

Philosophy 104, Business Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2007
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Lecture Notes, March 6

I. Quiz: What is moral nihilism?

II. Socrates' response to Thrasymachus, continued

Last week, we looked at Thrasymachus's claim that justice is a vice, and injustice a virtue. The true ruler is the most unjust person, and also the most rewarded. Against Thrasymachus, Socrates argued that true rulers rule for the benefit of their subjects, and earn no personal benefit from ruling. Thrasymachus responded with an analogy of a shepherd and a sheep. The shepherd cares for his sheep, but only so that the sheep can serve the shepherd.

Socrates and Thrasymachus proceed to compare the just person to the unjust person. Thrasymachus insists that the unjust man is good and wise, while the just man is ignorant and bad. There are two senses of 'good'. The first sense is opposed to evil, and usually entails self-sacrifice. Nietzsche decries this notion as indicative of a slavish, subservient character. The second sense of 'good' involves actions of objects that are beneficial to us. So, healthy food is good, and exercise is good. This second sense might entail some self-sacrifice, but it is primarily about self-interest. When Thrasymachus says that the unjust man is good, he uses 'good' in the second sense.

Socrates and Thrasymachus agree that the just man wants advantage over the unjust man, who is unlike him, but does not seek advantage over other just people. While the unjust man wants advantage over every one. Now, experts try to outdo laypersons, who are unlike them, but not other experts, who are like them. (The idea is that if one doctor has found a cure for a disease, other doctors seek the same.) But, the expert is one who is knowledgeable, and wise, and good (in the beneficial sense). So, the wise and good man seems to want advantage over those unlike him, but not over those like him. This is just how we characterized the just man. So, Socrates argues, the just man is wise and good, and the unjust man is not wise and good.

Thrasymachus holds to the claim that injustice is more powerful than justice. Socrates argues that a city must be just in order to rule other cities, p 16. The soul of a person is analogous to a city, according to Socrates. Just as a city must be harmonious to be strong, so must a person must be in harmony. The soul rules over the various parts of a person, and it must rule in harmony. Which is to say that a person must be just, in order to be successful and happy.

Thrasymachus is not convinced by Socrates's arguments, though he accedes. The *Republic* continues for ten books, exploring the analogy between the city and the soul. The claim that the soul must be in harmony seems pretty metaphysical. We will return to it in a few weeks; for now, our interest is in the nihilism, which Thrasymachus defends.

III. Other problems with nihilism

Socrates' arguments about the soul aside, nihilism seems incoherent.
If there is no right and wrong, even for ourselves, then our use of these terms as motivations is puzzling.
The terms must be mere expressions of bare, unjustified preference.
Contrast ethics with food preferences, about which we are nihilistic.
There is no fact of the matter about whether broccoli tastes better than chocolate.
I may prefer one, or the other, but my preference need not apply to others.
If some one has different tastes, there is no fact which will decide which are the right preferences.
We can urge someone to consider different preferences, but after that, it is up to them to decide.
(The question of what we prefer is distinct from the question of which it is better to eat.
There may be reasons to eat broccoli rather than chocolate, but we are considering which we like best.)
Morality seems different from preferences regarding the taste of food.
When we choose not to rape or murder, we do not think of it as a mere preference.
It has a force for others.

IV. Absolutism

The absolutist claims that there is just one set of rights and wrongs.
This is a claim about what exists, not what we know.
We may be ignorant of the right morality.
So, we can be absolutists, without being dogmatists, without insisting on the truth of our morality.
We will see a variety of examples of absolutism, throughout the course.
Pojman defines objectivism as the claim that there are objective moral principles.
He argues for objectivism over absolutism, but they really collapse, as we shall see.

V. Relativism

There are two types of relativism, which we will call conventionalism and subjectivism.
Conventionalism says that morality depends on your culture, society, religion, or other grouping.
Subjectivism says that morality depends on the individual.
Hobbes derives a complicated system of justice from basic subjectivist principles; see pp 69-70.
Sartre (and the existentialists) claims that morality is created through action, and that each individual creates his or her own morality.
Subjectivism is barely distinguishable from nihilism.
The nihilist says that there is no such thing as morality, and that right and wrong are illusions.
Subjectivism says that right and wrong are real, but only for the individual.
The nihilist can never make moral errors, though the subjectivist can.

For conventionalism, or relativism, consider that we learn moral facts from our communities.
On relativism, there is no right/wrong outside society, or subculture, or family.
Herodotus tells of King Darius, who brought Callatians and Greeks to court to prove relativism.
The Callatians were cannibals, and ate their dead; the Greeks cremated their dead.
Each thought the others' practice was not just repugnant but immoral.
Herodotus agrees that custom is king, which is just another way of putting the conventionalist point.