BOOK I
SOCRATES WENT DOWN TO THE PIRAEUS...

PLATO’S REPUBLIC
WHO WAS PLATO?

- Lived (approx) 428-348 BC in Athens
- Son of aristocratic parents
- Student of Socrates
- Mathematician, philosopher, scientist
- Founded the Academy, the first institution of higher learning in the West
- Teacher of Aristotle, among others
WHAT IS MEANT BY “THE REPUBLIC?”

- Ancient Greek title: Politeia, meaning “order or character of a political community”
- It was later translated into Latin and the title became Res Publica, meaning “public business.”
- Once the text finally made its way to the English language, the title became Republic and it has stuck, even with the recognition of its inaccuracy. As you can see, this is misleading considering the significance of republics as a particular form of government.
- Thus, don’t expect Plato to lay out some sort of master plan for republican government in this tract... you will be confused and probably disappointed too!
BACKGROUND: SOPHISTS

• Sophists = Professional, generally itinerant instructors of rhetoric, whose services were vital in a litigious direct democracy like Athens, where forensic skills were at a premium.

• Famous ones in ancient Greece included Protagoras and Gorgias.

• In arguments, they often emphasized the distinction between *phusis* (nature) and *nomos* (convention), which can be a ground for moral relativism, leading either to radicalism (Thrasymachus) or to conservatism (Protagoras)—no clean ideological implications.

• Plato and his teacher, Socrates, vilified them for being more concerned with victory than truth.

• Socrates was accused of being one, though he responded by noting that he conversed with all manner of people and never charged for it.
BACKGROUND: SOCRATIC TOOLS & TECHNIQUES

• Tools employed by Socrates in the dialogues:

1. **Elenchus**: progressive questioning technique in which the subject is confronted with the existence of tensions/conflicts within belief system (Apology 24d-); negative/deconstructive.

2. **Aporia**: perplexity at the end of an effective elenchus, when the subject is no longer clear about the meaning of the term in question (e.g., Laches, Crito 50a).

3. **Craft analogy**: Socrates uses every day ideas to explain philosophical concepts. For example: proper education of the young is compared to horse breeding (Apology 25b) and just rulership is compared to shepherding (Republic 345d).
BACKGROUND: SOCRATIC DOCTRINES

• Doctrines espoused by Socrates in Plato’s dialogues:

1. “Virtue is knowledge”: implying that pursuit of evil can only be the result of ignorance, not akrasia (i.e., weakness of will); nobody does evil willingly

2. Worse to commit an injustice than to suffer one

3. Truth and perfection of the soul take precedence over material well-being and honor
WHICH CHARACTER REPRESENTS PLATO?

• We might wonder which of the characters in *The Republic* represents Plato or his opinion. The natural instinct might be to assume that Socrates voices Plato’s opinion, but this would be a mistake.

• The work, taken as a whole, represents Plato’s teaching, as Bloom writes:
  • “There is a Platonic teaching, but it is no more to be found in any of the speeches [of the various characters] than is the thought of Shakespeare to be found in the utterances of any particular character” (*Republic*, xxi).

• Thus, it is important to try to avoid imprinting Plato on any particular character, but instead try to see that Plato is using each character to make his argument.
THE SETTING

- The book opens with Socrates telling a story of going to a festival in the Piraeus, the harbor area that Athens had built for sea access. Let’s see a map...
THE SETTING

• Because it was a harbor, it was an area full of foreign people with foreign customs.
• How is this significant for setting up the book? (Hint: recall the distinction between physis and nomos, nature and custom.)
• Socrates is “arrested” by a group of men and brought to the house of Polemarchus for dinner. A discussion of ensues about the meaning of justice and whether there is a meaning that is true in all places, at all times.
CEPHALUS

• Cephalus: A seemingly honorable and just man, who has come to such a state not via philosophy but rather experience.

• His statements presage what is to come. He speaks of:
  • the “very many mad masters” (329d) of desire, especially sexual desire (cf. 589a)
  • moderation of acquisitive desire (330b-c)
  • concerns regarding the afterlife (330e)
  • idea of just life as an intrinsic good
CEPHALUS & POLEMARCHUS

• After engaging Cephalus in a discussion of wealth, Socrates abruptly changes the subject and proposes a definition of justice that he thinks Cephalus would agree with (see pp 331c - 332a (Socrates, Cephalus, and Polemarchus).

