

MDC Just Ideas Course
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Plato's *Republic*: Justice and Happiness

Welcome to this course! Here is some information to get you started, and your assignments for each week.

We will be reading the *Republic*, one of the most famous works of philosophy. The author, Plato, was a philosopher who lived in Greece around 2400 years ago (428-348 BCE). He wrote in Ancient Greek; we are reading a translation.

Because this book was written so long ago, in a language that no-one speaks any more, the writing can feel very strange and unfamiliar. But – I hope you will agree by the end of our course! – the ideas it discusses are still very important to us now, and the way Plato discusses these ideas can help us think about them more deeply and more clearly.

It's also very hard to read! I've read it many, many times, and taught college classes about it every year for about 20 years now, and I *still* find it hard. My advice: try to read through the whole assignment for each week, but focus on the pages where I've given you study questions. In class we will discuss the readings, and work on making sense of them together. Then after class you might want to reread the sections we discussed.

The book is about *justice* and *injustice*. (Well, that's what most translations say. Another way to put it: it's about *doing right* and *doing wrong*, or *being moral* and *being immoral*. You can decide, as you read, which translation makes most sense.)

The main question of the book is: *Does being a just person make you happy?* Is it to your advantage to be a just person? Or is being unjust (immoral?) better for you? For example, if you have an opportunity to cheat or steal without getting caught, would it be in your interest to do it? Or would you be better off if you “do the right thing”?

The book is written as a conversation between different characters. The main character is Socrates (pronounced SOCK-ra-tees), who was Plato's teacher and mentor. He never wrote any books himself, but Plato and other students wrote books about him. In the *Republic*, Socrates argues that justice is good for you. For example, it would be better *for you* not to cheat or steal, even if you never get caught. His main opponent argues that justice is always bad for you. For example, it would be always be better for you to cheat or steal, so long as you don't get caught.

The *Republic* is divided into ten chapters, or “books.” For our course we will read Book 1, and parts of Books 2 and 4. You can read the rest whenever you like – it's great, and if we had time we would discuss it all! The *Republic* covers many topics – politics, ethics, psychology, the nature of reality, the value of art, etc. And some of the most famous passages in Western literature are to be found here: for example, the famous Cave story at the beginning of Book 7, on page 186.

Week 1 Assignment:

Reading: Plato, *Republic*, Book 1 – pages 2-28. (Page 1 is a summary written by a modern editor.) Remember that if you want, you can focus only on the pages where I ask study questions.

Background: In this book, Socrates, the main character, talks with three other characters. They argue about justice. The main questions they ask are: What is justice? And: Is it to your *advantage* – good for you, in your interest – to be just?

Questions to consider as you read: [You can take notes on these on this paper]

(1) page 5: Cephalus (pronounced KEF-a-luss), an old man, is talking about the benefits of being rich. He introduces the idea that it's bad to be *unjust*. Looking over this page, ask yourself: According to Cephalus, *why* is it good to be just and bad to be unjust? Do you agree? Why or why not?

(2) page 6: Now a new character, Polemarchus (pronounced Po-LEM-ark-uss), starts talking. He gives a definition of justice: "It is just to give to each person what is owed to them." He explains that this means helping your friends, and harming your enemies. Do you agree with this definition of justice? Why or why not?

[turn the page!]

(3) pages 14-15: Now another character, Thrasymachus (Thra-SIM-a-kuss), states his own views about justice. He says that “Justice is the advantage of the stronger.” This phrase is hard to understand, but from what he goes on to say we can figure out what he means: the rulers in any city (or state, or country) make laws that benefit themselves, and they say “It’s just to follow these laws, unjust to break them.” That’s all there is to justice – whatever the rulers make up. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

(4) pages 19-20: Thrasymachus argues that acting justly is always to a person’s disadvantage, and acting unjustly is always to a person’s advantage. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Week 2 Assignment

Reading: Book 1 page 29- Book 2 page 43. (The reading is shorter this time, but you can still focus mainly on the pages where I ask study questions. Page 32 is a summary by a modern editor.)

