic**

The need to combine the practical life with the theoretical life is the central theme of the *Republic*. Plato’s youth was spent under the shadow of the Peloponnesian War. The death of Pericles at the beginning of the war had marked the moment when men of action and men of thought began to take different paths. Pericles was the last philosophic statesman. Under the stress of war, men of thought, like Thucydides and Euripides, went into exile, voluntary or enforced. The task of winning the war was left to businessmen like Cleon, or ambitious egoists like Alcibiades. To Plato, this drifting apart of men of thought and men of action resulted in Athens’ loss of the war and eventual decline. It allowed three powerful motives: ambition, fear and greed to triumph over reason and humanity. As a result, Plato carried on the traditions of Socrates and the Sophists where philosophy was not the study of nature or logic or metaphysics, but the pursuit of wisdom, and to achieve wisdom meant achieving human perfection, well-being, happiness. Wisdom is the embodiment of the cultivation of excellence in practice and theory.<sup>2</sup>

Keeping the political context in mind can help students see how much of the *Republic* is actually a lament for the loss of the golden age of Athens and Plato’s critique of the political climate. We commonly consider this dialogue an exposition of the ideal state but only about one third of the text actually focuses on that topic<sup>3</sup>. The dialogues were used as teaching tools within the Academy whose primary function was to inspire critical thought. This is important when considering the *Republic* because even though Plato is proposing a model for an ideal political institution, it is by no means absolute. The *Republic (Politeia)* is a model subject to the process of revision. By using dialectical examination in the pursuit of better constitutions, Plato believes we may end up with political organizations whose primary goal is the flourishing of the citizenry.

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<sup>2</sup> See Francis MacDonald Cornford’s Introduction to *The Republic of Plato*.

<sup>3</sup> See Erick Havelock’s *A Preface to Plato*.

## Section C: Analysis of the Arguments in Republic I, II

### *Cephalus: Justice as Honesty*

Cephalus embodies the wisdom of a long life honorably spent in business. He is well to do, but values money as a means to that peace of mind that comes of honesty and the ability to render to gods and men their due. This is what he understands by 'right' conduct or justice: "it can do much to save us from going to that other world in fear of having cheated or deceived anyone even unintentionally or of being in debt to some god for sacrifice or to some man for money" (I.331).

Socrates objects to defining justice merely in terms of being honest and paying debts, stating "take this matter of doing right: can we say that it really consists in nothing more nor less than telling the truth and paying back anything we may have received?" In response, he uses the example of giving back a weapon borrowed from a man whom has now gone mad. Polemarchus breaks in referring to Simonides (lyric and elegiac poet) and Homer. Cephalus allows him to inherit the argument and takes leave in order to see to a sacrifice (I.331).

### *Polemarchus: Just Desert*

Polemarchus defines justice in line with the poets as rendering not what is merely due but what is truly due, i.e. as benefiting one's friends and harming one's enemies. Socrates reduces this conception of justice to absurdity by making his usual distinction between appearance and reality. That is, does one render benefit and harm to those whom he *believes* to be friends and enemies or to those whom *actually are* his friends and enemies? He concludes his objection to the common conception of justice by considering the notion of harming enemies and argues that returning harm with harm merely promotes more injustice.

### *Thrasymachus: Justice as the Interest of the Stronger*

Thrasymachus is fuming and attempting to break in throughout the conversation but his neighbors restrained him, wanting to hear the argument to the end. He finally breaks in like a wild beast criticizing Socrates for always taking the easy way out by never answering questions but simply asking them. Thrasymachus proceeds to define justice as equivalent to the advantage of those in power. There is no higher ideal of righteousness – justice is relative. Many sophists and statesmen held this conception of justice.

After pointing out to Thrasymachus that he is not arguing on *generally accepted principles*, Socrates considers Thrasymachus' position on three separate grounds:

1. the unjust is superior to the just in character and intelligence
2. injustice is a form of strength
3. injustice brings happiness

In reference to the first argument, Socrates argues that the just man will not attempt to outdo another just man, only those who are unjust. It appears we only attempt to outdo those whom are not like ourselves. However, the unjust man attempts to outdo both the just and the unjust. We can see that this is neither clever nor good when we consider the other arts. Consider musicianship. One who is musical is obviously clever and good. He

does not attempt to outdo others who are the same, just those who are not musical. Musicality, like proper tuning, is a standard for which the nonmusical strives. Socrates is alluding here to his general method of inquiry. A proper definition of justice is in terms of its true essence or nature. That nature must be universal and serve as a standard that we can use to judge whether our acts and our character are just or unjust.

Concerning the second argument, Socrates refers to honor amongst thieves arguing that even the unjust need justice for the sake of unity and strength. Justice provides strength in numbers by working towards a common purpose and provides individual strength by promoting concord.

Socrates finally argues that justice, not injustice, brings happiness. He defines happiness (*eudaimonia*) in the context of the proper functioning of the human *psyche*. The primary function of the human *psyche* is living, but it also deliberates, takes charge and exercises control (I.352-353). When a thing performs its function well it is said to be excellent or virtuous. Therefore, Socrates argues, if justice involves deliberating, taking charge and exercising control with excellence, then justice is the virtue of the soul. Happiness then, amounts to living honorably and justly.

#### *Plato's Brothers: the Central Argument of the Republic*

Glaucon and Adeimantus will not let Socrates escape Thrasymachus' grasp so easily by playing the ironical critic and not providing a constructive argument. With the belief that just life can be defined, they challenge Socrates to do so with the argument that justice is a social convention, imposed from without, and practiced unwillingly. In what is the best rendering of the challenge to the ethical life in the history of Western ideas, Glaucon revives Thrasymachus' theory that injustice is more advantageous than justice by considering the nature and origin of justice (state of nature theory), why justice is always practiced with reluctance (Ring of Gyges), and how it is that this reluctance is reasonable because the unjust life is actually the better life (comparison of extreme lives).

Harkening back to Glaucon's distinguishing three classes of goods, i.e.:

1. Goods performed for their own sake, not for the sake of their result
2. Goods performed for their own sake and for the sake of their result
3. Goods performed solely for the sake of their consequences

Adeimantus argues that most people, including the poets, consider justice a good of the third class, unwillingly doing what is right for the sake of its beneficial consequences. The challenge that Socrates must face for the rest of the *Republic* is to define justice in terms of the second class of goods: as beneficial in itself and for the sake of its results.

#### **Section D: Topics for Discussion**

1. Why establish Socrates in the heroic tradition? Is the life of critical examination an exemplary one? Is critical examination only appropriate in the classroom? What would it mean to make examination a life long habit?
2. What is Socrates' method of inquiry in the *Republic*? Does he merely cast aside the arguments of the interlocutors or does he include some of their ideas in his concept of justice?

3. Compare Socrates encounter with Thrasymachus with Haemon's encounter with Creon? Is there a relation between tyranny of the mind and political tyranny? How does tyranny affect both the individual and the state?
4. The *Republic* is a model for an ideal state, but is it absolute? Are you uncomfortable with certain aspects of Plato's model? Does it inspire you to provide a better model and compare our own political organizations to it?