The question posed by this seminar series is whether classical political philosophy has anything to teach us as we enter the twenty-first century. Let me begin, then, with a word on how Plato’s analysis of justice might speak to this question. The simplest and most important way in which Plato is relevant today and as we look into the future is the way in which he has always been relevant: Plato’s *Republic* remains the most profound work on justice ever written, and it is a work which can help us discover the truth about justice. But since this claim can be at this point nothing more than an assertion, let me offer a more specific reason to study Plato today. Much of contemporary political theory, especially that strand initiated by the early work of John Rawls, rests on a Kantian foundation, and this "deontological" strand of contemporary thought has become quite influential in shaping contemporary thinking about justice. It is often argued today, or even just assumed, that certain "rights claims" or claims to just desert must take precedence by justice over considerations of advantage or even over the welfare of society as a whole. Justice, considered in Rawls’ words, "the first virtue of social institutions," is seen to be beyond compromise as a factor or consideration in our decision making.\(^1\) However, the most powerful case for the foundation of this view—the heart of which is a claim about the priority of the right over the good—is found not in Rawls but in Kant himself. Unlike Rawls, who borrows Kantian principles without repeating the rigorous foundational work of Kant, Kant himself offers a powerful case for the absolute primacy of moral duty conceived of in terms of categorical imperatives, a case which has now come through Rawls and his followers to be expressed in terms of the priority of the right over the good. Yet, if we want to consider whether the
Kantian view is correct, whether the demands of morality and justice are really what this view holds them to be, one of the best ways to do this is to set Kant’s work against that of classical political philosophy, especially that of Plato, who presents the decisive alternative to this view.

Of course, it is hard matter to say where Plato diverges from Kant, i.e., what his non-Kantian understanding of justice is, or, more importantly, to grasp the reasoning underlying Plato's understanding of justice. And this brings me to a further question I want to touch on here at the outset, that of why I am focusing on the opening sections of the Republic. Plato's treatment of justice in the Republic is perhaps most famous for culminating in a number of extraordinary and paradoxical conclusions: that justice consists in the proper order of the soul, that there will be no end to the evils in the cities until philosophers rule, even that the truest or highest practice of justice is philosophy itself. Yet, despite the grandeur of these conclusions, and in part because of it, the humbler, less glamorous beginning of the Republic is in fact the essential foundation of the whole. Because it offers the most thorough dialectical confrontation with the everyday opinions just men hold about justice, the beginning of the Republic is the most important part in establishing the basis of Plato's view of justice. Humble as the Republic’s opening pages may be, they are crucial to the ascent to the later, more spectacular discussions of justice and philosophy: these later discussions, so paradoxical in that they depart so radically from the way justice is ordinarily understood, can only be justified, so to speak, by the examinations and challenges found in Book One and at the beginning of Book Two. The latter parts of the Republic are arbitrary if they are not understood as dictated by (in the sense either of solutions to or elaborations of) the problems posed at the beginning.

Now, with this brief explanation of the contemporary relevance of Plato’s analysis of justice and my reasons for focusing on the beginning of the Republic, let
me turn directly to the text. My aim in what follows is not to give a complete account
of the twists and turns of the text, but rather to highlight a few crucial moments and
to trace what I take to be the thread tying the arguments of this part of the dialogue
together.

I shall begin with Socrates’ exchanges with Cephalus and Polemarchus, which
open the discussion of justice in the Republic. To state the general point first, the
movement of these exchanges consists largely in bringing out the significance of a
certain thought embedded in any ordinary, decent understanding of justice. We can
see the emergence of this thought very early on, with Socrates’ well-known objection
to Cephalus’ view of justice. Against Cephalus’ view that justice is simply telling the
truth and returning what one has taken (or received: labêi) from another, Socrates
insists that justice is more complicated, that it is only sometimes just to do these
things but other times unjust (335c1-5).2 The example Socrates gives is of a man
faced with the demand that weapons he had been keeping for a friend be returned
when his friend is in a fit of rage. “I suppose,” Socrates says, “that all would say . . .
that one ought not to return such things, that the man who did return them would
not be just, and, further, that one ought not to be willing to tell the truth in all
respects to someone in such a state” (331c5-9). Now, on first hearing, Socrates’
objection certainly seems very simple, and it also seems to be something which, as he
suggests, anyone would join Cephalus in agreeing with: the rule admits of
exceptions. The important question raised by this opening example, though, is how
such exceptions are to be understood, and how the rule is to be understood in light of
such exceptions. For rules seem to provide a clear standard of justice: justice is \( x, y, \)
and \( z \), in this case telling the truth and returning what one has taken. But, as is
indicated by the allowance for exceptions, and by the admission that in the
exceptions \textit{the deviation from the rule and not the rule is just}, justice is never thought
to be only \(x, y, \) and \(z\).\(^3\) As his concession to Socrates shows, Cephalus holds another opinion about justice. Beyond telling the truth and returning what one has taken, he also thinks that justice is not something harmful, or, stated positively, he thinks that it is something good. Indeed this thought appears to be even more important than the rule that justice is telling the truth and returning what one has taken, since it can justify an override of that rule.

