

IN DEFENSE OF CEPHALUS

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I have given my remarks the title, "In Defense of Cephalus." It might surprise some that Cephalus needs a defense, not because he is so highly regarded, but because he is hardly regarded at all. Cephalus appears briefly, very briefly, in the opening scene of Plato's *Republic*. In Allan Bloom's translation the *Republic* covers 300 pages. Cephalus appears in only three of those 300 pages. If we were performing the *Republic* on stage, the entire performance would occupy several hours, whereas the appearance of Cephalus would be performed in perhaps as little as ten minutes. In his brief appearance Cephalus says little and the little he says appears innocuous and mundane. One is left with the impression that Cephalus is not an important character in the *Republic* but appears merely as a prop to set the stage for the important aspects of the dialogue. It would seem that Cephalus is a character to be little noted nor long remembered.

Despite this appearance, Leo Strauss and his disciple, Allan Bloom, have published commentaries on the *Republic* in which they draw significant conclusions from Plato's treatment of Cephalus. Bloom follows Strauss's lead and develops Strauss's thesis regarding Cephalus, and it is his commentary with which we will primarily be concerned. Before going on

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to Bloom's commentary, however, I want to make a few remarks about Strauss.

Strauss published two commentaries on Plato's *Republic*, one in *The City and Man* and the other in *The History of Political Philosophy*. The commentary in *The City and Man* is a more scholarly work than the essay in *The History of Political Philosophy*. The essay in *The History of Political Philosophy* is shorter and more popular in form. It is published in a book intended to introduce undergraduate students to political philosophy. In *The City and Man* Strauss says that Cephalus represents piety, which Strauss equates with the ancestral or the paternal, in contrast to Socrates, who represents philosophy. With the early departure of Cephalus from the dialogue, Socrates takes center stage, which Strauss says signifies the replacement of piety by philosophy. These remarks are omitted from the essay in *The History of Political Philosophy*, which suggests that Strauss does not regard them as appropriate for a work intended to have wide distribution among undergraduates.

Bloom does not share his master's reticence to comment on the delicate relationship between philosophy and piety in a work intended for wide distribution among undergraduates. He repeats and elaborates Strauss's assertions in the commentary appended to his translation of the *Republic*, which is widely used in undergraduate courses. Strauss and Bloom seem to share the view that philosophy and piety are incompatible, and that the pursuit of philosophy, the love of wisdom, undermines piety. The difference between them appears to be that Strauss seems reluctant to encourage large numbers of undergraduates to abandon their piety, while Bloom does not share that reluctance. Without questioning Bloom's immense erudition and without making any claim to be his equal in these matters, we may wonder whether Bloom has inherited only half, and perhaps less than half, of his philosophical father's understanding of the issue.

That, however, is not the question before us. Let us turn to the *Republic* and Bloom's commentary on it.

Bloom opens his commentary by saying that the *Republic* is the true Apology of Socrates, for only in the *Republic* does he give an adequate treatment of the theme that was forced upon him by the Athenians' accusation against him, which is the relationship between the philosopher and political society. The connection between the theme of the *Republic* and the accusations against Socrates is signified by the manner in which the *Republic* begins. Socrates is arrested, if only playfully. Polemarchus and those with him compel Socrates to stay with them by force. After a brief discussion, Socrates acknowledges that he must stay with them, saying, "if it is so resolved," words that call to mind a formal decision of the Athenian assembly.

Socrates was accused of undermining the relationship between Athens and the young men of Athens by, among other things, calling into question the city's gods. Meletus, in fact, accused Socrates of being an atheist. Bloom says that the *Republic* demonstrates that the accusations against Socrates were accurate. Socrates, he says, replaces the gods with the ideas and teaches young men to despise Athens by teaching them to love a regime in which philosophers are kings. Socrates teaches the very things of which he is accused. His defense, according to Bloom, is that the things he teaches are true. He does not deny the accusations, rather he turns the tables by placing the city on trial. He becomes the accuser; the city becomes the accused.

