

Lecture 2: Political Immoralism

the opening critique: Thrasymachus' account of justice as the advantage of the stronger (see sections I and II) (336b-340c)

the turn to tyranny: his praise of the tyrant, including his account of the 'real ruler' as the one who practises injustice in pursuit of his own interest (340dff.) and his praises of the life of tyranny as admirable, enviable, etc. (343bff.) (see section IV)

dikaios - a -on - just, as predicated of actions, people, etc.

to dikaion - the just, justice; justice (i) as a property of actions and (ii) as a political principle ordering a state ('political justice')

Dikê - Justice, daughter of Zeus [= *to dikaion* (ii)?]

dikaiosunê - justice as a virtue of character, the disposition which causes just behaviour in the person of whom it is characteristic

pleonexia: the self-interested, maximizing desire to 'have more' [*pleonektein*] of the good

the pleonectic theory: human beings are by nature [*phusei*] predominantly motivated by *pleonexia*, the maximizing desire for competitive zero-sum goods such as wealth and power

Pleonectic Man: someone of whom the pleonectic theory is true

error theory - the metaethical position claiming that (i) everyday moral judgements (including, in the ancient context, predications of 'just' and 'unjust') are to be understood objectively, as asserting claims about the way the world is; and that (ii) all such positive claims are false because (iii) no moral entities (justice, injustice, rightness, wrongness, the Good, virtue) exist.

I. Error Theory in the Opening Critique (I): The Unmasking of 'Just':

The three formulations:

- (1) justice is the advantage of the stronger (338c2-4, 339a3-4, 343c4)
- (2) justice is the advantage of the ruler (339a1-2, 343c4)
- (3) justice is the advantage of another person (343c3)

Hesiod on justice:

Perses, lay these things in your heart and give heed to Justice, and put violence entirely out of your mind. This is the law that Cronus' son has established for human beings: that fish and beasts and winged birds eat one another, since Justice is not among them; but to human beings he has given Justice, which is the best by far. For if someone who recognizes what is just is willing to speak it out publicly, then far-seeing Zeus gives him wealth.

ὦ Πέρση, σὺ δὲ ταῦτα μετὰ φρεσὶ βάλλεο σῆσιν, καὶ νῦν Δίκης ἐπάκουε, βίης δ' ἐπιλήθεο πάνπαν. τόνδε γὰρ ἀνθρώποισι νόμον διέταξε Κρονίων, ἰχθύσι μὲν καὶ θηρσὶ καὶ οἰωνοῖς πετεηνοῖς ἔσθειν ἀλλήλους, ἐπεὶ οὐ Δίκη ἐστὶ μετ' αὐτοῖς· ἀνθρώποισι δ' ἔδωκε Δίκην, ἣ πολλὸν ἀρίστη γίνεται· εἰ γὰρ τίς κ' ἐθέλη τὰ δίκαι' ἀγορευῆσαι γινώσκων, τῷ μὲν τ' ὄλβον διδοῖ εὐρύοπα Ζεὺς· (*Works and Days* 274-81, trans. G. Most)

Thrasymachus' argument:

"Don't you know," he said, "that some cities are ruled tyrannically, some democratically, and some aristocratically?"

-- Of course.

In each city, isn't the ruling group master?"

-- Certainly.

And each ruling group sets down laws for its own advantage; a democracy sets down democratic laws; a tyranny, tyrannic laws; and likewise in other cases. And they declare that what they have set down-their own advantage-is just for the ruled, and the man who departs from it they punish as a breaker of the law and a doer of unjust deeds. This, best of men, is what I mean: in every city the same thing is just, the advantage of the established ruling body. It surely is master; so the man who reasons rightly concludes that everywhere justice is the same thing, the advantage of the stronger." ¹

Εἴτ' οὐκ οἴσθ', ἔφη, ὅτι τῶν πόλεων αἱ μὲν τυραννοῦνται, αἱ δὲ δημοκρατοῦνται, αἱ δὲ ἀριστοκρατοῦνται;

Πῶς γὰρ οὐ;

Οὐκοῦν τοῦτο κρατεῖ ἐν ἐκάστη πόλει, τὸ ἄρχον;

Πάνυ γε.

