

Chapter 1

Questions Asked

An Evening's Argument

Shadow Boxing

Many would-be readers of the *Republic* give up. Not that it is very difficult to understand; but it seems all very trivial. After setting the scene in Cephalus' house, Socrates starts scoring rather unconvincing points over Cephalus and Polemarchus about homicidal maniacs, poisoners and bankers, and we feel a lot of sympathy with Thrasymachus when he finally bursts in and tries to get to grips with the basic problem of morality. That, in part, is the point: Plato wants to give Thrasymachus a fair wind, so that we can enter into his position and find it attractive, in spite of its crudity. But there are other points too. Plato, it was said, rewrote the first book of the *Republic* 37 times; he was hardly likely to have devoted the opening passages to purely pointless argumentation, simply in order to exasperate us into sympathizing with Thrasymachus. We should look beneath the surface, and try to discern an underlying theme.

The key is in the final sentence of Thrasymachus' outburst (336c7-d4). 'And don't tell me that morality, τὸ δίκαιον (*to dikaion*), is the obligatory, τὸ δέον, or the advantageous, τὸ ὠφέλιμον, or the profitable, τὸ λυσιτελοῦν, or the expedient, τὸ κερδαλέον, or what is to one's interest, τὸ συμφέρον, but, whatever you say, say it clearly and precisely, σαφῶς καὶ ἀκριβῶς (*saphos kai akribos*).'¹ Is this an important passage? Plato makes it clear that it is. There are many delicate allusions to the key words, ἀκριβῶς and σαφῶς in the next few pages.¹ He also shows what it is that he is trying to get across in the parody of Thrasymachus that Socrates puts forward in his protest at Thrasymachus' demand (337b1-c1). To demand that Socrates say what morality, τὸ δίκαιον, is, not in terms of the obligatory, the advantageous, the expedient, or what is to one's interest, but clearly and accurately, is like demanding that he say what twelve is, but not as two times six, three times four, or any other numerical expression. The suggestion is that we cannot give a clear and precise account of morality, τὸ δίκαιον, except in terms like obligatory, advantageous, or profitable, any more than we can give a non-numerical specification of twelve.

¹ 338d5, 340a1, 340e2, 340e8, 341b6, 342b7-8, 342d6, 342d9, 346b3, 346d2; see also 445b6.

What is common to terms like obligatory, advantageous, or profitable? Why are they not susceptible to a precise specification? All these words are ‘gerundive’ words: they indicate actions, other things being equal, which ought to be undertaken. If I am told that it is obligatory to stop at red traffic lights, I am being told that I must stop at red traffic lights; if I am told that it is advantageous to join a political party, I am being told that I should join a political party; if I am told that it is profitable to invest in mining, I am being advised to buy mining shares. In each case, of course, there may be further considerations which point the other way; but, in the absence of further considerations, the gerundive word indicates the course of action to be taken. *Τὸ δίκαιον*, however it is translated, is likewise a to-be-done word. Traditionally it is translated ‘just’, but often it means much more than what is meant by the English word ‘just’. Sometimes it means ‘right’. ‘Righteous’ and ‘righteousness’ sound old-fashioned to our ears, but sometimes capture what is meant by the *δίκαιος* and the virtue of *δικαιοσύνη*. ‘Morality’ is a more modern word: much of the *Republic* is concerned with working out what morality is, and in what circumstances men can live moral lives. But it is not a simple matter. Although Simonides, like many Old Testament prophets (*e.g.* Micah 6:8b, Ecclesiastes 12:13), offers a formula to guide us to the good life, each formula turns out, on examination, not to be as clear and precise as we could wish. Honesty (here the best translation of *δικαιοσύνη*) may be the best policy, but what is honesty? To tell the truth and give back what you have borrowed? As a general rule that seems fair enough, but there are difficulties in applying it in certain circumstances—when the homicidal maniac is around, we neither tell him where his intended victim is, nor return to him the hatchet we had previously borrowed. Equally nowadays, if a drug addict demands that we give him the money we owe him, we are not sure that that is what we ought to do. The words ‘owe’ and ‘ought’ are etymologically connected, as are the words ‘debt’, ‘due’ and ‘duty’, the latter all stemming from the Latin *debitum* and the French *du*. In most cases there is little room for argument whether we owe something: our debts can usually be clearly and precisely determined. Not so our duty: we have to take a whole range of factors into consideration in determining what we ought to do, what is due from us in the particular circumstances of the case—we ought not to give the drug addict the money we owe him, but ought to help him as much as we can to free himself from his addiction; a helping hand, not money, is what is due from us to someone no longer able to make autonomous decisions for himself.

