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## SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THRASYMACHUS' DEFINITION OF JUSTICE

There are two questions to be answered regarding Thrasymachus' view about justice in Plato's *Republic*, I 338 c - 347 e, namely (i) whether it is self-consistent<sup>1</sup> or changing<sup>2</sup>, and (ii) what is really his view of justice. The two questions are obviously interrelated.

That Thrasymachus' view is self-consistent is argued by both Hourani and Kerferd, although they differ in other respects. Hourani<sup>3</sup> argues that Thrasymachus' real view is that justice is obedience to law (conventionalism or legalism) and that his first assertion, i.e. that justice is serving the interest of the stronger, is not seriously meant. Only thus he can see Thrasymachus' definition as self-consistent<sup>4</sup>. Kerferd, on the other hand, defends his view that Thrasymachus' true position is that justice is (the promotion of) another's good;<sup>5</sup> the statements justice is the interest of the stronger and justice is obedience to the laws are regarded as incomplete but correct for those cases where the former or the latter involved seeking another's good<sup>6</sup>. Others believe that Thrasymachus' view is not self-consistent, as R. C. Cross and A. D. Woozley<sup>7</sup> and E. R. Dodds<sup>8</sup>.

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1. Kerferd G. B., 'The Doctrine of Thrasymachus in Plato's Republic', *Durham University Journal* N. S. 9, 1947-8, 19-27, and 'Thrasymachus and Justice: A Reply', *Phronesis* 9, 1964, 12-16; Hourani G. F., 'Thrasymachus' Definition of Justice in Plato's Republic', *Phronesis* 7, 1962, 110-120.

2. Maguire J.P., 'Thrasymachus... or Plato?', *Phronesis* 16, 1971, 142-163.

3. *Phronesis* 7, 1962, 110-120.

4. *Ibid.* 110.

5. *Phronesis* N. S. 9, 1947-8, 19-27, and *Phronesis* 9, 1964, 12-16. See also D. J. Hadgopoulos, 'Thrasymachus and Legalism', *Phronesis* 18, 1973, 204-8, which is supporting Kerferd's view.

6. *Phronesis* 9, 1964, 12.

7. *Plato's Republic*, London 1964, 23-60.

8. *Plato Gorgias*, Oxford 1959, 14 n. 3.

Before we discuss Thrasymachus' view about justice, it is necessary to go through his main points of argument.

- 338 c - 340 c: the arguments are based on the empirical level.
- 338 c 1-2 Thrasymachus starts with his provocative definition that justice is nothing else than that which is advantageous to the stronger<sup>1</sup>.
- 338 d 10 The stronger is defined as τὸ κρατοῦν, τὸ ἄρχον.
- 338 e Every government lays down laws for its own advantage, and makes it plain to its subjects that what is its advantage is just; it punishes him who departs from this as a lawbreaker and unjust man.
- 339 a 1 Justice is what is advantageous to the established government (τὸ τῆς καθεστηκυίας ἀρχῆς συμφέρον).
- 339 b 7-8 Justice is also to obey the rulers (οὐ καὶ πείθεσθαι μέντοι τοῖς ἀρχουσιν δίκαιον φῆς εἶναι; - ἔγωγε).
- 340 d - 342 e: When Thrasymachus understands that his definition is faced with the danger to be diminished by Socrates' dialectic, he moves to a «theoretical» level of argument.
- 340 d 8 ff Every craftsman is infallible.
- e 5 A ruler is always infallible so long as he is a ruler.
- e 8 ff A ruler, so far as he is a ruler, is infallible, and being infallible he prescribes what is best for himself, and this the subject must do.
- 341 a 3 ff To do what is advantageous to the stronger is just.

Socrates' cross-examination of the reshaped definition of justice by Thrasymachus on the «theoretical» level makes Thrasymachus transfer his argument again to the empirical level, with his long speech (343 b ff).

- 343 c 3 ff Justice and the just is really the good of another, the advantage of the stronger who rules, but the self-inflicted injury of the subject who obeys (ἢ μὲν δικαιοσύνη καὶ τὸ δίκαιον ἑλλότριον ἀγαθὸν τῷ ὄντι, τοῦ κρείττονός τε καὶ ἀρχοντος συμφέρον, οἰκεία δὲ τοῦ πειθομένου τε καὶ ὑπηρετοῦντος βλάβη).
- Injustice is the opposite, and rules those very simple just souls; the governed serve the advantage of the stronger man, and by their obedience contribute to his happiness, but in no way to their own (ἢ δὲ ἀδίκια τοῦ-

