

## Thrasymachus' Sophistic Account of Justice in *Republic* i

Merrick E. Anderson

It is now widely recognized that Socrates' discussion with Thrasymachus is crucially important for understanding the philosophic trajectory of Plato's *Republic*.<sup>1</sup> Thrasymachus is the first character explicitly to raise considerations about justice in the political sphere, and he introduces the concept of the 'ruler in the strict sense', which is later developed in the discussion of the philosopher-king. In Socrates' responses to Thrasymachus certain themes are developed that prove fundamental to the *Republic*'s later arguments, such as the identification of virtue as that which unifies the elements of our soul. Finally, books 2-10 are (in one form or another) a response to Thrasymachus' claim that it is more profitable to live an unjust life than a just life.<sup>2</sup> It is easy to see why there is such a consensus that getting a clear understanding of Thrasymachus' view is so important for understanding the *Republic*.

And yet we are very far from understanding what Thrasymachus is up to. Even a brief survey of scholarship reveals that an amazingly diverse set of views and theories have been attributed to the anti-hero of the *Republic*. At various times he has been interpreted as an enlightened legalist (Hourani 1962), a confused conventionalist (Everson 1998), and a cynic (Samaras 2012). At other times he has been called 'an ethical nihilist' (Guthrie 1971, 96), a natural right theorist (Sparshott 1966), an immoralist or an amoralist (Williams 1985 and 2006), and an empirical sociologist (Santas 2006). These are just some of the many views that have been attributed to Thrasymachus, and there is still no consensus over how correctly to characterize him. And if understanding Thrasymachus' role in the *Republic* is necessary for understanding the whole, then we are far from understanding this most seminal of works.

Before attributing yet another view to Thrasymachus or swearing our allegiance to one of the many interpretations already on offer, we might do well to take a step back from the controversy and ask *why* there are so many conflicting interpretations. One possibility that I explore is that there may be confusion over *what* Thrasymachus has to say about justice because there is confusion over *how*

---

<sup>1</sup> This point has been forcefully argued by Kahn 1993, which, while arguing against the view that book 1 was originally its own dialogue, has drawn our attention to at least twelve important ways that *Republic* i prepares the reader for the remaining books.

<sup>2</sup> It is a matter of dispute whether books 2-10 are primarily intended as a response to Thrasymachus or to Glaucon and Adeimantus. Whatever view one ultimately takes on this matter, Glaucon announces at 358b that he will be reviving Thrasymachus' argument. So one must get clear on the latter's argument as well.

he says it. What I refer to when I say *how* he speaks about justice are the methodological assumptions he accepts for investigating, explicating, and discussing its nature. Just like Parmenides, Plato, or Pascal, Thrasymachus—so I shall argue—exhibits certain presuppositions about the right way to approach philosophic questions.<sup>3</sup> Before we try to draw any firm conclusions about the substance of Thrasymachus' views we should think about the preliminary question, 'What manner or method does Thrasymachus think is most apt for discussing questions about justice?'

We must take into consideration the fact that the historical Thrasymachus was a sophist, and I further suggest that what the character Thrasymachus is doing in book 1 is importantly akin to a certain genre of sophistic arguments from the fifth century. Thus I shall call my view 'Thrasymachus as sophist'.<sup>4</sup> I suggest that in his discussion with Socrates Thrasymachus attempts a genealogical unmasking of justice, which he hopes will change the action-guiding beliefs of his audience (it will later become clear what these cumbersome terms mean). Although my discussion is primarily about the methodology or structure of Thrasymachus' argument, I conclude by offering a brief discussion of its substance, as well.

### I. Getting Thrasymachus Wrong

It will be helpful, as a start, to identify the methodology or argumentative strategy Thrasymachus is most frequently interpreted as adopting, if only to see why this interpretation is incorrect. Most often, Thrasymachus has been understood as a dialectician of sorts. 'Dialectic' is a finicky word with too many meanings to allow for easy comprehension, but when I label Thrasymachus a 'dialectician' I mean that he is often read as offering a definition of 'justice', intended to cover and explicate the ordinary application of the term and its opposite, 'injustice'. On this view, Thrasymachus is playing the same game that Socrates plays in many of the dialogues, in which he consistently tries to arrive at a definition of a moral term—say, piety—a definition that has the power to explain what exactly piety is and why every actually pious act is pious and not an instantiation of another virtue, such as courage, or of some vice. A quick survey of the titles of works can show how frequently Thrasymachus is associated with this sort of project: 'Thrasymachus' Definition of Justice in Plato's *Republic*' (Hourani 1962), 'Thrasymachus and Definition' (Chappell 2000), 'Thrasymachus' Definition of

<sup>3</sup> Here and throughout I will not hesitate to call what Thrasymachus does 'philosophic'. This seems to me as it should be, since he is concerned with issues central to (at least certain conceptions of) philosophy, such as justice and politics. But nothing hangs on this, nor do I mean to advance a substantive conception of philosophy. If any reader has a more robust understanding of what it means for something to be properly philosophic, she may ignore this epithet or understand my expression 'philosophic' to mean 'of or relating to issues that might interest a real philosopher'.

<sup>4</sup> I should immediately say that, in my view, there is nothing wrong or pernicious about Thrasymachus arguing sophistically. In fact, I think Thrasymachus' challenge to justice is quite powerful. So I am challenging the pejorative connotations the words 'sophist', 'sophistic', and 'sophistry' carry in our language. At least when these words are used to refer to the figures and intellectual climate of fifth century Greece, there is no reason they should carry the dirty ring they do in common parlance.

Justice' (Reeve 2008). It is not at all surprising that so many scholars have interpreted Thrasymachus in this way. Following Socrates' lead, many interlocutors in the 'Socratic' dialogues do attempt to define a certain ethical term and, as has often been noticed, *Republic* i has very many similarities with these dialogues.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, those who believe Thrasymachus is attempting to give a Socratic-style definition of justice must show that the four claims he makes about justice can be worked into one unified and coherent definition.<sup>6</sup> The four claims are:

I say that justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger. (φημὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ εἶναι τὸ δίκαιον οὐκ ἄλλο τι ἢ τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον, 338c)

And each kind of government lays down laws to its own advantage...and they declare what they have laid down to be just for their subjects. (τίθεται δέ γε τοὺς νόμους ἐκάστη ἢ ἀρχὴ πρὸς τὸ αὐτῆι συμφέρον...θέμεναι δὲ ἀπέφηναν τοῦτο δίκαιον τοῖς ἀρχομένοις εἶναι, 338e)

I say justice is this, the same in all cities, the advantage of the established rule. (τοῦτ' οὖν ἐστίν...ὃ λέγω ἐν ἀπάσαις ταῖς πόλεσιν ταῦτόν εἶναι δίκαιον, τὸ τῆς καθεστηκυίας ἀρχῆς συμφέρον. 338e-339a)

Justice is really the good of another.<sup>7</sup> (ἡ μὲν δικαιοσύνη... ἄλλότρουτον ἀγαθὸν τῷ ὄντι, 343c)

It has been pointed out by a number of scholars that these four claims are quite probably incompatible, if they are meant to be part of a definition (e.g., Chappell 1993, 2). Consider the example of the ruler in a Thrasymachean tyranny. According to claim 2, it will be just if this tyrant follows the laws that the ruler of her state (which is to say, herself) has established. And in doing this she will also be promoting her own interest, which satisfies claims 1 and 3. No doubt she will go about this quite happily, but this would leave Thrasymachus' definition quite unhappy. For by following the laws, acting justly, and acting for her own interest *she is not acting for the good of another*, which is Thrasymachus' fourth and most forceful claim about justice. There is no easy way to explain the actions of the rulers in a Thrasymachean regime in a way that is consistent with all four of his claims about justice.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, one would expect that on his account the rulers

<sup>5</sup> Vlastos 1991, 248-251 went so far as to label *Rep.* i an early dialogue, in contrast with books 2-10, which he thought to be a product of Plato's middle period.