The Greek word *ὑφειλόμενον* (*opheilomenon*) is ambiguous as between ‘owed’ and ‘ought’. In 332a-c3 Socrates pushes Polemarchus from construing it, when used to define *τὸ δίκαιον*, in the former sense to understanding it in the latter. It is not simply paying one’s debts, but giving people their due, that is, what is appropriate, *προσήκον*—another gerundive word, like *ὑφέλιμον*, *λυσιτελοῦν*, *κερδαλέον*, and *συνφέρον*. Polemarchus thinks it is

simply a matter of doing good to one's friends and harm to one's enemies, but Socrates first uses this specification to explore another possibility, that it is some sort of skill. Skills often cannot be reduced to simple recipes. There are many rules for writing good English prose, or Latin verses, but someone can follow all the rules and yet produce a wooden result. Knowing how to write cannot be exhaustively defined in terms of knowing that certain rules are to be obeyed. It could be that morality was similarly a skill, *τέχνη* (*tekhnē*), a flair for doing the right thing. But that identification breaks down when we examine it more closely. Skills are specific: there are occasions when we are glad to avail ourselves of the *expertise* of a doctor or a pilot, but morality is not confined to special occasions; admittedly there are some professions where honesty is particularly important—banking for example—but paradox ensues if we try to make out that honesty is a special sort of *expertise*. Moreover, and more importantly, skills are abilities that enable one to achieve whatever ends he wishes—medical skill can be used to poison patients—whereas morality is concerned with what ends should be sought. Later, Aristotle at the beginning of Book V of the *Ethics* (1129a11-23) draws a sharp distinction between a disposition *ἕξις* (*hexis*), which is what *δικαιοσύνη* is, and an ability, *δύναμις* (*dunamis*), which, being indifferent as to ends, it cannot be.

After this digression (332c5-334b) Socrates returns to Polemarchus' gloss on 'appropriate', namely that it is appropriate to do good to friends, and harm to enemies. But who is my friend? who is my enemy? Socrates draws a distinction between those who seem to be and those who really are. We know who our seeming friends and seeming enemies are; to that extent the injunction to do good to the one and do harm to the other is clear and precise—we have no doubt who are to be the objects of our benevolence and malevolence. But we could be mistaken in our assessments, and clearly it could not be right to harm those who were really our friends, though we did not know it. We should do good to our real friends—that is indisputable: but who our real friends are—that is difficult to say, and no simple formula will specify them clearly and precisely.

Socrates' example of Polydamas (338c4-d2) seems rather trivial, but is making the same point. Thrasymachus has defined *τὸ δίκαιον* as *τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον* what is in the interest of the superior person: *τὸ συμφέρον* is one of the forbidden terms; equally, *τοῦ κρείττονος*, of the superior person is ambiguous, and might be an overall term of approbation, or might be a purely descriptive term. Socrates takes it as the latter, in which case there are clear and precise criteria for being *κρείττων*; physically, we can tell who is stronger than whom, and Polydamas comes out top. And by the same token, his *συμφέρον*, physically, is strengthening food—meat. So, if we are to take *τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον* in a clear and precise sense, it is meat. Thrasymachus protests, and explains that he had not meant *τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον* in a purely physical sense, but in a political one; but

again he falls foul of the same point: if we take *κρείττων* to be the dominant political class, we may be able to identify it clearly and precisely, but it may be inept; and if we write in a requirement that the government be really superior, it is no longer clear precisely at any one time what it actually is.