1. The translation is that of A. D. Lindsay, *Plato Republic*, London 1976<sup>2</sup>.

- ναντίον, και ἄρχει τῶν ἀληθῶς εὐθητικῶν τε και δικαίων, οἱ δ' ἀρχόμενοι ποιοῦσιν τὸ ἐκείνου συμφέρον κρείττονος ὄντος).
- 343 d A just man always comes off worse than an unjust, in commercial dealings,  
in politics, (i) where there are taxes to pay;  
(ii) where there is money to be got;  
(iii) when they are in office;  
(iv) in the case of tyranny.
- 344 c 5 Injustice is mightier and freer and more masterly than justice. Justice is to the advantage of the stronger, but injustice is profitable and advantageous to oneself (τὸ μὲν τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον τὸ δίκαιον τυγχάνει ὄν, τὸ δ' ἀδικον ἑαυτῷ λυσιτελοῦν τε και συμφέρον).
- 348 d Justice is sublime good nature (πάνυ γενναία εὐθθεια). Injustice is good policy (εὐβουλία).
- 349 c 11 The just outdoes not the like but the unlike; the unjust man both the like and the unlike.

One point which is made apparent by Thrasymachus himself is that he insistently repeats his original definition<sup>1</sup> towards the end of his argumentation both on the «theoretical» level (341 a 3 f ὅπερ ἐξ ἀρχῆς δίκαιον λέγω, τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος ποιεῖν συμφέρον) and on the «empirical» level (344 c 6 f και ὅπερ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἔλεγον, τὸ μὲν τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον τὸ δίκαιον τυγχάνει ὄν). For Thrasymachus, therefore, his definition of justice is self-consistent.

The definition τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον (338 c 1) is equivalent to τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος ποιεῖν συμφέρον (341 a 4). This last sentence is again equivalent to τὸ σφίσι συμφέρον (338 e 4), where σφίσι is τοῖς κρατοῦσι, τοῖς ἀρχουσι, τῇ καθεστηκυία ἀρχῇ ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν. Unjust is the man who disobeys the laws laid down by the κρείττονες. Therefore, justice is obedience by the subjects to these laws; and obedience to the laws means to do what is advantageous to the stronger. «The interest of the stronger»

1. Some scholars share the view that this is not a definition at all. For Murphy N. R. (*The Interpretation of Plato's Republic*, Oxford 1960<sup>2</sup>, 2) it is «rather a consequence of its being what it is than a definition of it». Hourani too (*Phronesis* 7, 1962, 110 ff) believes that Thrasymachus' first statement about justice «is not seriously meant by him as a 'real' definition»; it is meant not as a definition but as an important generalization, based on the underlying conventionalist definition combined with supposed facts of psychology and politics». For Kerferd this is an incomplete statement only partly correct (*Phronesis* 9, 1964, 12 ff).

means consequently obedience by the subjects to the laws laid down by the stronger party for its own interest<sup>1</sup>. Socrates' argumentation about the fallibility of the rulers, which is like his previous one about friends in his discussion with Polemarchus, makes Thrasymachus state that a ruler *qua* ruler never fails, and to this ruler's laws the subjects must obey. Thrasymachus' argument does not indeed change until now; the only difference between his argument in the first and the second section is that he moves from the empirical to the theoretical level<sup>2</sup>.

When he is forced to return once again to the empirical level (with his long speech), he makes some interesting statements which have led to confusion and controversy about his true definition of justice.

The «new» definition is that justice is really the good of another. Is this definition contrary or different from his earlier one? It is soon apparent from the explanatory apposition which follows, i.e. τοῦ κρείττονός τε καὶ ἄρχοντος συμφέρον, what is meant by ἀλλότριον ἀγαθόν: the good of another is the interest of the stronger and the ruler. Thus the definition «justice is to do the interest of the stronger» is equivalent to «justice is the good of another»<sup>3</sup>. At the same time justice is the self-inflicted injury of the man who obeys. Thus, for the subjects obedience to the laws = to do the interest of the stronger = another's good. Injust-

1. It is interesting to contrast Callicles' view in the *Gorgias*, 483 b 3, that those who lay down the laws are not the stronger but the weaker who are the majority in each state. Callicles shares Thrasymachus' view about justice, saying that δίκαιόν ἐστι τὸν ἁμείνω τοῦ χειρόνος πλεόν ἔχειν καὶ τὸν δυνατώτερον τοῦ ἀδυνατωτέρου and τὸν κρείττω τοῦ ἥττονος ἄρχειν καὶ πλεόν ἔχειν. He differs from Thrasymachus in that he, contrary to Thrasymachus, approves of the actions of the stronger because he believes in «the justice of nature» (see E.R. Dodds, *Plato Gorgias*, Oxford 1959, 14). Plato, *Laws* IV. 714 c-d (cited by Hourani in *Phronesis* 7, 1962, 113) is illuminating Thrasymachus' view in the *Republic*: natural justice is the interest of the stronger, which is embodied in the laws laid down in each state by the ruling party, laws which seek the interest of this party; these laws are named by the stronger party justice; everyone who transgresses these laws is regarded as a lawbreaker and he is punished as guilty of injustice. Therefore, to do what is in the interest of the stronger is to obey the laws laid down by the stronger.