<sup>6</sup> I read Thrasymachus as sincerely and candidly offering his substantive views, at least in the earlier parts of book 1. Those who prefer a 'rhetorical' interpretation and who think Thrasymachus' goal in the *Republic* is primarily to win students or show up Socrates may find this hard to accept. It seems to me, however, that one can construct a consistent and coherent interpretation of Thrasymachus if one reads him as being more-or-less sincere, and such an interpretation is *prime facie* stronger than one that reads Thrasymachus as posturing or being insincere.

<sup>7</sup> Translations of Plato follow Cooper ed. 1997, sometimes slightly revised.

<sup>8</sup> One might try to avoid any claim of incoherence here by arguing that the rulers in any Thrasymachean regime are not considered to be citizens of that city. If they are not citizens then they need not follow the laws laid down by themselves, in which case Thrasymachus need not maintain that the

always act justly when they rule to advance their self-interest, and yet he calls a tyrant the embodiment of injustice (344a). Thrasymachus, it appears, is not even concerned to save the consistency of his so-called definition of justice.

This particular problem with Thrasymachus' view has been well discussed in the literature, yet there are other indications—hitherto little recognized and more important for our purposes—that Thrasymachus is not interested in offering a definition of this kind. These are considerations more directly concerned with Thrasymachus' preferred method of argument, or his own philosophic project. When Thrasymachus finally enters into the conversation of the *Republic*, the first thing he does is vociferously to object to the manner in which Socrates has been discussing issues of justice with Polemarchus: 'Why do you act like idiots giving way to one another? If you truly want to know what justice is, don't just ask questions and then refute the answers...give an answer yourself' (336c).<sup>9</sup> This indicates that Thrasymachus thinks Socrates' usual practice of questioning his interlocutor is a hopeless one for discovering the truth about justice. It might be thought that since Thrasymachus goes on to prohibit Socrates from giving certain answers about what justice is, he is only attacking the *substance* of what Socrates says about justice (when he finally says anything at all, that is). But this would be a mistake. To see that his objection is mainly methodological, observe that after Thrasymachus offers his first three claims about justice, Socrates, just as he had done with Polemarchus, responds to Thrasymachus with a set of questions designed to clarify Thrasymachus' position. Yet Thrasymachus insists that these questions are not intended for a genuine search for the truth, but are rather tricks to slip him up: 'You think I asked you the questions I did in order to harm you in argument?—*I know it very well*' (341a-b). Thrasymachus announces that Socrates uses his questions only to harm the views of others and to aggrandize himself. This is what Thrasymachus was objecting to when he took offense with Socrates' treatment of Polemarchus. He saw Socrates playing the eristic and doing nothing to advance either discussant's understanding of the nature of justice.<sup>10</sup> Because Thrasymachus is so sure that Socrates is doing nothing productive for getting at the nature of justice, we might reasonably infer that

---

rulers both serve the interests of the ruling class by following their laws and truly promote the good of another. Moreover, the shepherd analogy he later makes can be read to support such an argument (343a-b). We would not call shepherds sheep because they rule over sheep. Nonetheless, I think we should resist such a move. Thrasymachus intends for his view to hold for democracies as well as tyrannies and in democracies (at least in principle) citizens were able to contribute to the production of the laws, which would have been binding for every citizen, including those who produced the laws. This would make (at least many of) the citizens among the rulers, laying down laws in their own and every other citizen's interest. In such cases it makes little sense to say that those who create the laws are not meant to follow them, or would not be subject to penalty if they were to break them.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Nicholson 1974, 219: 'Thrasymachus' first words are mainly about the *method of argument* that has been adopted until then.'

<sup>10</sup> We might think Thrasymachus wrong or even crazy for objecting to Socrates' method of questioning-and-answer. What could be more edifying than being questioned by Socrates? But surely Thrasymachus believes Socrates is not addressing the question at hand in a productive way.

Thrasymachus has his own ideas about what would be productive. In fact, Thrasymachus says as much in so many words. After giving his reasons for thinking that justice is the advantage of the ruling party, he tells Socrates that ‘anyone who reasons correctly’ (τῷ ὀρθῶς λογιζομένῳ) will come to this conclusion too (339a).

What does Thrasymachus mean by reasoning correctly, and how does this differ from correct reasoning on Socrates’ view? One thing is obvious. Socrates thinks that questioning others is an appropriate way to get at the truth, presumably because people like Polemarchus and Thrasymachus claim to know about justice, whereas Socrates does not. Nonetheless, Thrasymachus wants Socrates to state his positive views about justice. But this difference is rather unenlightening, and I think we can flesh out the disagreement in a more substantial and productive way. Consider the set of prohibitions Thrasymachus initially imposes on Socrates’ answers about justice: he prohibits Socrates from making the typically Socratic claim that justice is ‘the right, the beneficial, the profitable, the gainful, or the advantageous’ (336c-d). Now look at how Socrates responds:

Thrasymachus, if you ask someone how much twelve is, and, as you ask, you warn him by saying, ‘Don’t tell me, man, that twelve is twice six, or three times four, or six times two, or four times three, for I won’t accept such nonsense, then you will see clearly—I think—that no one could answer a question framed like that. (337b-c)

In response, Thrasymachus scoffs sarcastically, ‘so you think these two cases are alike?’ and Socrates responds in turn by telling us that, yes, he thinks they are (337c). William Welton has recently and persuasively argued that here Plato is drawing our attention to a serious disagreement between Socrates and Thrasymachus (see Welton 2006, esp. 293-305).<sup>11</sup> Socrates apparently thinks not being able to say ‘justice is the beneficial’ is similar to being prohibited from saying ‘12 is thrice four’. Thrasymachus thinks the two cases are not at all alike.

Seasoned readers of Plato may expect Socrates to characterize justice with a simple identity-like statement. The Socrates of the ‘Socratic’ dialogues often maintains that ‘virtue is knowledge’ (e.g., *Protagoras* 361b). Nor might it surprise that Socrates introduces a mathematical analogy. He later links mathematical education with understanding philosophic truths, including justice (537c-d). So it seems natural that Socrates thinks defining justice is analogous to defining a mathematical concept. But why does Thrasymachus object to this analogy?

Thrasymachus likely objects to the appeal to mathematics, for mathematics is paradigmatically objective. Time and place are indifferent for mathematical truths. We know already, however, that Thrasymachus cannot accept that justice is like this. Whatever his fully worked out view of justice, Thrasymachus clearly holds that its content differs from state to state, since in each state the rulers make different laws to support their own advantage. Thrasymachus must view

<sup>11</sup> Beversluis 2000, 230 called attention to this passage, but without explaining its crucial importance.

justice as a messy affair, as it results from competing and conflicting interests between different groups. Moreover, his understanding of justice is presumably going to need to include considerations about the nature of the polis under discussion, the rulers, the type of citizens, and the general culture as well.<sup>12</sup> All this will further complicate Thrasymachus' view of what justice is, and it will throw it in starker contrast with Socrates' desired simple and elegant account, akin to the truths of mathematics.

