



BRILL

---

Thrasymachus' Definition of Justice in Plato's "Republic"

Author(s): George F. Hourani

Source: *Phronesis*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1962), pp. 110-120

Published by: [BRILL](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4181704>

Accessed: 23/02/2011 16:52

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=bap>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



BRILL is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Phronesis*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## *Thrasymachus' Definition of Justice in Plato's Republic*

GEORGE F. HOURANI

THE PROBLEM of interpreting Thrasymachus' theory of justice (τὸ δίκαιον) in *Republic* i, 338c-347e, is well known and can be stated simply. He makes two assertions about the nature of just or right action, each of which appears at first glance as a "real" definition:

1. Justice is serving the interest of the stronger.<sup>1</sup>
2. Just action is obedience to the laws of one's state.

But, as Socrates quickly points out (339b-e), these two assertions cannot both be true as definitions, because their two predicates conflict in certain instances; for obedience to the laws by the subjects is occasionally not in the interest of the rulers. Thus the only way in which Thrasymachus' position can be maintained without inconsistency is if one of his assertions is not seriously meant by him as a "real" definition. Assuming, then, as a working hypothesis that he has a consistent position, we must look in the text for answers to the questions, which assertion does he mean seriously as a "real" definition? and what is the logical character of the other assertion? We shall then be able to see the relation of the two assertions to each other in his argument.

The obvious answer to the first question, and the one that generally remains in our memory of Thrasymachus, is that he defines "justice" (a loose word for "just action") as doing what is in the interest of the stronger. This answer also seems to be supported by Thrasymachus' own deliberate choice in face of the contradiction shown by Socrates, for he then says that justice is the real interest of the stronger, not what they think to be their interest as shown in the laws they make (340c-341a). Nevertheless I believe there are good reasons for the other view, that Thrasymachus' intended definition of justice is obedience to law (conventionalism or legalism). This view is not new – it has been held by Grote, Gomperz, Lindsay, Bosanquet, Winspear and others – but it needs to be justified by a closer examination of the text than has yet been made for this purpose. The present article attempts to do this, and to answer objections raised by Professor G. B. Kerferd in an article publish-

<sup>1</sup> At this stage Thrasymachus is concerned with the nature of just action as performed by *subjects* of states. Later, in order to embrace just action as performed by the rulers, he broadens "the interest of the stronger" to "the interest of others". See below, p. 116.

ed some years ago.<sup>1</sup> It will also be maintained that “Justice the interest of the stronger” is meant not as a definition but as an important generalization, based on the underlying conventionalist definition combined with supposed facts of psychology and politics. I shall go through the argument between Socrates and Thrasymachus in the nine pages referred to, in the order of the text, and then consider its relation to later parts of the *Republic*.

338c-339a. Thrasymachus begins the statement of his position with a bold pronouncement:

“I declare that justice is nothing else than that which is advantageous to the stronger” (338c).<sup>2</sup>

This looks at first glance like a definition. But when we examine Thrasymachus’ explanation of how he reached this conclusion we come to a different view of it. The explanation is given briefly (338d-339a) in three premisses and a conclusion.

[i]: “Then it is the government (τὸ ἄρχον) which is master in each city, is it not?”

Certainly.

[ii]: Well, every government lays down laws for its own advantage – a democracy democratic, a tyranny tyrannical laws, and so on.

[iii]: In laying down these laws they have made it plain that what is to their advantage is just for their subjects. They punish him who departs from this as a lawbreaker and an unjust man.<sup>3</sup>

[Conclusion]: And this, my good sir, is what I mean. In every city justice is the same. It is what is advantageous to the established government. But the established government is master, and so sound reasoning gives the conclusion that the same thing is always just – namely, what is advantageous to the stronger”.

<sup>1</sup> “The doctrine of Thrasymachus in Plato’s ‘Republic’”, *Durham University Journal*, 9(1947), pp. 19-27. Kerferd gives references to previous opinions, in notes 2-12.

