Part I

SOCRATES, PLATO, AND FRANK

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Of Sheep, Shepherds, and a Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

The Cynical View of Politics in *House of Cards* and Plato's *Republic*

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The road to power is paved with hypocrisy.

—Frank Underwood

The reviews all seem to agree: "The Empty Cynicism of *House of Cards*," reads one. "The Most Cynical Show on TV," reads another. And "The Very American Cynicism of *House of Cards*," reads yet another.

The reviews are still coming in on Plato's (428–348 BCE) *Republic*,[1] which ends more optimistically than *House of Cards* probably will. Frank Underwood and *House of Cards* in general are modern manifestations of a deeply cynical view of politics, and as such they reflect the challenge of the Sophists presented by Plato in Books 1 and 2 of the *Republic*. In Plato's day, professional teachers called Sophists taught the youth of Athens the political skills purported to be necessary for success in public life. Key to their teaching was a cynicism about the political world in which the strong get the better of the weak, and where exploitation, manipulation, and, yes, hypocrisy "paved the road to power."

House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic,
First Edition. Edited by J. Edward Hackett.

Justice and Power

The *Republic* is very much a philosophical set piece, each part carefully designed to further the arguments and ideas under consideration. Early on in Book 1, the character Socrates turns the discussion to the nature of justice.[2] In the ensuing discussion, Socrates' interlocutors give several definitions like "justice is telling the truth and paying one's debts,"[3] or "justice is helping one's friends and hurting one's enemies."[4] None of these definitions stands up to scrutiny as Socrates exposes weaknesses in them.

A decisive transition in the dialogue occurs when the character Thrasymachus—a Sophist—forcefully intervenes like a "wild beast,"[5] saying that the discussion of justice to that point has been stupid and naïve. Thrasymachus offers his own definition: Justice "is nothing but the advantage of the stronger."[6] This account is not so much about how we ought to live as it is about the de facto status of what norms guide us. The rules benefit the powerful. That's just how it goes.

Thrasymachus' view of politics, like Frank's, is deeply cynical. Politics is about power, and nothing more. The powerful will see to it that the rules serve their interest. From the standpoint of those who don't have power, the rules will not be to their advantage but to someone else's advantage. In the course of his defense, Thrasymachus slides from a descriptive statement to an evaluative one: Those who are just (who follow the rules) are dupes or suckers. One would be better off not following the rules, if one had the power and ability, and so living the life of injustice is supremely preferable to the life of justice. It is, in short, better to be ruthless and unjust than it is to be just and taken advantage of.

Underwood's Cynical Use of "His People"

Frank often asserts a kind of ownership over people. Certainly, this "ownership" is not in the form of chattel slavery, but in important respects his relations with other characters go beyond just manipulation.

One of Frank's central strategies is to place people in thrall to him. At one point he refers to his Gaffney, South Carolina, constituents as "my people," and this means more than just "those like me" or "the

people from which I come." There is a sense of proprietorship in his attitude, as though Gaffney were a kind of fiefdom or, perhaps, apropos of the *Republic* and Thrasymachus, a flock of sheep. Evocative of this latter image is Frank's admiration for Tusk, who, he tells us, "Measures wealth not in jets but in purchased souls."

Arguably the most tragic of Frank's "sheep" is Peter Russo, who upon coming to the end of the line with Frank, bleats forlornly, "Whenever has your help helped me?" Frank even gets Russo to sacrifice and slaughter some of his own sheep with the closing of the naval base in Russo's district. Countless lives were ruined, and the social upheaval was immeasurable.