In 335b2-336a10 Socrates makes use of various ambiguities to deny that it could ever be right to harm even one's genuine enemies. The conclusion is admirable, but the argumentation is full of holes. The Greek word *βλάπτειν* (*blaptein*) can mean 'frustrate', 'hinder', or 'hurt', but normally carries a stronger sense of harming and damaging. It could be right to frustrate or hinder or even hurt one's enemies, and the good horseman might, on occasion, hurt his horses to teach them a lesson. But the good horseman would never actually harm his horses, and the humane man would not want to make his enemies less human, even though they were genuine enemies. If morality, *δικαιοσύνη*, is the specifically human excellence, *ἀρετή* (*arete*), concerned with making humans as human as possible, then it would not be moral to inflict real harm on a human being. Besides the ambiguity in *βλάπτειν* there is an ambiguity in the range of concern: the humane man is not merely interacting with friends and enemies, but is considering them all as fellow-human-beings, and his humanity is not only the excellence he possesses *qua* human being, but also the peculiar characteristic of a humanitarian whose concern is with human beings in the same way as a horseman is concerned with horses. It is not surprising that this piece of word-play was too much for Thrasymachus, and provoked his outburst 'What absolute drivel possesses you, Socrates...'

Cleitophon's Suggestion

After the political version of Thrasymachus' definition has been refuted, Cleitophon offers an emendation which would save Thrasymachus from refutation (340b). Cleitophon suggests that instead of saying that *δικαιοσύνη* was *τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον* (*to tou kreittonos sumpheron*), he should say that it was *τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον δοκοῦν* (*to tou kreittonos sumpheron dokoun*), that which the superior person took to be his interest.

Why was Cleitophon's emendation not taken up? It would have saved Thrasymachus' position, but at the cost of making it vacuous. How would we know what the seeming interest of the superior person was? We could not rely on what he himself said, because he might well claim to be guided by moral considerations. The whole point of Thrasymachus' position is that people are not to be believed when they claim to be acting on moral grounds. But if we cannot be told by the superior person what he takes to be his own interest, the only way of telling what it is will be to observe his actions. We shall know what his interest is from seeing what he does. But then it will be

an empty tautology that he always acts in his own interest, since it is what he does that tells us what his interest is.²

Who was Thrasymachus?

It is with the entry of Thrasymachus into the discussion that the *Republic* comes alive for us. The argument with Cephalus and Polemarchus employs categories which are unfamiliar to us. Thrasymachus, however, holds a position which is permanently attractive and worthy of refutation. For this reason Plato's attempt to refute it in the *Republic* remains a classical essay in the justification of morality.

Thrasymachus was not a straw man. His views were widely prevalent at the time the dialogue is supposed to have taken place. Behind Thrasymachus stands Thucydides.³ Thrasymachus' view is the view both of the protagonists, and of the historian, of the Peloponnesian War. The best-known passage is the Melian Dialogue at the end of Thucydides Book V. It is also taken for granted in the Mytilene debate in Book III, where Diodotus, who is advocating mercy, says (III.44.1): 'The argument is not about their wrongdoing, but about our self-interest.' That Plato had Thucydides in mind is shown clearly by 348c-d which turns on the meaning of the words *εὐήθης* (*euethes*) and *εὐήθεια* (*euetheia*). 'So that honesty is a virtue and dishonesty a vice.' 'As if I would say that,' answered Thrasymachus, 'when I maintain that dishonesty is the best policy, not honesty.' 'So you would say that honesty was a vice.' 'Not quite that; rather a naive good-naturedness.' 'And dishonesty an ill-naturedness?' 'No, just common sense.' We could translate the adjective *εὐήθης* by 'simple' or 'simple-minded' or 'well-meaning', which display a similar ambivalence. The word 'silly' underwent over a period of time the same change of meaning. When the carolist says 'Then to the stall the silly shepherds came' he is not to be taken as suggesting that in going to Bethlehem the shepherds were foolish, but that they were unsophisticated. Since then the word has gone the same way as *εὐήθης* did in Greek. We know the exact date when *εὐήθης* and *εὐήθεια* lost their good meanings and obtained a bad. It happened in 427 BC in Corcyra, when, according to Thucydides, the exigencies of revolution forced a change of meaning on many words, and in particular on the word *εὐήθης* 'Thus every sort of evil doing was established throughout Greece by reason of the revolution, and the word *εὐήθης* which has

² A further reason is given on p.10.