<sup>2</sup> Tr. A. D. Lindsay, rev. ed. (London, 1920). φημι γὰρ ἐγὼ εἶναι τὸ δίκαιον οὐκ ἄλλο τι ἢ τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον. Ed. J. and A. M. Adam (Cambridge, 1909). F. M. Cornford (Oxford, 1941) translates εἶναι as “means”. This is how we should normally understand the word in this sentence, but it shuts out a lurking ambiguity in the Greek which becomes important later. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from Lindsay’s translation which is less interpretative and generally closer to the Greek than Cornford’s.

<sup>3</sup> Lindsay omits “for their subjects”. θέμεναι δὲ ἀπέφηναν τοῦτο δίκαιον τοῖς ἀρχομένοις εἶναι, τὸ σφίσι συμφέρον, καὶ τὸν τούτου ἐκβαίνοντα κολάζουσιν ὡς παρανομοῦντα τε καὶ ἀδικοῦντα.

Now this is not the way in which a definition is usually established, in Plato's dialogues or anywhere else. A definition is normally proposed first, as a hypothesis, with illustrations from current language; it is then tested by further examples from current language. But the present explanation goes far afield, into empirical facts of government and law. The reason for this is, surely, that Thrasymachus is not trying to establish a definition at all, but a synthetic proposition; this is why the premisses are partly empirical. Like many other antagonists of Socrates in the dialogues, Thrasymachus is either ignorant or careless about the difference between definition and description. He is only concerned to make an impression of daring cynicism, and states his thesis as a definition because it is more arresting in that form. As N. R. Murphy expresses it,

“Naturally enough, in accordance with dramatic propriety, Plato makes him begin with an exhibition of fireworks; but his epigrammatic appraisal of justice as ‘the interest of the stronger’ is rather a consequence of its being what it is than a definition of it”.<sup>1</sup>

This attitude may be clarified by a modern parallel, fictitious but typical.

A. “How would you define democracy?”

B. Democracy is nothing but the rule of the stupid.

A. What do you mean by that?

B. Well, democracy means the rule of the majority, and the majority of the people are invariably stupid”.

Obviously B's first statement is not to be taken seriously as a definition; it is stated in the form of one only to make a witty point.

Going back to Thrasymachus' argument, I shall now state it schematically as I understand it.

[i]: The rulers in each city are the stronger. [Fact of politics]

[ii]: The laws are always made by the rulers for their own advantage.

[Fact of psychology]

[iii]: Justice is obeying the laws. [Definition]

[Conclusion]: Therefore justice is the advantage of the stronger.

It will be apparent that all three premisses are necessary to reach the conclusion, including the third premiss, the definition of justice as obedience to law. Although the definition is not very clear in this premiss as stated by Thrasymachus, we know that it is present – as a definition – for these reasons: (a) It is basic to the argument, which would collapse without this link; for *without it there would be no connection between justice*

<sup>1</sup> *The interpretation of Plato's 'Republic'* (Oxford, 1951), p. 2.

*and the rulers.* (b) In the passage which follows immediately afterwards (339b-e), Socrates in cross-questioning Thrasymachus makes it plain that he understands obedience to law as *one* of the supposed definitions offered by Thrasymachus, e.g.

“And their subjects must do what they order and this is justice?”  
(339d)

Socrates is concerned to show that Thrasymachus is claiming two statements as definitions and that the two contradict each other.

To corroborate indirectly this claim that a definition of justice as obedience to law is present here, it is worth quoting a passage from the *Laws*, iv, which is closely parallel and which states this definition clearly as a part of the argument. The Athenian stranger is explaining to Clinias the sophists' theory of justice.

ATH. "... that the natural definition of justice is best stated in this way.

CLIN. In what way?

ATH. That justice is 'what benefits the stronger'.

CLIN. Explain yourself more clearly.

ATH. This is how it is: the laws (they say) in a State are always enacted by the stronger power? Is it not so?

CLIN. That is quite true.

