

# Reading Book I of Plato's *Republic* in Context

*Benjamin A. von Bredow*

In the first book of Plato's *Republic*, no character says anything about justice that is entirely wrong. Yet, by the end of the book, these same characters have no clear understanding of what justice is. Socrates explains the situation by comparing their conversation to a banquet at which he has been a glutton, not savouring each dish before passing over it to the next.<sup>39</sup> He and his interlocutors discussed "what justice is, ... whether it is a kind of vice and ignorance or a kind of wisdom and virtue," and whether "injustice [is] more profitable than justice."<sup>40</sup> Each of these issues, he says, deserves a longer and more systematic conversation than they gave them. However, he does not directly comment on the quality of the "dishes" which he tasted in Book I, whether they were good or bad. I argue that, reading Book I in the light of Platonic metaphysics and the literary structure of the *Republic*, which I will explore and summarize, one must affirm all of the "incorrect" views of justice at least in part; none of them are really wrong. I will proceed by tracking some of the definitions of justice in Book I, and showing that they all reflect aspects of the final Platonic definition of justice. I will then interpret this investigation in terms of Platonic metaphysical principles and the literary structure of the *Republic*.

In order to properly investigate how Platonic ideas about justice are present in Book I, I must first explain Plato's definition of justice from later in the *Republic*. In Book IV, Socrates and Glaucon conclude that "doing one's own work ... is justice."<sup>41</sup> This follows the full development of the hypothetical city, during which Socrates described the three classes in the city, their education, and their corresponding virtues, as well as the analogy between the three classes of the city and the three parts of the soul. Justice is achieved when each of these parts does its work properly and in the right measure, not interfering with the work of the other parts. When the appetite is moderate, and the spirit is courageous,

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39. Plato, *The Republic*, in *Plato: Complete works*, ed. John Cooper, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 354b. All further citations refer to this text.

40. *ibid.*

41. 443b.

and the intellect wise, and all of these in the proper amounts, then the soul as a whole is just. So, when each class of the city does its own work virtuously, the city as a whole is harmonious and just. Later in the *Republic*, when Socrates develops the images of the sun, the line, and the cave, he comes to the conclusion that each of the virtues, including justice, exists objectively as a form, a metaphysical object. This object, as well as the higher, unified Good from which all of the forms proceed, is known by the philosopher-king, who governs the affairs of the city so as to produce an image of these forms in the life of the city. So, justice is a matter of knowledge, and also matter of objectivity, since the philosopher knows the form of justice to be more real than any of its iterations and distortions. This developed idea of justice is already present in all of the partial definitions of justice brought out in Book I.

Cephalus and Polemarchus are the first people in the *Republic* to define justice, and their definitions reflect characteristics of Plato's final definition of justice. Though the conversation between Socrates and Cephalus begins with a discussion of old age, and then transitions to a discussion of wealth, Socrates discerns a definition of justice in one of Cephalus' statements, and begins the discussion of justice which continues throughout the dialogue. Cephalus says one might "owe sacrifice to a god or money to a person", and Socrates understands this as a claim that justice is "speaking the truth and paying whatever debts one has incurred."<sup>42</sup> "Speaking the truth" becomes very important to Socrates and Glaucon as they discuss poetry in Book II. Their discussion begins by arguing that it is dangerous to the development of justice and courage in the city for the citizens to be told lies, especially lies about the gods.<sup>43</sup> They on to say that the "false is hated not only by the gods but by human beings as well."<sup>44</sup> Though Plato will also later introduce the "noble lie" to the city, there is a significant sense in which this "lie" is a "true lie," or a false image of the truth. Cephalus' emphasis on the justice of truth is later reflected by Plato's city in that it is a city grounded in the objective structure of reality.

However, there is another level on which "speaking the truth and paying one's debts" is a reflection of the later, fuller definition of justice. The just city, as it is formulated in Book IV, is a city in which

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42. 331b.

43. 379a ff.

44. 382c.

all debts have been paid. In the just city, nothing that belongs to one part of the city is held in trust by any other. Each part has full and proper authority over everything that belongs to it, and nothing else. "Speaking the truth" as a definition of justice, as well as associating justice with objectivity, pre-figures the idea that each part of the city has a proper knowledge which is owed to it. There is, in a certain sense, a "debt of knowledge" owed to each part, which is the connection between paying debts and telling the truth. It is unjust to deny knowledge to those to whom it is owed, or to extend knowledge to those whom images rather than explicit truths are owed.