³ Thus Oswyn Murray, commenting on Thucydides in John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, Oswyn Murray, edd., *The Oxford History of the Classical World*, Oxford University Press, 1986, p.196, remarks of the view of Thrasymachus in the *Republic* 'We know that this view of society was not a universal view in the fifth century, and very probably not a majority one; nevertheless it was clearly an influential one.'

a predominantly good sense was laughed out of court.' (Thucydides 3.83.1). This change of sense stuck, as in the *Republic* 336c1, 343c6, 400e, 425b7; Aristotle in his Table of Excellencies and Defects in the *Eudemian Ethics* has it as one of his defects (EE 2.3.4, 1221a13).⁴

Thucydides' account gives substance to Thrasymachus' explanation of what he means by saying τὸ δίκαιον, 'right' or 'honesty', is τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον 338e-339a. In the Corcyrean Revolution words did change their accustomed meaning under the pressure of events (Thucydides 3.82.4) and were used in accordance with the interests of the dominant faction. It is because Thrasymachus' account is largely true that Plato felt unable to allow Cephalus or Polemarchus to give a simple answer to the question 'What is δικαιοσύνη, honesty?', and felt obliged to write the *Republic* instead. In stable societies, the criteria for the application of evaluative and gerundive words are generally agreed to be clear and fixed. The Greeks at the time the dialogue of the *Republic* is supposed to have taken place (perhaps during the Peace of Nikias) looked back, somewhat nostalgically, to a time when the traditional standards, τὰ πάτρια or τὰ νόμιμα were recognised and observed, and many hoped to recreate a society in which the rules for the words δίκαιον, honest or right, εὐήθης, good-natured, and the rest would be applied σαφῶς καὶ ἀκριβῶς,⁵ clearly and rigorously. If this had been possible, then Socrates would have had a short way with the sophists, being able to convict them of linguistic incompetence in not knowing the correct use of the Greek language.⁶ But Plato saw that this was not possible, and that conventional wisdom as enshrined in language, even if unchallenged, is not necessarily right. Thrasymachus is raising a more fundamental problem than can be settled by an appeal to the correct use of words, and therefore it must be examined on its own merits.⁷

Thrasymachus' Position

What *is* Thrasymachus' position? It is useful to start from Cross and Woozley's clear but, in our view, finally mistaken discussion.⁸ They suggest that there are four things that Thrasymachus might have been doing:

⁴ In addition to 348cd, 343c5, d2, there are further uses of *eutheia* at 349b5, III 400e1-3, 401a7, b4, 409a8, 425b6 (silly) VII 529b3. The latter pejorative uses give some support to the view that these passages were written long after Book I.

⁵ 336d4-5; see above pp.1-4.

⁶ See further, ch.5, esp.p.60.

⁷ See further, ch.5, p.62.

⁸ R.C.Cross and A.D.Woozley, *Plato's Republic: A Philosophical Commentary*, London, 1966, pp.28-41.

1. Naturalistic definition. On this view Thrasymachus is giving a naturalistic definition of morality, so that 'x is *δικαίον*, (*dikaion*), right' means exactly the same as 'x serves the interests of the stronger'. 'That is, the apparently moral judgement "x is *δικαίον*, right" containing the apparently moral word 'right' is not really a moral judgement at all, making a favourable comment on x, for 'right' is not really a moral term, but a neutral factual term.' Cross and Woozley reject this interpretation on the ground that Thrasymachus does repeatedly say 'It is right to promote the interest of the stronger', which he could not intelligibly do if 'right' simply meant 'promoting the interest of the stronger'.
2. Nihilist view. Thrasymachus is saying that there is 'no such thing as morality', morality is an illusion. 'The strong man exploits the weak man's mistaken belief in morality, by persuading him that certain actions or policies of action are what ought to be pursued, when in fact all that is true is that they will, promote the strong man's interest.' Cross and Woozley ask what is the difference between the naturalistic definition view and the nihilist view, and reply 'On the naturalistic definition view, that there is something properly to be called morality and that some actions are or may be right, is not denied. What is denied is that any distinction is to be drawn between an action's being right and its serving the interest of the stronger. According to the Nihilist view, on the other hand, morality is an illusion—nothing at all corresponds to, or could correspond to, the word "morality"'. The nihilist interpretation is rejected for the same reason as the other. Thrasymachus does say 'It is right to...' thus implying that 'right' has a clear meaning.
3. Incidental comment. On this view Thrasymachus is not attempting to define morality or say what it really is at all. He is not claiming to explain what morality is, but is pointing out what he claims to be a fact about it, *viz.* that it serves the interest of the stronger. Cross and Woozley concede that this fits a lot of what Thrasymachus says and especially the fact that he is less interested in answering the question what morality is than in recommending the life of immorality if you can practise it successfully. This 'incidental comment' view, however, is rejected on the ground that Thrasymachus does repeatedly say what morality is, *viz.* that it is what serves the interest of the stronger.
4. Essential analysis. According to this view Thrasymachus 'does not think that morality is an illusion, and he does not think that there is no distinction in meaning between "x is right" and "x serves the interest of the stronger"'. In saying that morality is nothing but the interest of the stronger, he is maintaining that an action is right if and only if it serves the interest of the stronger: it is the fact of an act's serving the interest of the stronger that gives it the characteristic of being right. Cross and Woozley concede that it is a difficulty for this view that Thrasymachus