ATH. Do you suppose, then (so they argue), that a democracy or any other government – even a tyrant – if it has gained the mastery, will of its own accord set up laws with any other primary aim than that of securing the permanence of its own authority?

CLIN. Certainly not.

ATH. Then the lawgiver will style these enactments "justice", and will punish every transgressor as guilty of injustice.

CLIN. That is certainly probable.

ATH. So these enactments will thus and herein always constitute justice.

CLIN. That is, at any rate, what the argument asserts". (714c-d)<sup>1</sup>

Summing up now the conclusions to be drawn about Thrasymachus' first position, we must say that "Justice the interest of the stronger" does not behave logically as a definition should – even though it is claimed to be one –, while underlying it as a premiss is the proposition "Justice is obedience to law", which is a true definition.

339b-341c. The next section raises a difficulty for our conventionalist

<sup>1</sup> Tr. R. G. Bury (London: Loeb Library, 1926).

interpretation of Thrasymachus. Socrates puts the objection that rulers in legislating may sometimes make mistakes about their interest, and lay down laws that are not really in their own interest. So Thrasymachus must choose between two definitions of justice: as obeying the laws whatever they are, and as obeying only those laws which further the real interest of the stronger. Clitophon suggests helpfully on behalf of the sophist that

“by what is advantageous to the stronger he meant ‘what the stronger thinks is to his advantage’”. (340b)

Now this would be reflected in legislation, so that by accepting this formula Thrasymachus could have preserved in a simple manner the essential connection of justice with obedience to law. Yet he refuses Clitophon’s suggestion, remarking,

“Do you think that I call him who makes a mistake the stronger at the time of his mistake?” (340c)

Kerferd takes this as evidence that Thrasymachus did not hold the conventionalist or legalist view of justice.<sup>1</sup> Since this is the most serious evidence that Kerferd produces against the conventionalist interpretation, we must consider carefully what Thrasymachus proceeds to say in justification of his new position.

Thrasymachus compares rulers with other skilled professionals and argues that all of them are strictly speaking craftsmen only when they are performing their tasks competently. He sums up his conclusion as follows:

“A ruler, so far as he is a ruler, is infallible, and being infallible he prescribes what is best for himself, and this the subject must do. So that, as I said originally, to do what is advantageous to the stronger is just”. (340e-341a)<sup>2</sup>

The point to notice here is that in all this passage, where he is speaking of the real interest of the stronger, Thrasymachus never goes outside the limits of the law and the political relations of governments with their subjects. What “the subject must do”, i.e. what is just for him to do, is in the first place to obey what the ruler prescribes as law (τίθεσθαι) when he is ruling competently. Thus the sophist has merely *restricted* the laws that define justice to certain laws.

But supposing he were now defining justice directly as “the real

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> Τὸν ἄρχοντα, καθ’ ὅσον ἀρχῶν ἐστί, μὴ ἀμαρτάνειν, μὴ ἀμαρτάνοντα δὲ τὸ αὐτῷ βέλτιστον τίθεσθαι, τοῦτο δὲ τῷ ἀρχομένῳ ποιητέον. ὥστε, ὅπερ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἔλεγον, δίκαιον λέγω τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος ποιεῖν συμφέρον.

interest of the stronger”, without reference to law, some strange consequences would follow:

(a) It would be just for subjects to disobey the laws when they were not really in the interest of the stronger. The ruled would have a “duty” to look after the interests of their rulers rather than their own, even when these rulers mistakenly commanded them to do otherwise.

(b) It would be unjust for subjects to obey the laws when doing so would be in their own interest. (This would follow from the corresponding definition of injustice as furthering one’s own advantage). It seems to me that it is not in the spirit of Thrasymachus to believe in such just disobedience and unjust obedience.

