

Thrasymachus and the Order of Pleonexia

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Throughout the Platonic corpus, one finds that Socrates spends much of his time engaged in dialectic with the sophists. Among the most famous of these characters is Thrasymachus, the character who dominates the first book of *The Republic*. Thrasymachus's world view is a topic of heated disagreement among scholars. Many different interpretations have been proposed, some at complete odds with others. In this paper I will briefly explain some of these interpretations, and then advance my own. I believe that Thrasymachus's doctrine is driven by the primacy of self-interest (*pleonexia*). This *pleonexia* is not seen as a vice, but is in fact the predominant force that guides human existence. This creates an order in which the strongest thrive and the weak die off, which is the way Thrasymachus believes things *should* be according to the ways of the universe. Thrasymachus goes beyond inconsistency, descriptive observation, legalism, and amorality; he is an immoralist.

Before turning to my own exegesis, it is useful to look at what others have been saying about Thrasymachus. One view that has been put forward is that Thrasymachus in fact makes no consistent argument. Joseph Maguire is the most notable proponent of this interpretation. He narrows down Thrasymachus's doctrine to contain three propositions regarding justice: the advantage of the stronger, obedience to laws, and the good of another (Maguire 143). The crux of his argument is that the third statement cannot be reconciled with the first two. "Clearly," Maguire points out, ". . . 'the advantage of the stronger' . . . is not compatible with (3) 'justice is another's advantage', unless 'another' is defined as the ruler . . . But this would leave us with the same problem we already had; viz., that

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the ruler himself is left outside his laws, and, therefore, outside justice and injustice" (147-48). From the perspective of the ruler, he cannot obey both the first and third propositions concurrently. Maguire determines in the end that the third statement was actually imposed upon him by Plato, the author. Maguire writes, "It is, rather, Plato's device to move from political statements about 'right' to the very different question, whether observance of 'right' (i.e., justice) is more or less advantageous than non-observance (i.e., injustice)" (163).

Others have written that Thrasymachus is purposefully presented in this incoherent manner. According to these thinkers, he is *meant* to be seen as incompetent in the argument with Socrates. P. P. Nicholson explains the thought of one commentator: "Jowett depicts Thrasymachus as a vain clown and 'a mere child in argument,' implying that consistency was beyond him" (Nicholson 213).

Another manner of understanding Thrasymachus is proposed by C. N. Johnson. Johnson argues that Thrasymachus is merely making empirical observations about the world he sees, and is not making a normative argument. He is not trying to define justice at all, and is simply pointing out how it operates in the real world. "[Thrasymachus] was not offering definitions. Instead he was making empirical generalizations about how justice works," Johnson says, "and supporting these general statements by bringing forth several sets of observations" (137). In this regard, he should be seen not as an "immoralist preaching injustice but a political scientist attempting to make . . . statements about the operation of justice in the observable world of politics" (137). Therefore the inconsistency of the statements doesn't matter, as Thrasymachus is not attempting to offer "definitions" (137).

Others scholars, going beyond these interpretations, have argued that Thrasymachus's doctrine is indeed internally consistent. George Hourani presents a "legalist" interpretation of Thrasymachus. Thrasymachus states that justice is advantage of the stronger, the stronger will be the rulers, and rulers will make the laws conducive to their advantage. Therefore obedience to law is how one is "just," as this obedience benefits the stronger. Hourani writes that "'Justice as the interest of the stronger' is meant not as a definition but as an important generalization" (111). Thrasymachus throws this statement in immediately, but it takes some time before the reader comes to understand all the presumptions upon which it rests. The general statement Thrasymachus first makes regarding justice is that it is "advantage of the stronger." When explicated, though, justice is found to rest upon something else. "It soon appears that behind his major assertion lies another one which is more truly a definition," Hourani states, "that jus-

tice is obedience to the laws" (120). Hourani believes that Thrasymachus is arguing for legalism.

Alan Bloom contests Hourani's interpretation on the basis of Thrasymachus' response to Clitophon. Clitophon suggests that Thrasymachus means "the advantage of the stronger is what the stronger believes to be his advantage" (*Republic* 340a). It does not matter whether or not the laws are actually advantageous, only that they emanate from the proper authority. This is positivism, or the legalism described by Hourani. However, as Bloom notes, Thrasymachus rejects Clitophon's aid. He has something deeper than this in mind.