By thinking through the acknowledgment, then, that there are exceptions to the rules of justice, we see very early in the *Republic* that this acknowledgment reveals another thought about what justice is, a thought not expressed by any rule, but apparently stronger than any rule. Our own agreement with Socrates’ example, it is important to add, shows that the belief that justice is good is not idiosyncratic to Cephalus but belongs to us all. And if we begin to think out the implications of our willingness to sacrifice rules when following them is not good, we may begin to see that this can lead very far.\(^4\)

But where exactly does it lead? To what understanding of justice? A certain possibility is, if not fully presented, at least suggested in the ensuing exchange between Socrates and Cephalus’ son Polemarchus. Polemarchus enters the conversation in defense of his father, invoking the poet Simonides’ saying that the just is giving to each what is owed (331d4-e4). Against Polemarchus’ presumably straightforward initial interpretation of this saying, by which each would be owed what legally belongs to him, Socrates repeats, and even expands, his basic objection (331e5-332b3). Given that there are circumstances in which it would be unjust, because harmful, to return a deposit, it is hard to see what Simonides, "a wise and divine man," could have meant by saying that the just is giving to each what is owed. Moreover, Socrates also gives us now a glimpse of an alternative: perhaps the just is giving to each what is *fitting*, i.e., what is good for them. This would seem at any rate to be the understanding of justice dictated by the logic of Socrates’ argument, or the
way of expressing justice by a rule never in conflict with justice being good. Thus, Socrates points us quite quickly in Book One to a movement from, in short, "owed" to "fitting" (consider especially 332a1-2, b9-c3). To be sure, this movement would carry us in a very radical direction—beyond private property and the laws that sanction private property—but it is a movement based on the simple thought that it is better, and therefore more just, to give to each what is good for them than it is to give them what legally belongs to them.

Now, Socrates may encourage us to entertain this radical movement. But he does not let us simply accept it. For one thing, the conversation in Book One does not turn immediately from "owed," in the conventional sense of what legally belongs to each, to "fitting" in the sense of what is good for each. Rather, the conversation turns to another, specific understanding of what it means to give to each what is fitting that is put forth, not by Socrates, but by Polemarchus, who has in mind by this something other than giving to each what is good for them. Indeed, Polemarchus says that it is fitting to give enemies some harm, that is to say, the opposite of what is good for them (332b6-8). Polemarchus understands "fitting" in this way: one gives what is fitting by helping friends and harming enemies. In this, Polemarchus preserves a certain (if revised) notion of "owed": since our friends deserve our help, helping them is both owed and fitting, and since our enemies deserve to be harmed, harming them is also both owed and fitting.

Polemarchus' understanding of justice as helping friends and harming enemies is open, of course, to a number of objections. In his critique that follows, Socrates emphasizes three main difficulties. First, in order to truly help friends and harm enemies, one must have knowledge of how to do so; but this seems to mean that it is knowledge, more than justice, that is essential to helping friends and harming enemies (332c5-333e2). Secondly, we sometimes make mistakes in choosing our friends and enemies, taking as friends those who are bad and as enemies those who
are good; yet can we maintain, as Polemarchus would have to, that it is sometimes just to help the bad and harm the good (334c1-335b1)? And finally, would a just man really harm anyone, thereby using his justice, something good, to produce harm, something bad (335b2-d13)? Now, each of Socrates’ arguments here appeals in one way or another to the same thought I noted above—namely, that justice is something good—each bringing out some respective variation and implication of this thought. Admittedly, each of Socrates’ arguments also abstracts from some important consideration. Rather than trying, though, to explain Socrates’ abstractions, I want to focus on another point which arises later, after Socrates has completed his critique of justice as helping friends and harming enemies. I mentioned above that the turn to the definition of justice as helping friends and harming enemies came on the heels of and largely eclipsed Socrates’ suggestion that justice ought to be defined as giving to each what is fitting, understanding “fitting” again to mean what is good for each. And it could thus seem that Socrates’ critique of justice as helping friends and harming enemies, once it is complete, has prepared the way for a return to that earlier suggestion. In fact, not only does the door seem open at this point for Socrates to return to justice as giving to each what is fitting, but a number of the difficulties Socrates has raised with both Cephalus’ and Polemarchus’ understandings of justice would seem to point towards this alternative understanding of justice. Giving to each what is fitting, since it would require knowledge of what is fitting for each, could be accomplished only by the wise, who would have to be in a position to distribute all things according to the needs and abilities of each. Such an arrangement would overcome the crudeness and inflexibility of laws (a way of putting the earlier problem raised in the discussion of returning another’s property); it would best provide for the knowledge needed to help people; and it would seem never to cause undue harm. Yet, strikingly, after he has rejected justice as helping friends and harming enemies, Socrates does not return to the suggestion that justice is giving to each what is
fitting—instead, he concludes his conversation with Polemarchus by asking that another definition of justice be proposed. But why not? Why doesn't Socrates say that justice is giving to each what is fitting?