If Thrasymachus is a conventionalist, it may be asked why at this point he chooses to qualify his definition of just action in a way which limits it and makes it more complex – “obeying the laws when they are to the real advantage of the stronger” – rather than adopt the straightforward amendment of Clitophon, “doing what the stronger decides is to his advantage”.<sup>1</sup> In answer to this question we can only make some guesses from the context and from Plato’s habitual manner of presenting the sophists. There may be a glorification of skill and success, which would make the sophist unwilling to admit that an incompetent ruler would determine justice equally with a competent one. Thrasymachus may also have been afraid that if he admitted Clitophon’s formula it would enable Socrates to destroy the generalization of which he (Thrasymachus) was so proud, by arguing that justice is only the supposed not real interest of the stronger. (Actually Thrasymachus could have fought such an attack on empirical grounds, by maintaining that in most cases rulers know their own interests). And, apart from any reasons we may attribute to Thrasymachus as natural parts of his position or attitude in the *Republic*, we cannot ignore Plato’s own artistic and philosophical purposes. Here it seems that Plato preferred to make Thrasymachus give the answer he did so that Socrates could go on to make a new point about the craft of ruling.

341c-343a. Socrates gets Thrasymachus to admit that the purpose of every craftsman is the good of the objects or persons in his charge. Applying this principle to the craft of ruling, Socrates draws the conclusion that “no one in any kind of government will, so far as he is a ruler, prescribe or seek his own advantage but that of the subject of his craft over which he rules”. (342e)

<sup>1</sup> The latter “is in fact precisely what Thrasymachus should have said”: H. W. B. Joseph, *Essays in ancient and modern philosophy* (Oxford, 1935), p. 17.

### Why at this point is it

“plain to all that the account of *justice* had been turned around”?  
(343a)<sup>1</sup>

It can only be because justice has been defined as what the ruler prescribes or seeks, and this is now shown to be in the interest of the governed not his own. It is through the link of what the ruler prescribes or seeks that relations have been established between justice and interest.

343a-344c. Thrasymachus of course cannot accept Socrates' conclusion, and he now revokes the admission that he should never have made, that all craftsmen including rulers aim at the good of their charges. In a vehement speech he maintains two major points. (a) Rulers “who are really rulers” (343b) seek only their own profit, using their subjects like sheep to serve this end. (b) Justice is

“really the good of another (*ἀλλότριον ἀγαθόν*), the advantage of the stronger who rules” (343b),

while injustice is advantageous to oneself, especially if practised on a great scale and backed by power. It is this second point which he argues at length. His argument is important and calls for our attention.

As Kerferd has pointed out,<sup>2</sup> the new characterization of justice as “the good of another” does not represent any real change in Thrasymachus' initial position that justice is the interest of the stronger, but only a broadening of it so that it may be applicable to just action performed by the rulers as well as their subjects. (The application is made in the course of the same speech, where he says that the just man in office is prevented by his justice from making a profit out of the public (343e)). He also makes a contrasting broad characterization of injustice, as serving one's own good. The doctrine in its full development is clearly and correctly tabulated by Kerferd:

Justice-Another's good,	so for the ruler the interest of the weaker
	for the ruled the interest of the stronger
Injustice-One's own good,	so for the ruler the interest of the stronger
	for the ruled the interest of the weaker”. <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> My translation and italics. *δτι ὁ τοῦ δικαίου λόγος εἰς τὸναντίον περιειστήκει*. Lindsay and Cornford translate *λόγος* as “definition”, but the breadth of *λόγος* should not be so restricted here, for reasons which will be clear by now.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Thrasymachus adds some corollaries relating justice and injustice to harm. Justice is “the self-inflicted injury of the subject” (343c), etc. Thus four more propositions might be added to the table. Of the total eight propositions there are four with which Socrates and Plato agree: justice is another's good (2), injustice is another's harm (2); and four from which they dissent: injustice is one's own good (2), justice is one's own harm (2).