Stamper, Meechum, Sharp, Seth, his Gaffney constituents—all are, for Frank, merely sheep to be used as the shepherd sees fit: groomed and perhaps pampered one moment, fleeced and even sacrificed the next. Admittedly, some of his sheep are more wolf-like than others (Stamper, Seth, and Jackie, for example). In keeping with a metaphor from the *Republic*, we might think of them rather as "sheepdogs" than "sheep." Nonetheless, all are at his mercy, all serve at his pleasure, and he makes it clear that he can and will do with them as he pleases. Notably, the most significant early falling out between Frank and Claire, which foreshadows the decisive falling out at the end of Season 3, occurs when she accuses him of using her "like you use everyone else." Claire is a fellow shepherd, not merely Frank's "head sheep" or, as Jackie Sharp refers to herself, his "pit bull." She is quick to remind Frank of that status. All of this cynical manipulation was long anticipated in the *Republic*.

Socrates deploys the shepherd–sheep analogy in attempting to refute Thrasymachus' view that justice is the advantage of the stronger. As this analogy would have it, the relationship between ruler and ruled is like that between shepherd and flock. As a shepherd's charge is to look after and care for the sheep, so too a proper ruler should act only to secure the advantage of the ruled. Thrasymachus will have none of this argument. He turns the analogy around on Socrates: It may be true that the shepherd cares for the wellbeing of his flock, but only insofar as it is ultimately to his advantage to do so. Thrasymachus scoffs smugly (as Frank often does),

> [Y]ou do not even recognize sheep or shepherd. . . . You suppose shepherds or cowherds consider the good of the sheep or the cows and fatten

> them and take care of them looking to something other than their masters' good and their own; and so you also believe that the rulers in the cities, those who truly rule, think about the ruled differently from the way a man would regard sheep, and that night and day they consider anything else than how they will benefit themselves.[7]

Much in this exchange comes to life and is reflected in how Frank uses people. The exchange contrasts two views. On one view, politicians ought to strive not for their own interests but rather for those who they are said to represent. On the second view, as a matter of fact politicians ultimately serve their own interests; they serve the interests of the people only to the extent that this advances their own interests. The reason the latter, "realist" view is thought to be cynical is precisely because it grates against the former, "idealist" view. Thus, if the view of politics presented by Thrasymachus and *House of Cards* is cynical, it is so because it grates against some idealist view we hold about what politics should be.

It's clear enough that Frank has a cynical, or realist, view of politics. Even when it appears that he is acting on behalf of his constituents, like the parents of the girl who drove off the road distracted by the giant peach, he is really acting to advance his own interests (avoiding lawsuits and bad publicity). Everything that Frank does is calculated to advance his immediate and ultimate interests and to augment his power. That is precisely as Thrasymachus would have it. And, if we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that we too often find the realist view attractive. Frank both repels and attracts us after all. As we shall see, it is precisely this tension, between our idealist and realist selves, that makes the Sophist's (not to mention Frank's) challenge so powerful.

It's Good to Be Bad

As if to appeal to the realist in all of us, Thrasymachus shifts the focus of the debate. Not only does he insist that "justice is the interest of the stronger," but he adds that the unjust life is better and to be preferred to the just life.

To be just, or to act justly, is a "high-minded innocence" or naivety in one's view of the world that sets one up to be used and manipulated.

To practice injustice is the best sort of life because it allows the unjust to get the better of the just and to attain what they desire. Justice is either for fools (like Blythe) who don't understand that the stronger have pulled the wool over their eyes, or for those who are too weak (like Zoe's colleague Janine) to challenge the strong.

Early in the series we actually see Frank suffer what, on this realist view, would surely be an "injustice." Frank is "cheated" out of his appointment as secretary of state. It is a tough blow after all of his hard, loyal work. Frank didn't see it coming because he underestimated his opponents. In this situation, he was gotten the better of because he had played by the rules and expected others to keep their promises and reward loyal service. That Walker and Vasquez broke their promise echoes Thrasymachus' contention that the unjust will almost always cheat on promises, at least when it suits them and furthers their own interests.[8] Frank certainly takes this to heart and never looks back, fully embracing prudence and injustice.

A number of characters embody something like the virtues of conventional morality—the just life. Think of Lucas Goodwin, in many ways the paragon of virtue in the show. He is high-minded, out to expose corruption and malfeasance. His love for Zoe appears genuine, and his pursuit of truth is noble and virtuous. Lucas is completely dominated and destroyed by Frank.

