

Revisiting Thrasymachus' Challenge: Another Socratic Failure

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Introduction

Call Thrasymachus' position in the *Republic* the 'profitability thesis' (PT). According to (PT), when injustice is practiced perfectly, the life of the unjust person is:

(a) profitable in terms of the extrinsic goods that can be acquired by its use (such as power or money); and

(b) profitable in terms of the intrinsic goods that can be acquired by its use (such as happiness).¹

We may say, then, that in both cases perfect injustice is instrumentally valuable, but that the goods that can be acquired in each case are substantially different.² The first component—Thrasymachus' assertion that perfect injustice is instrumentally valuable in terms of acquiring extrinsic goods—is left undisputed by all parties in the *Republic*. Socrates, I suggest, is never meant to address the question of its instrumental value. Instead, Socrates' efforts in the *Republic* are made to refute the second component in (PT), Thrasymachus' assertion that perfect injustice is intrinsically valuable in terms of acquiring happiness.³

My thesis is that although Socrates does not directly argue against the instrumental value of perfect injustice as a means to the possession of extrinsic goods, his argument against its intrinsic value entails a rejection of Thrasymachus' position that happiness is a good resulting from acting in a perfectly unjust manner.

Arguing for my thesis, therefore, involves demonstrating that 1. the extrinsic value of perfect injustice is left an outstanding issue in the *Republic* and 2. that unjust actions cannot lead to happiness.

1. The Instrumental Value of Perfect Injustice: Extrinsic and Intrinsic Goods

Injustice is profitable. Through unjust means you can acquire riches, power, fame, and happiness.⁴ The notion that injustice is profitable is the heart of the position of Thrasymachus, a Sophist, arguing against Socrates in Plato's *Republic*:

You will learn most easily of all if you turn to the most perfect injustice, which makes the one who does injustice most happy, and those who suffer it and who would not be willing to do injustice, most wretched. And that is tyranny, which by stealth and force takes away what belongs to others, both what is sacred and profane, private and public, not bit by bit, but all at once. When someone does

some part of injustice and doesn't get away with it, he is punished and endures the greatest reproaches . . . But when someone, in addition to the money of the citizens, kidnaps and enslaves them too, instead of these shameful names, he gets called happy and blessed, not only by the citizens but also by whomever else hears that he has done injustice . . . So, Socrates, injustice, when it comes into being on a sufficient scale, is mightier, freer, and more masterful than justice . . .⁵

If you are perfectly unjust, Thrasymachus tells us, and if you act unjustly on a sufficiently large scale, you will obtain whatever you want. You will be 'mightier, freer, and more masterful than the just'. Conversely, if you are just, you will always be taken advantage of by the unjust.⁶ If you are just and have contracts with the unjust, the unjust will profit when your partnership dissolves. If you share public office with the unjust you will always work harder, pay more, and receive less. Additionally, Thrasymachus thinks, perfect injustice is valuable in terms of its intrinsic worth. That is, Thrasymachus thinks an instrumental benefit of acting unjustly includes happiness.⁷ This is Thrasymachus' praise of the benefits of the unjust life; and his scorn and ridicule for those who are just. Why be just when the benefits of being unjust are superior in all respects? Why be just when the instrumental value of perfect injustice is so profitable? Why, Thrasymachus asks, be moral? This is Thrasymachus' challenge.

When Thrasymachus introduces the intrinsic worth of injustice, as we have seen, he does so within the context of a forceful argument praising the profitable consequences or instrumental uses of acting unjustly. The reason Glaucon and Adeimantus, early in book II of the *Republic*, reinstate Thrasymachus' thesis (PT) is this: Thrasymachus' position, Glaucon and Adeimantus think, has not been sufficiently articulated.⁸ To be sure, Socrates goes on to argue against the intrinsic worth of injustice for the remainder of the first book,⁹ while an articulate argument in its favour has not yet been presented. Unsatisfied, Glaucon asks Socrates: "do you want to seem to have persuaded us or truly to persuade us, that it is in every way better to be just than unjust?" 'I would choose to persuade you truly', Socrates answers, "if it were up to me'. 'Well, then . . . you're not doing what you want . . .'"¹⁰ Glaucon and Adeimantus are not yet persuaded that the just life is intrinsically better than the unjust. To know whether injustice is intrinsically valuable—whether perfect injustice causes the unjust to be happy (and the just to be 'wretched')—is the motivation behind Glaucon and Adeimantus' insistence that Socrates address the intrinsic worth of justice as superior to that of injustice.¹¹ Doubtless this is their concern; after all, there has not yet been a counter argument to Socrates' argument that the just life is intrinsically better than the unjust life. This is the reason and motivation for Glaucon and Adeimantus to restore Thrasymachus' argument and argue for the intrinsic worth of injustice. They want a refutation of the arguments that the unjust life is intrinsically valuable after those arguments have been powerfully and articulately stated—and Glaucon and Adeimantus are the ones who will state them.