After this rejection, Thrasymachus enters into his discussion of the craft of ruling: "A ruler, insofar as he is a ruler, never makes errors" (341a). According to Thrasymachus, while one is erring he is neither a "ruler" nor "stronger" (340c). Bloom writes that "Thrasymachus encumbers himself with the responsibility for what amounts to a moral imperative, requiring rulers to be selfish with perfect knowledge" (329). Bloom believes that Thrasymachus's ideal ruler combines knowledge and strength to serve his *pleonexia* (331). "Thrasymachus looks at politics from the point of view of the man who wants to live well and has understood the nature of justice" (Bloom 330). This is why he rejects Clitophon's suggestion. The rulers who are strongest "should" always act with "scientific selfishness," otherwise they lose their legitimate claim to the title of "ruler" (Bloom 329). Thrasymachus's insistence on expertise in selfishness cannot be reconciled with the positivism of Clitophon, which would assert that the essence of "justice" is only the "apparent advantage" of the laws to the stronger (Bloom 329). This Thrasymachean ideal presupposes an order in the universe, and goes beyond positivism or legalism. There is not moral chaos; there is a way things *should* be.

At this point I will offer my own analysis of Thrasymachus's statements in *Republic* I. I will attempt to show that he is presenting an internally coherent doctrine, as opposed to Maguire's thesis. Furthermore, I will argue against Johnson and affirm that Thrasymachus is much more than a mere political scientist; he is making a normative argument. He is no amoralist; he is an immoralist. I will then go further into what Bloom has hinted at when discussing Clitophon.

In describing his rather unsavory definition of justice, Thrasymachus is not presenting a mere descriptive account of how things play out in reality. He is not the "man on the street" who is simply "telling it like it is." One cannot maintain this position after the passage in 348d, where Thrasymachus incontrovertibly makes his definition a normative one. Socrates asks, "You consider unjust people, then, Thrasymachus, to be clever and good?" He answers affirmatively (348d). Only a few lines below

this, one finds that Thrasymachus actually equates “injustice with virtue and wisdom” (348e). Furthermore, he agrees that “complete injustice is more profitable than complete justice” (348c). Given these statements, it is undeniable that Thrasymachus’s discussion is normative. Its coherence, however, has yet to be proven.

Justice, when discussed by Thrasymachus, is political justice. For the most part, he is talking about the relationships between rulers and subjects. Almost all of Thrasymachus’s arguments regarding justice, as well as the examples he employs, support this notion. In his extended explanation of “advantage of the stronger,” he gives the example of the ruling regimes in a city and the subjects who obey them (338d). Furthermore, the discussion of the “shepherds and cowherds” which Socrates and Thrasymachus disagree about is also a ruler-subject relationship (343b, 345c). Finally, Thrasymachus’s extended description of “the whole of injustice” reveals that it is tyranny that he has in mind (344b). This is a fundamentally political discussion and is not concerned with subject-subject relations. Given the political schema of subject-ruler, it is necessary to discuss what “just” and “unjust” mean for each according to Thrasymachus.

Let us first take the simplest perspective: the subject in relation to the ruler. “Justice” for the subject consists in benefiting the ruler and thereby harming one’s self. Thrasymachus says, “Justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger . . . and in each city this element is stronger, namely, the ruler” (338c–d). This is all from the point of the view of the subject. He who is being “just” here is he who obeys. “Justice is really the good of another,” Thrasymachus says, “the advantage of the stronger and the ruler, and harmful to the one who obeys and serves” (343c). The “sheep” do justice to their shepherd by grazing peacefully and “fattening” themselves up for “their master’s good” (343b).

Injustice on the part of the subject is then the opposite of this self-sacrifice: it is selfishness, or *pleonexia*. *Pleonexia* is roughly equivalent to greed, or the constant desire to acquire more of any good for one’s self. Thrasymachus agrees with Socrates’ proposition that the unjust person “will strive to get the most he can for himself and from everyone” (349c). This is the elevation of self-interest above all else, and is certainly the opposite of the “justice” described earlier. Perhaps the strongest evidence that Thrasymachus’s idea of injustice is coterminous with *pleonexia* is a statement he makes after his explanation of tyranny. “As I said from the first,” he states, “justice is what is advantageous to the stronger, while injustice is to one’s own profit and advantage” (344b). While still looking at things from the perspective of the weak subject, Thrasymachus’s doctrine is quite clear. Problems only arise when one shifts to the point of view of the ruler in relation to the subject. What is justice and injustice for the *strong*?