There may be a number of reasons for Socrates' unwillingness to return to his earlier suggestion. But let me mention what I think is the most important point to consider. Giving to each what is fitting would require, to repeat, that the wise be the distributors of all things. It would require, in other words, the absolute rule of the wise. Yet, in addition to the most obvious obstacles facing the prospects of such rule, many of which are brought out in the later books of the Republic—e.g., the unlikelihood that the many unwise would welcome the rule of the wise—there is also the question of whether this arrangement would be good for the wise themselves and therefore whether the wise would be willing to rule. For while a case can be made that it would be good for the others, the unwise, to be ruled by the wise, it would seem to be less beneficial for the wise themselves to spend their time and energy attending to the problems and needs of everyone else. Still, even if it is not good for the wise to rule, this may not settle the matter. For couldn't it be said that, if the rule of the wise is what is required for the good of everyone else, then the wise have an obligation to rule? That is to say, in considering the full problem of the rule of the wise, one must raise the question of whether it is tenable to insist that, quite apart from any consideration of their own good, the wise are rightfully obligated to rule. In fact, I would suggest that this question about obligation is the deepest question that the movement of Socrates' discussion with Cephalus and Polemarchus—especially given the failure of that movement to return to justice as giving to each what is fitting—raises or at least points to.

As for the answer to this question, it can be approached, if not fully resolved, by reflecting further on a few points that have already come to light in Socrates' discussion with Cephalus and Polemarchus. To see the first point, it is important to
recall, once again, that we were originally led to the view that justice ought to be
giving to each what is fitting, and therefore that the wise ought to rule, by the
importance, affirmed implicitly by Cephalus and Polemarchus, of the thought that
justice is good. Since Cephalus and Polemarchus proved unwilling to call something
harmful or bad "just," one can even say that they demanded that justice be good. Yet
there was an ambiguity in that demand that I have not yet considered: good for
whom? If we look back at Socrates' exchanges with Cephalus and Polemarchus,
especially the earliest ones, we can see that at least the primary emphasis seems to
have been on justice's goodness for others—that is, its goodness for those whom the
just man helps, his beneficiaries. Yet it is also true that the goodness of justice for
the just man himself has certainly not been denied. To the contrary, it seems largely
to have been assumed, and Cephalus and Polemarchus have given visible
indications that their concern for the goodness of justice extends also—and perhaps
above all—to the just man himself. Cephalus' hopes about what awaits the just in
Hades, for instance, testify to the concern in question (see 330d4-331b7). And even
more so does Polemarchus' unwillingness to think that true justice could bring about
the suffering of the just (see 334d3-11; see also 332a11-b4), as well as his belief that
justice is human virtue, especially when one considers that, in the context in which
he expresses this belief, "virtue" means a human being's own perfection and a good
entirely free of evils (see 335c1-d13).6 Yet, to return to the question of the rule of the
wise, if the goodness of justice for the just is essential to our convictions about justice,
can we really maintain that there are genuine obligations in cases in which the just
man would be harmed? And if not, wouldn't this mean that the wise man, if he knew
of a better way of life than rule, would be free to pursue it (consider, e.g., 347b5-d8,
517c7-d2; see also Plato's Apology of Socrates 31d5-32a2, 38a1-8)?7

Now, that the goodness of justice has thus far been assumed and Cephalus'
and Polemarchus' concern with it has been confirmed is relevant not only to this
question of the rule of the wise, but it can also help one to see in a simple way the
significance of Thrasymachus’ entry into the conversation in Book One. For
Thrasymachus delivers perhaps the most famous of all attacks on justice, denying
most explicitly that it is good for the just. Thrasymachus’ attack on justice,
moreover, initiates a crucial turn in Book One, one that will affect the entire
Republic. Whereas the focus of the first part of Book One is on discovering what
justice is, with Socrates leading the search for the true definition of justice, at a
certain point in his discussion with Thrasymachus the guiding question shifts to the
question of whether justice is good—and Socrates’ role switches accordingly from
leading the search for justice to defending the goodness of justice. But this turn
raises a number of questions. In addition to the questions I will touch on regarding
the character of Socrates’ defense of justice in Book One, and the question Socrates
himself raises of how one can defend something before one has discovered what it is,
my argument thus far should prompt the following question. Socrates’ exchanges
with Cephalus and Polemarchus were driven, as I have stressed, by the conviction
that justice must be good, a conviction which I suggest ultimately means good for the
practitioner as well as the recipient of justice. These exchanges, to put this another
way, were driven by the thought that justice would not be justice if it were not good.
The turn, however, to the question of the goodness of justice as a question, seems to
imply that justice could be bad. Can justice not be good and still be justice? The
turn to the question of the goodness of justice forces one to raise another question as
well: Should justice be judged by and hence subordinated to a standard other than
justice itself?

