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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-consistent¹ or changing², 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. Hourani³ 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-consistent⁴. Kerferd, on the other hand, defends his view that Thrasymachus' true position is that justice is (the promotion of) another's good;⁵ 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 good⁶. Others believe that Thrasymachus' view is not self-consistent, as R. C. Cross and A. D. Woozley⁷ and E. R. Dodds⁸.

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4. Ibid. 110.
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.
338 d 10 The stronger is defined as τὸ κρατοῦν, τὸ ἀρχοῦν.
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 αρχής συμφέρον).
339 b 7-8 Justice is also to obey the rulers (οὐ καί πείθεσθαι μεντοι τοῖς ἀρχουσιν δίκαιον φής εῖναι; - ἐγωγε).
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.
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 (ἡ μὲν δικαιοσύνη καί τὸ δίκαιον ἐλλότριον ἀγαθὸν τῷ ὑντι, τοῦ κρείττονός τε καὶ ἀρχοντός 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 (ἡ δὲ ἀδικία τοῦ-
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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.

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 δὲν, τὸ
δὲ δικαίον ἐκτοτῷ λυσιτελοῦν τε καὶ συμφέρον).

Justice is sublime good nature (πάνυ γενναία εὐθεία).
Injustice is good policy (εὐβοιλία).

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 towards the end of his
argumentation both on the «theoretical» level (341 a 3 ἀπ' ἐξ ἀρχῆς
dίκαιον λέγω, τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος ποιεῖν συμφέρον) and on the «empirical»
level (344 c 6 ἀπ' ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἔλεγον, τὸ μὲν τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον τὸ
dίκαιον τυγχάνει δὲν). For Thrasymachus, therefore, his definition of
justice is self-constistent.

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 καθεστηκυίᾳ 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 19602, 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 incom-
plete 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. 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.

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. τὸ κρείτ-
tονός τε καὶ ἄρχοντος συμφέρον, what is meant by ἄλλοτρον 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». 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. Inju­

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 δοξαίων ἔστι
τὸν ἀμείνω τοῦ χείρονος πλέον ἔχειν καὶ τὸν δυνατώτερον τοῦ ἄδυνατώτερον ἄγαθον.
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 Thrasyma-
chus' 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; every-
one 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, Phro-
nessis 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
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ice is, conclusively, οίκείον αγαθόν, to the interest 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 χρείττον is meant by Thrasymachus 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 (ή τελεωτάτη αδικία 344 α 4) with tyranny is characteristically denoting that the χρείττονες are the unjust men. Thrasymachus' 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.

Thrasymachus confesses that justice is sublime good nature, but it is really unprofitable and disadvantageous to oneself. 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 Thrasymachus 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. Thrasymachus argues that it is absolutely useless and unprofitable to oneself; Socrates believes the opposite. Thrasymachus, led by both the actual facts of

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1. This could serve as an answer to those defending the «nihilist view», i.e. that Thrasymachus 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 Thrasymachus that justice is συμφέρον. Thrasymachus, 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, τὰ τὰ αὑτοῦ πράττειν, and this is valid both for the individual and the state.
politics 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, 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 (οἷς εἴσων ἡγαθόν).

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).