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Matthew Carter Cashen

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, mcashen@siue.edu

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Cephalus and *Euthydemus*

Matthew Carter Cashen, *Southern Illinois University Edwardsville*

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Abstract

Cephalus makes only a brief appearance in Plato's *Republic*, but his conversation with Socrates has generated remarkable disagreement: while some think Plato's portrayal of the rich old metic is largely positive, many, including Julia Annas, Peter Steinberger, and Mark Gifford, argue that beneath Plato's superficially sympathetic portrait lies a subtext of condemnation and malice. In this paper, I reject the later interpretation, defending Cephalus against two common charges: first, that Plato finds Cephalus' views on the relationship between money and virtue morally outrageous, and next, that Plato exploits readers' background knowledge of the historical Cephalus' tragic fate to employ the literary device of tragic irony. To do this, I compare Cephalus' position with one Socrates himself defends in *Euthydemus*, a dialogue with unmistakable connections to the *Republic*. Pairing *Euthydemus* with *Republic I*, I conclude, provides insight into Socrates' moral commitments, while Cephalus' life provides a vivid illustration of their implications.

1. Introduction

We meet Cephalus, the smiling old businessman whose home is the setting for Plato's *Republic*, in a moment of tacit but tragic irony. Adorned with a ceremonial wreath, he returns from the courtyard after offering a sacrifice to Zeus Herkeios, a deity whose function is to protect the home.¹ Shortly after Plato's dialogue takes place, however, Cephalus' home is sacked by the Thirty Tyrants in the oligarchic coup of 404 BCE, his fortunes are confiscated, and one of his sons, Polemarchus, is executed. Plato does not relate these facts about the historical Cephalus but ancient readers would know the fate of Athens' wealthiest metic (or resident foreigner) and father of the famous speech-writer, Lysias. Today most commentators cite Cephalus' fate as evidence that Plato disapproved of him, despite the many compliments Socrates pays his host. In particular, Julia Annas, Mark Gifford, and Peter Steinberger—in the most thorough treatment of Cephalus so far—all argue that Socrates' many expressions of admiration are insincere, and they allege that Socrates never could endorse Cephalus' central claim, that money can help a person to be just². In this paper, I will argue to the contrary that the condemnation Cephalus has received is unfair. I will argue first that Cephalus' allegedly anti-Socratic view about the utility of money mirrors Socrates' own views in *Euthydemus*, a dialogue unmistakably linked to the *Republic*, and next, that we should not interpret Cephalus' fate as a sign of Plato's disapproval. Pairing *Republic I* with *Euthydemus*, I will conclude,

¹ On identifying the deity to whom Cephalus makes his sacrifice, see Mark Gifford 2001, pp. 61-62.

² Julia Annas 1981, Mark Gifford 2001, and Peter Steinberger 1996. Cephalus' critics also include Rachel Barney 2001, pp. 209-211. Some who read Plato's depiction of Cephalus as favorable include C.D.C. Reeve 1998, p. 6, Terrence Irwin 1995, p. 170, and most recently, Patrick McKee 2008

reveals to us a richer understanding of Socrates' moral commitments, while Cephalus' life provides a vivid illustration of their implications.

2. Cephalus on the utility of money: *Republic I* 328b-331d³

The setting is familiar: Socrates has “gone down” to the Piraeus, the harbor district and a democratic stronghold, to attend Athens' first festival for the Thracian goddess Bendis. On his way back, he is accosted by Polemarchus and a few others who persuade him to stay, have dinner, and see more of the celebrations, and so the group makes its way to Polemarchus' home. There, Socrates is welcomed by Polemarchus' father, Cephalus, a wealthy old metic who came to Athens from his native Syracuse to operate a business manufacturing shields for Athenian infantrymen during the Peloponnesian War. He talks briefly with Socrates about old age and money, but before long the old host politely begs off to attend to a sacrifice.