With this having been said, let us turn to Cephalus and Bloom's comments specifically about him. After Polemarchus arrested Socrates, the miniature civil society that had just been formed went to the home of Cephalus, the father of Polemarchus. Cephalus had just performed a sacrifice when they arrived. Cephalus and Socrates begin a conversation that leads in short order to a question regarding the nature of justice, when Cephalus abruptly departs to look after the sacrifices and never returns. Bloom says that the philosopher must replace the father at the center of the circle and hence Socrates must

induce Cephalus to leave. Socrates banishes Cephalus and only thereafter begins a frank discussion of justice. By questioning Cephalus's understanding of justice, Bloom says, Socrates takes command of the little community, forces Cephalus to leave, and makes the nature of justice the problem of the discussion. This is a discussion that could not properly take place under the eyes of Cephalus. He is said to represent the ancestral which cannot but must be questioned. Piety is equated with the ancestral, both of which must be banished from a frank and philosophical discussion of justice.

Cephalus is described by Bloom as an old man who once was led astray by youthful passions and who now spends his old age worrying about and atoning for his transgressions. He is the type of man whose life is split between sinning and repenting. He has a radically deficient view of justice, which he sees as mere law-abidingness. He is afraid of punishment after death, so he does not want to die owing debts to men or sacrifices to gods, or having deceived or cheated anyone. Hence, his interest in justice is selfish. Socrates is silent about the gods and the sacrifices owed to them. Socrates forgets the divine, which is Cephalus's prime preoccupation.

This, in sum, is the accusation against Cephalus. Cephalus, a most unattractive character, represents piety, which is not simply replaced by philosophy but is banished by it, because the presence of piety is incompatible with a frank discussion of justice.

The seriousness of the charge is almost too obvious for comment. It has the partial sanction of one of the great minds of modern times, Leo Strauss. Bloom, himself is a scholar who commands and deserves great respect. The accuser who levies this serious charge is no lightweight.

Nevertheless, neither Bloom, Strauss, nor, for that matter, Socrates, would wish that we accept these allegations solely on the authority of the accuser. If we are seriously interested in the truth of the matter, we must examine the evidence and judge for ourselves whether the allegations are true.

We begin by noting, as Bloom tells us in a footnote, that Cephalus was not an Athenian citizen but a metic, that is, an alien who was allowed to settle in Athens and who paid taxes but enjoyed no civil rights. Moreover, he did not live in the city but at the Piraeus, some six miles outside the city. He would seem to be a poor choice for a representative of any aspect of the Athenian order. If, as Bloom says and as we will agree for the purpose of this discussion, the *Republic* is the true apology of Socrates to the charges made against him by Athens, one would expect a careful author, such as Plato, to choose an Athenian to represent the Athenian order. It seems odd that the piety of the city would be represented by an alien who enjoyed none of the rights of the city and who lived outside it.

Secondly, the text contains no indication that Socrates set out to banish Cephalus, to force him to leave, so that he would not be present for the discussion. In fact, the indications from the text point to precisely the opposite conclusion. Socrates, himself, says that he delights in conversation with the old, and he seems to prove his sincerity by drawing Cephalus into a discussion, beginning with the one subject about which Cephalus would know more than anyone present, old age. Following Cephalus's answer to the question regarding old age, Socrates as narrator comments that he wanted Cephalus to say more and stirred him up with still more questions. Socrates seems eager to converse with Cephalus, who ultimately leaves the scene, not in response to Socrates' remarks but as a result of his son's interruption in the conversation.

If it seems odd to say that an alien, without civil rights, who lives outside the city, represents the piety of the city, it seems still more odd to say that Socrates would not discuss justice in the presence of the representative of the ancestral order. Socrates, himself, tells us in the *Apology* that he spent his life doing just what Bloom says he would not do. After the oracle at Delphi said that Socrates was the wisest living man, Socrates went to the men who were reputed to be wise

and questioned them in the presence of young men about topics such as the nature of justice. It is precisely this conduct, according to Socrates, that resulted in the criminal charges against him.