Just like mathematical truths, Socrates' Forms, eternal and unchanging, have no history. This opens the possibility of understanding them and, eventually, giving a fully worked-out account of them, no matter how difficult and time consuming this might be. However, if Thrasymachus thinks that what normally goes by the name of justice is a constantly changing, dynamic battlefield of interests, varying from city to city, it is much less clear that 'justice' could ever be captured by a succinct definition. It may be that we can only speak truths about justice that hold most of the time, or give accounts that are true from a certain perspective—say, those exploited by the rulers in a Thrasymachean regime. If this is on the right track, it might explain why Thrasymachus needs to offer numerous statements about justice, which at first glance may seem in tension with one another. This is just to say that Thrasymachus is looking for a different kind of answer about justice than is Socrates.

## II. Getting Him Right: Thrasymachus as Sophist

The question obviously arises: if Thrasymachus is not offering a definition of justice, what is he doing? One recent trend in reading Thrasymachus is to interpret him as offering an empirical and descriptive account of the way justice is commonly practiced, as opposed to a normative or analytic definition (see Chappell 1993, Santas 2006, White 1995, and Barney 2011). There are two good reasons supporting a general interpretation along these lines. First, we know that as a matter of historical fact Thrasymachus of Chalcedon, like many other sophists, was involved in the politics of his native city (see Tell 2011, 84-92). We even have a fifth century text, which looks to be part of a speech addressed to a political assembly preserved under Thrasymachus' name, and it has been argued that he spoke in person to a number of different cities on behalf of his own (see White 1995). Since the historical Thrasymachus was so immersed in both his local politics and those of the other cities, we might reasonably infer he had access to the relevant data for making empirical or sociological generalizations about how justice functioned in the different polities of his own time. Further, the setting and drama of the *Republic* encourages such an interpretation. The dialogue is set sometime during the Peloponnesian War when one would expect envoys to come to Athens, so it might be thought that Thrasymachus is present during the discussion because of political circumstances and his views might well be expected to

<sup>12</sup> This point was made clear by Maquire 1971, 146-147. However, he goes on to suggest that this understanding of justice, as it is limited to following the laws of one's society, is irrelevant to the more important question of moral action. I cannot agree with this second step, as we shall see below.

reflect these circumstances. On its own this is not enough to draw any definitive conclusions about the character Thrasymachus in the *Republic* since, aside from the last, these are considerations about a historical figure, who need not have been represented faithfully by Plato. However, these historical considerations prove fruitful for thinking about Thrasymachus' position in *Republic* i. It turns out—and this is the second point in favour of this view—that there is good textual evidence within the *Republic* itself that empirical or descriptive considerations make up the foundation of Thrasymachus' argument.

In fact, Thrasymachus says exactly what we might expect him to say if he were a sociologist giving his empirical findings concerning the political data across various *poleis*. He asks Socrates, 'Don't you know that some cities are ruled by a tyranny, some by a democracy, and some by an aristocracy?' (338d). After securing Socrates' agreement, he goes on to say:

And each city makes laws for its own advantage. Democracy makes democratic laws, tyranny makes tyrannical laws, and so on with the others. And they declare what they have laid down...to be just for their subjects and they punish anyone who goes against this as lawless and unjust. This, then, is what I say the just is, the same in all cities, the advantage of the established rule. (338d-339a)

This passage exemplifies what Santas 2006, 126 calls 'the empirical method of Thrasymachus'. Here Thrasymachus makes two large empirical claims: first, that each city is ruled by a certain socially identifiable ruler or group of rulers, who are called 'the stronger'; and second, that they establish rules that promote their own advantage, and subsequently call these rules 'just'. These two empirical claims provide the evidence leading to Thrasymachus' conclusion that justice is the advantage of whichever regime rules in whatever city. Similarly, Barney 2011 states that Thrasymachus, 'begins like a good social scientist, claiming to discern the underlying unity behind superficially diverse phenomena: laws differ from *polis* to *polis*...but really are everywhere the same in serving the powers that be'. These scholars are certainly correct in identifying these empirical statements as the force behind Thrasymachus' position. And this, in turn, lends some plausibility to the consideration that when Plato produced his own picture of Thrasymachus he borrowed from the historical figure who was, as we have seen, familiar with politics of many cities.

In fact—although so far as I know this has not yet been noted—the empirical thrust of Thrasymachus' argument continues well into the later sections of his argument and even constitutes the primary evidence for his fourth claim that justice is really the advantage of another. In his longest speech Thrasymachus tells Socrates that:

You must look at it as follows, most simple Socrates. A just man always gets less than an unjust one. First, in their contracts with one another, you'll never find, when the partnership ends, that a just partner has got more than an unjust one, but less.

Second, in matters relating to the city, when taxes are to be paid, a just man pays more on the same property and an unjust one less, but when the city is giving out refunds, a just man gets nothing, while an unjust man gets a large profit. Finally, when each of them holds a ruling position in some public office, a just person, even if he isn't penalized in other ways, finds that his affairs deteriorate because he has to neglect them... The opposite is true of the unjust man in every respect. (343c-e)

What Thrasymachus is here arguing is the simple point that careful and sober-minded observation of the lives of both the just and the unjust reveals that generally the unjust secure more money, power, and friends than the just. Thrasymachus' reason for believing this is merely what he sees all around him: the unjust become rich, the just are punished, and everywhere the tyrant is admired by many people as happy and blessed.<sup>13</sup> Again, the force behind Thrasymachus' views is his own empirical observations.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency for some of those who recognize that the character Thrasymachus is offering a descriptive account of justice to think he is *only* offering a descriptive account and not also offering prudential and normative conclusions about how one ought to live one's life.<sup>14</sup> This cannot be correct. Thrasymachus flirts very closely with calling injustice a virtue and justice a vice (348c-d). Only at the last opportunity does he withdraw from this strong claim to make the more tempered claim that injustice is 'good judgment' (εὐβουλίαν) and he contrasts this with acting justly, which he calls 'high-minded simplicity' (γενναίαν εὐήθειαν). So when he offers Socrates the example of the ruthless tyrant as the peak of injustice we must understand this as his example of a man to be admired and emulated. Thus Thrasymachus concludes from this example, 'So, Socrates, injustice if it is on a large enough scale, is stronger, freer, and more masterly than justice' (344b-c). This is a ringing endorsement of the tyrant who acts for his own self-interest and dominates over the justice that Socrates appears to be advocating for as a principle to live by.

Moreover, it is abundantly clear to Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus that Thrasymachus is arguing that the unjust life is a better life than the just one. At the outset of book 2, Glaucon explicitly takes himself to be restating Thrasymachus' argument, and so he says he will explain why the life of the unjust person is better than the life of the just person (358b). Right before this passage, Socrates reminds us that Thrasymachus has previously argued that justice is bur-

<sup>13</sup> Since much more hangs on this example of the tyrant than has hitherto been realized, I return to it later. Guthrie 1971, 92-94 aptly points out that Thrasymachus is saying all this with the Peloponnesian War as the backdrop, during which injustice could often make one more successful than not.

<sup>14</sup> This is explicit in White 1995, 322: 'The indignant opening, the insistent indicatives, the generic classifications—suggest that his claim is based entirely on observation... At no point, however, does he express clear approval for the self-serving by the strong. On the contrary, if he simply reports the facts as he sees them, then his remarks are more likely to reflect a rejection of the *Macht-politik*.'

densome, injustice beneficial (358a). Finally, Thrasymachus himself admits in his discussion with Socrates that he is talking about the most important of topics, how one should lead one's life (344e). All this confirms that Thrasymachus did intend to suggest very emphatic and, indeed, specific normative or prudential claims about how one should live one's life.