holds that morality is the other man's interest: because it cannot be the other man's good from the point of the stronger whose interest it is. But they take Thrasymachus to have overlooked this difficulty.

What Cross and Woozley actually show is that it is impossible to discover in Thrasymachus a view that is at the same time *entirely* consistent *and* at all plausible; but we can get closer to it than Cross and Woozley do. Basically Thrasymachus is a nihilist. The reason why he is impatient with all the blather between Socrates and Polemarchus is that they assume that there is *point* in their discussions as to whether, *e.g.* it is right to tell the truth and pay one's debts, or help friends and harm enemies, the point being to discover what is right in some objective sense. They assume that when they have discovered what is right they will have discovered an absolute standard which they are under some kind of rational obligation to observe. If this is what morality is taken to be, then there is no such thing as morality. And this is what Thrasymachus does maintain against Socrates and the common opinion.

In another sense, however, Thrasymachus believes that there is such a thing as morality and is prepared to give a naturalistic definition of it: morality is obedience to the laws. Since the content of the laws varies from one city to another, there are no sorts of action which are absolutely right; morality is relative to the laws of a particular society. The variations are attributable to the class-structure of these societies. Hence democracies make democratic laws, oligarchies oligarchic laws and so on. That is to say, the ruling class, the stronger, make the laws in their own interest. Hence, morality, law-abidingness, is the interest of the stronger, in the quite straightforward sense that the tendency of the ruled to act in accordance with the laws promotes the interest of the rulers, who have rigged the constitution in their own favour.

On this interpretation the assertion that the rulers make the law in their own interest is what Cross and Woozley call 'incidental comment'. It is a piece of sociological observation that this is so and not an attempt to define morality. The ruled, in obeying the laws and investing the notion of morality with an absoluteness and an imperativeness which it does not properly possess are, as Thrasymachus observes, *εὐήθεις*, guileless. There is a close analogy here with Marxist doctrine, according to which the law and the morality of a society reflect the class-structure of that society, *e.g.* bourgeois morality and law reflect the interests of the entrepreneurs and operate at the expense of the manual worker. The working man who believes in the essential morality of the so-called free institutions of a capitalist society is guileless. The point is neatly stated by Gibbon in his comment on the religions of the Roman Empire: 'The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful.'⁹

⁹ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch.2.

Difficulties for this Interpretation

There are two problems for this interpretation of Thrasymachus. One is to account for Thrasymachus' insistence that ἀδικία immorality, or injustice, is better and stronger than δικαιοσύνη morality, or justice; that the answer to the question of 'how should one live?' is 'immorally', or unjustly.

This is not difficult to do. The immoral man rejects justice on the ground that it is another's good. Unlike the other cardinal virtues, courage, wisdom, self-control, which obviously benefit their possessor, justice benefits not him but other people. It is of the essence of justice that it inhibits people from pursuing their own advantage in deference to the rights of others; so the jingle:

The rain it falls upon the just
And also on the unjust fellow;
But more upon the just because
The unjust has the just's umbrella.

And so, as Thrasymachus points out, at the dissolution of a partnership it is always the case that the unjust man has more and the just man less. Hence one could characterize ἀδικία, immorality, or injustice, as the getting the better of the other man. Since the reasonable man will, of course, pursue his own interest, he will not wish to be moral and will regard those who are moral as deluded. Moreover, he has himself contributed to their being deluded; because as a member of a ruling class he has helped to engineer and to maintain the situation in which most people are misled into supposing that the laws represent some absolute standard of morality.