These questions, as it turns out, raise many of the same issues as the earlier
question of whether the wise have an obligation to rule. In fact, the questions just
posed can be seen as broader and more radical versions of that question, since that
question is really about the relation of the just and the good, or about obligation and
its relation to benefit. Now, the uncovering of the more radical questions—or, if one prefers, the posing of the same basic question in more radical terms—can be blamed on Thrasymachus, who is of course the one who usually gets the blame and who has become one of the most infamous characters in all of Plato’s dialogues. But although he is not without some responsibility for his reputation, Thrasymachus is misunderstood. He is almost always taken to be much more unjust than he is, or at least than he simply is. Let me try, then, to sketch some aspects of the puzzle of Thrasymachus, this infamous Platonic villain.

Thrasymachus begins with a statement that describes how the rulers in each city force and deceive the ruled into serving the rulers’ own private advantage. This is true, he argues, under all regimes—democracies as much as tyrannies—and thus he insists that justice is in the decisive sense everywhere the same thing: the advantage of the ruling group, or the advantage of the stronger (338c1-339a4). This is Thrasymachus’ most famous argument, so famous that we sometimes speak of a "Thrasymachean" view without further explanation. Yet, famous as it is, Thrasymachus' argument is rarely understood in its full complexity, a complexity which begins to show itself if we reflect on the angry manner in which Thrasymachus enters the conversation of the Republic and ask about his intention in delivering this debunking argument. Stated simply, does Thrasymachus mean simply to praise the rulers, or is he also blaming them? That is, can’t we understand Thrasymachus’ desire to expose the fraud that the rulers have going in each city as exactly that—namely, a desire to expose a fraud? Doesn’t this, in fact, have to be the explanation of what would otherwise be the inexplicably foolish candor of an unjust man who blows his cover in the very act of declaring his principles? Now, if I am correct in this suggestion that Thrasymachus is accusing the rulers of a fraud, Thrasymachus’ attack on justice must be understood as stemming not entirely from wickedness (or injustice) but partly from a kind of justice of his own: he wants to expose the fraud,
show that when the rulers order the ruled to be just or to serve "the common good," the rulers are merely deceiving (and/or forcing) the ruled into serving their own private interests. The rulers in the various cities are not themselves just. They are acting solely for the sake of their own good. Yet, in making this accusation, doesn't Thrasymachus (unwittingly) suggest or imply that he himself believes that there is a standard higher than the individual good? This is implicit in his indignation at the rulers for acting only on the basis of their own interests: just as one would not (with genuine indignation) accuse others of dishonesty unless one believed that people ought to be honest, or accuse others of cheating unless one believed that people ought to act fairly, so it would seem that one would not accuse the rulers of seeking their own good unless one believed—at least on some level—that they ought to act otherwise. Now, throughout the conversation between Thrasymachus and Socrates, rulers represent a kind of test case for justice. My suggestion can therefore be put another way: Thrasymachus himself thinks—at least on some level—that the rulers ought to be just, or, stated in terms more appropriate to his accusation, he thinks that they ought to put the common good before their own individual good in fact and not only in speech.9

Needless to say, however, Thrasymachus never quite brings himself to say this. In fact, what he explicitly says is quite the opposite. But why can't he bring himself to say this? What prevents him from insisting upon the obligation that his accusation of the rulers seems to point to? With this question, we can better understand the full significance of the longest speech Thrasymachus delivers in Book One, his most extreme attack on justice (343b1-344c8). For it is in this speech, which is based on the image of shepherds and sheep, that Thrasymachus makes fully explicit his belief that there is no common good and thus that the rulers would harm themselves by serving the ruled (see especially 343c1-d1, e1-7). That is, if Thrasymachus' initial argument can be read as an insistence, in part, that the rulers
in the various cities do not act for the sake of the common good but that they should, his longest speech makes the problem deeper, because Thrasymachus there explicitly argues that there is not even a potential common good that one could act for.

Although Thrasymachus believes somewhere in his heart, then, that the rulers ought to be just, what prevents him from fully affirming this, from fully believing in this "ought," is his view that it would be foolish of the rulers to be just, and Thrasymachus proves unwilling to insist that anyone ought to be foolish, or that anyone could have an obligation to harm himself.

So Thrasymachus in his own way shows both a concern with justice and a concern with its goodness, at least in the sense that we see that he cares about justice and is unwilling fully to affirm the justice or obligatoriness of something harmful.

