

Part ①

# The Republic

Plato of Athens

355BC

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{327} Yesterday I went down to the harbour at Piraeus with Glaucon, the son of Ariston, to say a prayer to the Goddess and to see the festival. It was the first time that this festival has been held here in Athens, and I must say that the locals put on a wonderful procession, though the visitors from Thrace were equally, if not more, impressive. There was a new type of race where runners passed batons to each other- a wonderful sight indeed. Afterwards we went to Polemarchus' house with Adeimantus and Niceratus where we found Polemarchus' brothers Lysias and Euthydemus and his old father Cephalus, garlanded as if for a glorification, who said to me, "*You don't visit us as often as you should, Socrates. I may be too old for physical pleasures, but I enjoy intelligent conversation all the more.*" "Actually," I said, "I enjoy talking to old men, for you have already trod the long road. Tell me, is old age a difficult time of life, or not?"

*"You know, Socrates, when we old men get together, most of them just grumble. They complain that they don't make love or drink or go to parties, and that their families don't respect them. But, in my opinion, they're putting the blame in the wrong place. I remember someone asking the old poet Sophocles whether he still enjoyed sex, he replied that he was glad to have left that frenzy behind him. A good reply I thought, for it is not age that matters but character. For a sensible, good-tempered man, old age is easy- otherwise youth as well as age is a burden."*

{330} "I am afraid," I said, "that people will say you are content because you are rich."

*"There is some truth in that, Socrates. But riches won't make a bad man happy, though wealth has its uses. It makes it easier to avoid cheating and lying, or the fear that one has left some sacrifice to God or debt to man unpaid."*

"Fair enough, Cephalus," I said. "But surely doing right {*dikaiousuene*} is more than just being truthful and returning the things we have borrowed. What if I had borrowed a weapon from a friend who later went mad; surely I would be wrong to repay my debt to him?"

"Ah," said Cephalus, with a smile, "*You can continue this discussion with Polemarchus, I must go to the sacrifice.*"

"Well then Polemarchus," said I, "as heir to this argument tell me what you think it is to do right."

*"Simonides says that it is 'to give every man his due', and I think he puts it as well as can be"*

"Simonides was a wise poet, but surely he didn't mean to return something dangerous to a madman?"

*"I suppose not. I think he must have meant that we owe it to our friends to do good to them, not harm."*

"So what then of our enemies? What is it that we should give to them?"

*"If we're to give everyone their due, then it looks as if we must give enemies something appropriate; some injury perhaps."*

"So Simonides says that justice is to benefit one's friends and harm ones enemies."

*"I think so."*

"So, what about a just man? In what activity will he help his friends and harm his enemies?"

*"In wartime he'll fight against his enemies and for his friends."*

"Good. But people who are healthy have no need for a physician. Those on land don't need a navigator. So, what use is justice in peacetime?"

*"It is useful in business, where money is involved I suppose."*

"Except," said I, "when we want to use money. If we're buying a horse or a ship, wouldn't a trainer or a sailor be a more useful partner?"

*"Yes, but a just man is very useful if we want to put our money on deposit."*

"So justice is useful if we want to put a pruning-knife or a lyre in a safe place, but if you want to use the things you'd better turn to the vine-dresser or the musician. You're saying that justice is useful when you're not doing things, and useless if you are?"

*"Maybe."*

{334} "But there's another problem. Skill {*techné*} in defence goes with skill in attack. If our just man is good at keeping money, he'll be good at stealing it as well. Don't men often mistake friends for enemies in that sort of way?"

*"I still think that justice is helping your friends and harming your enemies."*

"So you still think the just man will do harm to some others? Tell me, if we harm a horse or a dog, do we make the creature better or worse?"

*"Worse, certainly."*

"Should we use justice, then, to make others less just? Should we use goodness {*arete*} to make others bad?"

*"No, I suppose not."*

"Heat never cools things down, nor dryness make things wet. It is simply never right to harm anyone at any time. I think both you and I should agree that this view couldn't possibly originate with Simonides, or Bias or Pittacus, or any of the ancient sages. I think it more likely that the idea of helping friends and harming enemies must have come from someone wealthy and arrogant like Periander or Ismenias."

*"Very likely."*

"Well, we have seen what justice is not. Would anyone care to suggest what justice is?"

{337} All this time Thrasymachus had been trying to interrupt. Eventually he exploded at us;

*"Ridiculous, childish nonsense Socrates, and you know it! If you're so clever, you tell us what justice is!"*

I was quite taken aback. "Don't be so hard, Thrasymachus," I said, "you wouldn't get in our way if we were searching for gold, would you? Now, Justice is far more precious than gold- and we're doing our best to try and find it."

*"Oh, Socrates." He said, with a sarcastic laugh. "I know you of old, with your shammed ignorance. Anything rather than a straight answer."*

"And I know you, Thrasymachus. You ask someone what twelve is, then you forbid them to say it's twice six or three times four. I am always willing to listen, and if you listen too, you might learn."

Glaucon broke in *"Go on, give us your answer Thrasymachus."*

*"Listen then," he said, "I say that justice, or 'right', is simply what is in the interest of those in power."*

"Explain?" I asked

*"You know that some cities are tyrannies, some democracies and some are aristocracies. They all make laws in their own ways, but they all make laws to suit the interests of the ruling classes, and in every one those who don't agree are punished as 'wrongdoers'."*

"And are these ruling classes infallible?" I asked, "Or do they sometimes make laws which are against their own interests?"

*"Perhaps they do. But following the laws is what is right."*

"So you're saying that the right thing to do is to support laws which are wrong?"

*"Socrates! I expected this. You're distorting my argument with tricks."*

"I think trying to shave a lion might be safer than trying to trick Thrasymachus!" I said.