Background: In the last part of book 1, Socrates tries to win the argument against Thrasymachus: Socrates argues that justice makes you happy, injustice makes you miserable. Then at the start of Book 2, two new characters join the conversation: Glaucon and Adeimantus. They agree with Socrates that justice is good, but they think his arguments have not been persuasive. They tell him that *most* people agree with Thrasymachus. They tell some stories to illustrate their point. We will read up to page 43, where Socrates starts to build up his new defense.

Questions to consider as you read:

(1) Pages 29-31: Socrates gives a strange argument that justice makes us happy because it makes our *souls* do their *function* well. We will discuss this argument in class, but for now take a look and state your reaction: does it make sense to you? Do you agree?

(2) page 34 bottom to 35 top (the paragraph that starts “They say...”): This is a claim about how people decided to form societies with laws and moral codes. Do you think this is true? Are there other reasons why people would want to enter society? Are there other reasons to care about morality?

(3) page 35-36: read the story about the man who found the invisibility ring and used it to get away with theft, adultery, murder, etc. Glaucon says that *anyone* who had the chance would do the same. Is that true? Why or why not? What would you do?

[turn the page!]

(4) The rest of the reading (to page 43) discusses the way that justice is treated by parents and popular culture (poetry, in Plato's day – which was popular entertainment, like television or pop music or movies now). Glaucon and Adeimantus argue that children grow up being told that justice is difficult and unpleasant, but valuable for the reputation and rewards it brings. And they are told the opposite about injustice: that it's the easy, pleasant way, but it tends to bring a bad reputation and punishments.) Do you think that's how popular culture treats morality nowadays?

Week 3 Assignment

Reading: Book 4 (IV), pages 111-121

Background: In the part we've skipped, Socrates argues that in order to know if justice is good for you we need to know what justice *is*. He assumes that justice is a condition of someone's soul (psyche). He makes an analogy between a person's soul and a city (or state).

He then lays out his political views: there are three social classes: people naturally suited to be rulers ('guardians'), people naturally suited to be soldiers ('auxiliaries'), and people naturally suited to be workers ('money-makers' or 'craftsmen' or 'producers'). (Many readers, myself included, find this idea to be very elitist, offensive, and false! But the way he uses it is still interesting.)

He argues that a city is *just* when *each social class in it does its own work*. At the start of our reading, he sets about trying to show that justice in the soul is similar. He asks if there are three parts of the soul corresponding to the three classes in a city, with similar functions, and tries to show that the answer is yes.

Questions to consider while you're reading:

(1) Pages 111 to top of 117 (if you want, start on top of 115, where things get less confusing!): Socrates argues that there are three different parts of each person's soul:

the rational part: the part that reasons and calculates and deliberates

the spirited part: another translation would be 'passionate' or 'emotional' – he's *not* talk about 'spirit' in the sense of 'spiritual', but instead something more to do with strong emotions, anger, competitiveness, caring about honor)

the appetitive part: the part with appetites (strong desires) for bodily pleasures.

Do you agree that we have these different parts inside us? Do you agree that they can war with each other as he describes?

[turn the page!]

(2) Pages 117 to top of 121: Now Socrates argues that, as with the city, a soul is just when each part does its own work – the rational part rules, the spirited part helps it, and the appetitive part obeys. Do you agree that people will act justly if their souls are arranged in this way? Why or why not?

(3) Page 121, starting “So now it remains”: Now finally Socrates returns to the question that started off the whole discussion: does justice make you happy? He and Glaucon agree that, now that they know what justice is (the condition in which the rational part rules, the spirited helps, the appetitive obeys), it is *obvious* that justice makes you happy. They don’t really defend this claim, they just think it’s clear. Do you agree? Would having your soul in that arrangement make you happy, or unhappy? Would having a different arrangement – for example, being ruled by appetites – make you happy, or unhappy? Why?