The question we must ask is what Thrasymachus is doing, such that he can confidently offer a view that is so obviously grounded in empirical observations and yet one that he expects will also result, for those who hear, understand, and accept it, in normative or prudential conclusions about how we ought to live our lives. So far as I can tell, Thrasymachus does not present any explicit or deductive argument, the conclusion of which addresses the way we may best lead our lives. It might seem strange to us that in a work of Plato's a sophisticated and intelligent interlocutor hopes to offer advice about how we should live without presenting such an argument, but there is nothing strange about this. We need only realize that in the *Republic* the character Thrasymachus is employing a sort of strategy common to the sophists who were prominent in the century before Plato was writing, a strategy I earlier called 'genealogical unmasking'.<sup>15</sup>

I now discuss some sophistic texts roughly contemporary with the historical Thrasymachus to show how, by looking at the way other sophists advanced their philosophic views, we can better appreciate Thrasymachus' purpose in the *Republic*. I hope to provide some reason for believing that this is a productive and insightful way to think about the strategy Thrasymachus adopts in his conversation with Socrates.

Consider Prodicus' innovative views on religion and the gods. He was regularly called an atheist in the ancient world because he developed a 'non-religious' anthropological or genealogical account of how mankind came to believe in the Olympian gods.<sup>16</sup> Prodicus held that mankind's belief in the gods was not due to any first-hand experience with them, nor to the accounts of the gods presented in Homer and Hesiod. Rather, prehistoric mankind developed their own belief in these 'gods' by venerating and deifying certain features and people of their world who were responsible for the great benefits and utilities of life. Mayhew 2011, 180-181 summarizes this account as follows:

According to Prodicus there are two stages to the origin of religion and particularly of the belief in the gods. 1) Primitive people came to regard certain aspects of nature—'the nourishing and useful'—as gods; for example, the sun, the moon, the rivers and springs, trees from which they gathered fruit, or vegetation generally. 2) Primitive people also came to regard certain *people* (and their discoveries) as gods—those who first

---

<sup>15</sup> My suggestion is not that Plato gives us the exact words of the historical Thrasymachus, but that Plato displays a method or genre of argument that was, as a matter of fact, advanced by a number of sophists.

<sup>16</sup> We learn from Philodemus' *On Piety* (1, fr. 19.519-41) that Epicurus had called Prodicus a 'deranged' atheist in book 12 of his *On Nature*.

discovered and invented what is nourishing or otherwise useful.<sup>17</sup>

It is not difficult to understand what Prodicus might have in mind here. Primitive humans lived in a hostile environment, a difficult and dangerous life. There would be gratitude for nature's little gifts: fresh berries to snack on and clean rivers to drink from. To secure more of these gifts, primitive humans instituted a *quid quo pro* relationship, offering prayers and sacrifices in hopes of receiving more goods in recompense. A similar story would be told for those figures who first discovered the great expedients of life: whoever invented agriculture was called Demeter and worshiped as a god and whoever discovered how to make wine was called Dionysus. This sort of account is an unmasking insofar as it offers a narrative that effaces the conventional beliefs in the gods and reveals the deeper—and perhaps more unsettling—truths about the origin of our conception of them. It is genealogical insofar as it does this through a historical account of the origins and development of religious belief.

Note that this theory includes only (what the author presents as) true anthropological and empirical claims about the development of belief in the Olympian gods. There is no indication that in his account of religion Prodicus offered any advice, let alone any explicit argument, about how to live one's life. And yet I suggest that Prodicus hoped that this genealogical account would have a powerful effect on his listeners, or at least on those able and intelligent enough to understand its radical import, though not to conclude that there is no good reason to adhere to customary practices in one's personal or civic life. Instead, his intelligent listeners might realize that if Prodicus' account is correct then they too could become revered as gods in posterity so long as they bestow some great benefit to humanity. And this fate, Prodicus must have assumed, was something to which no intelligent listener of his could be indifferent. Who could give up the opportunity of becoming revered as a god?

I am suggesting that his developmental account of religion may have challenged or undermined the 'action-guiding' beliefs that his audience held. Although everyone previously believed that the Olympian gods existed wholly in a world of their own, Prodicus indicates that the gap between humankind and the gods was not so great; it could even be bridged by a few, unique individuals. So without any explicit argument Prodicus is able to open up new vistas and possibilities concerning what goals one might pursue and how one might live. That this is a real possibility lurking in the background of Prodicus' genealogical account of religious belief is confirmed by his speech *The Choice of Heracles*, which we have some reason to believe came from the same work that originally contained his discussion of religion (see Mayhew 2011, 202-226).

In *The Choice of Heracles* Prodicus narrates a story about the young Heracles,

---

<sup>17</sup> There is some scholarly debate concerning the extent to which Prodicus himself developed the second element of the view Mayhew ascribes to him, although the majority of commentators do take Prodicus to advance both parts. I accept the majority view, which seems to me correct for reasons that will become clear below.

who is contemplating what sort of life he should live. At this great cross-road Virtue and Vice come to him, each personified as a beautiful woman, and both try to persuade him to adopt their own way of life. Vice promises Heracles an easy life full of enjoyment, power to satisfy every desire for pleasure, plenty of sex, lots of relaxation, and little work. Virtue tells Heracles that if he follows her he will be burdened with hard work, must shun many luxurious pleasures, and must benefit others rather than take benefits for himself. If, however, he cultivates his talents and works virtuously for others, Virtue tells him that he will become like the other great benefactors of mankind who, ‘whenever their appointed end comes...*do not lie forgotten without honor, but flourish remembered, celebrated in song for all time*. O Heracles, child of good parents, by working hard at such things it is possible for you to possess the most blessed happiness (DK 84 B1.33)’. Prodicus apparently did not tell how Heracles responds to these choices, nor does Prodicus announce which of the two lives is the better life: he leaves his readers and listeners to contemplate these questions for themselves. However, he surely expected all his listeners to recall that Heracles was one of the great paradigms of virtue in the Greek world and that—here is the crucial point—he was the only hero, according to the myths, who merited an apotheosis to the Olympian ranks after his death. This of course suggests the same possibility implicitly raised in Prodicus’ account of religion: if one becomes supremely virtuous then one may be revered as a god and sung about for ages to come, i.e., one may achieve the only sort of divine immortality that is possible. In fact, the Heracles story seems to follow from Prodicus’ account of religion and should, I think, be understood as a depiction of the new possibilities this account generates. Given that the Olympian gods do not truly exist and mankind created their own belief in them, certain great individuals can steal their way into the realm of the gods: no divine ancestry is required. *The Choice of Heracles* shows us how this might be done and the rewards one might reap if one’s symbolic apotheosis is achieved through a life of outstanding virtue.

Prodicus was not the only sophist, I should add, who gave a genealogical account of religion. Critias, in the so-called ‘Sisyphus fragment’, offers another account of how mankind came to believe in the gods, only in this text we learn that the gods were the political invention of some wise man, who developed and hoped to promulgate the belief in the all-seeing and just gods as a tool to control people’s lawless behavior (DK 88 B25.12-14).<sup>18</sup> There is an implicit lesson in this unmasking of people’s religious sensibilities as well, although in this case I think the lesson to learn is that we can get away with committing unjust acts so long as we keep our actions hidden from other people, and sometimes it is in one’s interests to do so. It seems, then, that this genealogical investigation into

---

<sup>18</sup> Some ancient sources attribute this fragment to Euripides, rather than Critias, the leader of the Thirty Tyrants who lived from about 480-403. It also should be noted that the fragment itself is only 44 lines in length and probably comes from a Satyr-play, not a philosophic text, although this does not mean we should avoid drawing philosophic lessons from the fragment. On the fragment, its importance, and a discussion of the authorship, see Sedley 2013.

the origin of social phenomena was developed in a number of fifth century sophistic texts.<sup>19</sup> In fact, there is a good case to be made that this was an important element of the sophistic movement, and one inherited from the Pre-Socratics. Western Philosophy is standardly said to have developed when the Pre-Socratics revolutionized the poetical or mythological depictions of the origin of the world by searching for an immanent and scientific explanation of its genesis (see Guthrie 1962, 29). This search for the *archē*, or first principle, of the physical world was thought not only to reveal the temporal beginnings of the universe but also its true, fundamental nature, from which other important truths could be derived. Many of the sophistic projects emulated this sort of inquiry. The sophists held that coming to understand the beginning of any social phenomenon provided them with special knowledge about its nature and value.