The exchange between the philosopher and the businessman culminates with Cephalus' controversial claim that money is valuable insofar as it can help a person avoid injustice (331b), but that claim comes as the result of much prodding by Socrates, who behaves throughout the conversation in his typically rude way. Socrates begins by telling Cephalus flatly that he looks very old and wonders aloud how he endures it (328de). In response, Cephalus says that although most moan and resent old age because they are no longer able to indulge in the pleasures of sex, feasts, and drinking parties, he welcomes it as a release from such mad and tyrannical masters (329ac). Age is not the cause of happiness or hardship, he reasons, but rather, “the way people live” (ho tropos tōn anthrōpōn), whether they are moderate (kosmioi) and content (eukolos) or insatiable and disturbed (329d). Incredulous, Socrates next insinuates that Cephalus bears old age well not because he is moderate but because he is rich, and he asks his host how he made his money—did he inherit it or earn it himself (329e)? When Cephalus explains that he has managed to grow moderately a fortune he inherited from his father and that he is content to leave as much for his sons (330ab), Socrates inquires finally into the greatest good wealth provides. “Wealth,” Cephalus answers, “can do a lot to save us from having to cheat or deceive someone against our will...this is how it is most useful to a man of any understanding” (331b). Being rich is good, then, because it makes it easier to avoid unintentional injustice, while poverty makes living justly hard.

Hearing this, Socrates next does something surprising: he compliments Cephalus on his “fine sentiment,” telling the old man that he speaks very well (legeis pagkalōs) (331b).⁴ This is surprising because it is difficult to rectify Cephalus' so-called “fine sentiment” with Socrates' frequent admonitions against those who care about money,

³ Unless otherwise noted, all passages are from the G.M.A. Grube translation of the *Republic* and the Rosalind Kent Sprague translation of *Euthydemus* in John Cooper 1997.

⁴ Of course, one always has to be careful with Socrates' compliments, which often are ironic, barely disguised insults, or prods to encourage puffed-up interlocutors further down the road to refutation. But there is no sign of that here, no overblown exaggeration typical of Socrates' false compliments. Compare, for example, his hyperbolic praises for the sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus in *Euthydemus*: their wisdom is “marvelous!”, “absolutely omniscient!” (271c), so remarkable that Socrates declares “I had never in my life seen such wise men” (303c).

power, and reputation.⁵ Socrates often rejects money as altogether valueless, idealizing the philosopher as someone not at all interested in material possessions, and his own way of living, deliberately poor, relying on others' support, is a testament to that ideal. Given this, Peter Steinberger thinks Socrates must find Cephalus' claim about the utility of money "outrageous," despite what Socrates says.⁶ Calling Cephalus "limited and complacent" and "philosophically unreflective,"⁷ Julia Annas and Mark Gifford agree: Cephalus tries to rationalize the importance he attaches to money by associating in his own mind the possession of wealth with the possession of virtue. Plato could not have respected Cephalus' position, Annas reasons; instead, he must have felt "contempt for it and for the complacency it engenders." Gifford meanwhile cites Cephalus' interest in money as evidence of an unreflective mind.⁸ The charge against Cephalus, then, is that his view on the utility of money is naïve and, from the perspective of Socrates, morally indefensible. Steinberger summarizes the charge: "the case of Socrates makes it highly doubtful that material possessions could contribute *in any way* to living the good life, properly understood. The truth is, in fact, rather the reverse. The possession of wealth implies a preoccupation with money that inevitably detracts from, rather than abets, the pursuit of virtue."⁹

Put in this way, the charge is not fair, however, for of course the mere possession of wealth does not *inevitably* imply a preoccupation with money, as Steinberger writes. A person could inherit a large fortune and be uninterested in it, for example, or pursue an occupation that happens to be lucrative not because it is lucrative but because she finds it meaningful and important. The question to ask is whether there is any evidence for thinking Cephalus was in fact *preoccupied* with making money. In the text of *Republic I*, there is nothing to indicate this is the case, however. Cephalus says that he has had little interest over the course of his life in either spending or multiplying his fortunes¹⁰ and Socrates seems to believe him, for he responds by admitting to Cephalus that he doesn't "seem to love money too much" (330b). Nor is there historical evidence for thinking Cephalus lived unjustly. To the contrary, we are told through an oration of Lysias that Cephalus and his family were highly regarded throughout Athens and that, in their thirty years living there, they had never been involved in any accusations of injustice, either as plaintiff or perpetrator.¹¹ So there appears to be no evidence for the charge that Cephalus

⁵ In the *Apology*, for example, Socrates admonishes his accusers on just these grounds—"are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom and truth, or the best possible state of your soul?" (29e)—while later in the *Republic* he will prevent the rulers of his ideal city, the Kallipolis, from owing practically anything (416de).