2. Glaucon: Revisiting the Intrinsic Worth of Perfect Injustice

Glaucon voices his first argument in terms of a social contract theory. Doing injustice, Glaucon argues, is naturally good; suffering injustice is bad. No one wants justice in itself, but we grudgingly adopt it to prevent us from suffering harm.¹² The next argument is presented in the form of a thought experiment—the Ring of Gyges—that is designed to isolate an intuition about the motivation for acting justly. If a just person and an unjust person were both to possess a ring that could make them invisible, thereby allowing them to act unjustly without fear of reprisal, both the unjust person and the just person would act unjustly. In the case where the just person is invisible, there is no reason not to pursue self-interest. The Ring of Gyges tells us that the pursuit of self-interest is our basic natural tendency and preference. Fear of punishment, of being caught performing unjust actions, is the motivational force behind acting justly. No one acts justly willingly.

Glaucon adds one further challenge for Socrates. Suppose that both the just and the unjust person are perfect in what they practice. Suppose, further, that each has a reputation for the opposite: The just person has a reputation for injustice and the unjust person has a reputation for justice. Who, of these two, will have a better life? The quality of their lives, Glaucon thinks, will differ dramatically. The person who is truly just will suffer. He will be beaten, tortured, and put to death for seeming to be, not for actually being, unjust.¹³ The truly unjust person who seems to be just will flourish.¹⁴

There is a certain difficulty in making sense of what function these three arguments play for Glaucon; what philosophical ‘work’ they serve in the structure of Thrasymachus’ argument as a whole. To be sure, although Glaucon has an expressed and unambiguous interest in discovering what justice and injustice do to the soul itself,¹⁵ he has mentioned nothing about the effect(s) justice and injustice on the soul. Rather, he has offered Socrates arguments demonstrating what people regard as the motivation for acting justly and the consequences of being just as opposed to unjust. Adeimantus later reproaches him for this very reason, remarking that what was most in need of being said has not yet been said.¹⁶ While this appears to be a *prima facie* inconsistency in Glaucon’s position, there is a sense in which Glaucon has manipulated the conversation forcing Socrates into a position where he must address the intrinsic worth of injustice. The explicit emphasis Glaucon places on the severity of punishment that comes with having an unjust reputation forces Socrates to offer an intrinsic reason to prefer justice over injustice no matter what the consequences of being truly just are. This suits Glaucon’s purpose well. Glaucon’s concern with justice (and with Socrates defence of justice), extends only so far as justice is, by itself, worthwhile to have. In other words, Glaucon’s ultimate concern is with the intrinsic value of justice.

3. Adeimantus’ ‘Turn’: Revisiting the Intrinsic Worth of Perfect Injustice

Adeimantus’ arguments, like Glaucon’s, are likewise divided into three sections. First, argues Adeimantus, justice is not valuable in itself, but only for its reputation. Second, the life of the unjust person is more profitable than the life of the just and third, as Aristotle would later echo, those who blame injustice do so because they are unable to do it.¹⁷

Initially, Adeimantus reinstates the issue of reputation raised by Glaucon. Justice is not to be praised by itself, thinks Adeimantus, but only for the useful reputation that comes from it.¹⁸ The

unjust person with a reputation for justice, Adeimantus argues, will benefit in this world and the next. In this world, the unjust person will benefit from holding public office, marriage, power, money, and family.¹⁹ In the life to come, the unjust person's reputation for justice (for *seeming* to be just) will award him with all the riches and goods that come from being favoured by the gods.²⁰