Cross and Woosley point out that Thrasymachus sometimes says that it is right to promote the interest of the stronger, in a way which strongly suggests that he does give 'right' a definitive evaluative force. *e.g.* 'Do you not say that it is right to obey the rulers?' (I 339b7) followed later by 'The ruled must do as the rulers require and this is morality.' (339c10) and again 'Not only is it right according to your argument to promote the interest of the stronger, but also to promote the opposite, what is not his interest.'(339d1-3)¹⁰

Here Thrasymachus seems to be letting Socrates assume that it is a permissible question to ask whether it is right to obey the laws and whether it is right to promote the interest of the stronger in a way that it could not be if δικαίον, right meant either 'in obedience to the laws' or 'in the interest of the stronger'. This objection is reinforced by the impression Thrasymachus gives throughout that it is *right and proper* that the stronger should prevail, that in some sense 'might is right'. This is what makes Cross and Woosley finally interpret Thrasymachus as maintaining that an act is right if and only if it serves the interest of the stronger.

¹⁰ See further below, ch.6, p.74.

The truth would seem to be that, at this point, Thrasymachus has been betrayed into a slight, and entirely understandable inconsistency. What he really thinks—and is quite entitled to think in terms of his own theory—is that the ἄδικος is the best sort of man; he is the master of the art of living; he is the sort of man to become if you can. He is truly happy. This is where he differs from Socrates who believes that it is the δίκαιος righteous, man who is happy. But these evaluative and gerundive words—‘best sort of man’, ‘master of the art of living’, ‘man to become’—are not to be understood in any moral sense. For Thrasymachus is an immoralist and believes that any reasonable person should repudiate morality as prejudicial to his interests.

His mistake is to allow himself to be beguiled by Socrates into expressing this conviction by the use of the *evaluative* word δικαίον, ‘right’. He cannot use that word for this purpose because he has already given it a different non-evaluative sense. But so long as he avoids using the word δικαίον there is no reason why he should not express the view that the completely immoral man, who is also the stronger, *should* have his interests promoted.

His wanting to maintain that the immoral man is in all respects the superior of the moral man constitutes a further reason for rejecting Cleitophon's proposed amendment that ‘morality is what the stronger *thinks* is to his advantage’.¹¹ On the face of it this would get Thrasymachus out of his difficulty and would accord with the facts; rulers do, after all, sometimes make mistakes and a purely sociological theory of morality would allow for this. But Thrasymachus' official theory is shot through with another which only gets made explicit later in the discussion, *viz.* that the ideal sort of person is the immoral man who recognises no obligation to obey the law and is out to get the better of other people. The main way he achieves this is by making laws and persuading or coercing other people to keep them. This is the sort of person to be: he is strong and clever and does not make mistakes. He is an artist in living.

The second objection to this proposed interpretation is that Thrasymachus does not initially say what on this view he ought to say, *viz.* ‘morality is nothing else than obedience to the laws’; he says ‘morality is nothing else than the interest of the stronger’. So that, if anything is his definition of morality, this must be it. The answer to this is that, notoriously, throughout Book I there is little care taken to distinguish between definitions and contingent truths, and that ‘answer’ is a much wider term than definition. When Thrasymachus says ‘morality is nothing else than the interest of the stronger’ this is shorthand for ‘since morality is nothing else than obedience to the laws and, since the laws are made in the interest of the stronger, morality is (boils down to) nothing but the interest of the stronger’. The only point in the entire discussion at which he slips away from this contention is when he is

¹¹ See above, p.4.

led to say, incautiously, that it is right, *δικαίον*, to promote the interest of the stronger and that, as we have seen, was a mistaken way of expressing his belief that it is proper that the interest of the stronger should prevail or, as he finally puts it, immorality is better than morality. When (in Book II), Glaucon and Adeimantus undertake to reformulate his position and defend it against Socrates, it is this claim which they explicitly make, and which Socrates seeks to refute in the remainder of the *Republic*.

Three Further Arguments Against Thrasymachus

Before Glaucon and Adeimantus intervene, however, Plato makes Socrates deploy three further arguments against Thrasymachus which are all of considerable intrinsic interest. The first (I 349b-350c11) introduces the notion of virtue as a *μέσος*, or *μέτριον*, mean, which appears again in the *Philebus* and the *Politicus* and which has affinities with the traditional Greek identification of *τὸ πέρασ* (*to peras*) with good and *τὸ ἄπειρον* (*to apeiron*) with bad.