It is unsurprising, then, that Polemarchus associates his father's view of justice with that of Simonides. Simonides says that "it is just to give to each what is owed to him."<sup>45</sup> This is consistent with the fully-developed idea of justice in the same way as Cephalus' definition: the parts of the soul are each owed a certain respect. However, Socrates problematizes the view that always paying debts is just, and so Polemarchus interprets this definition interpersonally, saying that "what is owed" is to do good to friends and evil to enemies,<sup>46</sup> which later develops into the idea that justice is a matter of contracts and partnerships.<sup>47</sup> Adherence to a contract or a partnership is a way of understanding the final Platonic definition of justice, which is reached in Book IV. Each of the parts of the city and of the soul have a certain place which they are obligated to keep and not to overreach, and justice is achieved in the whole when each part interacts with the others according to the proper partnership. Of course, this is not a contract in the sense of an agreement between two equals, since the "contract" of Platonic social order is strictly imposed. However, it is certainly a "contract" in that it prescribes responsibilities to multiple parties outlining the rules for their harmonious and mutually-beneficial interactions. Justice is a matter of interaction of the different parts, which is why it is appropriate, and not entirely incorrect, for Polemarchus to define justice in interpersonal terms. Though Socrates points out the inadequacies of distinguishing between friends and enemies, to interpret "friends" as "those who form and keep contracts with one another" does grant Polemarchus' definition of justice a certain integrity. In the end, Plato will agree that one owes good to friends in accordance with their contractual place. Specifically, one owes good to friends

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45. 331e.

46. 332a.

47. 333a.

in accordance with the place proper to that person in the “contract” of the city, in which the rational rule, the spirited enforce, and the appetitive produce. The just man owes good to his fellow-citizen friends to fulfill his own role in the city and allow them to fill theirs. As such, Polemarchus’ definition of justice reflects the Platonic conclusion that justice in the city is a matter of proper order.

Similarly, Thrasymachus, whose conversation takes up the greater part of Book I, also suggests definitions of justice which are not entirely wrong, considered in light of conclusions about justice from later in the dialogue. Thrasymachus’ main contention is that “justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger.”<sup>48</sup> Much of the rest of the dialogue can be read as an extended interpretation of what it means for something to be “the stronger”. As Socrates argues briefly in Book I, strength is a feature of unity and objectivity. He shows that strength is something that is necessarily unified, rather than divided, by arguing that a band of thieves must at least be just towards one another in order to carry out injustice against those outside if their own band.<sup>49</sup> In a similar way, he argues that true strength is a matter of objectivity in the same way that the most excellent musician, the one who out-does all of the bad musicians, tunes his instrument to the pitch which is objectively correct.<sup>50</sup> True strength, which out-does everything which is inferior to it, is an objective measure. Socrates uses these arguments to show that Thrasymachus is wrong to say that justice is the advantage of the stronger, in the sense which Thrasymachus means it, but the definition itself is one that the Platonic philosopher really ought to accept. The strong – that is, the unified and objective – *should* rule over the weak, both to its own advantage and to the advantage of the weak.

But, perhaps most interestingly for this discussion, Thrasymachus suggests quite a large number of definitions of justice in passing, most of which he does not support with argument, which all have a certain truth to them. Early in the conversation, he forbids Socrates from offering a number of definitions of justice, such as “the right, the beneficial, the profitable, the gainful, or the advantageous.”<sup>51</sup> Socrates objects, saying that one of these definitions may well turn

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48. 338c.

49. 351b ff.

50. 349e.

51. 336d.

out to be the right one, and later points out to Thrasymachus that he himself defined justice as “the advantageous.”<sup>52</sup> At another point, Thrasymachus agrees that justice is obedience to the laws.<sup>53</sup> On yet another occasion, he says that that justice is “high-minded simplicity,” and this definition merits particular attention.<sup>54</sup> In the end, apprehension of the forms and of the Good is perfectly high-minded and perfectly simple, since the Good is reached by *ascent* towards *unity*. Thrasymachus throws this line away, and he means it pejoratively, but he seems to have stumbled upon something very profound, capturing in a single phrase the Platonic ascent from plurality and from intellectual obscurity – that is, from low-mindedness – towards the unity, or “simplicity” of the Good. This sarcastic definition of justice as “high-minded simplicity”, taken seriously in light of the later developments in the *Republic*, is actually compatible with Platonic doctrine. The other definitions of justice which Thrasymachus suggests in passing, including those which he forbids Socrates to defend, also have this characteristic; Socrates will ultimately affirm that justice is right, beneficial, profitable, gainful, and advantageous, and that one realizes it in obedience to good laws.

Why, then, is no final definition of justice reached in Book I, if everything that everyone says is correct in the end? I have made it seem, perhaps, that Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus were entirely correct in their definitions of justice. This is hardly the case. In each instance, the Socratic objections which make them change their views, giving them nuance and careful articulation, are legitimately problems for these initial definitions. But, just as they are not entirely correct, so are they not entirely wrong, but are all true to a limited degree.