⁶ Peter Steinberger 1996, p. 1881

⁷ Julia Annas 1981, p. 19, and Mark Gifford 2001, p. 63.

⁸ Again, Julia Annas 1981, p. 19, and Mark Gifford 2001, p. 71.

⁹ Peter Steinberger 1996, p. 190, emphasis added.

¹⁰ Cephalus' characterization of himself as not particularly interested in money is consistent, too, with what he has to say about the pleasure of sex, feasts, and drinking parties—he is not much interested in them and is not sorry to have put those pleasures in his past (329ad), since it is not the satisfaction of carnal desires that matters but, rather, it is "the way people live" (329d).

¹¹ "We lived in such a way," Lysias writes, "as to avoid both doing wrong to other people and suffering injustice from others ourselves" (*Against Eratosthenes* 12.4.). In his comprehensive study of metics in ancient Athens, *The Ideology of the Athenian Metic*, David Whitehead in fact

was preoccupied with money or that his interest in money precluded an interest in living justly. Still, even if Cephalus was not fixated on money, and even if he led an outwardly just life, the question remains: can Socrates endorse the claim that money actually helps a person avoid injustice?

3. Socrates on the utility of money: *Euthydemus* 278e-282d

I now am going to argue that Socrates can in fact endorse Cephalus' claim about the utility of money and, to do that, I am going to introduce an argument from *Euthydemus*—a dialogue with unmistakable connections to the *Republic*¹²—in which Socrates, like Cephalus, argues that money can help a good person to be just. We find Socrates in *Euthydemus* trying to convince a boy named Clinias to pursue philosophy and to “devote himself to wisdom and excellence” (278d). He begins by cataloguing a list of goods conventionally thought to make life go well, like health and beauty, reputation, power, wealth, and also canonical virtues like moderation and wisdom (279ac). After compiling his list, Socrates adds what he initially suggests is the greatest good, good fortune (eutuchia), but immediately retracts the suggestion and claims instead that if a person is wise, good fortune is superfluous. This is so because, as he puts it, “wisdom *is* good fortune (sophia...eutuchia estin)” (279cd). While Clinias at first is shocked by this pronouncement, his shock wears off as Socrates explains his meaning. He gives several examples of wisdom providing people with what he calls good fortune: wise pilots are more fortunate at sea than unskilled pilots, for instance, while wise doctors are more fortunate in the practice of medicine than incompetent ones (279e1-280a3). By ‘good fortune,’ Socrates means success, so his claim really is that wisdom is, and so guarantees, success. Thus he concludes, “in sum, things are like this: whenever a person has wisdom, he has no need for good fortune in addition” (280b).

portrays Cephalus as the moral ideal of a 5th-Century metic, a man with a spotless reputation who performed many services for the city (David Whitehead 1977, pp. 58 and 160).

¹² There are two reasons, in particular, for connecting the arguments of *Euthydemus* and the *Republic*. First, there is in *Euthydemus* a notorious, out-of-the-blue mention of the dialectikos (290c), Plato's technical term in the *Republic* for a person possessing the superior art required for the philosopher's ultimate “ascension to reality” (521d). Socrates in *Euthydemus* neglects to explain his meaning, and indeed it is explicable only if we read *Euthydemus* with background knowledge about the philosophical method of dialectic Plato develops in the *Republic*. The next reason emerges from an unexpected transition between two arguments in *Euthydemus* that are supposed to be about the same thing. In the first argument, Socrates claims that the virtue of wisdom, sophia, is the one thing that makes an individual's life go well—I will fare well, for example, only if I am wise (278e-282d). In the second, however, he mysteriously and without comment seems to change the subject: sophia, the virtue that benefits the individual who possesses it, transforms into basilikē technē, the kingly skill a ruler needs to benefit his or her subjects (288d-293a). That Socrates would change the subject from personal to political virtue is baffling until we recall the grounding idea in the *Republic* that a person can become virtuous only in the virtuous state, the Kallipolis. With this idea from the *Republic* in mind, the transition in *Euthydemus* makes sense: if one wants to become wise, one first must inquire into which kinds of political states that make it possible for their citizens to acquire virtue. (Annas briefly explores this idea in Julia Annas 1993, pp. 61-2, stressing Socrates' association of political virtue with the art of a king, which most Greeks would find shocking.)