We are reminded that, as Socrates went to court to defend himself, he encountered Euthyphro, a man known for his piety, and induced him into a conversation regarding the nature of piety. Socrates not only questioned Euthyphro about the nature of piety, he even indicated his doubts regarding the truth of some of the stories about the gods. Bloom says that, while Socrates would question the nature of piety in the presence of a man noted for his piety moments before the commencement of his trial on charges of impiety, he would not discuss the nature of justice in the presence of Cephalus because to do so would be subversive and impious.

I am not convinced. If we were in court and if Bloom had the burden of proof, as an accuser would have, we would have to say that he had not met his burden. But to leave the issue here would be unsatisfying. It is not enough to say that Bloom has not made his case. The issue he raises is an important one, and it would speak ill of us merely to criticize his comments without offering our own explanation of the significance of Cephalus in the *Republic* and our own views on the issue Bloom raises.

So, with fear and trembling, like Socrates expecting to be drowned by laughter and ridicule at the announcement of the third wave, I will state my views. I will agree with Bloom that the *Republic* picks up the theme of the *Apology* and elaborates on it. I will also agree with Bloom that Cephalus represents piety. Bloom and I differ on the question of the relationship between piety and philosophy. Bloom says that the accusations against Socrates by the Athenians were true. I say that they were false. Bloom says that the *Republic* indicates that piety and philosophy are enemies. I say that the *Republic* indicates that piety and philosophy are friends.

As we have mentioned, Socrates was accused of impiety and

of corrupting young men. Recall that in his *Apology* before the assembly he denied that the accusations were true. "My whole concern," he told the assembly, "is not to do anything unjust or impious." (32d) Nearly his whole defense was that he had spent his life in the service of the god, and he claims to have a daimonion from the god to prevent him from making a misstep. His defense was not Bloom's. He did not say that philosophy had led him out of piety. He said that piety had led him into philosophy. Despite his defense, or perhaps because of it, Socrates was convicted and sentenced to death.

The contrast between the actions of the assembly and the actions of Cephalus could not be more striking. Cephalus, Socrates says, greeted him warmly. Cephalus, the father of the household, the representative of paternal authority, issued only one command. Addressing Socrates, Cephalus said, "Now do as I say: be with these young men, but come here regularly to us as to friends and your very own kin." Athens demanded Socrates to stay away from the young men. Cephalus commanded Socrates to be with the young men. Athens wanted rid of Socrates. Cephalus wanted Socrates to come to his home regularly as a friend and a kinsman.

Bear in mind also that there was another trial the same day as that of Socrates. Plato records that Euthyphro, a man known for his piety, prosecuted his father for murder on the same day that Anytus and Meletus prosecuted Socrates for impiety and corrupting the young men. Plato seems to be suggesting that it is not Socrates who has corrupted the young men but the degenerate form of Athenian piety that could give rise to men such as Euthyphro. Socrates and Euthyphro's father share the same fate at least to the extent of being prosecuted. Perhaps, Plato is indicating that philosophy, rather than being an enemy of the ancestral, is somehow aligned with it. The community that kills philosophy also commits patricide.

Again, the contrast with the conduct of Cephalus is striking. Cephalus offered sacrifices to the gods. We are not told what he sacrificed, but we may presume that he offered the

traditional animal sacrifices, much as Socrates at the moment of his death directed Crito to sacrifice a cock to Asclepius. Euthyphro, on the other hand, offered his father as his sacrifice. The Athenian assembly offered Socrates as theirs.

It is true, Cephalus leaves the discussion of the nature of justice, but not because he is banished by Socrates. He leaves just at the moment that his son shows an interest in discussing the nature of justice with Socrates. Cephalus is not afraid of Socrates corrupting his son. Rather, he entrusts his son to Socrates for instruction regarding the nature of justice. If, therefore, Cephalus represents piety, we may say that piety entrusts its children to philosophy for instruction on the nature of justice.