According to the poets, Adeimantus continues, the life of the unjust is the better life than the life of the just. The poets praise justice but notice that justice is difficult and full of drudgery while injustice is "sweet and easy to acquire."²¹ Moreover, being unjust is more profitable than being just, not only in terms of extrinsic goods, but also in terms of happiness (something Adeimantus is never at a loss to repeatedly emphasize).²² Finally, the inept and weak blame injustice not because it is morally corrupt or naturally evil, but because they are unable to do it. While all of these things are said about justice and injustice, there is one issue remaining, Adeimantus thinks, that has never been adequately stated by anyone. This issue—an issue gone unnoticed by the gods and by human beings—is what effect justice and injustice have on the soul itself.²³ Although Adeimantus initially revisits Thrasymachus' position about the extrinsic goods that result from being unjust, Adeimantus, like his brother, now wants Socrates to defend justice as being intrinsically valuable. This is Adeimantus' 'turn':

Leave wages and reputation for others to praise. I could endure other men's praising justice and blaming injustice in this way, extolling and abusing them in terms of reputations and wages; but from you [Socrates] I couldn't . . . show what each in itself does to the man who has it—whether it is noticed by the gods and human beings or not—that makes the one good and the other bad.²⁴

Adeimantus, in the end, does not want Socrates to argue against the first component of PT; he does not want Socrates to address injustice as an instrument in the acquisition of extrinsic goods.

Presumably, both Adeimantus and Glaucon accept, like Thrasymachus, that injustice contributes to the acquisition of extrinsic goods. There is nothing particularly blameworthy about Glaucon and Adeimantus' insistence on shifting the conversation away from the extrinsic component of Thrasymachus' thesis. A more important issue now comes to the fore. Glaucon and Adeimantus want to know whether the state of the soul of the individual who is really unjust is better or worse than the state of the soul of the individual who is really just. This is the issue both Glaucon and Adeimantus insist that Socrates address.

By removing from the argument the concept of injustice as a means to extrinsic goods, not only do Glaucon and Adeimantus distance themselves from one of Thrasymachus' principle positions, but they force Socrates into a position where he is only required to offer a defence of justice as an intrinsic good. This represents a significant departure from the first component in PT: No one in the *Republic* is expressly interested in the refutation of injustice as a means to extrinsic goods. This argument has been very neatly severed from the dialogue. It does not require an answer from Socrates.

4. Socrates: A Reply

It does not follow, strictly speaking, from an examination of the *Republic* that Thrasymachus' position on the extrinsic goods resulting from unjust actions is correct. I have maintained throughout only that the issue is not addressed. To be sure, Socrates himself is not required by his interlocutors to take up the question. Victory by default, of course, is no real philosophical victory. Even so, it appears to be extraordinarily difficult to argue that it is not the case that unjust means will provide the unjust person with extrinsic benefits. To argue the opposite seems false—even naive. Although it is not obvious that Socrates' concern is to dispute the instrumental use of perfect injustice as a means to extrinsic goods, I think the issue Socrates *does* address has clear implications for the life of the unjust generally.

Socrates offers three arguments designed to show the intrinsic undesirability of the character of the unjust. The first argument is meant to demonstrate that the nature of the life of the unjust is to be unfree (and friendless), poor, and haunted by fear. The second argument is based on the philosopher's superior experience, and the third is based on the nature of true pleasures. The first argument, I think, is the argument most clearly associated with the intrinsic value of justice. Accordingly, it is this argument that I will consider in some detail.

For Socrates, the intrinsic worth of justice depends upon the proper ordering of the soul.²⁵ Although the unjust person may have acquired many goods through unjust means, he will be unfree and friendless—unfree because he will be bound to the satisfaction of his insatiable desires and friendless because there is no one of whom he will not take advantage to satisfy them.²⁶ Moreover, Socrates argues, the unjust person will be poor since all of his resources will be consumed satisfying his appetites. The unjust person will steal from family, friends, and strangers in order to secure temporary satisfaction.²⁷ Lastly, the plight of the unjust person is to be haunted by fear; perpetually concerned that those of whom he has taken advantage will seek retribution when time or circumstance allow.²⁸ Is the kind of life that Socrates calls the good life? Is it the kind of life you would want to live, even if it were full of a bounty of unjust acquisitions?