In my reading, Thrasymachus's argument does not fall apart in the shift of perspective from subject to ruler. Scholars see a breakdown in the argument because Thrasymachus praises injustice constantly. How is the ruler supposed to be unjust (self-regarding) when anything he does to benefit himself is also what benefits the stronger, and is therefore "just" according to the earlier definition? The solution to this problem is to make a distinction between aspiring ruler or ascendant tyrant and the "established" ruler. Whenever Thrasymachus discusses and praises injustice as *pleonexia*, he makes it clear that this must be the most complete injustice: becoming the tyrant, ruler, or "stronger." Furthermore, this injustice he recommends is on the part of the subject. It is given to he who wishes to become tyrant but is not yet so. In referring to *established* regimes or tyrants, Thrasymachus does not advise "injustice." Even though the rulers are still acting self-interestedly, they are no longer committing "injustice." Essentially, if one takes injustice to its greatest extreme, the designation of his actions changes. Let us look at the text for evidence of this.

Thrasymachus calls self-interested action while still a subject "injustice," but if the subject can somehow manage to become the ruler through the most complete injustice, this word will no longer apply. Thrasymachus advises Socrates, "turn your thoughts to the most complete injustice This is tyranny, which through stealth or force appropriates the property of others" (344a). The complete injustice which Thrasymachus describes here is the action of "appropriating" everything. The "injustice" is not the sitting tyranny, but the coup by which the usurpation takes place. This action is described here as unjust because, while usurping, the ascendant tyrant is still in fact the subject. This usurpation must happen, therefore, "all at once" or the partial appropriations would quickly be caught as acts of injustice (344a). Thrasymachus gives the examples of "temple-robbers, kidnappers, housebreakers, robbers, and thieves" who commit "only part of injustice" and are consequently "punished and greatly reproached" (344b). If the usurpation or "appropriation" is complete, however, "he is called happy and blessed . . . by all those who learn that he has done the whole of injustice" (344c). Once the usurper is the established tyrant, no one punishes him for his *pleonexia*, because it has encompassed the entire city. He is now the "stronger." "So, Socrates, injustice, if it is on a large enough scale, is stronger, freer, and more masterly than justice," Thrasymachus says (344c). Note the important qualifier: if it is large enough. What Thrasymachus is saying here is that the *pleonexia* of the subject, if pushed to the extreme of tyranny, is better than the "justice" of the subject which benefits the rulers. He is talking about subjects here when he praises injustice, and it is injustice aimed at political usurpation. Injustice in its highest form is transformed

into something else. The aim of injustice, then, is to legitimize itself. One finds evidence for this in a later passage as well.

Thrasymachus makes the assertion that injustice is a “virtue” and that those who practice it are “clever and good” (348d). However, this is with an important caveat. It is only of “those who are completely unjust, who can bring cities and whole communities under their power,” that he is speaking (348d). “Perhaps you think I meant pickpockets,” Thrasymachus retorts, “but they aren’t worth mentioning by comparison to what I’m talking about” (348d). The injustice that he is praising is not the petty dealings of thieves and private men; Thrasymachus is talking about the supreme political injustice of usurping the state and bringing it under one’s power. He is talking about making one’s self the “stronger” one who will be advantaged by the subjects. Partial injustice is not enough to even be compared to this. It is only in this context of political usurpation that Thrasymachus claims that “injustice is fine and strong” (348e). Injustice as a means to tyranny through usurpation, however, can only be committed by one who is not himself the tyrant. Injustice in this sense is the injustice of the aspirant ruler. In both these passages the praise of injustice refers to the injustice of the hopeful tyrant who is still a subject. Two elements characterize Thrasymachus’s extolment of injustice: The actor must currently be a subject, and the ultimate aim of his injustice must be complete injustice (i.e. tyranny).

In Thrasymachus’s explanations of *established* tyranny, one finds a different portrayal. The established ruler makes laws which are advantageous to himself, and obedience to these laws is consequently “justice” for the subjects (339a). Justice for the subject, however, enjoins different actions than justice for the ruler. As the strongest, the ruler acts justly by being self-regarding. The “advantage of the stronger” means his own advantage. Therefore, by legislating laws beneficial to himself, the ruler is still just. The most important evidence for this interpretation is Thrasymachus’s discussion of the “craft” of ruling. He argues that the ruler *qua* ruler will always act in a way beneficial to himself, and therefore justly. The moment he ceases to do this, he ceases to be functioning as a ruler. “Do you think I’d call someone who is in error stronger at the very moment he errs?” Thrasymachus asks (340c). Through error, rulers renounce their title of “stronger,” and once this is absent they are not properly called rulers. Rulers are not infallible, but when they mistakenly act in a manner deleterious to their advantage they are not “rulers” in that action. “A ruler, insofar as he is a ruler, never makes errors and unerringly decrees what is best for himself, and this his subject must do,” says Thrasymachus (341a). Established rulers can never act unjustly, because while functioning as rulers they will never fail to enact laws beneficial to themselves. Actions proceeding from *pleonexia* are characterized as “unjust” while one is a subject, but once he has

made the completely selfish move and become ruler, the pleonectic man acts “justly” given Thrasymachus’s understanding.