2. Viewed from the empirical aspect this view of Thrasymachus would lead to the conclusion that «the sophist has merely *restricted* the laws that define justice to certain laws» (Hourani, *Phronesis* 7, 1962, 114) or that «what we have is no more restriction of the supposed definition but its complete destruction» (Kerferd, *Phronesis* 9, 1964, 15). But this is not the point, I think.

3. Contrary to Kerferd's view that these two «definitions» are inconsistent with each other (*Phronesis* 9, 1964, 15) or that they are inconsistent when applied to the stronger (R.C. Cross and A.D. Woozley, *Plato's Republic*, London 1964, 41).

ice is, conclusively, *οἰκεῖον ἀγαθόν*, to the interest both of the subjects and the rulers. Injustice for the subjects is disobedience to the laws laid down by the stronger party for its own interest, and this disobedience is beneficial to the subjects. Injustice for the rulers is to lay down the rules of the game according to their own interest. Thus they rule over the just men and in general they come off better than the just men in every way, in commercial dealings and in politics.

That the *κρείττων* is meant by Thrasy-machus to be equivalent with the unjust man is very clear. Thus justice is to the advantage of the stronger and to the injury of the weaker and just men, whereas injustice is profitable and advantageous to oneself, both the stronger and the weaker, the ruler and the subject.

The equalization of the sublime form of injustice (*ἡ τελευτάτη ἀδικία* 344 a 4) with tyranny is characteristically denoting that the *κρείττονας* are the unjust men. Thrasy-machus' definition, therefore, «justice is to do the interest of the stronger» comes to mean «justice is to do the interest of the unjust man» = «to obey the laws laid down by the unjust men» = «to do the good of the unjust man». These definitions seem indeed absurd.

Thrasy-machus confesses that justice is sublime good nature, but it is really unprofitable and disadvantageous to oneself<sup>1</sup>. The just man obeys the laws and, although he suffers, he will not do unjustly (a view shared with Socrates) (344 a 5 f); the just man always comes off worse than the unjust; he does not want to outdo his like but only his unlike.

It is obvious, in my view, what Thrasy-machus thinks about the true definition of justice and injustice. His true definition of justice and the just is like the one shared by Socrates; the difference lies in that they disagree that justice is profitable to everybody. Thrasy-machus argues that it is absolutely useless and unprofitable to oneself; Socrates believes the opposite<sup>2</sup>. Thrasy-machus, led by both the actual facts of

1. This could serve as an answer to those defending the «nihilist view», i.e. that Thrasy-machus believes that there is no such thing as justice (see the criticism of this view in R.C. Cross and A.D. Woozeley, *Plato's Republic*, London 1964, 32-36).

2. See Socrates' interesting remark in 339 b 3 f that he agrees with Thrasy-machus that justice is *συμφέρον*. Thrasy-machus, however, thinks that justice is profitable not to oneself but to others; Socrates believes, on the contrary, that it is profitable both to oneself and to others. This view is expounded in the following books of the *Republic*, and particularly in book IV, where Socrates (and Plato) gives the definition of justice (432 b-434 c and 441c-442 d): justice is, according to Socrates, *τὸ τῷ αὐτοῦ πράττειν*, and this is valid both for the individual and the state.

politics<sup>1</sup> and the everyday life, argues that only injustice is profitable to oneself, whereas justice is another's good, both for the rulers and the subjects<sup>2</sup>, or for the common man in his everyday dealings.

In conclusion, Thrasymachus' definition «justice is to do what is advantageous to the stronger = obedience by the subjects to the laws laid down by the stronger = to do another's good» are to be viewed as impressive statements which are valid in everyday life and in politics, the best manifestation of which is in the relation between rulers and subjects. Obedience by the subjects to the laws (legalism) is, therefore, only one aspect of the stronger's superiority over the weaker, a facet of their outdoing of the just men, a «legal» form of the natural law, according to which the stronger and unjust rule over the weaker and just men.

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1. See for instance Thucydides' view as it is cynically represented by the Athenians in the Melian Dialogue. The same 'philosophy of life' is represented by Callicles (see E.R. Dodds, *Plato Gorgias*, 14, with references to Menzel A., *Kallikes*, 1922, and Heinemann F., *Nomos und Physis*, 1945, and to Plato's *Laws* 889 e-890 a, and several passages in Isocrates - and his comments on 482 c 4-483 c 6).

2. For the rulers, if they were just, justice as another's good would really mean to look for the benefit of their subjects. But they are not just men, and therefore, injustice for them means to do what is in their own interest (*δικαίων ἀγαθόν*).

For the subjects, who are just, justice is really another's good, because they obey the laws laid down by the stronger for their own interest (that is, the interest of the stronger).