Now, since this new doctrine is nothing but an expansion of the original doctrine, "Justice is the interest of the stronger", either both statements on justice must be genuine definitions or both must not be definitions. (The statements on injustice will also follow the same course). We should therefore examine the method by which the new doctrine is supported, for the light it reflects on the original doctrine. The relevant characteristic of Thrasymachus' argument here is that it is entirely empirical. Assuming by now that it is known what justice and injustice mean, he shows with illustrations from business and government that "a just man always comes off worse than an unjust". (343d)

And what is the character of his conclusion? His final sentence shows very clearly what he has been trying to prove:

"Therefore, Socrates, injustice, when great enough, is mightier and freer and more masterly than justice; and, as I said at the start, justice is to the advantage of the stronger, but injustice is profitable and advantageous to oneself". (344c)<sup>1</sup>

Thus his conclusion is a synthetic one. It is no longer disguised as a definition. Yet it is said to be the same conclusion "as I said at the start". Thrasymachus is not conscious of any change from a question of definition to a synthetic question. And if the reader too feels no surprise at this point and does not notice any abrupt transition to the question whether justice or injustice is in fact more advantageous, it is because the ground has been prepared in the preceding pages. The discussion on this question was already tacitly on a synthetic basis, combined with Thrasymachus' understanding of the defining essence of just action as "obedience to the laws". More will be said below about this matter of change of subjects in the *Republic*.

344d-347e. In his reply to Thrasymachus, Socrates first clarifies the distinction between practising a craft as such and earning a reward for it. He then brings evidence to show that most rulers have to be offered a reward for ruling, and draws from this fact the conclusion that they think ruling itself is not to their own advantage.

<sup>1</sup> The last half: *καὶ ὅπερ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἔλεγον, τὸ μὲν τοῦ κρείττονος ἑυμμέρον τὸ δίκαιον τυγχάνει ὄν, τὸ δ' ἄδικον ἑαυτῷ λυσιτελοῦν τε καὶ ἑυμμέρον.*

Cornford persists: "and 'right', as I said at first, means simply what serves the interest of the stronger party; 'wrong' means what is for the interest and profit of oneself". "Means" is wholly out of place by now, and ignores the absence of the article in front of *ἑαυτῷ λυσιτελοῦν*.

“Therefore I in no way agree with the statement of Thrasymachus that justice is the advantage of the stronger”. (347d-e)<sup>1</sup>

Socrates is here carrying on the discussion on an empirical level like his antagonist, and he is connecting justice with government (though not, of course, accepting the legalistic definition of it).

The words of Socrates just quoted formally close the debate on the nature of justice in this section of the *Republic* (338c-347e), for Socrates goes on immediately:

“But this we shall consider again. I attach much greater importance to Thrasymachus’ present position, that the life of the unjust man is superior to that of the just man”. (347e)

This becomes the main formal subject of the rest of the *Republic*. An analysis of its logical relation with the preceding debate will, I believe, reveal decisively the impossibility of interpreting “the interest of the stronger” in that debate as a definition of justice.

The *Republic* after 347e is formally about the question, whether a just or an unjust life is more profitable (*λυσίτελέστερον*) to the agent, i.e. to the person himself who is just or unjust (i 347e, 354 b-c, ii 367b, e, ix 588 b ff., x 613e ff.) This is treated throughout the dialogue as a synthetic question, whose answer depends on facts of various kinds – metaphysical, psychological, political. But would it be sensible to discuss this as a synthetic question immediately after discussing, *as a question of definition*, whether justice is the interest or advantage (*ξυμφέρον*) of others and injustice the interest of the subject? That it would not be sensible becomes apparent as soon as we realize that *the two questions are the same*. The identity is established as follows:

(a) *ξυμφέρον* and *λυσίτελοῦν* are synonyms, at any rate in this context. (For an example see p. 117, n. 1).

