Cephalus, the Myth of Er, and Remaining Virtuous in Unvirtuous Times

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ABSTRACT

Through a reading of the Myth of Er and Socrates’ conversation with Cephalus, I will argue that merely conventional virtue is highly unstable and unreliable. Virtue acquired by convention proves foundationless outside the confines of the political regime that establishes those conventions, and a tendency toward an unreflective moral complacency on the part of the conventionally virtuous leaves them in particular danger of committing unjust actions. Socrates recommends the study of philosophy because it can ground conventionally acquired virtue and, even more importantly, because it is capable of shaking the moral complacency that afflicts the conventionally virtuous.

Keywords: Republic, conventional virtue, Cephalus, Myth of Er, ancient political philosophy, relation between convention and philosophy

Though Cephalus first introduces the topic of justice in the Republic, he departs from the conversation before he can hear the fruits of his initial conversation with Socrates. His absence raises the question of the value of philosophical study for those who are virtuous by convention without philosophy. Let us assume that Plato holds that Cephalus’ departure from the conversation is an error, and that he would have benefited from taking part in a philosophical analysis of justice. Depending on how the reader interprets Plato’s presentation of Cephalus, he is either a habitually just person who has a good character or a civically just person who at least acts externally in accordance with conventional standards. It is not immediately obvious how a philosophical consideration of the nature of justice would benefit a person virtuous in either of these two ways. The difficulty reemerges in the context of the Myth of Er. In that mythic context, Socrates argues that those who live in accordance with virtue unsupported by philosophy are in the greatest danger with respect to choosing their next life, and that careful attention to philosophical study is a helpful way of avoiding the dark fate of choosing an unjust future life. In this context, it again fails to become immediately obvious why a soul will be benefited from the study of philosophy, particularly outside of the immediate mythic context of the story. The puzzle becomes even more perplexing in reference to other comments that Socrates makes throughout the dialogue about the difficulty and danger of philosophical study outside of the kallipolis.

In this paper, I will argue that Plato proposes that undergoing the Socratic elenchus is beneficial for all citizens, even for those who are already conventionally virtuous and despite its many dangers. After a careful study of Socrates’ conversation with Cephalus and his
presentation of the Myth of Er, it will become clear that Plato holds that virtue acquired without the practice of philosophy is highly unstable and unreliable. Rooted fundamentally in *nomos* (custom or law), both habitual and civic virtue remain at the mercy of the regime in which individuals find themselves. Outside the confines of that regime and the *nomos* that governs it, such as in the afterlife in the Myth of Er or in the very concrete circumstance of political upheaval and tyranny like the reign of the Thirty, conventional virtue will prove foundationless, and the individual will have no framework to orient decision making. Even worse, a tendency toward a certain sort of moral complacency or laziness on the part of the conventionally virtuous actually leave them worse off with respect to these extra-conventional situations than others within the regime. In the myth, Plato ultimately advocates the study of philosophy because it can ground conventionally rooted virtue in something more secure than convention and, even more importantly, because it is capable of shaking the moral complacency that afflicts the merely conventionally virtuous.

1: CEPHALUS’ RELATIONSHIP TO PHILOSOPHY AND TO CONVENTION

I will begin by considering the conversation between Socrates and Cephalus concerning the nature of old age and the importance of virtue—particularly justice—for withstanding old age well. In this conversation, Cephalus shows himself to possess a kind of conventional virtue that is rooted in obeying various sorts of conventional norms. However this virtue should be understood—and as I will argue below, the text admits of at least two plausible interpretations of Cephalus’ virtuousness—it is apparent that philosophy plays little to no role in the acquisition of virtue for Cephalus. Convention—including both the laws of the city and religious authority—tells human beings which actions are virtuous, and which actions are not. Insofar as Cephalus’ primary concern is to act justly, he seems to see effectively no use for a philosophical discussion of what the virtues themselves are, or of what the justice is. Nowhere is this orientation more evident than at the end of his appearance in *Republic*, where Cephalus returns to his conventionally mandated sacrifices to the gods rather than stay to hear an extended discussion of what justice is. In this section, I will discuss two ways of interpreting Cephalus’ character on the basis of his speech, and show how on either interpretation Cephalus fundamentally relies upon a conventional understanding of the virtues that is resistant to elenchic questioning. In the next section, I will then discuss the specifics of Cephalus’ speech in greater detail.

Cephalus’ speech has three main stages. First, he argues that old age is, in itself, a blessing insofar as it lessens the tyrannical desires of youth. Those who find it odious, he contends, do so because they possess poorly formed and disorderly characters and so are unwilling to let go of desires that a virtuous person would be happy to abandon. Second, Cephalus argues against the thesis that it is his wealth, and not his virtuous character, that allows him to withstand the loss of his youthful desires as well as he has. Finally, Cephalus argues that wealth is still valuable to the virtuous person insofar as it promotes justice by allowing the virtuous to pay off old debts and to avoid unintentionally lying or cheating anyone on account of poverty. In this way, he argues, the virtuous person who possesses some means can avoid going to the afterlife in fear. Socrates then attempts to con-