Now, especially given these concerns, it is important to consider what Socrates grants to Thrasymachus and what he does not grant. What he does not grant is that Thrasymachus has shown that justice is bad, or that Thrasymachus’ critique of the goodness of justice is sound. But what Socrates does grant is that the question of justice’s goodness is indeed a meaningful and important question. In fact, Socrates stresses the gravity of this question (see 344d6-345b3 and 347e2-4). What Socrates also seems to grant to Thrasymachus is that, in considering the goodness of justice, the justice whose goodness is to be considered—or what deserves the name "justice"—is more or less justice as it is ordinarily understood. That is, despite the indications that Thrasymachus too is concerned with justice, Socrates does not try to use this concern, as he had with Cephalus and Polemarchus, to launch or continue the search for a new, unfamiliar definition of justice. Rather than insisting on a return to the search for what justice is, Socrates responds to Thrasymachus’ attack on justice by turning to defend the goodness of justice, therewith granting, apparently, that justice itself, its content, can be taken to be what it is generally thought to be. Or does Socrates really grant this? At the end of Book One, he faults his procedure, saying
that he made a mistake in turning to the question of the goodness of justice before having discovered what justice is (353a13-c3). And furthermore, Socrates’ defense of justice in Book One has a peculiar character. Of the three arguments that make up this defense, two of them (the first and the third) begin not so much from justice as it is ordinarily understood—to try from there to show that it is good—as they begin from something good (namely, wisdom and virtue) and try to show that this is justice. Yet there are other complications too. For only two of Socrates’ arguments proceed in this way: the other one, Socrates’ well-known argument that every group—even a gang of robbers—requires justice amongst its members, does begin from justice as it is ordinarily understood. And there is also the more massive problem that all three of Socrates’ arguments prove to be very poor arguments.10

What are we to make, then, of this tangle of difficulties surrounding Socrates’ defense of justice in Book One? The explanation, I think, must take into account the peculiar flaws in the arguments of Socrates’ defense, and especially the difference between Socrates’ second argument on the one hand and his first and third on the other. Stated briefly, Socrates’ second argument begins, as I have just noted, from something that looks a lot like justice as it is ordinarily understood: commitment or devotion to the common good that binds a community together. But it fails to show that justice so understood is always good for the individual; in fact, it even suggests the opposite.11 On the other side, Socrates’ first and third arguments sketch out something that sounds a lot like it would be good for the individual: namely, wisdom and virtue, with virtue understood as that which enables one’s soul to do its work well and thereby makes one happy. But the great failure of these two arguments is to show that this virtue (or wisdom and virtue) is justice. Juxtaposing these two different failings, I believe, is a way of formulating the problem of justice: while we can easily find something that looks like justice—devotion to the common good that binds a community together—it is questionable whether this is always good for the
individual; and on the other hand, what is good for the individual, or what we might be able to discover to be so, is not so clearly justice. Socrates' defense of justice in Book One, then, proves to be a kind of preliminary presentation of a problem that comes out more clearly later in the Republic. The later search for justice in Books Two through Four results in two different understandings of justice: doing one's job in the city on the one hand (see 433a1-434c10, cf. 420b3-421c6), and setting one's own soul in order on the other (see 441d5-444a2; consider 434d2-435a3).

This dilemma proves to be so vexing because both of its horns can be traced back to something we think is essential to justice and yet the two horns seem to point in opposite directions. On the one hand, we believe that justice consists in devotion and even sacrifice on behalf of the common good. Therefore, if one simply redefines justice so as to ensure its goodness, as one strand of the issue at hand might suggest—if one defines it, say, as wisdom and virtue or as the proper order of the soul—this may run into a problem. For it may lead so far from anything that is recognizable as justice, especially in justice's aspect of devotion and its connection to political life, that it could seem meaningless to continue to use the word "justice" in speaking of it. It is in recognition of this difficulty, I think, that Socrates concludes Book One with a statement suggesting that the question of what justice is ought to be answered before and thus separated from the question of the goodness of justice—a suggestion which would seem to circumvent the role that the concern for the goodness of justice itself plays in raising and pressing the question of what justice is (consider 354a13-c3). In light of this suggestion, taken together with the fact that the concern for the goodness of justice seems in Book One to be the driving force in shaking the ordinary understanding of justice and launching a search for a new definition, Book One can be said to end with a kind of retreat, or with a qualified return to the ordinary understanding of justice. Yet this cannot be simply satisfactory either. For Book One casts doubt in various ways on the goodness of
justice as it is ordinarily understood, and yet the goodness of justice is itself also a part of the ordinary understanding of justice. That is, even if we recognize the questionableness of redefining justice so as to ensure its goodness, it would seem to remain essential to what we think justice is that it be something good. When we take into account this horn of the dilemma as well, the general problem with which Book One culminates can be restated in the form of the following question: Is there in fact a genuine whole which incorporates everything we think about justice, including both that it has the form and direction we ordinarily suppose it to have, i.e., that it is directed to the common good, and also that it is good for each of us as individuals?