The idea Socrates is presenting is that the instrumental value of perfect injustice is insufficient as a means to happiness. Acting unjustly does not lead to happiness but its opposite. Although Socrates is not explicitly addressing the instrumental use of injustice, he *is* offering an argument that is clearly directed towards the quality of life of the truly unjust. What ultimate value can an unjust life really have if that life is mired by the dominance of want, misery, isolation, and poverty? Consider:

P1. If the instrumental use of injustice leads to happiness, then those who act unjustly are happy *(Second component of PT).

P2. Yet those who act unjustly cannot be happy.

C. So it is not the case that the instrumental use of injustice leads to happiness *(Second component in PT is false).

You will be a worse human being, Socrates argues, if you are truly unjust. Regardless of the extrinsic goods the Thrasymachan unjust person has acquired, his soul will be in a worse state than the soul of the just.²⁹ Socrates puts the point like this:

‘[I]n what way, Glaucon, and on the basis of what argument, will we affirm that it is [intrinsically] profitable to do injustice, or be licentious, or do anything base, when as a result of these things one will be worse, even though one acquires more money or more of some other power?’
‘In no way,’ he answered.³⁰

Recall Thrasymachus’ position. According to PT, the life of the unjust person is profitable both in terms of the extrinsic benefits that can be acquired through its use and the intrinsic goods (specifically happiness) that can be acquired by its means. Socrates is arguing that the intrinsic good of happiness that Thrasymachus suggests follows from perfect injustice does not actually follow from acting unjustly. Socrates is directly attacking the legitimacy of the connection between injustice and happiness.

I think Socrates’ argument against Thrasymachus’ claim that happiness can be achieved through unjust means is only conditionally correct. The condition upon which it depends upon is this: by hypotheses, Thrasymachus’ unjust person is supremely unjust—he is unjust ‘entire’; a person who “gets the better in a big way.”³¹ The scale of unjust actions the kind of person Socrates is modeling his argument against does not compare with the model of the unjust person we receive from Thrasymachus. The image with which Thrasymachus presents us is the image of a tremendously powerful individual. He is akin in strength and cunning to a dictator “kidnapp[ing] and enslav[ing] citizens,” taking what he wants “both what is sacred and profane, public and private, not bit by bit, but all at once.”³² The scale of unjust actions in which Thrasymachus’ unjust person engages is decidedly greater than the comparably petty unjust actions that Socrates describes *his* unjust person as participating in.³³ The unjust person Thrasymachus describes is the model of the unjust individual he directly challenges Socrates to consider.³⁴ Yet, Socrates does not have this person in mind when he argues against injustice. The result is that the unjust person, as the object of Socrates’ counterarguments, is not the same person Thrasymachus has in mind when he praises the power of injustice. Not only is Socrates arguing against the easier of the two examples, but he is not arguing against Thrasymachus proper.

While it is true that the kind of unjust actions Socrates describes are the kind of unjust actions we notice in everyday life, and Socrates’ arguments against this kind of life are successful and convincing, since he does not ‘elevate’ his argument to a point where it could match Thrasymachus’, I think his argument, in this respect, necessarily fails.

Lastly, since Thrasymachus’ thesis (the ‘profitability thesis’) contains two components and Socrates has only attempted to refute one (indeed because he is only required by his interlocutors to refute one), Socrates argument against Thrasymachus’ expressly held position is incomplete.

5. Conclusion

Plato's dialogues are difficult to write about. Part of the reason must be that a dialogue is comparably less focussed than a single-tract didactic philosophical treatise. The nature of a dialogue is such that many different subjects and considerations are presented in a condensed format. More importantly, another part of the reason Plato's dialogues prove a challenge to communicate is that they are rich in implication in a way that other philosophical dialogues are not.³⁵ Consider only a few examples from the Platonic corpus: the cause of philosophical scepticism;³⁶ the violence directed against philosophers;³⁷ the *Apology* (general topic of Socrates' execution);³⁸ and *Meno*;³⁹ eugenics;⁴⁰ social control;⁴¹ censorship;⁴² democracy as an inappropriate political system;⁴³ paternalism.⁴⁴ Also, the many insights Socrates has into human psychology are remarkable—and extensive. After considered reflection, it would be appropriate to say that, at the very least, Plato's dialogues invite the reader to place more emphasis on certain elements of his philosophy rather than on others. Among whatever divisive scholarly controversy this may create, it certainly makes an accurate exposition tedious and the room for error and misinterpretation ample. Nonetheless, in this essay I have tried to faithfully capture the structure of Thrasymachus' argument as his argument is reinstated by Glaucon and Adeimantus. In so doing, I have drawn out what I take to be the specific response Socrates offers to the principle issue of the intrinsic worth of justice (and injustice) as it concerns Glaucon, Adeimantus and, by extension, Thrasymachus himself.

