**Plato: The State and the Soul**

***The Republic***

The most comprehensive statement of [Plato](http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/plat.htm)'s mature philosophical views appears in [Πολιτεια](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=plat.+rep.+327a&vers=greek" \t "new) ([*The Republic*](http://plato.evansville.edu/texts/jowett/republic.htm)), an extended treatment of the most fundamental principles for the conduct of human life. Using the character "Socrates" as a fictional spokesman, Plato considers the nature and value of justice and the other virtues as they appear both in the structure of society as a whole and in the personality of an individual human being. This naturally leads to discussions of human nature, the achievement of knowledge, the distinction between appearance and reality, the components of an effective education, and the foundations of morality.

Because it covers so many issues, *The Republic* can be read in several different ways: as a treatise on political theory and practice, as a pedagogical handbook, or as a defence of ethical conduct, for example. Although we'll take notice of each of these features along the way, our primary focus in what follows will be on the basic [metaphysical](http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/m7.htm#mephy) and [epistemological](http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/e5.htm#epis) issues, foundational questions about who we are, what is real, and about how we know it. Read in this fashion, the dialogue as a whole invites us to share in Plato's vision of our place within the ultimate structure of reality.

**What is Justice?**

Book I of *The Republic* appears to be a Socratic dialogue on the nature of [justice](http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/j.htm#jus) (Gk. [δικαιωσυνη [dikaiôsunê]](http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/d5.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22dike)). As always, the goal of the discussion is to discover the genuine nature of the subject at hand, but the process involves the proposal, criticism, and rejection of several inadequate attempts at defining what justice really is.

The elderly, wealthy Cephalus suggests that justice involves nothing more than telling the truth and repaying one's debts. But Socrates points out that in certain (admittedly unusual) circumstances, following these simple rules without exception could produce disastrous results. ([*Republic* 331c](http://plato.evansville.edu/texts/jowett/republic1.htm#331c)) Returning a borrowed weapon to an insane friend, for example, would be an instance of following the rule but would not seem to be an instance of just action. The presentation of a [counter-example](http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/c9.htm#coux) of this sort tends to show that the proposed definition of justice is incorrect, since its application does not correspond with our ordinary notion of justice.

In an effort to avoid such difficulties, Polemarchus offers a refinement of the definition by proposing that justice means "giving to each what is owed." The new definition codifies formally our deeply-entrenched practice of seeking always to help our friends and harm our enemies. This evades the earlier counter-example, since the just act of refusing to return the borrowed weapon would clearly benefit one's friend. But Socrates points out that harsh treatment of our enemies is only likely to render them even more unjust than they already are. ([*Republic* 335d](http://plato.evansville.edu/texts/jowett/republic2.htm#335d)) Since, as we saw in the *Phaedo*, [opposites invariably exclude each other](http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/2f.htm#soul), the production of injustice could never be an element within the character of true justice; so this definition, too, must be mistaken.

**The Privilege of Power**

At this point in the dialogue, [Plato](http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/plat.htm) introduces Thrasymachus the sophist, another fictionalized portrait of an historical personality. After impatiently dismissing what has gone before, Thrasymachus recommends that we regard justice as the advantage of the stronger; those in positions of power simply use their might to decree what shall be right. This, too, expresses a fairly common (if somewhat [pessimistic](http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/p2.htm#pess)) view of the facts about social organization.

But of course Socrates has other ideas. For one thing, if the ruling party mistakenly legislates to its own disadvantage, justice will require the rest of us to perform the (apparently) contradictory feat of both doing what they decree and also doing what is best for them. More significantly, Socrates argues that the best ruler must always be someone who knows how to rule, someone who understands ruling as a craft. But since crafts of any sort invariably aim to produce some [external goal](http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/e5.htm#end) (Gk. [τελος [télos]](http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/t.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22telos)), good practitioners of each craft always act for the sake of that goal, never in their own interest alone. Thus, good rulers, like good shepherds, must try to do what is best for those who have been entrusted to them, rather than seeking their own welfare. ([*Republic* 342e](http://plato.evansville.edu/texts/jowett/republic3.htm#342e))

Beaten down by the force of Socratic questioning, Thrasymachus lashes out bitterly and then shifts the focus of the debate completely. If Socrates does happen to be right about the nature of justice, he declares, then it follows that a life devoted to injustice is be more to one's advantage than a life devoted to justice. Surely anyone would prefer to profit by committing an act of injustice against another than to suffer as the victim of an act of injustice committed by someone else. ("Do unto others before they do unto you.") Thus, according to Thrasymachus, injustice is better than justice.

Some preliminary answers come immediately to mind: the personal rewards to be gained from performing a job well are commonly distinct from its intrinsic aims; just people are rightly regarded as superior to unjust people in intelligence and character; every society believes that justice (as conceived in that society) is [morally obligatory](http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/o.htm#obli); and justice is the proper [virtue](http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/v9.htm#virtue) (Gk. [αρετη [aretê]](http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/a7.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22arete)) of the human soul. But if Socrates himself might have been satisfied with responses of this sort, Plato the philosophical writer was not. There must be an answer that derives more fundamentally from the nature of reality.

**Is Justice Better than Injustice?**

When Thrasymachus falls silent, other characters from the dialogue continue to pursue the central questions: what is justice, how can we achieve it, and what is its value? Not everyone will agree that justice should be defended as worthwhile [for its own sake](http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/i9.htm#intr), rather than for the extrinsic advantages that may result from its practice.

It helps to have a concrete example in mind. So Glaucon recounts the story of Gyges, the shepherd who discovered a ring that rendered him invisible and immediately embarked on a life of crime with perfect impunity. The point is to suggest that human beings—given an opportunity to do so without being caught and therefore without suffering any punishment or loss of good reputation—would naturally choose a life of injustice, in order to maximize their own interests.

Adeimantus narrows the discussion even further by pointing out that the personal benefits of having a good reputation are often acquired by anyone who merely appears to act justly, whether or not that person really does so. ([*Republic* 363a](http://plato.evansville.edu/texts/jowett/republic5.htm#363a)) This suggests the possibility of achieving the greatest possible advantage by having it both ways: act unjustly while preserving the outward appearance of being just, instead of acting justly while risking the outward appearance of injustice. In order to demonstrate once and for all that justice really is valuable for its own sake alone, [Plato](http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/plat.htm) must show that a life of the second sort is superior to a life of the first sort.

Thrasymachus, Glaucon, and Adeimantus have given voice to a fundamental issue at the heart of any effort to improve human conduct by appealing to the principles of [moral philosophy](http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/e9.htm#eth). If what I am morally required to do can (in some circumstances) be different from what I would choose do for my own benefit, then why should I be moral? Plato wrote the remainder of *The Republic* in an attempt to provide an adequate, satisfying answer to this question.

After Book I, the entire dialogue is pervaded by an extended analogy between the justice of individual human beings and the that of an entire society or city-state. Since the crucial elements of justice may be easier to observe on the larger scale ([*Republic* 369a](http://plato.evansville.edu/texts/jowett/republic6.htm#369a)), Plato began with a detailed analysis of the formation, structure, and organization of an ideal state before applying its results to a description of personal life.

<http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/2g.htm>