Or take Donald Blythe. Whether or not we agree with his policy views, he comes across as an honorable man, true to his word, upstanding, and honest. Given how effortlessly Frank uses and gets the better of him, he indirectly illustrates a Thrasymachian view of justice: While justice might not be a vice, it is a "very high-minded innocence," a naivety about the world and its workings that sets its practitioners up to be dupes and suckers, ripe for a good fleecing.[9] In Thrasymachian terms, the unjust gets the better of the just and the life of the former comes out seeming best. And, if we're honest, we have to admit that our "realist" selves are more attracted to Underwood than to Blythe. Or at least we recognize that the virtuous characteristics we admire in someone like Blythe are something of a liability in politics. It proves expedient for Frank to make him his Vice President, but when the prospect of his becoming a candidate for the presidency is raised, the party power brokers without hesitation accept Frank's assessment that he lacks what it takes.

Heather Dunbar is also instructive in this regard. She begins her run for president committed to high-minded ideals about political campaigning, flatly rejecting, on presumably moral grounds, an offer from Stamper to expose political dirt on Claire. However, as the campaign progresses and things heat up, she changes her mind. She reaches out to Stamper to play the "abortion card," as if in the interim she had learned the cynical Thrasymachian lesson that nice guys finish last: If you want to win, you have to be willing to hit below the belt.

Rings of "Power" and Myths

Frank's Sentinel class ring is not necessary to further the plotline, but it serves an important, symbolic purpose for both Frank and the viewer. Typically, when he bangs his ring, it is in the context of some new scheme. It's as though through this process he invokes a kind of power, a resolve to get the thing done. He even has a myth about its origins: that his father told him it both hardens the knuckles and knocks on wood—preparation and luck. It's unlikely that this origin story is true; we have already learned, through an aside during his sermon at the Gaffney funeral, that Frank has no respect for his father (a point that gets reinforced in Season 3 when he urinates on his father's grave). However, it does make for a good story that he can use to impress others.

In "Chapter 8," focusing on the new library at The Sentinel, we learn that it was at this formative military academy that Frank "learned his craft." The ring then, as a reminder of that place, may well be a token of his craft, representing his skill at manipulation and his ability to get the better of others through deception and treachery. For our purposes, the ring also links *House of Cards* to one of the greatest thought experiments in moral philosophy: the Ring of Gyges story in Book 2 of the *Republic*.

The character Glaucon introduces the story to sharpen the position of Thrasymachus (who by now has withdrawn from the dialogue in disgust) by showing that most people would choose the life of injustice if they knew they could get away with it. The story concerns a shepherd, who comes upon a magic ring that gives him the power to become invisible. It's not long before he puts the ring to good (or bad) use by gaining entry into the palace where he seduces the

queen, kills the king, and usurps the throne. His ring makes him all-powerful and able to fully realize the life of injustice. Who among us, Glaucon argues, possessing such a ring, could resist the temptation to get all that we wanted, acting unjustly while appearing to the world to be just?

Obviously there are no such rings of power, and yet there are people who think they can (and often do) live the life of injustice and get away with it undetected. They have a kind of special ability to mask or hide their injustice, making it invisible to the rest of the world. Certainly Frank has such an ability, and he likely developed it at The Sentinel. But there's more. Frank not only has the ability to appear just while being unjust, he also has the ability to make others who are just appear to be unjust.

Rings and the "Craft" of Perfect Injustice

The library dedication at The Sentinel is important for the development of Frank's character in the show. We have already seen that he has a *craft* or skill for injustice. He has told us that he is like the plumber whose "job it is to clear the pipes and keep the sludge moving," but to the school president he stands for and "exemplifies" all the values and virtues The Sentinel represents and tries to instill: "honor, duty, discipline, sacrifice, service, and respect." Frank's reputation, at least at The Sentinel, is that of the man of justice. All of this was anticipated in the *Republic* through Glaucon's challenge.

