

Materials to Guide Reading

LECTURE ONE

Plato:

Consider three models of excellence:

1. Thrasymachus follows the Vince Lombardi model, the zero-sum game. "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." One derives one's sense of self by measuring its success against the failure of others. No "value-added" here--there's only so much of the good stuff to go around, and its distribution in your favor is what counts. Even better, getting more also yields the pleasure of knowing that you're a superior sort of person. *Success is not enough; friends must fail.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "Every child of the Saxon race is educated to wish to be first. It is our system; and a man comes to measure his greatness by the regrets, envies and hatreds of his competitors."

2. Plato (and Aristotle) follow the Sam Snead model. "Forget your opponents; always play against par." A mere reaction against others cannot lead to pro-activism. Can't you do better than just exceeding the standard set by your adversaries? Never mind the competition; there are reasonable standards set by every task, even the task of living justly. The standards may not be easily known--this is especially true in the case of living justly--but they are objective, and measuring up to them completely is what "excellence" means. ("Excellence" comes down, therefore, to a kind of perfect competence; in this sense, however unlikely, it is possible that *everyone* can be excellent.)

3. The Nietzschean alternative. You don't try to do better than the competition, because it may be unworthy, and you don't try to meet the reasonable standards set by the task. You take notice of worthy opponents, those who will call out in you energies that you did not possess until you engaged in struggle with them. The aim is not to meet an objective standard but to exceed yourself or become worthless in the attempt.

Jack Welch made it a practice even in good times to have his senior executives fire ten percent of their subordinates once every three years, and those at lower levels to do the same: "It's all about performance. Some think that it's cruel or brutal to remove the bottom 10 percent of our people. It isn't. It's just the opposite. What I think is brutal and false kindness' is keeping people around who aren't going to grow and prosper." What would Thrasymachus make of Jack Welch? What would Plato?

Underlying much of the Platonic dialogues is the notion that the different virtues (*areteia*--the word "arete" means "excellence") are good for the possessor. Three virtues in particular concern Socrates throughout the dialogues, piety, courage, and justice. The last two are problematic because it isn't clear that being courageous tends to one's benefit, and this holds even more sharply in the case of justice, which may be good for others but is often exercised to the detriment of the person acting justly. Hence the questions surrounding justice in Plato are the nearest stand-ins for our questions about the relationship between ethical values and personal fulfillment.

The idea that virtue or excellence (*arete*) is good for the possessor raises the possibility that justice is not a virtue. This is ultimately Thrasymachus's position. He starts, however, with a definition: "Justice is the interest of the stronger." Technically, then, both the weak and the strong can be just (both acting in the interest of the stronger), but what Thrasymachus means is that justice should be forsaken by anyone capable of excellence--that justice is simply the name that the weaker give to the stupid or cowardly surrender of their own interests to the interests of the stronger. As it stands, Thrasymachus's "justice" is a relational term, designating one sort of

action in the case of the weak (surrender of one's interests) and another sort of action in the case of the strong (exploiting others). There is a built-in instability in this use of "justice", so long as means, as Thrasymachus argues it means "whatever the strong just happen to take as their interest at the moment".

The Grand Inquisitor:

Are the three temptations in St Matthew rightly explicated by the Grand Inquisitor? Why is it terrible to be free? With reference to the second temptation, the Inquisitor seems to equate "a stable conception of the object of life" with "deciding for oneself what is good and what is evil." Is the nature of good and evil a matter for decision? The Inquisitor claims to be more merciful than Jesus. How does this claim square with the auto-da-fé, that is, the burning of one hundred heretics in the public square? What is the meaning of Jesus's silence? Of Jesus's kiss? What does it mean to call the Inquisitor a Secret Atheist--a disbeliever in God?

Foreign Assignment:

Consider the case of the unhappily named Sara Strong. Is there a victim here? If not, why not? How important is it on the job to get earned credit from clients for a job well done, in addition to your salary? Or is praise from an immediate supervisor alone enough to keep you going? Is there anything deeply wrong with mandated gender differences expressed through dress codes? Don't we have these codes anyway? Distinguish between authority and power along the lines laid out by Rosabeth Kantor. Doesn't the case made by her supervisor (Vitam) to Sara come down to this: that she has all the authority that goes with her job but will have no opportunities to acquire power? Does the locale of the story (Mexico) have anything to do with the way that you answer these questions? One way to deal with case studies is to imagine yourself in roles other than the major one. In this case we might ask how you would advise Sara if you were Fried and Sara had come to you with her problems.