Τίθεται δέ γε τοὺς νόμους ἐκάστη ἢ ἀρχὴ πρὸς τὸ αὐτῇ συμφέρον, δημοκρατία μὲν δημοκρατικούς, τυραννὶς δὲ τυραννικούς, καὶ αἱ ἄλλαι οὕτως· θέμεναι δὲ ἀπέφηναν τοῦτο δίκαιον τοῖς ἀρχομένοις εἶναι, τὸ σφίσι συμφέρον, καὶ τὸν τούτου ἐκβαίνοντα κολάζουσιν ὡς παρανομοῦντά τε καὶ ἀδικοῦντα. τοῦτ' οὖν ἐστίν, ὃ βέλτιστε, ὃ λέγω ἐν ἀπάσαις ταῖς πόλεσιν ταῦτόν εἶναι δίκαιον, τὸ τῆς καθεστηκυίας ἀρχῆς συμφέρον· αὕτη δὲ που κρατεῖ, ὥστε συμβαίνει τῷ ὀρθῶς λογιζομένῳ πανταχοῦ εἶναι τὸ αὐτὸ δίκαιον, τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον. (338d6-9a4)

1. *The observation of diversity*: Regimes differ by constitutional form and ruling power: some cities are ruled tyrannically, some democratically, some aristocratically (ie oligarchically). (338d6-7)

2. *The cynical induction*: Each ruling power sets down the law for its own advantage. (338e1-3)

3. In setting down the law, the ruling power proclaims what is just. (338e3-6)

4. Therefore justice in every city, despite constitutional diversity, is the same: the advantage of the ruling power. (338e6-9a2) [(1+2)+3]

5. The ruling power is everywhere stronger than the ruled. (339a)

6. Therefore justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger. (339a) [4+5]

II. Error Theory in the Opening Critique (II): Political Justice and the Common Good:

'Protagoreans' on legislation and the good of the city:

"Then consider political questions, about the fine and shameful, the just and unjust, the pious and impious: whatever view each city takes on these matters, and establishes as its law or convention, is truth and fact for that city. In such matters neither any individual nor any city can claim superior wisdom. But when it is a question of setting down what is to the advantage of the city and what is not, the matter is different.... It would certainly not have the audacity to affirm that whatever a city sets down, thinking it will be advantageous to itself, will also turn out to be so." (*Theaetetus* 172a-b, trans. Levett/Burnyeat revised)

Οὐκοῦν καὶ περὶ πολιτικῶν, καλὰ μὲν καὶ αἰσχρὰ καὶ δίκαια καὶ ἄδικα καὶ ὅσια καὶ μῆ, οἷα ἂν ἐκάστη πόλις οἰηθεῖσα θῆται νόμιμα αὐτῇ, ταῦτα καὶ εἶναι τῇ ἀληθείᾳ ἐκάστη, καὶ ἐν τούτοις μὲν οὐδὲν σοφώτερον οὔτε ἰδιώτην ἰδιώτου οὔτε πόλιν πόλεως εἶναι· ἐν δὲ τῷ συμφέροντα ἑαυτῇ ἢ μὴ συμφέροντα τίθεσθαι, ἐνταῦθ', εἴπερ που, αὐτὸ ὁμολογήσει σύμβουλον τε συμβούλου διαφέρειν καὶ πόλεως δόξαν ἑτέραν ἑτέρας πρὸς ἀλήθειαν, καὶ οὐκ

¹ Translations from the Republic are revised from A. Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (New York, 1968)

ἂν πάνυ τολμήσειε φῆσαι, ἃ ἂν θῆται πόλις συμφέροντα οἰηθεῖσα αὐτῇ, παντὸς μᾶλλον ταῦτα καὶ συνοίσειν·

"Here they are perfectly ready to maintain that whatever any city decides to be just, and establishes as such, actually is what is just and right for that community and for as long as it is established. On the other hand, when it is a question of what things are good, we no longer find anyone so heroic that he will venture to contend that whatever a city thinks useful, and establishes, really is useful, so long as it is the established order....

And surely this that a city aims at when it legislates, whatever name it calls it. A community always makes such laws as are most useful to it -- so far as the limits of its judgement and capacity permit -- Or do you think legislation may have some other object in view?