That challenge ultimately has us imagine two different characters: the perfectly unjust individual in contrast with the perfectly just individual. The former, Glaucon tells us, will "act like the *clever craftsmen*"[10] who will know what is possible and impossible to achieve, and should he "trip up he has the skill to fix things." While he will achieve the greatest of injustices, he will have "provided himself with the greatest reputation for justice." Perhaps most telling, "through words and deeds," he is able to persuade and to use force to achieve his ends. With his skill and cunning, the unjust person will "rule because he seems to be just," and he will be rewarded with riches and honors and will always get the better of others in both private and public affairs. In short, through being unjust while appearing just, he will have the best sort of life.[11]

Glaucon contrasts this characterization of the ideal unjust man with that of the perfectly just man. Such a person will actually have a reputation for injustice, lying, and deceit. He will be shunned and ridiculed. In the end, he will be made to suffer all manner of torment. He "will be whipped; he'll be racked; he'll be bound; he'll have both his eyes burned out; and, at the end, when he has undergone every sort of evil, he'll be crucified and know that one shouldn't wish to be, but to seem to be, just."[12]

House of Cards brings this contrast to life through the clash between Frank and Lucas Goodwin. Lucas, of all the characters in the show, is arguably the most just. He is honorable and pursues the truth about injustice and corruption. Led astray and entrapped by Frank's minions, he is made to seem like an unjust man. If all of the stories of the state of American prisons are true, he will be made to suffer the greatest of torments, what in the modern world might be comparable to the fate of he whom Glaucon describes as the "seeming unjust just man."

Tyranny, Philosophy, and the Search for Meaning in a Cynical World

The model that Thrasymachus holds up for would-be politicians is the tyrant,[13] the perfectly unjust person who can do whatever he or she wants, a characteristic that Claire ascribes to Frank in discussion with their dying bodyguard. And in Season 3, while listening to a broadcast of a speech in which Frank extols the virtues of the founding fathers for their fight against tyranny, veteran *Telegraph* reporter Kate Baldwin, aware of his ruthless machinations, retorts that "*he* is the tyrant."

No doubt Frank is a tyrant, but the model of the tyrant that Plato sets up for purposes of his argument is the *perfect* tyrant. There are reasons to suppose that Frank falls short of this ideal. In this regard, it is useful to contrast Frank with Petrov, the Russian President, who appears to get the better of Frank in Season 3. Compared with Petrov, Frank comes across as being somewhat weak. The show drives this contrast home in a rather clichéd and stereotypical way by accenting Petrov's machismo (he downs vodka like water; he openly flirts with Claire), on the one hand, and attenuating Frank's (e.g., he cries and is sexually attracted to men) on the other.

Clichés aside, the main difference between Petrov and Frank is that Frank, at least as far as the plot has developed so far, seems to have a conscience and something in him that moves him to reflect on the meaning of his life and his actions beyond mere calculation. Petrov and Frank are both murderers, but we see no evidence that Petrov has any qualms about this. Frank, on the other hand, shows signs of having, and struggling against, a guilty conscience. We see him on two occasions in a church, as if being on the verge of prayer or confession, and seeking some kind of meaning to his actions and life beyond mere power and calculation. Visiting the church in "Chapter 30," echoing the question of the *Republic*, he tells the priest that he wants "to understand what Justice is." He does not like the answer the priest gives him, and dramatically rejects it by profaning a crucifix. Nonetheless, he is tortured by the question, and appears to remain so. One might say that Frank's weakness (from the standpoint of the "ideal" tyrant), is that, in part, his nature is irrepressibly searching and philosophical, a claim that some commentators have made of Thrasymachus.