There is, however, a significant difference between inquiring into the nature of the physical universe, on the one hand, and inquiring into the origins and nature of social phenomena, on the other. Truths about social phenomena are likely to be more immediately relevant to practical reasoning than truths about the genesis of the cosmos. Learning truths about the origins and nature of social institutions can change the lives of average citizens, for their lives are tangled up in these institutions.

The project of genealogical unmasking hence purports to offer truths about a social phenomenon or institution. These truths are expected to challenge received beliefs about the phenomenon and to affect understanding of the value of the institution. No one could ever again look to the skies in fear of a retributive deity, for example, once they accepted Critias' account of god as a political invention of some wise man. Projects of a similar sort to sophistic genealogy have not disappeared in modernity. Preeminent among them is the project of Nietzsche, who in the preface of his *Zur Genealogie Der Moral*, sounds very much like the sophists when he announces that he is searching for the true value of moral values, 'und dazu tut eine Kenntniss der Bedingungen und Umstände not, aus denen sie gewachsen, unter denen sie sich entwickelt und verschoben haben' (Preface, 6).

The similarities with Nietzsche are fruitful because they can help to ward off a possible objection to certain elements of this sophistic practice, and they can deepen our understanding of their project. It might be wondered why Prodicus would not have explicitly argued that one should strive to become revered like a god. One obvious reason is that such an argument could have landed him in hot waters. Intellectuals could get in a great deal of trouble for challenging the views of the gods accepted by their fellow-citizens, as is evidenced by Socrates' conviction for impiety and Anaxagoras' exile from Athens. But the comparison with Nietzsche gives us at least two other reasons why someone might have chosen to present a genealogical unmasking rather than an overt attack on social institu-

---

<sup>19</sup> I have mentioned only religion here, but other social institutions were given a similar analysis. The best example remaining to us is the account of the development of justice and the political capacity of mankind put in the mouth of Protagoras in Plato's *Protagoras* 320d-322d.

tions. The first is that exposing hitherto unrecognized truths about people's presupposed beliefs can be an extremely powerful tool. The force of Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie Der Moral* is not due to any sort of explicit argument; rather, it comes from his account of the contingent social and psychological circumstances that he claims gave rise to the Christian moral world-view. By revealing how arbitrary and ugly the development of these values may have been, he forces his readers to doubt certain commitments that they had hitherto been unable even to conceive of questioning.<sup>20</sup> This can be a deeply emotional and revelatory experience because it allows one to imagine new possibilities for one's life. This may have been the strength Prodicus and Critias hoped their genealogical accounts would have: to force people to question the presuppositions they held about the gods, which in turn would allow them to reorient the ways they lived their lives.<sup>21</sup>

The comparison with Nietzsche also brings out that the method of genealogical unmasking is particularly effective when the full force of the author's views can only ever be appreciated by a limited number of people. Although Critias believed that it could sometimes be beneficial to act unjustly if one could do so without getting caught, he would never have hoped that everyone would attempt unjust deeds whenever they thought they could escape detection, nor could he have wanted to recommend that they should. His fragment suggests, rather, that it is beneficial for most people to believe in an all-seeing and just god so that society is not reduced to chaos. Only a minority of the people can be brought, without serious deleterious effects on everyone, to act unjustly when they act in secret. It is a structural feature of his view, like Nietzsche's and Thrasymachus' as well, that their more far-reaching and radical consequences can only ever truly be appreciated by a minority of the population.

We can now appreciate how Prodicus' genealogical unmasking of the traditional belief in the gods clears the way for new goals and projects, available to the most able of his listeners. His mechanism for revealing these possibilities has to be quite subtle. He merely baits his intelligent listeners and readers with his implicit message. When the genealogical account of religion and *The Choice of Heracles* are considered together, Prodicus offers an implicit view of how one might live one's life that does not depend on any sort of explicit argument about

---

<sup>20</sup> One can think of the *Genealogie* as a prerequisite for anyone who might accept Nietzsche's later arguments—only if one first starts to doubt the hegemony of the moral world-view will one be able seriously to entertain arguments or suggestions that lead one away from it. In this respect the *Genealogie* looks to be interestingly akin to the Socratic elenchus, since Socrates often has to reveal to his interlocutors that they do not know what they are talking about before they desire to learn anything new.

<sup>21</sup> Of course there are serious limitations to this argumentative strategy. As Lane 2012, 80 has recently reminded us, such an unmasking 'will only be unsettling for those who share those valuations', or what I have called action-guiding beliefs that the genealogy targets. Prodicus' account of religious belief will have no great effect on someone who already accepts his story and has no ambition to any sort of glory in his afterlife. Or, to anticipate, Thrasymachus' unmasking of justice will have no ground-breaking effects for those who, like Polus, already reject justice as a beneficial principle by which to live.

what sort of life one should live. The force of his presentation depends first on an unmasking of certain (as he claims) truths about a social phenomenon that open up new possibilities and, second, a paradigmatic example of an admirable man who capitalized on those possibilities. This is important for us to note because both these features occur in Thrasymachus' speeches in the *Republic*, to which we now turn.

Some traditional views about justice appear in the *Republic*. Hesiod, *Works and Days* 328-332 argues that one should not follow the path of injustice:

The road that goes the other way, to doing justice, is the better course, and justice comes in the end to triumph over *hubris*. A fool learns this by experience. For Oath catches up right away with crooked judgments and there's an uproar when justice is abducted and men take her away in their hunger for gifts... But to those who give straight verdicts to both foreigners and residents, and who do not step outside justice, their city flourishes and their people blossom in it... The earth bears a plentiful livelihood for them; on the mountains oaks bear acorns on their branches and bees in their hollows; the woolly sheep are covered with heavy fleece. (Gagarin and Woodruff trans. 1995, 17)

Hesiod's moral here is simple. If one acts unjustly bad things will happen and if one acts justly good things will happen: peace will reign, honey will flow, wool will be plentiful, and so all will flourish. *Republic* i takes place in the shadows of this account of justice (see Barney 2011). When Cephalus argues that his money allows him to avoid cheating and lying, he seems to be echoing Hesiod's view that one should give straight verdicts lest one be punished by the gods. Cephalus' point, too, is that acting unjustly will ultimately prove to be detrimental to his interests—and so he should act justly. Moreover, he makes most of his case in the dialogue by appeals to socially accepted authorities, and particularly the poets.<sup>22</sup> This suggests that he accepts the traditional, poetical views of justice and what it means to live the good life. When in book 2 Adeimantus is explaining to Socrates why most people (incorrectly, according to the view he is presenting) think justice is a beneficial principle to live by, he quotes the very text from Hesiod presented above (364c-d). Clearly the background of the early books of the *Republic* is the conventional and traditional view that justice is beneficial because of the profitable consequences we win from it. In one form or another Cephalus, Polemarchus, Socrates, and the 'many' of Glaucon's speech accept this view.<sup>23</sup> This is important to note for appreciating Thrasymachus' effort to do something quite similar to what we saw Prodicus do. Recognizing that these conventional views about justice constitute important action-guiding beliefs for his

<sup>22</sup> He refers to Sophocles at 329b and quotes Pindar at 331a. At 331d Polemarchus suggests that his father's final view is just like one the poet Simonides earlier suggested.