Now this argument is problematic, for Socrates' examples don't seem to support the conclusion he draws: they warrant the claim that wisdom provides *more* success than a person would get without it, but they don't seem to warrant the conclusion that wisdom *is* success, or even that it *guarantees* success: no doctor, for example, no matter how wise she may be, can successfully cure an incurable patient. If she tries, she will fail.¹³ The argument only makes sense under the assumption that, for Socrates, the outcome of one's action is irrelevant to an assessment of whether the action was successful: a person is successful whenever she acts wisely and uses wisely the resources at her disposal, no matter the outcome: the wise doctor, for instance, who does all she can for the incurable patient and who knows the patient's fate is beyond her control practices her art successfully: whether or not she cures the patient has nothing to do with whether or not she succeeds as a doctor. Similarly, a pilot who does everything he can to save his ship from a storm but whose ship goes down because the storm was unpredictable and unbeatable is no failure, nor is he unfortunate, not if he responds to his situation with wisdom and skill. It is not unreasonable to make this assumption, about Socrates' understanding of success either, given his frequent claim that the only object of concern is the state of one's soul and the rightness of one's actions.¹⁴

That Socrates has this meaning in mind in this passage becomes clear in the next step of his argument.¹⁵ He next checks to see what his conclusion about wisdom and fortune means for his initial catalogue of goods that make a life go well and decides that merely possessing a good is not itself beneficial. For a good to benefit a person, a person must use it *wisely* (280ce). An extravagant feast, for example, benefits me only if I want it and eat it—just sitting there, it is no benefit at all. Moreover, I must eat wisely—if I am dieting and know I cannot control myself around rich foods, the feast harms me. Using wisely the goods one has, then, is what matters; the other goods Socrates initially catalogued are good only insofar as they make wise action possible and, when not put to wise use, they are no good at all. “To sum up,” he concludes, “with respect to all the things we called good in the beginning, the correct account is this...if ignorance (amathia) controls them, they are greater evils than their opposites, to the extent that they are more capable of complying with a bad master; but if wisdom and good sense (phronēsis te kai sophia) are in control, they are greater goods. In themselves, however, neither sort is of any value” (281de).

When we apply Socrates' argument in *Euthydemus* to the topic of wealth, the implications are clear: having money can help a person to act virtuously, so long as the person uses his or her money wisely and with good sense: with money, for example, I can support and nourish my family, act charitably toward others, and even contribute to the betterment of the city. In the same way, I can use reputation and political power to positively influence others and promote the right values throughout my community.

¹³ Because of this, M.A. Stewart, for example, dismisses the argument as “disastrous” (M.A. Stewart 1977, p. 22), while T.H. Irwin calls the argument's apparent faults “recurrent, gross, and obvious” (T.H. Irwin 1986, p. 202).

¹⁴ As he famously puts it in the *Apology*: “a man who is any good at all...should look to this only in his actions, whether what he does is right or wrong, whether he is acting like a good or a bad man” (28b).

¹⁵ This meaning is of course also consistent, too with Socrates' frequent claim that the only true object of concern is the state of one's soul and the rightness of one's actions. See previous note.

Wealth, then, can help me to live a just and virtuous life, just as surely as it can help me to live a self-indulgent and shallow life—it is a tool that can be put to either virtuous or vicious use. Now this parallels Cephalus' claim about the utility of money in *Republic I*. Reflecting on how wealth has lightened the burdens of old age, he says that it has given him peace of mind because he has used it to avoid injustice. Money is valuable when put to the service of just aims, like paying debts and dealing honestly with others, but it won't help the wicked because their aims are not just (330d-331b). That is why, Cephalus reasons, "a good person wouldn't easily bear old age if he were poor, but a bad one wouldn't be at peace with himself even if he were wealthy" (330a).