This is one of the key insights of Platonic metaphysics: nothing is ever entirely false, but, inasmuch as it is a thing, it is a partially good and a partially true thing. The highest entity in Platonic thought is the Good, which is entirely simple, objective, and perfect, being entirely undifferentiated in itself. Below this, the forms are objective entities in that their source is the Good, but they have independent, knowable existences as separate things which each have a particular truth to them. So, even though the forms of, for example, courage and moderation have the same reality (both

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52. 339b.

53. 339c.

54. 348d.

being forms), yet the truth of courage is not the same as the truth of moderation; they are distinct from one another. And, because they are distinct and can be apprehended as such by mind, they are in conflict with one another except as they are understood by their participation in the unity which lies beyond them, in the Good. This process of division continues as one descends into the realms of mathematical objects, then physical objects, then images. At each of these levels, things become increasingly particular and decreasingly real as they are increasingly distant from the fount of universality and reality, the Good. And, as division increases at these lower levels, so does contradiction. One who does not understand all things in light of their unity in the forms, and then in Good, must see things as fundamentally in conflict with one another.

These metaphysical principles can serve as the interpretive key to all of the various definitions of justice in Book I of the *Republic*, both affirming their objective truth, and also explaining why none of these definitions can be adopted as final, facing Socrates' criticism. One must not understand these definitions of justice as capturing the *whole* good of justice, but rather as reflecting parts or aspects of it. Every definition of justice in Book I has a particular truth to it, and the error of the characters is to think that this particular, partial truth reflects the whole nature of what it means to be just. So, Cephalus is really correct that justice is a matter of paying one's dues, and Polemarchus is not wrong that justice is a matter of relating to one's friends according to the good and according to contractual arrangements. Nor is Thrasymachus wrong that it is just to serve the strong; indeed, this will end up meaning that it is just to serve justice! Their error is that they must still proceed from these partial definitions to the higher, unified definition of justice, which will necessarily respect the particular truth of every definition. Socrates' criticism, then, is the means by which his interlocutors discover the particularity of their own perspectives. This insight is how the reader can both understand the dialogue at face value, as saying that Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus are in error, while still respecting the underlying Platonic principle that they must all be correct.

On a literary level, that all of the opinions in Book I of the *Republic* have a certain truth to them makes Book I a fitting prelude to the rest of the work. Book I introduces some of the crucial distinctions in the dialogue, such as the distinctions between the nature and the benefits of justice, between the appearance of a just character and its

reality, and between conventional and objective justice. These true distinctions can be introduced early in the dialogue because they are merely images of the greater truth which is more fully explained later on. As such, they allow the reader to more easily recognize the value of these distinctions when they become important, since the characters in the dialogue have been using them all along in forms not fully explained. Moreover, understanding the truth of everything that is said in Book I allows the reader to appreciate the poetic structure of the *Republic*, whose form mirrors its content. Throughout the work, the reader ascends the divided line which Socrates describes in Book VI. The first book operates on the level of the image; it presents the same ideas which are stated again later in the work, but in a less stable and unified form, which belongs to the higher forms of knowledge. The reason, then, that the arguments in Book I are unclear and ever-changing is not that they are discussing different objects than the later books, but because they discuss them in an imaginary, rather than an intellectual, way. Reading Book I as a confused mishmash of true ideas allows the reader access to this important insight at the literary level, which is designed to aid in understanding the dialogue's content.

No character in Book I of the *Republic* ever presents a view that is totally false. Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus all present ideas which contain key elements of the final Platonic definition of justice, which come out of Book IV and the metaphysical images in Books VI-VII. Specifically, Cephalus is right that justice is a matter of paying what is due, which Plato reforms into a doctrine of the proper order of the parts of the soul; Polemarchus is right that justice is an inter-personal matter, involving the right relation of various parts of the city; and Thrasymachus is right that strength, and with it, objectivity, is at the core of what it means to be good and just. These can all be correct in their own particular way, despite their contradictions to one another and their failure in the face of Socrates' criticism, because they reflect particular aspects of the universal truth. They present contradictory, partial accounts of the whole, unitary Good in which there is no contradiction. Reading Book I in light of these later metaphysical ideas allows the reader to understand why so many of the contradictory ideas coming out of Book I can all seem to have a degree of truth. This same insight allows one to read Book I in its fullest literary context.

So, when Socrates compares the first section of his conversation in *Republic* I to a gluttonous banquet, he also is saying something

true. None of the “dishes” presented to him were savoured nearly as thoroughly as they might have been. But what was the temptation to move so quickly from one dish to the next. Well, they were all so tasty! Socrates the Glutton couldn’t help himself because no bad dish was ever set before him; Socrates the Philosopher tells us that there is fundamentally no such thing as a bad idea.