This hint of melancholy that Frank begins to display in Season 3 points to at least one further connection between *House of Cards* and the *Republic*. In Book 9, as Socrates is coming to the end of his long defense of justice and the just life, he returns once more to a discussion of the tyrannical personality.[14] Such a person, we are told, lives the worst sort of life. The driving force of the tyrant is an endless desire for self-aggrandizement and the pursuit of self-interest. He can trust no one and can be really close to none. Eventually he pushes away all those he thought loyal. He lives in isolation, fearing to venture out. Those who stay steadfast are mere flatterers or sycophants. Of him, Socrates asks rhetorically,

> Isn't it necessary that he be—and due to ruling become still more than before—envious, faithless, unjust, friendless, impious, and a host and nurse for all vice; and, thanks to all this, unlucky in the extreme; and then, that he make those close to him so?[15]

As Season 3 ends, Frank is being abandoned by all those who had been his closest servants and partners, not least Claire. He is becoming almost pitiable in his isolation and his single-minded pursuit of power for power's sake. He is abandoned and alone. As Socrates would say, he is living "the worst sort of life."

Can We Really Get Away with Injustice?

So, can Frank get away with it? *House of Cards* has not answered this question yet, though as Season 3 ends things don't look good. To be sure, if the final season follows the book or the UK version, Frank's injustice will not triumph in the end. The bad guy will not finish first, in the long run. He will be found out, and so he will not be the example of perfect injustice. Hollywood always tells the story that way: The bad guy loses in the end, but only because he gets caught (and therefore is not truly a super-crafty bad guy).

But the problem presented by the cynical view of politics transcends the question of whether or not Frank "gets away with it." Rather, that problem, for us as it was for Plato's characters in the *Republic*, and may well be for Frank himself, is "Why ought we choose the just over the unjust view of politics?" We want to know, in other words, even if the villain does win, is his life truly the best? Socrates, Plato's mouthpiece, ultimately argues that there is no getting away with injustice because injustice in the soul (our true selves) is like a disease in the body. The unjust person is out of sorts and cannot live with himself. It is much better to be a just person with a clear conscience because only in this way will our true selves, our souls, find harmony and balance. Certainly the cynicism of *House of Cards*, like that of the *Republic* before it, leaves us wondering whether this is true, and of course that's why it too is a brilliant portrayal of this age-old problem.

Notes

1. Plato presented his philosophy in the form of a series of dialogues, and *Republic* is considered his greatest achievement. The dialogues are dramas and relate their message through the give and take of philosophical discussion and argument between the characters. Plato's main character was his teacher, Socrates, and in *Republic* at least it is safe to assume that what Socrates says is what Plato believes. When discussing the ideas of the dialogues, it is customary to do so as they are expressed by the distinct characters who present them. Just keep in mind that always in the background is the author, Plato. The translation we use is that by Allan Bloom: Plato, *The Republic*, 2nd ed. (trans. with notes and an interpretive essay by Allan Bloom; New York: Basic Books, 1991). All

modern translations have adopted the practice of using the same original page numbers in the margins. Thus, the accepted way to cite Plato is via reference to these numbers. We follow that practice here.

2. The Greek term is *dikaiosune*. No one English term quite captures its full meaning Traditionally, it has been translated into English as "justice." That can seem strange to modern ears because we often think of justice in terms of political and social institutions and our relations to them. However, in using the term, Plato has in mind something more extensive, like morality, right and wrong, and virtue. It is in this moral sense, concerning the "proper," "right," or "good" ways in which persons should conduct themselves, that the term is intended in Books 1 and 2. In Book 3, Plato proposes an important analogy relating justice at the individual level of moral behavior and justice at the level of the society—justice in the soul of the individual and justice in the city or society. This analogy marks a significant transition in the book and is central to its argument.
3. *Republic* 331–332.
4. *Republic* 332d.
5. *Republic* 336b.
6. *Republic* 338c.
7. *Republic* 343b.
8. *Republic* 343d.
9. *Republic* 348d.
10. Emphasis added.
11. *Republic* 360e–361e.
12. *Republic* 361e–362a.
13. *Republic* 344a.
14. *Republic* 571–592.
15. *Republic* 580a.