Cephalus' claim about the utility of money thus coheres with Socrates' moral views in *Euthydemus*, and given that, it is reasonable to take Socrates at his word when he compliments Cephalus on his "fine sentiment." This of course does not mean that Cephalus' moral vision is perfect or that Socrates would agree with him on the topic of what *constitutes* wise use. When that question is raised, when Socrates presses Cephalus by asking if being honest and paying one's debts *always* is just, Polemarchus steps in and the old man politely excuses himself, laughing, Plato tells us (331d), so that the younger generation can continue the conversation. That Cephalus leaves the conversation early sometimes is itself taken to suggest that he is unreflective and that his professed interest in virtue is insincere, but it is more charitable to think he simply is being polite, given that when Socrates first entered his home, he acknowledged that his visitor had come to spend time not with him, but with his sons and the other young guests (328d): "stay with these young men now," he said, "but come regularly to see us, just as you would to friends or relatives" (328d). We might have preferred Cephalus to stay and finish the conversation, whether doing so is impolite or not, and the fact that he does not stay may prove that he is no philosopher, devoted to contemplation and conversation above all else. But neither does Cephalus represent a "magnificent repudiation" of Socrates' values, as Steinberger claims, nor is there good reason to think Plato's attitude toward him one of malice, as Annas claims.¹⁶ To the contrary, having neared the end of his life, Cephalus has come to ask himself hard questions about what has real value and, although he may not fully grasp its implications, his conclusion is one Socrates embraces: the pleasures of sex and feasts are distractions in life, justice is what really matters, and money is valuable when it helps a person to live justly.

4. Conclusion: Cephalus' fate.

There remains a final concern: Cephalus has claimed that wealth has helped him to live well and it clearly contributes to the security he feels in his old age and to the flourishing of his family, but we know that shortly after the dramatic setting of the *Republic*, when the Thirty Tyrants establish their oligarchic rule after Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War, Cephalus' household suffers a hideous reversal of fortunes. Steinberger, Annas, and Gifford all agree that, once we recall this, we cannot think Plato earnestly endorses Cephalus' claims about money. Instead, the contentment, good cheer, and satisfaction Cephalus finds in his wealth mask what Gifford calls a "grisly irony," the ruin of his family.¹⁷ In fact, Gifford thinks Plato chooses Cephalus and Polemarchus as Socrates' interlocutors to stage an ironic and pointed demonstration of the dangers of caring too

¹⁶ Peter Steinberger 1996, p. 189, and Julia Annas 1981, p. 18.

¹⁷ Mark Gifford 2001, p. 83.

much about money. Socrates, he reminds us, never investigates a person's ethical claims in isolation. He investigates how those claims match up to how the person lives. Once we match Cephalus' life to his words, Gifford concludes, we must see his wealth as an impediment to real virtue.¹⁸

If we recall the lesson of *Euthydemus*, however—that regardless of outcomes, the person who acts wisely and uses justly the resources at her disposal lives well—then we need not interpret the injustices committed against Cephalus' family as a sign that Plato believed the rich metic's values doomed him to failure.¹⁹ I would suggest that, when we examine the words of Plato's Cephalus' in *Republic I* in light of facts about the historical Cephalus and the fate of his family, we find not an ironic portrait of condemnation but rather a vivid illustration of how Socratic commitments can alter one's perspective on life, good fortune, and success. Plato offers a choice: if we judge life by conventional standards, we see the reversals that befell Cephalus' household as tragic and ruinous, while if we adopt the philosopher's standards, we see how the love of wisdom protects a person from the vicissitudes of fortune. It protects by changing priorities. A wise person would not regard the sorts of reversals that befell Cephalus' household as misfortunes, for the only true misfortune is to be possessed of an unjust soul. Whether Cephalus realizes it or not, when he claims that the value of money lies in its ability to help a good person avoid injustice, he thus introduces an idea that, if taken to its conclusion, can save him from tragedy by changing his understanding of what constitutes tragedy. Although he makes only a brief appearance in the *Republic*, Cephalus' his position in the text as the first person Socrates examines signals his significance, for we have in the fate of his family and fortunes an illustration of what is at stake when we take seriously Socrates' moral commitments.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 43-45.

¹⁹ It is instructive to note, too, that Cephalus' fate parallels that of Socrates. The metic's family was treated brutally and unjustly, and his son Polemarchus was executed; similarly, the philosopher was slandered and executed, and he condemned the verdict against him as unjust. Socrates, however, notoriously maintained that he was not harmed by the mistreatment he suffered at the hands of his accusers, for there is no harm in being treated unjustly, there is harm only in acting unjustly (30d). From Socrates' perspective in the *Apology*, too, there is no misfortune in suffering the kind of unjust treatment that both he and Cephalus endured.

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