In preserving the distinction between the aspiring tyrant and the established one, Thrasymachus’s statements can be brought to coherence. Scholars argue that, from the perspective of the ruler, “advantage of the stronger” and “advantage of another” cannot be reconciled. However, Thrasymachus uses these different ideas in different contexts. When speaking in the context of established rulers, he uses the first proposition: advantage of the stronger. When talking about those who are subjects or aspiring tyrants, though, he says justice is the advantage of another and recommends injustice. There is something that changes when one actually becomes “the stronger” and is the ruler. Thrasymachus foreshadows what his opposite, Glaucon, says in Book II: “The extreme of injustice is to be believed to be just without being just” (361a). For Thrasymachus the extreme of injustice somehow results in “justice.” By using injustice to usurp the reins of the state and thereby committing the most complete act of injustice, the subject becomes the ruler and will always thereafter act justly *qua* ruler. Injustice is “profitable” precisely in that it can change you from subject to ruler (348c).

Now one begins to see the sinister coherence of Thrasymachus’s doctrine. This is not just wordplay; it is no accident that he refuses to allow rulers *qua* rulers to act unjustly. When one commits the complete injustice and becomes the “stronger,” or the ruler, he is invested with a certain legitimacy or license to act out of *pleonexia*. No longer is his self-interested action considered “unjust,” it is in fact “justice” since he is the king of the hill. While some would argue that this transformation is because the rulers are the ones who define “justice,” I believe there is something deeper going on. Thrasymachus’s rejection of Clitophon’s positivism means that legitimacy must be grounded in some order. The stronger lose this legitimacy when they violate the order which undergirds the entire Thrasymachean system. This order or reality is *pleonexia* and the competition it engenders.

Thrasymachus is no ethical nihilist or *amoralist*, he is an immoralist. He does not see a chaotic world where there are no rules. In fact, the one normative rule that never changes is that one should always act out of self-interest. For Thrasymachus, “justice” is not a prescription for action; it contains no “ought.” The only “ought” is self-interest. One ought to act unjustly while a subject, and once he becomes the ruler his actions (while they remain self-interested) are now just. This is “Nietzschean immoralism,” (Chappell 2) or a theory of “natural right in an immoralist sense” (Maguire 158). Maguire describes this interpretation well: “There is a moral obligation, arising from the nature of man, for everybody, subject and ruler alike,

to be 'unjust' in the other sense, not of disobeying laws, but of seeking his own advantage (*pleonexia*)" (158).

The deeper layer to this order of self-interest is a differentiation through the resultant competition. Thrasymachus's portrait of the happiest person is the tyrant. Throughout the debate, what constantly recurs in this portrayal is not just *pleonexia*, but *strength* and *knowledge*. These are two elements that Bloom sees as salient (329). Recall that Thrasymachus states, "A person of great power outdoes everyone else" (344a). The criterion for being the "ruler" is that one is part of the "stronger element" (338d). Beyond strength, the ruler must have expert knowledge. These two are intricately connected. "Do you think I'd call someone who is in error stronger at the very moment he errs?" Thrasymachus asks (340c). This error is one of knowledge: "It's when his knowledge fails him that he makes an error" (340e). In order to be the tyrant, one requires both strength and expert knowledge of how to advantage one's self. Given that the tyrant will possess superior strength and knowledge, he *deserves* to be on top. Those who serve do so out of "high-minded simplicity" while the tyrant's acts proceed from "good judgment" (348d). This is why injustice as *pleonexia* is called "virtue and wisdom" and later "fine and strong" by Thrasymachus (348e). Those who are strongest rule, and this is the way things should be.

In a way, Thrasymachus presents a proto-Darwinian argument about the order of the cosmos. He is the precursor to Callicles, who lays out this doctrine in the most lucid manner: "Nature itself reveals that it's a just thing for the better man and the more capable man to have a greater share than the worse man and the less capable man" (*Gorgias* 483d). Paul Shorey, editor of the Loeb edition of *The Republic*, agrees that Thrasymachus and Callicles are presenting essentially the same thing: the "immoralist thesis" (x). If one has strength and knowledge, then his *pleonexia* is legitimate. If he can somehow manage to get more than others, he is entitled to keeping it. *Pleonexia* creates its own order through competition in which there is survival of the fittest. Thrasymachus is no clown in argument, and his views are more widely accepted than one may think. Thrasymachus describes a "law of the jungle" that many American capitalists would likely agree with.

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