This problem gets spelled out, as I have already mentioned, in the rest of the Republic. However, the rest of the Republic is not simply a repetition of Book One on a grander scale. By way of conclusion, I want to briefly consider what seems to be at least one important difference. It is my suggestion, to repeat a point I have just made, that given the two horns of the dilemma I have sketched, Book One ends with Socrates grasping more to the one that insists that justice not be radically redefined. That is, Socrates seems to conclude Book One with a certain acceptance of the ordinary understanding of justice, albeit an acceptance mitigated by an awareness of the problem of the goodness of justice so understood. Yet, if this suggestion is correct, it then becomes a question why the rest of the Republic seems to move in the opposite direction. For the most manifest definition of justice offered by the rest of the Republic is that justice consists in tending to the proper order of one's own soul. When Socrates "discovers" this definition of justice in Book Four, he describes justice in the city, which is at least a closer reflection of the ordinary understanding of justice, as a mere "phantom" of justice by comparison (see 443b7-d1). Of course, it hardly needs to be said that the proper order of the soul is a very paradoxical understanding of justice. The difficulties with calling this "justice" are easy to see.13
But what could lead Socrates, then, to define justice in this way? What justifies this understanding of justice, even if only partially?

This question can be answered, it seems to me, only by supplementing a study of Book One with a reflection on the famous speeches by the brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus at the beginning of Book Two. To end with a brief statement of the significance of Glaucon’s speech in particular, let me suggest that Glaucon provides the fullest display of the concern for the goodness of justice in all of its complexity and in one of its most impressive forms. Glaucon shows, in particular, how the very problematic character of justice’s goodness—something which is captured in Glaucon’s attempt to isolate justice as pure sacrifice and devotion—is bound up with the greatest promise raised by justice, a promise reflected in Glaucon’s hope that through sacrifice on behalf of justice he will find his own highest perfection and thus his deepest happiness.14 In making his famous demand of Socrates, Glaucon allows us to see, in a particularly powerful way, all that is entailed or contained in a thought Polemarchus too expressed in Book One: the thought, namely, that justice is virtue. Now, as for how this bears on the definition of justice as the proper order of the soul, I would suggest that it is through the thought that justice is virtue—through the striving for a perfect good that this thought brings to light—that we are first awakened to the question of the true good or the best life. By promising not only to gratify us but also to perfect us, justice evokes a longing that is not present in our pursuit of more ordinary goods and thereby uncovers a question which might otherwise remain obscured. In fact, it may be one of the most positive results of the examination of the ordinary understanding of justice early in the Republic that it opens up the question of the best life. To be sure, if the early sections of the Republic open up this question, they open it up as a question, which is to say that Socrates indicates that himself does not simply accept the answer that the ordinary understanding of justice gives to this question. There may be several reasons why he
does not—beginning with the contradiction in viewing sacrifice as one's own deepest
good. But rather than dwelling on those reasons at this point, it makes more sense to
conclude by stressing the link between the ordinary understanding of justice and
Socrates' paradoxical definition. Again, the ordinary understanding of justice leads
one to the question of the true good or the best life. And for this reason I think it
makes at least some sense to follow the later books of the *Republic* in regarding the
answer to that question—even if it proves to be the rule of reason within one's own
soul—as the truest meaning of justice.
NOTES


2. Unless otherwise noted, all references in parentheses in the text are to the Oxford Classical Texts edition of Plato's *Republic*. Translations are my own.

3. Notice that Socrates stated three things that he supposed all would acknowledge about the weapons example: (1) that one ought not to return such things, (2) *that the man who did return them would not be just*, and (3) that one ought not to be willing to tell the truth in all respects to someone in such a state.

   Compare Aristotle's *Politics* 3.10, where Aristotle rejects several possible distributions of political authority because they would be bad for the city, including a certain law because "it is clear that it will destroy the city, and yet it is surely not virtue that destroys what possesses it, nor is the just destructive of a city; so it is clear that this law cannot be just" (1280a18-21).

4. Socrates' opening argument has radical implications. Aware of such implications, Kant tries to avoid this general line of reasoning by denying that the moral law admits of exceptions or qualifications and by insisting on the absolute supremacy of "the rule" over considerations of the sort that might lead to exceptions. Yet, among other difficulties this creates, Kant's attempt requires that he depart from the ordinary moral perspective which he himself claims is the foundation of his thought. For, as Cephalus' (and our) agreement here indicates, it is part of our ordinary moral understanding to acknowledge that there are exceptions to rules, and we are willing—we even feel the need—to bend the dictates of justice when they would lead to destructive consequences. Moreover, to repeat a point made in the text above, we do not understand these instances as departures from justice but rather as examples of its flexibility. Our willingness to transform justice in this manner so as to preserve its goodness reveals a problem in strictly divorcing justice, or the moral law, from considerations of advantage.