Not only does Cephalus leave his son in Socrates' care, he permits the discussion to take place in his own home. Philosophy occupies an honored place in piety's home. It seems that piety acknowledges its limitations and calls upon philosophy's assistance.

If all of this is correct, then we would expect to see some degree of harmony between piety and philosophy with respect to the kind of person one ought to be and the way in which one ought to live. Bloom, however, asserts that Cephalus's opinions in this regard are demonstrated to be radically deficient. If Bloom is correct, our argument will need to be reconsidered, so let us examine the remarks of Cephalus, and compare them to those of Socrates regarding the just man and the unjust one.

Cephalus says that most old men bewail their loss of the ability to indulge the lower passions, but he does not. He regards it a great blessing that the lower passions no longer attack him but now leave him in peace and freedom. He says that what is important is not one's age but one's character. A man of good character, that is, a man who is balanced and good-tempered, will find neither youth nor old age to be troublesome. A man without good character will find both youth and old age to be hard. Cephalus is a wealthy man, though

he inherited his wealth rather than gaining it through his own efforts. The greatest good that he has enjoyed from wealth is freedom from the temptation to commit injustice out of financial need. Cephalus also says that as old age approaches, a man's concern for his fate in the afterlife increases. If he has done unjust deeds here, he fears that the tales of punishment in hades may be true. On the other hand, a man who is conscious in himself of no unjust deed has sweet and good hope ever beside him as a nurse in his old age.

Bloom says that Cephalus's youthful passions seem to have led him into activities that are contrary to justice, and his old age is spent worrying about them and atoning for them. The text does not say that. The text indicates that Cephalus had experienced within himself the frenzied power of the lower passions and was relieved that in his old age those passions now left him in peace. It seems that in his youth he had struggled with them. Whether the higher parts of his soul were victorious in that struggle, or whether the lower passions overcame Cephalus, we are not told. The important point is that even in his youth, it seems, Cephalus was aware that the lower passions needed to be restrained, and he experienced the difficulty that many of us experience in attaining that restraint. Nor does the text say that Cephalus was spending his old age worrying about his departures from virtue. True, he describes with some eloquence the old men who live in fear of the punishments of hades, but he describes with equal eloquence the old men who face death with sweet and good hope ever beside them as a nurse of their old age.

Plato does not tell us what kind of life Cephalus had lived. How virtuously Cephalus actually had lived apparently is of no import for Plato's purposes in the *Republic*. What is of some import is Cephalus's description of the kind of life one ought to live, and that is what is revealed to us and to the young men present at the discussion, one of whom is Cephalus's son.

Our question is whether Cephalus and Socrates had to some degree a common view on how one ought to live and what

should be said to the young men about that matter. If not, Cephalus was foolish to entrust the young men, including his son, to the instruction of Socrates. Like the Athenian assembly, he should have separated Socrates from the young men, and like the Athenian assembly, he had the power to do so, for Socrates was a guest in his house, and he could have ordered Socrates to leave.

Instead of ordering Socrates to leave, Cephalus himself leaves. His son takes up the discussion. As it develops, Polemarchus believes that justice is helping one's friends and harming one's enemies. Socrates demonstrates to Polemarchus that it is never just to harm anyone. Thrasymachus then takes up the discussion and asserts that justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger, which turns out to mean that injustice is preferable to justice. In light of Cephalus's concern that injustice will be punished in hades, we may suspect that he was disturbed that his son and the young men of his household were keeping company with Thrasymachus and he hoped that Socrates would counterbalance that undesirable influence. Bloom had said that Socrates directed the discussion toward the question of the nature of justice in order to force Cephalus to leave. Actually, Socrates asked Cephalus whether old age was a hard time of life, a question that has no particular reference to the nature of justice, and Cephalus directed the discussion to the subject of virtue in his answer, when he spoke of the importance of good character and controlling the lower passions in youth as well as old age. It was Cephalus, not Socrates, who directed the conversation toward the topic of how one should live, and the moment his son demonstrated an interest in discussing that topic with Socrates, he departed. It is as though he had hoped to induce his son to submit to the instruction of Socrates, and, having achieved that goal, he regarded his mission as accomplished and his presence no longer necessary.