<sup>23</sup> Socrates, to be sure, also believes that acting justly is also good *in itself* and not just good for the profitable consequences we achieve by acting justly.

listeners, Thrasymachus tries to undermine them by unmasking the dirty truths about justice as it exists and is practiced in Athens and beyond.

Assume that what Glaucon says about the many is true about Cephalus, Polemarchus, and others who accept the conventional Hesiodic view about justice: they believe that acting justly is beneficial through social or divine approval of such action. It is this action-guiding belief that Thrasymachus tries to shatter through his presentation of the dirty truth about justice as, he claims, it is normally practiced.

His first 'answer' about justice is his statement that 'justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger'. It is clear from what he says next that this statement is meant to pack a big punch and be quite surprising ('Well, why don't you praise me?' 338c). The reason for this, of course, is that he thinks that if his listeners understand the import of this statement it will shatter their background belief that acting justly promotes their own self-interest and is worth doing for that reason. On the contrary! Acting justly and deferring to the laws of one's society benefits only the rulers of one's city. It is utter foolishness to think that the rulers 'think about their subjects differently than one does about sheep, and that night and day they think of something besides their own advantage' (343b-c). Consequently, acting justly aids the material interests (the most important interests, on Thrasymachus' view) of others, the ruling elite. The sheep will not bear more wool nor will the honey run sweeter if one follows the laws in one's city. Rather, the sheep will be sheared raw and the stores of honey will run dry, flowing right into the cups of the rulers. Really, there is little or no benefit in political justice for anyone other than the ruling elite.

The case is similar when one acts justly to one's neighbors. Thrasymachus tells us very clearly that after entering into contracts, the unjust man always comes out with more than the just man; the unjust pay fewer taxes; and the just spend their money on public goods while the unjust take money from the public stores (343d). Over and over again, Thrasymachus impresses upon his listeners that it is foolish to think that acting justly generally pays. This is exactly why he flirts with calling injustice a virtue and justice a vice, although he ultimately settles on calling justice high-minded simplicity and injustice good judgment. He thinks people act justly under the assumption that this will reap rich rewards, but this is nothing but a pretty-sounding naïveté. The truth of the matter is that injustice can be much, much more profitable. Thrasymachus assumes that if people fully understood the true consequences of acting justly and unjustly, they would have to reevaluate their orientation towards others and change their disposition to acting justly in public affairs. It is in this respect that Thrasymachus hopes that his empirical claims about justice can have normative or practical force. By shattering the deluded action-guiding beliefs that arise from the conventional, mythic view of justice he hopes that at least some of his listeners can appreciate the possibility of doing better for themselves.

Just like Prodicus, then, Thrasymachus assumes that his listeners hold certain action-guiding beliefs about a certain social institution. Furthermore, both think

that by challenging these beliefs they can plausibly hope that some of their listeners will reevaluate the way they ought to act. There is another very important methodological strategy shared by the two. Although neither of them offers any explicit argument for the normative or prudential conclusions they want to advance, both do think they have an ace up their sleeves: each offers a paradigmatic example of a great life that is made possible if one exploits the radical import of their claims. We have seen already that Prodicus offers us the example of Heracles, who, according to the myth, was elevated to the status of an Olympian divinity upon his death. Thrasymachus offers us the example of perfect injustice—the tyrant, who everyone must concede is happy and blessed. It is here that he argues ‘justice is really the good of another’ and as his great proof of this he orders Socrates to consider τὸν μέγιστα δυνάμενον πλεονεκτεῖν, which one might gloss as ‘the man who is able to do injustice in a big way’ (344a). The example Thrasymachus gives here is the tyrant who not only appropriates the property of others but also enslaves whole cities. This person, Thrasymachus says, ‘is called happy and blessed not only by the citizens themselves, but by all who learn that he has done injustice entire’ (344b-c).<sup>24</sup> Here Thrasymachus is forcing upon his listeners that they cannot really maintain that justice is more to their advantage than injustice, and he is showing what is possible if they fully take to heart the radical consequences of his shocking truths about justice.

There is, in fact, very good reason to think that this example is the final gambit in Thrasymachus’ ‘answer’ about justice. Before he introduces the tyrant, he takes himself to have shown that acting justly actually advantages other people and disadvantages oneself, contrary to what most people believe. He then offers up the happy tyrant to show his listeners that injustice pays and, if really big, pays in a big way. This, he makes very clear, is intended to be sufficient to change at least some people’s action-guiding beliefs and therefore to change the way they act. Consider his response to Socrates after he is challenged about this example. Although Thrasymachus tries to exit the conversation, Socrates stops him and encourages him to stay and argue further, since he is not yet persuaded that acting unjustly is more profitable than acting justly. Thrasymachus responds to this exhortation with exasperation, ‘And how am I supposed to persuade you if you aren’t persuaded by what I said just now? What more can I do?’ (345b). He is sure that he has already said enough to persuade at least some of those listening to accept his own view of the issue at hand, which we have already seen was the question of how we ought to live our lives. The tyrant example is meant to be the culmination of his view and it is meant to secure the conclusion he hopes to advance. This is because he thinks that his elite audience cannot be indifferent to the life of the tyrant, just like Prodicus seems to have thought no one could be indifferent to the afterlife of Heracles’ universally admiring memory.

---

<sup>24</sup> There is good evidence within the Platonic corpus that Thrasymachus is on solid ground when he suggests that everyone calls the tyrant happy. In the *Gorgias* Polus says that everyone calls the tyrant blessedly happy and no one could agree with Socrates that he is unhappy because unjust—and here Socrates even concedes that everyone, or most everyone, does think this (473e-474a).

I hope it is clear in what ways Thrasymachus tries to unmask justice as it is conventionally understood and why he thinks this unmasking can have real effects on the actions and life-choices of his listeners. I would like now to draw out one final methodological similarity between the Thrasymachean position in the *Republic* and the arguments offered by the historical Prodicus and Critias. I have said nothing yet to suggest that there is anything historical about Thrasymachus' view, or that he ever concerns himself with the social origins of justice, although we have seen this to be an important part of the other sophistic arguments I have called 'genealogical unmaskings'. In fact it is clear that in the *Republic* Thrasymachus' view gets elaborated along such lines. Moreover, there is some evidence indicating that the views he offers in book 1 derive from, or are tied to, a real genealogical account of the nature of justice, or at least that a set of historical arguments very similar to Thrasymachus' were closely linked to such an account. The key text here is Glaucon's restatement of Thrasymachus' view in book 2.

At the opening of book 2, Glaucon announces that he was unconvinced by Socrates' response to Thrasymachus and that he remains unsure that the just life is superior to the unjust life. Accordingly, he plans to restate Thrasymachus' view so that it may be defeated once and for all. He says, 'I'll renew the argument of Thrasymachus and first I will state what kind of thing people consider justice to be and what its origins are' (358b-c). Then follows the famous contractarian account of justice, where we learn that by nature everyone wishes to do injustice but no one wishes to suffer it. Justice developed from this natural state because primitive man realized it was better to live in a world where no one harmed anyone else rather than a world where everyone harmed others whenever they thought it advantageous to do so. Thus primitive humans agreed to avoid harming others so long as others agreed to refrain from harming them. This was the birth of justice and, presumably, the beginning of a nascent legal system as well.