5. For instance, Socrates "ignores" that not only knowledge but also a just intention is often required to help people. So too, he "forgets" that it is in some sense desirable, and certainly politically necessary, that friendship should be based on more than goodness alone. Or, again, he disregards our belief that the wicked should be harmed (punished) because they deserve to suffer.

6. On the kind of good hoped for in the striving for virtue, see Darrell Dobbs, "The Piety of Thought in Plato's *Republic*, Book 1," *American Political Science Review* 88 (1994): pp. 668-683. Dobbs captures well the wish for a virtue of the soul that is "fundamentally opposed" to any evil and transcends the "contingency" of ordinary goods. He also shows how the belief in such a good can lead to a transformation in one's view of what justice consists in or demands. See especially pp. 678-679, and note 19.

7. This line of thought might seem to be contradicted by Socrates' own argument later in the *Republic* that the philosophers who have seen the Idea of the Good would
justly be compelled to return to the Cave and rule there (see 519c8-520c3). Socrates makes a two-part argument in that passage. First, he reminds Glaucon of an argument made earlier in the Republic that the law should aim at the good of the whole city, not the good of any one part of it. Secondly, Socrates argues that while it would be fitting for philosophers to avoid rule in other cities, in their city, i.e., in the City-in-Speech of the Republic, the philosophers owe it to the city to rule since the city has reared them and educated them to be what they are. However, there are several difficulties with this argument. The most obvious difficulty is that Socrates acknowledges that at least the second part of the argument applies only to the City-in-Speech; he thus implies, and even states (520a9-b2), that philosophers are not obligated to rule in any other city, i.e., in any city which actually exists. As for the first part of his argument, while it is true that Socrates argues not only in this passage but also elsewhere in the Republic that the good of the whole city is more important than the good of any part (see, e.g., 420b3-421c6), this argument must be weighed against the whole project of the Republic, which is to show that justice is good for the individual. Moreover, one must ask whether the insistence on the happiness of the whole over the happiness of the parts is ultimately coherent. How can "the whole" be happy without happy parts? Aristotle raises this objection to Socrates’ argument in his critique of the Republic in Book Two of the Politics, where he points out that happiness is not same kind of thing as evenness, which can exist in the whole but not in its parts (1264b15-21). Socrates’ suggestion that the philosophers whom he is discussing would have to be compelled to rule suggests that they too would not find his argument in Book Seven fully convincing (see 519c8-d2; see again 347b5-d8). Finally, it is noteworthy that Glaucon objects, at least initially, to Socrates’ suggestion that the philosophers should be compelled to rule; he thus shows a concern, as a just man, with the happiness of the just: “Are we going to do them an injustice, and make them live worse lives when it is possible for them to live better ones?” (519d8-9).

8. It is sometimes suggested that Thrasymachus is led to be so forthright in declaring his thoughts about justice, not by any indignation he may feel, but by his desire as a teacher of rhetoric to attract students; Thrasymachus’ downfall, according to this interpretation is caused by a fatal tension between his need to advertise and the reserve that prudence would otherwise dictate (See, e.g., John Sallis, Being and Logos: The Way of Platonic Dialogue [New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1986], pp. 338-339, 343-344, and Jacob Howland, The Republic: The Odyssey of Philosophy [New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993], pp. 69-75). However, the inadequacy or at least the incompleteness of this explanation is indicated by several facts. The first, which I have already alluded to above, is Thrasymachus’ anger. It is true that Thrasymachus’ anger is directed primarily at Socrates himself. But it is prompted by what Thrasymachus sees as Socrates’ sophisticated manipulation of justice in arguments, his sycophantic pretext that he is searching for justice when he is really pursuing his own honor (see 336b1-338b3, 338d3-4, and 340d1-341c3). Moreover, Thrasymachus becomes even more angry—and accordingly even more open and extreme in his arguments—when a certain argument of Socrates about the selflessness of artisans and rulers later convinces him that Socrates is not in fact the sycophant he initially appeared to be but is himself naïvely taken in by justice (see 342e6-344c8). Yet why would such naivety provoke, rather than delight, Thrasymachus? One must explain his desire to deprive the just of their innocence, a desire which a thoroughly unjust and calculating man would not feel
(see especially 343d1-e7). As for the response that Thrasymachus attempts to "enlighten" Socrates only because his eyes are on prospective pupils in the crowd listening to their conversation, it should also be noted, in addition to the fact of his anger, that Thrasymachus never boasts of the power of his art of rhetoric. Unlike his counterpart Gorgias, a more famous and self-promoting teacher of rhetoric who is at the same time far more reserved about his own view of justice, Thrasymachus never so much as mentions rhetoric in his conversation with Socrates (compare especially Gorgias 452d5-e8, 455d6-456c6; consider, however, Republic 340d1-341a4). Admittedly, Socrates himself has spoken at one point of Thrasymachus’ desire to win a good reputation (338a5-6); but this would seem in context to refer to a reputation less as a skilled rhetorician than as a man willing—as Thrasymachus complains Socrates is not—to speak the truth about justice (consider 336b8-337e3, 338b1-c3).