The dialogue then unfolds precisely as a good father would wish. Polemarchus asserts that justice is doing good to friends

and doing harm to enemies. Socrates argues that it is never just to do harm to anyone, a teaching which is in the interest of the old. Fathers and sons do become enemies, as the example of Euthyphro demonstrates, and as Cephalus no doubt is aware, since he mentions the abuse that the old frequently receive from their relatives.

When Socrates succeeds in convincing Polemarchus that it is never just to injure anyone and forms a partnership with him, Thrasymachus becomes the interlocutor and argues that justice is the advantage of the stronger, which in turn means that injustice is preferable to justice. Since the old are weaker than the young, Thrasymachus's view is a threat to the self-interest of the old, as well as a contradiction of the belief that injustice is punished in the afterlife. Socrates discredits Thrasymachus in the presence of the young men and forces him to concede that justice is superior to injustice, that the gods are just, and that an unjust man is an enemy to the gods, while the just man is a friend to the gods.

Glaucon then objects that he is not yet convinced and restates the argument that injustice is preferable to justice more eloquently and more cogently than had Thrasymachus. In fact, a part of Glaucon's case is that no one is willingly just, but because of cowardice, or old age, or some other weakness, men blame injustice because they are unable to do it. (366d) It comes to light explicitly, then, that the old are weak, and the young men suspect that the old praise justice because they are unable to do injustice.

When Glaucon had completed stating the case for injustice, Socrates proposes that they build a city in speech, because a city is bigger than an individual man, and it would be easier to see justice in a city than in an individual. When the city is completed and justice is found in it, Socrates at last describes the characteristics of a just man at the end of Book IV. A just man, he says, is characterized by a harmony of the soul, with the lower passions being ruled by the highest element of the soul. Such a man, he says, would be honest in all of his deal-

ings. "Further," Socrates says, "adultery, neglect of parents, and failure to care for the gods are more characteristic of every other kind of man than this one." (443a) A man whose soul is properly formed, then, will be honest in his dealings and faithful in his marriage. He will care for his parents and for the gods. We see the same lesson in the myth of Er, at the conclusion of the *Republic*. Er, the messenger from the underworld, says that the greatest wages in the underworld were for impiety and piety toward gods and parents and for murder. The one unjust man who in the myth is called by name is Ardiaeus the Great, a tyrant who had "killed his old father and elder brother and done many other unholy deeds." (615c)

The just man and the unjust man, as described by Socrates, remind us of the remarks of Cephalus, who stated that a man's character must be balanced and good-tempered, who recognized that the lower passions should be subject to the higher elements of the soul, who acknowledged the importance of honesty, who spoke of the abuse that some of the old receive from their relatives, and whose actions manifested care for the gods. We have found, then, the harmony for which we were looking between the views of Socrates and the views of Cephalus on the question of how one should live.

If our argument is correct, we have established that Socrates and Cephalus were, in fact, friends. Cephalus is not to be confused with the Athenian order that decided to inflict capital punishment on Socrates. Piety and philosophy are not enemies after all.

It seems to me that Bloom's error is that he fails to distinguish between true piety and pseudo piety. Socrates was prosecuted in the name of piety, and Bloom accepts the prosecutors' claims to represent piety without questioning their credentials. Since Socrates was prosecuted in the name of piety, and since Cephalus also presents himself as a pious man, Bloom infers that an antagonism exists between Socrates and Cephalus. I cannot, however, find that antagonism in the text

of the *Republic*. Quite the opposite. It seems that Plato takes pains in the *Republic* to indicate that true piety has nothing to fear from true philosophy.