Glaucon argues that this account shows that no one values justice as a good in itself; it is only a tool that secures safety from others. In any case, what is crucial here is what Glaucon says at the end of this genealogical account. He prefaced this account by saying that he was going to restate the view of Thrasymachus and he ends this account with the qualification that it is not his argument, but rather it is the argument of some other (ὡς ὁ λόγος, 359b). He thus carefully distances himself from the account of the origins of justice and ascribes it to Thrasymachus. Similarly, after Adeimantus supplements his brother's arguments about the origin and nature of justice, he ends his speech by suggesting that this is how Thrasymachus might further support his argument (367a). In this way, Plato is at pains to tie Thrasymachus' views in book 1 to an explicitly genealogical investigation, which makes the Thrasymachean position parallel to the sort of argument used by Prodicus and Critias. But we can say more than this. Earlier in his discussion Glaucon says his ears have been talked to death by Thrasymachus and *countless others* (μυρίων ἄλλων) who argue that the life of injustice is better

than the life of justice. This suggests that the sort of argument offered by Thrasymachus was sufficiently prevalent in Plato's time that he thought he had to respond to it. Someone had really argued that the life of injustice is better than the just life and most likely used a genealogical account to do so.

If this is right, then there existed a genealogical or developmental account concerning the nature of justice offered either by some historical figure or group. This is unsurprising, since Plato clearly responds to the positions of others in his work and, further, we know that there are very many similarities between both the initial account of justice Thrasymachus offers (claim number 1 above) and his later views with certain fifth century texts, such as those of the sophist Antiphon (see Pendrick ed. 2002, 53-67). And Antiphon is often read—with good reason—as offering an historical or developmental account of justice, which shares many similarities and affinities to Glaucon's restatement of Thrasymachus' view.<sup>25</sup> Some scholars even think that Antiphon may be the historical inspiration for the views advanced by both Thrasymachus and Glaucon in the *Republic* (see Barney 2011). This seems unlikely to me,<sup>26</sup> but what does seem clear enough is that the sort of immoralist arguments offered by Thrasymachus and Glaucon had some purchase in the late fifth century and were sometimes supported by a genealogical or developmental account of the origins of justice.

It is possible, of course, that Thrasymachus of Chalcedon was the figure who originally presented these immoralist arguments, or that he presented some important version of them, and this is why Plato chose him to be namesake of the anti-hero of the *Republic*. This is not part of my thesis, and I do not mean to maintain that Thrasymachus' argument in the *Republic* was ever offered by a fifth century figure. It was Plato who penned these arguments and he did so, no doubt, in the way that served the structure and purpose of the *Republic*. My point has been to show that the character Thrasymachus uses a method of argument that bears a striking resemblance to the sort of arguments offered by a number of sophists, and Prodicus chief among them. Like Prodicus, Thrasymachus hopes to advance normative positions without offering explicit arguments for them. Like Prodicus, he does this by challenging the action-guiding beliefs of his listeners and then offering up an example of a great and admirable human being who is meant to serve as a paradigm of how life might be lived. And like a number of sophists, the Thrasymachean position develops in the form of an argument that I have called 'genealogical unmasking'. The character Thrasymachus advances a consistent, coherent, and interesting view if we read him as adopting this variety of argument. This all suggests that Plato was aware of this genre of sophistic argumentation and that he intentionally presented us with a Thrasymachus who argued sophistically.

---

<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately we cannot make out the details of what Antiphon's historical account would have looked like with any precision. For what we can say, see Kahn 1981.

<sup>26</sup> For some considerations of why this might not be see Weiss 2007. Although her discussion is focused on the *Gorgias*, much of it can be applied to the *Republic* as well.

### III. A Sophistic Account of Justice

I have argued that we must pay close attention to the methodology that Thrasymachus adopts in the *Republic* and that evaluating how Thrasymachus goes about arguing can help us better understand the substantive views he wants to advance. Before concluding, I bring what I take to be Thrasymachus' substantive views into sharper focus. I state them via a brief reconsideration of the four claims Thrasymachus makes about justice in book 1.

I say that justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger. (338c)

And each kind of government lays down laws to its own advantage...and they declare what they have laid down to be just for their subjects. (338e)

I say justice is this, the same in all cities, the advantage of the established rule. (338e)

Justice is really the good of another. (343c)

What sense are we to make of these four claims on my 'sophistic' understanding of Thrasymachus? As I understand Thrasymachus, these four claims represent generalizations that hold true most of the time. They are 'for-the-most-part' truths, which present the typical expression of justice—an expression which can nonetheless sometimes get distorted or otherwise not realized in the messy world of empirical experience. According to Thrasymachus, it is generally the case that what goes by the name of 'justice' in any given polis advantages the rulers and disadvantages the ruled. This is because most of the time governments establish laws that directly serve the interests of those in the government—that is to say claims 1 and 3 hold true most of the time because claim 2 holds true most of the time. But in the same way that Thrasymachus admits that sometimes it can be advantageous for citizens to act justly, he must acknowledge many possible exceptions to these three claims.<sup>27</sup> In reality, not all the laws produced by the ruling class will invariably benefit them, despite Thrasymachus' claim that a ruling class with the skills of ruling will achieve this—sometimes the laws will benefit the citizens as well. Thrasymachus must also admit the possibility that some rulers (however defective on his own view) might rule primarily for the advantage of those they rule over and not for themselves. There is no conceptual incoherence in any of these possibilities on Thrasymachus' account, and he must

---

<sup>27</sup> Thrasymachus is sometimes read as maintaining that acting justly can never be beneficial to the just agent, but there is no justification for such a reading. Thrasymachus must maintain that it is sometimes prudent to act justly. Glaucon explicitly announces that Thrasymachus and the many say that justice is an instrumental good, not that it is invariably harmful, and Socrates acknowledges that this is the correct understanding of Thrasymachus' view (358a). Later in the dialogue Plato indicates that following the laws and ingratiating oneself to the rulers in a Thrasymachean regime can result in many real benefits. Above all else, acting justly in a Thrasymachean regime secures one the great good of remaining free from the punishments of one's rulers. Note the conditional force of many of Thrasymachus' statements: 'Injustice, *if it is on a large enough scale*, is stronger, freer, and more masterly than justice' (344c). He means that injustice is good only if one is able to get away with it. If not, one is punished and suffers many evils. In such cases acting justly is good and beneficial.

know this. However, because he thinks his own story exposes some hitherto hidden truths about justice, he exhorts us not to accept the alternative story according to which the rulers work for the citizens' own long-term interests and well-being, since in general such stories are no more than myths designed to pull the wool over the eyes of the many.

Thrasymachus is so emphatic and violent in presenting these claims because he wants to tear his listeners free from what he takes to be the ideological stranglehold that the Hesiodic view of justice-as-profitable has on them. This, I think, explains why he sounds so dogmatic and uncompromising when he makes each of the four claims presented above. And this veneer of dogmatism, in turn, is another reason why so many commentators have thought he must mean all of these claims to be true everywhere and always. But he presents these claims so forcefully not because they are invariably true, but because he thinks forcefulness is necessary to awaken his listeners from their ideological slumber. Something similar is going on when Thrasymachus makes his fourth claim. His point is not to lay down a truth about justice that holds everywhere and always, since he must know it does not. Rather, his point is to enforce upon his readers that most of the time one does better when one treats one's neighbors unjustly rather than justly. Thrasymachus is clear that he thinks this fact is obviously true—all one has to do is look at those who enter into contracts, go into politics, or pay taxes (343d-e). Most of the time nice guys really do finish last, even if once in a while one wins the lottery. Yet somehow his listeners are blind to this fact and he assumes this is because they have been deluded by some optimistic account of justice and the beneficence of rulers. What he really wants is to make some of his listeners realize that most of the time their interests will be advanced by breaking the rules. Once they realize this, he thinks, they will change their motivational dispositions and the way they act.