In the books of the *Republic* on which I have focussed, I have demonstrated what I take to be an uncontroversial conclusion: Socrates does not argue against Thrasymachus' assertion that unjust means are instrumentally valuable in regards to extrinsic benefits. The related conclusion I have drawn and substantiated—although not without stipulation—is that Socrates' argument against the intrinsic worth of injustice is sufficient to demonstrate the superiority of the just life, even if the unjust life is more profitable. The stipulation, of course, is that the unjust person considered by Socrates is not identical to the unjust person Thrasymachus recommends for consideration.

¹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom, 2nd ed. (USA: Basic Books, 1968) 343d-344c.

² I'm classifying Thrasymachus' position on injustice in terms of Glaucon's classification of goods. According to Glaucon's taxonomy, goods come in three different sorts (*Republic* 357b-d): (a) Intrinsic Goods: Goods valuable in themselves and not for their consequences, such as pleasure and enjoyment; (b) Mixed Goods: Goods valuable in themselves *and* for their consequences, such as a University degree which is good in itself (education) and good for the benefit it provides (employment); and (c) Instrumental Goods: Goods not valuable in themselves but useful as instruments to some further end, such as wealth and good looks.

³ Plato, *Republic*, 344a.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 343b-344d.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 344a-c.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 343d-e.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 343d; 344a.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Glaucon 357a-b; 358b,d; Adeimantus 362d; 367a.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 347e; 350c; 352d; 354a.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 357b.

- ¹¹ Ibid., Glaucon 358b-d; Adeimantus 367b-e.
- ¹² Ibid., 359a.
- ¹³ Notice the similarity here to the *Apology*. Glaucon observes that a truly just person with an unjust reputation will suffer for seeming to be, not for actually being, unjust. This is the exact portrait of Socrates himself at the trial. See Plato, *Apology*, in *Five Dialogues*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, 2nd ed., rev. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002) 19b-c, 23d, and 26b-e for a description of Socrates' 'unjust' reputation.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 1361a.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 358b,d
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 362b.
- ¹⁷ Aristotle notes: "The weaker are always anxious for justice and equality. The stronger pay no heed to either." *Politics*, trans. T. D. Sinclair (London: Penguin Books, 1992) 1318.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 363a.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 366b.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 363a-c.
- ²¹ Ibid., 362a.
- ²² Ibid., 364a; 365a.
- ²³ Ibid., 367b.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 367e.
- ²⁵ See Plato, *Republic*, 434a-441c for Socrates' argument that the soul has three parts.
- ²⁶ Plato, *Republic*, 575e.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 573e-574b.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 578e-579c.
- ²⁹ See Plato, *Republic* 576b-d, where Socrates argues that the elements of the just person's soul (reason, spiritedness, and the appetites) are inverted in the soul of the unjust.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 591a.
- ³¹ Ibid., 344a.
- ³² Ibid., 344a-b.
- ³³ Ibid., 574d-575a.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 344a.
- ³⁵ Cf. Augustine, Hume, or Berkeley.
- ³⁶ Plato, *Republic*, 538d-e.
- ³⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 336b,d (Thrasymachus generally); 488b; 489a; 517a.
- ³⁸ Plato, *Apology*, 21b-23e (particularly 23c-e).
- ³⁹ Plato, *Meno*, in *Five Dialogues*, trans. G. M. A. Grube and rev. John M. Cooper, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002) 94d.
- ⁴⁰ Plato, *Republic* 458a-461e.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 414b-415d.
- ⁴² Ibid., 392a-c.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 488a-498a.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., passim.