-- Oh no, not at all." (177d-8a1)

ἐν μὲν τοῖς ἄλλοις ἐθέλειν δυσχυρίζεσθαι καὶ οὐχ ἥκιστα περὶ τὰ δίκαια, ὡς παντὸς μᾶλλον ἂν θῆται πόλις δόξαντα αὐτῇ, ταῦτα καὶ ἔστι δίκαια τῇ θεμένῃ, ἕωσπερ ἂν κέηται· περὶ δὲ τὰγαθὰ οὐδένα ἀνδρεῖον ἔθ' οὕτως εἶναι ὥστε τολμᾶν διαμάχεσθαι ὅτι καὶ ἃ ἂν ὠφέλιμα οἰηθεῖσα πόλις ἑαυτῇ θῆται, καὶ ἔστι τοσοῦτον χρόνον ὅσον ἂν κέηται ὠφέλιμα...

Ἀλλ' ὁ ἂν τοῦτο ὀνομάζῃ, τούτου δήπου στοχάζεται νομοθετουμένη, καὶ πάντας τοὺς νόμους, καθ' ὅσον οἶεταί τε καὶ δύναται, ὡς ὠφελιμωτάτους ἑαυτῇ τίθεται· ἢ πρὸς ἄλλο τι βλέπουσα νομοθετεῖται;

Οὐδαμῶς.

Hesiod on justice and the common good: But those who give straight judgments to foreigners and fellow citizens and do not turn aside from justice at all, their city blooms and the people in it flower. For them, Peace, the nurse of the young, is on the earth, and far-seeing Zeus never marks out painful war; nor does famine attend straight-judging men, nor calamity, but they share out in festivities the fruits of the labors they care for. For these the earth bears the means of life in abundance, and on the mountains the oak tree bears acorns on its surface, and bees in its center; their woolly sheep are weighed down by their fleeces; and their wives give birth to children who resemble their parents. They bloom with good things continuously. And they do not go onto ships, for the grain-giving field bears them crops. (*Works and Days*, 225-37)

III. Thrasymachus' Anger:

"It is a very remarkable moment: the Sophists verge upon the first *critique of morality*, the first *insight* into morality: -- they juxtapose the multiplicity (the geographical relativity) of moral value judgements; -- they let it be known that every morality can be dialectically justified; i.e., they divine that all attempts to give reasons for morality are necessarily *sophistical*... -- they postulate the first truth that a 'morality-in-itself', a 'good-in-itself' do not exist, that it is a swindle to talk of 'truth' in this field." -- F. Nietzsche, notebooks March-June 1888 (as translated in W. Kaufman and R. Hollingdale eds., *The Will to Power*, New York, 1968)²

² "Der Augenblick ist sehr merkwürdig: die Sophisten streifen an die erste Kritik der Moral, die erste Einsicht in die Moral...-- sie stellen der Mehrheit (die lokale Bedingtheit) der moralischen Werthurtheile neben einander -- sie geben zu verstehen, dass jede Moral dialektisch rechtfertigen <lasse>, -- dass es keinen Unterscheid mache: das heisst, sie errathen, wie alle Begründung einer Moral nothwendig sophistisch sein muss ---- sie stellen die erste Wahrheit hin, dass 'eine Moral an sich', ein 'Gutes an sich' nicht existirt, das es Schwindel ist, von 'Wahrheit' auf diesem Gebiete zu reden" (*Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, edited by G. Colli and M. Montinari. Berlin:1980 ff., vol. 13, pp. 292-3)

The prohibitions:

"What is this nonsense that has possessed you for so long, Socrates? And why do you act like fools [*euêthizesthai*] deferring to one another? If you truly want to know what the just is, don't only ask and gratify your love of honour by refuting whatever someone answers -- you know that it is easier to ask than to answer -- but answer yourself and say what you assert the just to be. And see to it you don't tell me that it is what must be done [*deon*], or the beneficial or profitable or gainful or advantageous [*sumpheron*]; but tell me clearly and precisely what you mean, for I won't accept it if you say such inanities" (336b7-d4).

IV. Conclusions:*Normative compression:*

"But what about your victims -- did you ever feel sorry for them?" asked the American.

Vitaly looked nonplussed. He turned to me:

"Of course not. No one who does what I do feels sorry for the victim. You're either a dope or a real man, and dopes deserve all they get." (P. Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of Putin's Russia* (New York, 1914) p. 22)

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