9. From here one can perhaps understand why Thrasymachus sometimes speaks of the tyrant as an unjust man despite the fact that, according to his own argument, rulers are the source of and thus beyond justice (compare 344a3-c4 with 338e1-339a4). Paul Friedländer captures an aspect of Thrasymachus’ view with the remark "with reference to the tyrant, it makes no sense to speak of crimes" (Plato, Volume II [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964], p. 63). Yet Thrasymachus does speak of the tyrant as a criminal. On this point, see also C.D.C. Reeve, Philosopher Kings (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 18-19.

10. The problem with Socrates’ first argument is the most obvious. This argument is a long, complicated attempt to show that justice is virtue and wisdom by showing that both the just man and the wise artisan show a certain restraint towards their fellow just men or fellow expert artisans; this similarity in restraint then leads to the conclusion of an identity between the just and the wise and good (349b1-350c11). However, this conclusion depends on the premise that if one thing (justice) is in some respect like another thing (virtue and wisdom), then it is that other thing (see especially 349d10-12, 350c4-11). Yet it is entirely possible, of course, for two things to share a partial similarity while being quite different in other respects. This flawed argument then provides the basis for the crucial step in Socrates’ third argument, allowing him to claim, without further proof, that the virtue of the human soul is justice (see especially 353e7-9 and context). As for Socrates’ second argument, it is somewhat more sound, but its implications do not reflect altogether well on justice: justice, by this argument, can be regarded as a mere means even for unjust ends (see 351c8-e1, 352c3-8), and it is also that which leads one to do things which wisdom alone would not lead one to do (consider 351b7-c5).

11. Socrates’ second argument raises the question of why or in what case wisdom alone would be insufficient to guarantee each member’s commitment to a common undertaking (consider especially 351b7-c5). If we assume that each of the members of the group possesses a wisdom that includes knowledge of his own good, the answer must be that wisdom would be insufficient, and thus justice would be necessary, only when the group needs a contribution from an individual which would be harmful rather than beneficial for that individual. This line of thought leads to a surprising conclusion about justice: justice as devotion to the common good is needed, in principle, only when there is no true common good in the strict sense.
12. It should also be noted, more simply, that Socrates’ final statement, which criticizes the premature turn to the question of the goodness of justice in the Thrasymachus section (again 354a13-c3), also agrees in an important respect with the very development it criticizes. For Socrates grants here that the question, "Is justice good?" is at least at some point an essential and meaningful question, i.e., he grants that one should not simply insist that justice must be good and define it in any way whatsoever so as to ensure that it is good. In this way as well, Socrates' statement would seem to indicate a qualified return to the ordinary understanding of justice, or at least a recognition of the difficulty in following the impetus that leads away from it.

In saying that the concern for the goodness of justice is the impetus that leads away from the ordinary understanding of justice, I am bearing in mind a complexity I touched on above: namely, the doubts that Socrates cast on Cephalus’ and Polemarchus’ understandings of justice seemed in the first place to be doubts about whether justice so understood is good for those whom the just man helps, i.e., for the recipients of justice. However, I tried to indicate some of the reasons for thinking that the conviction that justice is good, and the bearing this conviction has on the question of what justice is, extends to the goodness of justice for the just man himself (see page 8 above).

13. For instance, does a well-ordered soul necessarily issue in actions that contribute to the community, as we ordinarily understand justice to do? And even if it does issue in such actions, doesn't it make a difference in what spirit these actions are performed, that is, whether they are performed with the community in view and out of devotion to it, or whether there is just a fortunate coincidence of interests between the individual soul and the community?


14. These two strands, and their connection, can be seen especially in the third and final section of Glaucon’s speech. Glaucon’s speech, an attack on justice for the sake of prompting a defense of justice (see 358c6-d6), is divided into three sections by Glaucon’s own division (see 358b7-c6). The first section is an account of the origin and character of justice (358e3-359b5); the second is an attempt to show that all who practice justice do so unwillingly, by compulsion rather than for its own sake (359b6-360d7); and the third section is an argument that the unjust life is better than the just life (360e1-362c8). It is in this final section that Glaucon sets up his famous contest between the perfectly unjust man, who enjoys all the advantages of injustice as well as those following from the appearance of justice, and the perfectly just man, who is willing to give up everything for the sake of justice. This perfectly just man, who even dies for the sake of justice, is the one whose happiness Glaucon wishes to believe can surpass any happiness belonging to the unjust life (see especially 361b6-d3).