

Socrates the Cosmopolitan

Socrates articulates a philosophy of global citizenship when he argues against Polemarchus that “it is the function not of the just person to harm either a friend or anyone else, but of his opposite, the unjust person.” *R* 335d11 At a minimum, the just person has the obligation to any and every human being, regardless of their status as friend or enemy, not to harm them. This language echoes the formulation of the *Crito* very closely, where Socrates says that those who recognize that this obligation of non-harm extends to all persons, whether or not they have injured us, are few and far between. Those who do recognize it and those who do not cannot belong to the same community. Nor does Socrates restrict membership in the Cosmopolis to Athenian citizens, as we hear in the *Apology*: “Thus, even now I still go around seeking these things, and in accordance with the god I search after anyone, whether fellow citizen or foreigner, whom I think is wise.”

Recall the identity of the interlocutors in *Republic* I: the first person to speak in *Republic* I is a slave; Cephalus an immigrant; Thrasymachus a foreign visitor; Charmantides is visiting from a rural deme, is of the highest class, and has inherited wealth; Socrates is poor. Cephalus owned a shield factory that employed 120 slaves. We also meet Socrates’ antagonist (later befriended by Socrates), Thrasymachus the Sophist, native of Chalcedon, a town recaptured for Athens by Socrates’ associate, Alcibiades, in the Ionian phase of the Peloponnesian war:

“Thrasymachus visited Athens for negotiations held in 407, after Chalcedon had mounted an unsuccessful revolt against Imperial Athens and...his diplomatic need to prevent harsh reprisals against his native city account[s] for the speech preserved as DK fr.1 and...Thrasymachus’ position in the *Republic* (351b). “ Nails (2002, 289)

Thus in the *Republic*, Socrates moderates between two parties—one, an enthusiastic proponent of business as usual, oblivious to the consequences of his actions, the other an enraged victim of Athenian Imperialism. Plato lets us imagine how angry Thrasymachus is: what ridiculous naiveté, he is saying—you sit here bantering about justice while people are living under a system of exploitation. Athenian hypocrisy. Socrates recognizes that those who are treated unjustly are harmed—in this case, Thrasymachus, by all historical accounts a decent man, now thinks that justice is only a fool’s game. Who knows how effective Socrates’ global politics proved to be? While Cephalus leaves the room Thrasymachus at the very least, stays to hear the rest of the conversation. The minimal community constituted by partners in the elenctic conversation, as here in *Republic* I, is a cosmopolis, a polity whose members are protected under the agreement of the just person, not to harm.

Bibliography:

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