• The first definition of justice: truth-telling & debt-paying – a partial understanding of justice appropriate to merchants/businesspeople.

• Cephalus agrees with this definition, but in the exchange listed above, realizes pretty quickly that it is deficient – and he worries about how he has lived his life

• Cephalus leaves to make sacrifices to the gods and, appropriately enough, Polemarchus “inherits” his father’s argument (331e).
POLEMARCHUS

- Polemarchus, who is a warrior, and Socrates begin to converse about justice. (see 332b-e).
- Polemarchus proposes a **2nd definition of justice**: giving "benefits and harms to friends and enemies," respectively.
- Appropriate for the warrior, Polemarchus provides a friend/enemy logic.
POLEMARCHUS (CONTINUED)

• But Socrates is not so sure… Read 334b-335e.
• This interlude with Polemarchus is a classic example of Socratic dialogue. Socrates dislodges Polemarchus from his definition of justice by:
  • Elenchus ending in aporia (Read 334b-c)
  • Employment of a craft analogy (horsecraft: harming horse will make it worse, not better [335b-c])
  • Ends with the acceptance of a harm prohibition (“never just to harm anyone” [335e]). With this redefinition of justice, they promise to go forward and “do battle then as partners.”
THRASYMACHUS

• Read 338b-339a.

• Thrasymachus offers a third definition of justice that, in most interpretations, would actually represent its perversion. It is the definition offered by a sophist.

• What’s Thrasymachus’ definition?
  • “the advantage of the stronger” [338c]
  • it is purely conventional, controlled and defined by the ruling class for its benefit [338e-].
  • How is this related to the distinction between nomos (customs) and phusis (nature)?
SOCRATES’ RESPONSE TO THRASYMACHUS

• In response, Socrates then exploits the craft analogy. Read 341c-342c.
• What’s going on here? How is Socrates using craft analogy here?
• Essentially, Socrates’ initial reply is encompassed in his statement that “it isn’t fitting for an art to seek the advantage of anything else than that of which it is the art” (342b). What does he mean?
THRASYMACHUS VS. SOCRATES

• Once Thrasymachus buys this, Socrates leads him deftly down the path to a refutation: justice is the art of ruling for the benefit of the ruled, not the rulers (342e).
• BUT... Thrasymachus changes his mind (340d), by pointing out that craftspeople exercise their craft for their benefit, not the benefit of the craft’s object. What does he say, in particular, about shepherds?
• He goes on to argue for the benefit of (orthodox) injustice, especially tyranny. [...]
THRASYMACHUS’ ARGUMENT IN FAVOR OF INJUSTICE

• Read 343c-344c.

• What is Thrasymachus arguing here?
  • The unjust man is always better off than the just. In what way?
  • What is the ultimate best way of living?
    • Doing injustice and getting away with it.
  • Why do people look down upon unjust deeds?
    • Because they fear they have these deeds done to them.
  • “[T]he just is the advantage of the stronger, and the unjust is what is profitable and advantageous to oneself.” (344d) This is an expansion of his initial statement about justice. What does it mean?
THRASYMACHUS VS. SOCRATES

• Socrates initially tries to salvage his earlier claim about crafts by distinguishing between the art itself and the associated “wage-earner’s art” (346b), but what is the problem with this?
• The wage-earner’s art has as its object, not the betterment of money itself, but rather the betterment of the practitioner
• Socrates thus refutes his own claim about crafts. This sophistical sleight of hand allows him to reassert that the “true ruler” rules for the benefit of the ruled.
• He then turns to Thrasymachus’ claim about the benefits of (orthodox) injustice, making a long series of equally sophistical counterclaims....
THE FAILURE OF SOCRATIC ELENCHUS AND SOCRATES’ SLIDE INTO SOPHISTRY

• The Socratic technique founders at 354b-c.: Socrates has made progress up to now due to the inexperience of his interlocutors, but Thrasymachus is different. How so?

• Socrates doesn’t win the argument; Thrasymachus withdraws in contempt.

• The best indication that Socrates’ arguments against Thrasymachus are unsatisfactory is his own admission to this effect: “I have not had a fine banquet” and “now as a result of the discussion I know nothing.” Is this consistent with Socrates’ criticism of sophistry?

• There’s a limitation in the Socratic elenchus: it can never transform the worldview of one’s interlocutor so long as it is internally consistent.