Thrasymachus has claimed that immorality is a human *ἀρεπή* excellence. The immoral man¹² is master of the art of living. Socrates seeks to show that this is impossible, logically impossible, if, as Thrasymachus claims, the immoral man has no other aim but self-aggrandisement, *πλεονεξία* (*pleonexia*). The argument is perfectly clear as soon as one is led to make the transition from *πλέον ἔχειν* (*pleon echein*) in the sense of ‘get more than’ to *πλέον ἔχειν* (*pleon echein*) in the sense of ‘outdo’ or ‘overreach’. Socrates starts from the obvious point that when things are to be shared the immoral man gets more than the moral man (or less if it is unpleasant). He does this without regard to any consideration of what is the right amount for him to take. The moral man, by contrast, does not try to outdo (get more than) the moral man or to go beyond the right action.

Socrates employs the analogy of a musician tuning a lyre. He aims to get the right tension on the string and so would any other musician. Someone who was unmusical, by contrast, who did not know or did not care, what the right tension was, might seek to outdo the musician by putting greater tension on the string.

The musical metaphor is developed quite naturally by Aristotle when discussing the virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1138b21-25):

¹² Here and throughout this book we use ‘man’ to include ‘woman’. Our reason is well expressed by Dr Kathleen V. Wilkes in her *Real People*, Oxford, 1988, p.27 n., who realises that her ‘acceptance of this convention will annoy some; but, for my part, I am annoyed by the clumsiness of “he or she”, “s/he”, and their ilk. The use of “she” in place of “he” strikes me as misleading . . .; and is, to my ear, distractingly precious and political. Anyone who thinks language helps determine sexual attitudes should contemplate Turkish’.

In all the states of character we have mentioned, as in all other matters, the man who has the rule looks and tightens or relaxes his activity accordingly, and there is a standard which determines the mean states which we say are intermediate between excess and defect, being in accordance with the right rule.

The point of the argument against Thrasymachus is this. Thrasymachus represents the immoral man as having no *σκοπός* standard, by reference to which he can determine what action is the right one *πρὸς δὲ ἀποβλέπων .ἐπιτείνει καὶ ἀνίησιν* always in unregulated competition with other people, moral and immoral alike. He is not trying to achieve a standard, and competing with others only in that endeavour; he has no standard and competes for competition's sake. If this is so, then he cannot be exhibiting any virtue or practising an art of living.

This is a powerful argument against Thrasymachus, if he is actually committed to the rejection of any standards whatever, if, that is, he has to make the transition he in fact makes, with encouragement from Socrates, from the statement that the immoral man tries *πλέον ἔχειν τοῦ δικαίου* in the simple sense of 'get more than' to the statement that he tries *πλέον ἔχειν τῆς δικαίας πράξεως* in the sense required by his argument. It is tempting to argue—and perhaps Plato is trying to argue—that the notion of a perfectly immoral man is logically incoherent because one could never tell when he had finally succeeded in getting the better of others. However successful he was in routing his opponents he might still fail at the next crisis; he can never have a secure hold on *πλεονεξία*, if that is his object.

We are familiar with the contrast between the maintenance of standards and unrestricted competition in the field of broadcasting. In Britain the BBC is required by its charter to maintain certain standards of excellence, but it is also involved in a struggle for ratings. Television companies subject to no such requirement would be engaged in an unrestricted competition for viewers in which the aim would be simply to achieve better ratings than their rivals. They will ask themselves not 'Is this a good programme?' but 'Will it attract more viewers than competing programmes?'

However, it is not clear that this argument succeeds. Perfection in an art and success in it are distinguishable even when the art is the art of success. The worst man (*i.e.* the best at being bad) may not win through factors beyond his control, although by the standards appropriate to the art he thoroughly deserved to win. Thus we might study the career of a thoroughly successful and utterly unscrupulous political schemer and still find it in some respects defective when judged by the most machiavellian standards—'he ought to have flattered that man not tried to bribe him', 'With that other rival threats would have been more appropriate than false promises' and so on. Similarly a TV programmer may be highly paid because of his skill in putting together a mixture of programmes which attracts overall the largest

audience while finding his calculations upset on occasion by some quite gratuitous change in fashion. Herbert Butterfield's *International Conflicts in the Twentieth Century* opens with the following sentence: 'Political action may be assessed according to the brilliance of its conception or the degree of its success, but it also has to be measured against the principles of morality'. Thrasymachus can distinguish between success and brilliance of conception without concerning himself with principles of morality.