{343} Thrasymachus didn't reply, instead he said:

*"You need a nurse, Socrates, to wipe your nose. You don't even know the difference between sheep and a shepherd."*

What makes you say that? I replied.

{345} *"Shepherds protect their sheep so that they can make a profit out of them. Rulers are just the same, what they call 'justice' is simply making a profit from the people. You're a fool, Socrates. Who comes off best in business? Always the unjust man and he'll pay less income tax too. Always the unjust man gets more and the just man gets less. And its not only in business, the just man gets to be despised by his own friends and relations when he refuses to bend the rules."*

"Tell me," I said, "do you really think that rulers actually enjoy being in authority?"

*"I don't think it- I know it!"*

"Very well. Haven't you noticed that people don't actually want authority, unless they get paid, either in money or in honours, for it?"

*"Yes."*

"Now, don't we differentiate between different crafts like medicine, or navigation, or wage-earning by

their different skills?"

"We do."

"And when the doctor takes his fee, do we say that he is not a doctor, but a wage-labourer?"

"No, we don't."

{347} "Being a ruler is a craft like being a doctor or a navigator or a wage-labourer. If a man does it, we must pay him, but it is a craft in itself. Men don't want to be called mercenary or over-ambitious, which is why they think it dishonourable to accept command without some pressure and some reluctance; the penalty for refusal being to risk being governed by someone worse than themselves. That is what frightens honest men into accepting power. In a city {polis} of good men, there might be as much competition to avoid power as to get it. So, Glaucon, are you with me or with Thrasymachus?"

"I go for the just {arete} life. But we must try to convince Thrasymachus" He answered.

"But if we each keep making speeches, we'll end up needing a judge to decide. Perhaps we should continue as we have, by mutual agreement, then we can be our own judge and jury. Would that do?"

"I suppose so," said Thrasymachus.

"So, Thrasymachus, do you say that the unjust man will fight with anyone to get the greatest share."

"I do."

{352} "Thank you" I said "Now tell me, can gangs of thieves succeed if they treat each other unjustly?"

"I suppose not."

"So those who have a common purpose, whether it is just or not, must treat each other with justice."

"I won't annoy our friends by disagreeing."

"The next question is, whether the just are happier than the unjust."

"Proceed."

"I'll begin with a question: Can you see, except with the eye?"

"Certainly not."

"Or hear, except with the ear?"

"No."

"So we can agree that the eye and the ear have their own proper functions which they excel at?"

"I understand your meaning."

"And can the eyes perform if they lack their proper excellence?"

"No. If they are blind they can't see."

"Well; hasn't the mind {psuche} its own special functions, like paying attention and deliberating, which it excels at?"

"Assuredly."

"So a bad mind must be incompetent at attention and deliberation, and a good mind good at them?"

"Yes."

"And don't we agree that justice is an excellence of the mind, and injustice a defect?"

"I admit that."

"Then the just mind and the just man will live well, and the unjust man will live ill? And he who lives ill is the reverse of happy? "

"Certainly."

{354} "Then the just is happy, and the unjust miserable?"

"So be it."

"But happiness and not misery is profitable."

"Of course."

"Then, my blessed Thrasymachus, injustice can never be more profitable than justice."

"Go on, enjoy your holiday fun, Socrates." He replied.

"If I do enjoy it, its thanks to you Thrasymachus," I replied, "You've been much more pleasant since you stopped being angry. But I can't say that I do enjoy it; I'm like the greedy gourmet, always wanting to taste the next dish. We still haven't found out what justice is." Glaucon did not seem satisfied.

"You are not making much progress" He said, "Look, there are some good things which we want for their own sake, like pleasure, and some which we want for themselves and their consequences, like wisdom and sight. And there's a third sort, those that we don't want for themselves, but endure for the sake of their good consequences, like medical treatment or exercise. Which category are you going to put justice in?"

"In the highest class, among things we want both for themselves and for their consequences."

*"That's not a popular opinion, Socrates. Most people would put Justice in the troublesome class of things we have to put up with for their consequences."*

"Perhaps I am slow to learn," I said, "Please explain."

*"Men know that it is a bad thing to suffer, so they make laws to protect themselves from each other, and they call these laws 'right'. Now, imagine how a man would behave with no laws to restrain him. You know the story of the Lydian shepherd who found a magic ring which made him invisible?"*

"Yes."

{361} *"Imagine a just man had such a ring. Would he have such iron will that he could resist taking whatever he wanted? I think not, no man is just of his own will, but only from fear of the law. So much for that, consider how the world views men. The unjust man, if he is skilled, will always appear to be in the right, he'll dishonestly cover up the most monstrous crimes and he'll always have a ready excuse if he's found out. The just man, on the other hand, will act for justice, not just the appearance of justice. And what will happen to him? He'll end up being blamed for others crimes, and like as not scourged and crucified."*

I was about to reply, when Adeimantus interrupted; *"You've missed the important point."*

"Well," I said, "Your brother has already said enough to floor me."

*"Nonsense! But listen to this; people say that the Gods decree justice and that those who live justly will be rewarded in the afterlife. They also say, along with Homer;*

*The Gods may be swayed in their judgement,*

*By sacrifice and humble prayers.*

{365} *...now, what do you think is the effect of this talk? It teaches people that any injustice can be cancelled by being religious, or at least by pretending to be religious. What we need from you, Socrates, is a proof that justice is better than injustice, irrespective of what Gods or men may think, simply because of its effect on those who have it.*

I was delighted, "How can I refuse? I've heard justice slandered, so I must come to her aid, but this is a difficult subject, and we're rather short-sighted. Perhaps it would be better if we looked at a bigger thing.