(b) In 338c-347e, Thrasymachus’ position “Injustice is one’s own good” is only the logical converse of “Justice is the interest of the

<sup>1</sup> This conclusion seems paradoxical from Socrates, who is later going to maintain that justice is to the interest of everyone, rulers and ruled alike, and who certainly does not think that injustice is to the interest of anyone. (See note 3 p. 116). But here he is arguing on the level of Thrasymachus, about material advantage, not the good of the soul. His argument relies on the fact that rulers generally feel they have no direct financial gain from ruling itself, hence have to be paid in money, honor or personal satisfaction of some kind. He does not want to explain to Thrasymachus too carefully what sort of reward the good ruler gains from ruling, and how justice in fact benefits his peace of mind and the health of his soul. All that is to be explained to his own disciples in the remainder of the dialogue.

stronger”, or “of others”. If the latter were definitions, the former would have to be one as well.

And (c) whether injustice is one’s own good is one side of the subject of the later parts of the *Republic*. (The equivalence of the questions about justice could be shown too, but less simply).

We must conclude, then, that Thrasymachus and Socrates could not intelligently have proceeded to discuss as a synthetic question, “Is injustice in fact in my interest?”, if they had just previously thought it was a matter to be settled by definition, “Does justice *mean* what is in my interest?” For they would have seen that the new question could only be settled by completing the discussion of definition, and that no other facts could be relevant but the usages of language. The only way, therefore, in which the later, empirical discussion can be intelligent is if the two parties to the earlier discussion have not really been dealing with definitions but have already been dealing with an issue of fact in an unacknowledged form. Evidence that this is the case has been present throughout the earlier discussion, as has been shown.

Further indications of the correct interpretation of Thrasymachus’ position are present in later pages of the *Republic*. One passage is of particular interest. When Glaucon resumes the case for the sophistic position in Book ii he says,

“I shall renew Thrasymachus’ argument. First, I shall state what is said to be the nature and origin of justice”. (358b-c)

He begins with the claim that by nature “to do injustice is good, to suffer it evil”. (358e) All but the strongest then

“come to this opinion: that it is more profitable that they should mutually agree neither to inflict injustice nor to suffer it”. (359a)

Here the relation between “justice” and “injustice” on the one hand, and “good” and “profitable” on the other, is synthetic not analytic. Then Glaucon continues:

“Hence men began to establish laws and covenants with one another, and they called what the law prescribed lawful and just (νόμιμον καὶ δίκαιον).” (359a)

So Glaucon is giving the conventionalist definition of justice, while claiming to “renew Thrasymachus’ argument”. This by itself would not be a conclusive proof that Thrasymachus held the same view, for it is possible that Glaucon is presenting an improved case. But in the light of the other indications to the same effect I think it has significance as supporting evidence.

Another interesting passage is vi 493c, where the typical sophist “calls what is compulsory just and good”.

One other argument given by Kerferd against the conventionalist interpretation of Thrasymachus may be answered at this point, since it is of a general kind, not referring to a particular context.

“If justice has no existence apart from legal justice, in other words justice made by the laws, then the person who makes the laws cannot be either just or unjust, he will be above or outside justice altogether. As this is clearly not the view of Thrasymachus, we must suppose he did not hold the legalist view”.<sup>1</sup>

In Kerferd’s hypothetical sentence, the consequence does not follow from the antecedent, where the lawgiver is human and can submit to law. For, on the conventionalist definition, he will be just simply when he himself lives within his own laws, and unjust when he flouts them.

The main conclusions to be drawn from this study of *Republic* 338c-347e may be summarized briefly. Thrasymachus starts with a bang by affirming that justice is the interest of the stronger, and he thinks he is defining justice, as Socrates had requested him to do. But it soon appears that behind his major assertion lies another one which is more truly a definition, that justice is obedience to the laws. Socrates’ dialectic soon forces him to modify this to “obedience to those laws which are in the real interest of the stronger”. The later part of the discussion moves more and more away from any question of definition, and is about two closely related synthetic questions, whether justice (whatever it may be) is to the interest of the stronger, and whether justice or injustice is more profitable to oneself. The definition of justice is left in suspense (347d, 354b-c), to be resumed later by Socrates as a necessary basis for proving that justice is more profitable.

*University of Michigan*

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 27.