Contrary to Bloom's assumption, true piety is not to be equated simply with the ancestral. Bloom seems to think that piety consists of nothing more than adhering to the traditions that one receives from one's forefathers concerning the nature of justice and of the divine. The old time religion, it's good enough for me, is piety's sole refrain. It is true that most people gather their understanding of justice and the divine from the traditions of their ancestors, because most people are not and cannot be philosophers. Even so, the ancestral traditions are the means and not the goal, the vessel from which we drink and not that which we drink. The goal of pious men in all ages and all places is not simply to maintain the ancestral traditions but to do justly and to walk humbly with their god. Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth is a more important hymn than the old time religion.

Socrates did criticize the stories in which the Greek gods were said to quarrel, fight, and engage in immoral behavior, but that hardly makes him impious, for St. Augustine made the same criticism. In the *Gorgias* Socrates says that the supreme misfortune is to enter the next world with one's soul loaded with sins. (522d) I see no reason not to take that statement seriously. If Socrates meant what he said, then he and Cephalus would agree on a point of utmost importance. In the *Apology* Socrates makes clear his view that a man who believes as he does, that it is the supreme misfortune to enter the next world with one's soul loaded with sins, had best stay out of public life. Socrates attributes the fact that he survived as long as he did to his abstention from public affairs. Cephalus, too, was, literally, outside of public life. He was an alien who lived outside the city. If he represents piety, then piety is truly at home only outside the city. Piety is no more at home in the city than is philosophy.

This is not to say that there is no difference between

Cephalus and Socrates, between piety and philosophy. Of course there is. While Cephalus may be a good man, he clearly is no philosopher. While he and Socrates may agree to some extent, his depth of understanding is far less than that of Socrates. His beliefs may be sound, but he is barely able to articulate them and unable to defend them. He is no match for Thrasymachus. Thrasymachus, not Socrates, is the real threat to piety. Left to his own devices, Cephalus might well lose his son to Thrasymachus's slick arguments for evil. Cephalus's departure from the dialogue indeed reveals the limitations of piety. Unaided piety has no place in a philosophical discussion of justice, not because piety will be proven false by true philosophy, but because it cannot defend itself against false philosophy.

But Cephalus's departure from the dialogue also indicates the limitations of philosophy. Cephalus is very old. He faces imminent death. In all of the Platonic dialogues, Cephalus is the only one of Socrates' interlocutors who faces imminent death. Cephalus represents the one opportunity in the Platonic dialogues for Plato to show us what Socrates would say to such a man. Yet, Plato has him leave the dialogue at a time when the discussion has barely begun. Why?

The thrust of Socrates' efforts in the Platonic dialogues is to lead young men into a particular way of life, a way of life that forms character in a particular way. The myth of Er, which appears at the close of the *Republic*, like the myths that appear in the close of several dialogues, graphically depicts the importance of living in such a way as to form a good character. The myths that appear at the close of many of the Platonic dialogues are designed to lead the reader to live with one eye on the prospect of judgment, with the certainty of death ever on his mind.

But when a man reaches the age of Cephalus and faces imminent death, his character is already formed. His life has been lived. His record of justice and injustice is complete. He already has one eye on the prospect of judgment, and he al-

ready has the certainty of death ever on his mind. It is too late for philosophy to mold him. The question of how he should live is moot. His question is what will happen to him now that death has come and the Grim Reaper is at his door. That is a question that philosophy is poorly equipped to answer. Socrates says in the *Apology* that he has no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld. (29b) In the *Phaedo*, on the day of his death, Socrates argues at length that the soul is immortal, not so much to persuade his audience, he says, as to persuade himself. (91) "For if what I say is true, then I do well to be persuaded of the truth; but if there be nothing after death, still, during the short time that remains, I shall not distress my friends with lamentations, and my ignorance will not last, but will die with me. . . ." The yearning for greater certainty is almost tangible. Unaided philosophy stretches its limits when it considers the nature of life after death.

The *Republic* closes with the myth of Er, who died and was sent back from the underworld as a messenger. Er is a mythical rather than a historical figure, but the story about him points to the need for a messenger from the other world to give the philosopher certain knowledge of its nature. The conclusion of the *Republic* points to philosophy's need for revelation.