It is in this context, as we have seen, that Thrasymachus introduces his example of the tyrant. I want to make one further point about this example because we can tease out another explanatory virtue of Thrasymachus' method from a close reading of this passage. We have seen that those who try to read Thrasymachus as a dialectician run into problems when they apply his 'definition' of justice to the rulers of any Thrasymachean regime. And we noted earlier in our discussion that although we would expect Thrasymachus to call a tyrant just (the tyrant gets to make the laws), he actually calls his tyrant the one who does 'injustice entire' (344c). How can this be? I think this unexpected statement derives from the fact that Thrasymachus' account of justice—much like Nietzsche's—allows and even encourages us to look at the complicated social phenomena of justice from different perspectives (see Nehamas 1985 on Nietzsche's perspectivism). Since justice can be a battlefield of competing interests for Thrasymachus, we may think about justice from the perspective of the citizens who are exploited by the laws, from the perspective of rulers who dominate in their society, or even from the perspective of someone completely removed from that society and the *bellum omnium contra omnes* fought under the banner of political justice. It is from this last per-

spective that Thrasymachus calls the tyrant unjust: every Athenian and metic listening to the discussion of the *Republic* would agree that what the tyrant does is unjust, even if in the tyrant's own society what he says constitutes the rules of justice. Of course, Thrasymachus prides himself on maintaining no single perspective in particular, but carefully considering many, and then giving expert advice from a consideration of all of them. He has witnessed enough cities in action to free himself from the perspective of any one society and to attain a more robust understanding of the workings of justice everywhere. We might say that Thrasymachus' is not the view from nowhere, but from everywhere. Or, to be more accurate but much less lapidary, the view from many places.

It is this more variegated and sophisticated perspective on justice that Thrasymachus thinks entitles him to announce the ugly truths he uses to unmask and undermine his listener's beliefs about justice. The perspectival nature of Thrasymachus' understanding of justice also allows us to see why there is no fatal incoherence in his view, as many have supposed (see, e.g., Everson 1998). He is not committed to maintaining that claims 1, 2, and 3 must entail or be strictly equivalent to claim 4. Instead, his claims have a pointed purpose. In order to shock his listeners out of their prejudices concerning justice, he emphasizes the perspective of those who are ruled over and dominated by the rulers. The only exception to this is his discussion of the tyrant, whose perspective he briefly adopts, but only to demonstrate how blessed such a life can be. In general, however, he tries to explain to his listeners how detrimental it can be to act justly—and to do this he has to adopt the perspective of those who are ruled over and dominated.<sup>28</sup> We must realize that he is making his statements to convince citizens that their interests are often thwarted by acceding to the will of their rulers. There is no reason to think that what he says in this context should have any rhetorical force—or even make sense—if it were to be addressed to the rulers of these citizens.

So on my view Thrasymachus is not trying to define justice, nor is he merely giving a description of what justice is. He is offering a view about how one should live one's life—a view that must have appealed to many of the impressionable youths in Athens. This is why Socrates is so eager to discuss the issue of justice with Thrasymachus and, no doubt, this is why Plato spends another nine books responding to the Thrasymachean position.<sup>29</sup>

Department of Philosophy  
Princeton University  
Princeton NJ 08544

---

<sup>28</sup> This explains why it was when scholars started applying Thrasymachus' arguments in *Republic* to rulers that his view started to seem incoherent. This problem is compounded—and indeed does lead to incoherence—when one further assumes that he is trying to offer a definition of justice, in the Socratic sense discussed above.

<sup>29</sup> My deepest thanks go to Melissa Lane, Alexander Nehamas, John Cooper, Alex Nevitte, Ben Morison, and Emily Hulme, who all read drafts of this article and offered very helpful criticisms and comments. Special thanks goes to Rachel Barney. This article would not exist without her encouragement and guidance.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barney, Rachel. 2011. 'Callicles and Thrasymachus' *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. E.N. Zalta ed. URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/callicles-thrasymachus/>>.
- Beverluis, John. 2000. *Cross Examining Socrates*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chappell, T.D.J. 1993. 'The Virtues of Thrasymachus' *Phronesis* 38: 1-17.
- Chappell, T.D.J. 2000. 'Thrasymachus and Definition' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 18: 101-107.
- Cooper, John ed. 1997. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Evenson, Stephen. 1998. 'The Incoherence of Thrasymachus' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 16: 99-131.
- Gagarin, Michael and Paul Woodruff trans. 1995. *Hesiod's Works and Days in Early Greek Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Guthrie, W.K.C. 1962. *A History of Greek Philosophy*. vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Guthrie, W.K.C. 1971. *A History of Greek Philosophy*. vol. 4. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hourani, George. 1962. 'Thrasymachus' Definition of Justice in Plato's *Republic*' *Phronesis* 7: 110-120.
- Kahn, Charles. 1981. 'The Origins of Social Contract Theory in the fifth Century B.C.' 92-107 in G.B. Kerferd ed. *The Sophists and Their Legacy*. Wiesbaden: Steiner.
- Kahn, Charles. 1993. 'Proleptic Composition in the *Republic*, or Why Book I Was Never a Separate Dialogue' *Classical Quarterly* 43: 131-142.
- Lane, Melissa. 2012. 'Doing Our Own Thinking for Ourselves: On Quentin Skinner's Genealogical Turn' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 73: 71-82.
- Maquire, Joseph P. 1971. 'Thrasymachus—or Plato?' *Phronesis* 16: 142-163.
- Nehamas, Alexander. 1985. *Nietzsche: Life As Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Nicholson, Peter. 1974. 'Unravelling Thrasymachus' Arguments in "The Republic"' *Phronesis* 19: 210-232.
- Pendrick, Gerard ed. 2002. *Antiphon the Sophist: The Fragments*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reeve, C.D.C. 2008. 'Glaucon's Challenge and Thrasymacheanism' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 34: 69-103.
- Samaras, Thanassis. 2012. 'The Cynical Thrasymachus' *Philosophy Study* 2: 172-184.
- Santas, Gerasimos. 2006. 'Methods of Reasoning about Justice' 125-145 in G. Santas ed. *The Blackwell's Companion to Plato's Republic*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Sedley, David. 2013. 'The Atheist Underground' 329-348 in Verity Harte and Melissa Lane edd. *Politeia in Greek and Roman Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sparschott, F.E. 1966. 'Socrates and Thrasymachus' *Monist* 50: 421-459.
- Tell, Hakan. 2011. *Plato's Counterfeit Sophists*. Washington DC: Center for Hellenic Studies.
- Vlastos, Gregory. 1991. *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Weiss, Roslyn. 2007. 'Why Isn't Antiphon in the *Gorgias*' 331-353 in Apostolos L. Pierria ed. *Phusis and Nomos: Power, Justice and the Agonistic Ideal of Life in High Classicism: Part 1*. Patras: Institute for Philosophic Research.
- Welton, William. 2006. 'Thrasymachus vs. Socrates: What Counts as a Good Answer to the Question "What Is Justice"' *Apeiron* 39: 293-317.
- White, Stephen. 1995. 'Thrasymachus the Diplomat' *Classical Philology* 90: 307-327.
- Williams, Bernard. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 2006. 'Plato against the Immoralist' 97-107 in B. Williams. *The Sense of the Past*. Myles Burnyeat ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press.