The second argument (I 351b6 ff.) calls attention to the need for 'morality among thieves'. A group of people cannot achieve any purpose unless they recognise some obligations to each other. This is an important argument which is bound to form part of any teleological justification of morality. The rules of morality are among the necessary conditions of any viable society; they are also among the necessary conditions of the individual's realisation of his own purposes. Hence a version of the argument finds a place in Cicero's *De Officiis*, in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, in Hume's *Treatise* and, more recently, in Hart's *Concept of Law* (OUP 1961) where it is treated under the heading 'The Minimum Content of Natural Law' (189 ff.). As Hart's heading suggests, it has its limitations, two in particular:

1. I may have an interest in the survival and welfare of any society of which I am a member, but do I have an interest in the survival or welfare of people everywhere, whatever society they belong to? Most historical societies have had a closed rather than an open morality.

Locke is aware of this limitation in chapter III of his *Essay*, entitled 'No innate practical principles':

Justice and keeping of contracts is that which most men seem to agree in. This is a principle which is thought to extend itself to the dens of thieves and the confederacies of the greatest villains; and they who have gone furthest towards the putting off of humanity itself keep faith and rules of justice one with another...

But it is impossible to conceive that he embraces justice as a practical principle who acts fairly with his fellow highwayman and at the same time plunders or kills the next honest man he meets with. Justice and faith are the common ties of society; and, therefore, even outlaws and robbers, who break with all the world besides, must keep faith and rules of equity among themselves or else they cannot hold together. But will anyone say that those who live by fraud and rapine have innate principles of truth and justice which they allow and assent to?

Locke is, of course, here campaigning against innate ideas, and his own position is not entirely clear, but he calls attention to the difficulty. Is morality, conceived as applying only to some limited group, fully morality? Perhaps Plato himself sees this: (I 352c4) *δηλον ὅτι ἐνῆν τις αὐτοῖς δικαιοσύνη*, it is clear that there is some morality of a sort in them.

2. If this difficulty can be overcome and it can be shown that a universal morality is required for the stability of society and the fulfilment of human

purposes, there remains the question whether the determined immoralist can resist the conclusion that he personally should be moral. It is the contention of Glaucon and Adeimantus that he can.

The third argument (I 352e to the end) turns on the assumption that, like eyes and ears, a horse and a pruning knife, the soul has an ἔργον (*ergon*), a job or a function, for which it is the indispensable or best instrument. It is to superintend, to rule and to advise. Since morality is a virtue, or excellence, of the soul and immorality a vice, a moral soul will rule and superintend well and an immoral soul badly. So, Socrates concludes, a moral man will live well, but an immoral man badly, which is to say that the moral man will be εὐδαίμων (*eudaimon*) and the immoral man not.

This passage encapsulates the entire argument of the *Republic* and it remains to be seen whether in its complete form it is able to carry conviction.¹³ In its present abbreviated form, it is open to a number of objections which have often been made:

1. Plato has generalised illegitimately from such things as pruning knives which are made for a purpose, by way of eyes and ears which can be seen biologically to be serving a purpose, to horses which are, indeed, used by men for a purpose but cannot be said to have one by nature. The soul as such may generate purposes but does not otherwise have one. If Plato wishes to maintain otherwise he needs to do more than rely on the analogies he employs in this passage.
2. Whether the virtue or excellence of the soul is morality or immorality is precisely the question at issue with Thrasymachus and he ought not to be allowed to concede this point.
3. The conclusion, that the moral man lives well and hence is εὐδαίμων is a pun which trades on an ambiguity of the Greek expression εὖ ζῆν, to live well. It does not follow that if someone lives well, *i.e.* morally, that he lives well in the sense of being happy.

That the argument as it stands is open to all three objections is undeniable. It remains to be seen whether the argument thus summarily and unconvincingly set out can, in the remainder of the *Republic*, in its full metaphysical development, be taken more seriously.

¹³ See below, ch.8.