

Republic – book 1

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- In *The Republic*, Plato, speaking through his teacher Socrates, sets out to answer two questions. What is justice? Why should we be just?
 - Book I sets up these challenges. The interlocutors engage in a Socratic dialogue similar to that found in Plato's earlier works.
 - While among a group of both friends and enemies, Socrates poses the question, "What is justice?"
 - He proceeds to refute every suggestion offered, showing how each harbors hidden contradictions.
 - Yet he offers no definition of his own, and the discussion ends in a deadlock, where no further progress is possible and the interlocutors feel less sure of their beliefs than they had at the start of the conversation.
 - Nine more books follow, and Socrates develops a rich and complex theory of justice.

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- When Book I opens, Socrates is returning home from a religious festival with his young friend Glaucon, one of Plato's brothers.
 - On the road, the three travelers are waylaid by Adeimantus, another brother of Plato, and the young nobleman Polemarchus, who convinces them to take a detour to his house.
 - There they join Polemarchus's aging father Cephalus, and others. Socrates and the elderly man begin a discussion on the merits of old age. This discussion quickly turns to the subject of justice.

Cephalus and Socrates

- Cephalus, a rich, well-respected elder of the city, and host to the group, is the first to offer a definition of justice. Cephalus acts as spokesman for the Greek tradition. His definition of justice is an attempt to articulate the basic Hesiodic conception: that justice means living up to your legal obligations and being honest. Socrates defeats this formulation with a counterexample: returning a weapon to a madman. You owe the madman his weapon in some sense if it belongs to him legally, and yet this would be an unjust act, since it would jeopardize the lives of others. So it cannot be the case that justice is nothing more than honoring legal obligations and being honest.

Polemarchus and Socrates

- At this point, Cephalus excuses himself to see to some sacrifices, and his son Polemarchus takes over the argument for him.
- He lays out a new definition of justice: justice means that you owe friends help, and you owe enemies harm.
- Though this definition may seem different from that suggested by Cephalus, they are closely related.
- They share the underlying imperative of rendering to each what is due and of giving to each what is appropriate.
- This imperative will also be the foundation of Socrates's principle of justice in the later books.
- Like his father's view, Polemarchus's take on justice represents a popular strand of thought—the attitude of the ambitious young politician—whereas Cephalus's definition represented the attitude of the established, old businessman.

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- Socrates reveals many inconsistencies in this view.
 - He points out that, because our judgment concerning friends and enemies is fallible, this credo will lead us to harm the good and help the bad.
 - We are not always friends with the most virtuous individuals, nor are our enemies always the scum of society.
 - Socrates points out that there is some incoherence in the idea of harming people through justice.

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- It serves as an introduction to Thrasymachus, the Sophist.
 - We have seen, through Socrates's cross-examination of Polemarchus and Cephalus, that the popular thinking on justice is unsatisfactory.
 - Thrasymachus shows us the nefarious result of this confusion: the Sophist's campaign to do away with justice, and all moral standards, entirely.
 - Thrasymachus, breaking angrily into the discussion, declares that he has a better definition of justice to offer. Justice, he says, is nothing more than the advantage of the stronger.
 - Though Thrasymachus claims that this is his definition, it is not really meant as a definition of justice as much as it is a delegitimization of justice.
 - He is saying that it does not pay to be just. Just behavior works to the advantage of other people, not to the person who behaves justly.
 - Thrasymachus assumes here that justice is the unnatural restraint on our natural desire to have more. Justice is a convention imposed on us, and it does not benefit us to adhere to it. The rational thing to do is ignore justice entirely.

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- The burden of the discussion has now shifted.
 - At first, the only challenge was to define justice; now justice must be defined and proven to be worthwhile.
 - Socrates has three arguments to employ against Thrasymachus' claim.
 - First, he makes Thrasymachus admit that the view he is advancing promotes injustice as a virtue. In this view, life is seen as a continual competition to get more (more money, more power, etc.), and whoever is most successful in the competition has the greatest virtue.
 - Socrates then launches into a long and complex chain of reasoning which leads him to conclude that injustice cannot be a virtue because it is contrary to wisdom, which is a virtue.
 - Injustice is contrary to wisdom because the wise man, the man who is skilled in some art, never seeks to beat out those who possess the same art. The mathematician, for instance, is not in competition with other mathematicians.

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- Socrates then moves on to a new argument.
 - Understanding justice now as the adherence to certain rules which enable a group to act in common, Socrates points out that in order to reach any of the goals Thrasymachus earlier praised as desirable one needs to be at least moderately just in the sense of adhering to this set of rules.
 - Finally, he argues that since it was agreed that justice is a virtue of the soul, and virtue of the soul means health of the soul, justice is desirable because it means health of the soul.

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- Thus ends Book I. Socrates and his interlocutors are no closer to a consensus on the definition of justice, and Socrates has only advanced weak arguments in favor of justice's worth. But the terms of our challenge are set. Popular, traditional thinking on justice is in shambles and we need to start fresh in order to defeat the creeping moral skepticism of the Sophists.