

Narrative Background and Arguments of *Republic*, Bk. I

- 431-404 B.C. Peloponnesian War btw. Athens and Sparta
425 Athenians on the way to Sicily seized outpost at Pylos, with 120 Spartans captured; leaders like Cleon make Athenian continuation of war seem attractive.
424 Delium: Athenians are disastrously defeated, but Socrates shows his famed courage in retreat
424-3 Thucydides, as general, protects Athenian interests in Thrace. Brasidas, best Spartan general, persuades Amphipolis to revolt. Thucydides arrives too late before city accepts Brasidas' terms; Thucydides is punished with exile from Athens. A truce of one year is declared, followed by renewal of the war, then in battle both Brasidas and Cleon (obstacles to peace) are killed at Amphipolis.
421 Peace of Nicias: Nicias is man of great wealth & birth, who negotiates the peace. Both sides refrain from invading other's territory for 7 yrs., though terms of peace not honored by either side.

At this juncture in the war, Athens sees her heavy losses in life and money now taking its toll. Reserves in the Acropolis are nearly exhausted; citizens are forced to stay within Long Walls for safety, so little farming is possible; plague has broken out within confinement in the city; invasions and destruction of some of the Long Walls force citizens to precarious life; tribute from allies is dwindling; and some island members are now revolting, preferring to face death rather than coerced contributions. So Nicias is able to argue for peace.

Euripides, *Suppliants*: prays that war may never come again. The Agora overflows with prosperity, as provisions are restocked and prices drop.

Aristophanes, *Peace*: represents the farmers & rural dwellers as delighted with new conditions under the peace -- rural labor, homely festivals, gathering of friends in home for simple meals, rest from agricultural fatigues.

- 420 Now, Athenian foreign policy will be dominated in the next years by Alcibiades, the nephew of Pericles. Alcibiades has everything going for him -- handsome, brilliant, daring, favored democratic leader's nephew. However, he also has been saturated in Sophist teaching, and recognizes no principle except self-seeking; and he recklessly violates law and custom, combining his own personal charisma with the arts of the demagogue so as to win a generalship in 420.
417 Alcibiades, Nicias, and Hyperbolus struggle for power in leading Athens; Alcibiades and Nicias join forces and ostracize Hyperbolus -- Alcibiades now regarded as leader, whose war policy dominates Athens.
416 Alcibiades sends expedition to island of Melos. In famed Melian Dialogue, Thucydides reveals how most humane ancient city-state can be led to adopt a policy of 'Might makes right' -- thus brutal force of Athenians arouses universal hatred and fear, and gives enemies a justification for overthrowing Athens.

What all this historical, social, and political background means is that:

- a. The meaning of "justice" is up for grabs, given the cultural stresses and strains of the Peloponnesian War.
- b. The older, aristocratic notions of "excellence" [*aretê*], i.e. the idea of practical wisdom derived from rote memorization of Homer and Hesiod, no longer hold sway over the many, since the Athenian Constitution embraces democracy.
- c. The 'New Education' of the Sophists dominates the youth, and Plato's dialogues are filled with references to the corrupting influences of these teachers.

In Bk. I of the *Republic*, Polemarchus ('one who begins the war') presents an argument to the effect that justice is that which benefits one's friends and harms one's enemies (332d-334a). Notice that this position begins from a premise used in many of the earlier, Socratic dialogues.

- 1) In crafts, the most knowledgeable [**deinotatos** = most clever, cunning] person is a better associate than other ones.

Then, Socrates invokes a 'bivalency of the crafts' thesis: that the most knowledgeable person is also the one most able to misuse his craft. So:

- 2a) However, the most knowledgeable person is also the one most able to inflict harm on others with his knowledge.
- 2b) So, one who is a skillful guardian of a craft is also a skillful thief (since he has the knowledge for misusing his craft: the doctor who can heal can also kill; the teacher who can improve his students can also corrupt them).

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- 3) Thus, the just man (one who gives to each what is due him) who is good at guarding money deposited with him is also good at stealing it.

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- 4) Hence, the just man has turned out to be a kind of thief.

Of course, this conclusion does not follow. In logic, we call this a **non sequitur** ['it does not follow']. Socrates does not think this is a good argument, but he shows us how a certain mistaken view of justice leads to a morally corrupt conclusion. In fact, Socrates follows up this conclusion with the observation: "Maybe you learned this from Homer, for he's fond of Autolycus... whom he describes as better than everyone at lying and stealing. According to you, Homer, and Simonides, then, justice seems to be some sort of craft of stealing, one that benefits one's friends and harms one's enemies."

In the early dialogues, Socrates uses a number of these fallacious forms of reasoning to defeat his partners in debate, not because Socrates himself accepts the premises of the argument but because the interlocutor accepts the premises. However, in Bk. I of the *Republic*, Socrates, in explicit contrast to most other early dialogues, does give us a position that he himself advocates. [Actually, I would argue that this philosophical position is present in several other earlier dialogues, such as *Crito* and *Gorgias*.] Socrates does admit that there is something in Polemarchus' definition of justice that is worth retaining.

Since people often make mistakes about who are their friends (confusing those believed to be their friends with those who truly are their friends), they also falsely conclude that good men are their enemies and bad people their friends. So Socrates suggests that they start the argument over again (334d and ff.).

- 1) A true friend is one who is both thought to be and actually is beneficial.
 - 2) Also, it is part of a just person's proper function not to harm anyone.
 - a) Conventional belief assumes that it is just to benefit one's friend and harm one's enemy.
 - b) But when human beings are harmed, they deteriorate in their human excellence [**aretê**].
 - c) Justice is a human excellence.
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- d) Thus, men who are harmed become more unjust.

- e) It is not the function of the good person to harm people; rather his function is to improve people (just as it is the function of heat to warm things, not cool them).
 - f) The just man is good.
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- g) Hence, it is not the function of the just man to do harm to a friend or anyone else; rather, that is the function of the unjust man to harm himself and corrupt others.

3) Thus, the just person is a true friend who will not harm himself or corrupt others.

Now, combining some other argumentation from 352e and following, we get the following additions to the argument, what we might call the 'Function of Man' argument.

- 4) The function [**ergon**] of a thing is that which can be done only or done best by that particular thing.
 - a) The proper function of a horse is to run well.
 - b) Similarly, the proper function of an eye is to see well, and of ears to hear well.
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- 5) Hence, each thing has its own excellence [**aretê**] in carrying out its own particular function [this is a key premise of many arguments in the *Republic*].
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- 6) Accordingly, a thing cannot perform its own function well if it does not possess its own excellence.
 - 7) The human soul [**psychê**] has its own function which no other thing can fulfill.
 - 8) The function of the good soul is for the rational part of the soul to rule or deliberate well over the spirited (courage) and appetitive (self-control) parts of the soul.
 - 9) Justice is the primary excellence of the soul, consisting in our apprehending (having intellectual vision of) and participating in (being causally motivated by) the Form of the Good (those eternal, unchangeable realities that arouse us to understand Being itself). Otherwise, we are driven to and fro in the world of change, being misled by petty concerns with pleasure, fame, wealth, or success).
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- 10) Thus, the just man apprehends and participates in the Form of the Good, and hence his moral actions become beneficial both to himself and to the **polis**.

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