

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Thrasymachus and the Relational Conception of Authority

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**T**hrasymachus, in the first book of Plato's *Republic*, defines justice as the interest of the stronger:

*The just is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger. (338c)*

*The just is the same thing everywhere – the advantage of the stronger. (339a)*

And since in each city the rulers are the stronger, Thrasymachus apparently treats this definition as equivalent to defining justice as the interest of the rulers:

*Is this not what exercises power in each city – the ruling party? (338d)*

*This, then, sir, is what I say the just is, alike in all cities – the advantage of the established rule. (338e-339a)*

If we follow Thrasymachus in identifying the stronger with the rulers, then Thrasymachus's definition appears to entail P1:

- **P1. S acts justly iff S acts in the interest of the stronger/rulers.**

And P1 in turn evidently entails both P2 and P3:

- **P2. The weaker/ruled act justly iff the weaker/ruled act in the interest of the stronger/rulers.**
- **P3. The stronger/rulers act justly iff the stronger/rulers act in the interest of the stronger/rulers.**

Does Thrasymachus indeed endorse P2 and P3? P2 he certainly accepts, agreeing that 'to obey the rulers is just' (339b) and that 'those who are ruled do what is to the advantage of the one who is stronger.' (343c)

But P3 he equally clearly rejects.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere does Thrasymachus describe the rulers who rule in their own interest as just. On the contrary, he repeatedly describes those who rule in their own interest as unjust, explaining (344b-c) that while a common criminal ‘commits injustice by the part’ (*kata merē*), a political ruler ‘has committed injustice by the whole’ (*tēn holēn*). And consider these further passages:

*Injustice ... rules over those who are truly simpletons and just. (343c)*

*When each of them holds some ruling office, a just person ... gains no advantage .... Of the unjust man the opposite is true in every respect [i.e., the unjust man does gain advantage by ruling, contrary to P3]. (343e)*

*The most superlative form of injustice, the one that makes the perpetrator of injustice happiest ... is tyranny. (344a)*

*Injustice, when it is sufficient in extent [meaning, as the context makes clear, when it achieves political power], is mightier, freer, and more masterful than justice. (344c)*

*Those who commit injustice in a complete manner ... are able to subject cities and nations of people to themselves. (348d)*

*Would be unjust for a city to undertake to enslave other cities unjustly? ... That is what the best city will do most of all, the one that is most completely unjust. (351a-b)*

In short, while one might expect Thrasymachus’s definition of justice to imply that when the stronger/rulers act in their own interest, they are being just, Thrasymachus apparently says just the opposite – that when the stronger/rulers act in their own interest, they are being *unjust*. Thrasymachus thus rejects P3 in favour of its opposite, P4:

- **P4. The stronger/rulers act unjustly iff the stronger/rulers act in the interest of the stronger/rulers.**

Yet how is P4 to be reconciled with P1, Thrasymachus’s purported definition?

Should we even *expect* consistency here? There’s a common tendency for interpreters to see Thrasymachus as muddled; Annas (1981), for example, declares that ‘his statements certainly do not add up to a consistent position’

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<sup>1</sup>Some interpreters present Thrasymachus’s position as though he accepted P3. Sayers (1999), for example, takes Thrasymachus to view justice as ‘the ideology of the ruling class,’ so that ‘[p]eople from *other* classes have no reason to act justly’ (13; emphasis added) – as though the rulers themselves *do* have such reason; while Rosen (2005) describes Thrasymachus as holding that ‘the strongest have the *right* to take away the benefits of the less strong’ (39; emphasis added) – which strongly suggests, contrary to Thrasymachus’s explicit statement, that the strongest are acting *justly* in doing so.

(37), while White (1979) suggests that the ‘confused manner’ in which Thrasymachus presents his position indicates ‘Plato’s opinion that those who hold such positions do not generally articulate them very well.’ (65) Barney (2006) thinks Thrasymachus never settles whether the rulers are supposed to be just or unjust when they rule in their own self-interest because he is ‘not giving a definition of justice but rather debunking it by pointing out the standard effects ....’ (45) For Cross and Woosley (1979), Thrasymachus ‘is not being perfectly consistent,’ but ‘has advanced two different criteria of justice,’ the interest of the *stronger* and the interest of the *other*, ‘without appreciating that they do not necessarily coincide. In the case of the weaker they do coincide, but in the case of the stronger they do not.’ (41) Dorter (2006) likewise notes that because ‘if we do good for someone weaker than ourselves it will be just according to the second criterion, the good of another, but not the first, the advantage of the stronger, these ‘cannot both be definitions of justice’ (34) – though Dorter attempts to rescue Thrasymachus from inconsistency by taking only the first claim to be Thrasymachus’s true definition. Weiss (2007) suggests that Thrasymachus must have been ‘unaware’ (97) of shifting from justice as obedience to the rulers to justice as deference to others’ interests generally, while Everson (1998) complains that since the enactments of the tyrant are the only standard of justice that Thrasymachus has offered us, his insistence that ‘the tyrant is unjust because he ignores the interests of other people’ is ‘nonsensical.’ (115-16) In fact most interpretations take *both* Socrates and Thrasymachus to be arguing rather badly in *Republic* I. I rather lean toward thinking they’re both arguing fairly well; but my present concern is with Thrasymachus, not with Socrates.

There are three possibilities here. One is that Plato deliberately made Thrasymachus’s position inconsistent on this point. But in that case it’s somewhat puzzling that Plato never has Socrates pick up on and exploit the inconsistency, but instead has him criticise the view on other grounds. A second possibility is that Plato himself simply failed to notice this glaring inconsistency; but that hardly seems the way to bet. The third possibility, and the one I shall defend as actual, is that, whatever its other deficiencies, Thrasymachus’s position is actually not inconsistent on the present point at all. (Well, a fourth possibility is that Thrasymachus’s inconsistency is innocent: he is simply switching from defining the concept of justice to using the terms ‘just’ and ‘unjust’ as they are conventionally used, meaning by them something like ‘what is conventionally considered just’ and ‘what is conventionally considered unjust’.<sup>1</sup> But I take it that Thrasymachus’s definition is intended to capture how the terms are actually used; Thrasymachus is not arguing for a change in the *reference* of the terms, but is rather trying to lay bear their implicit *sense*.)

We can see a clue to the resolution of the apparent inconsistency by noticing how freely Thrasymachus conjoins P1 with the thesis that justice is another’s good (call this P5):

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<sup>1</sup>I owe this objection to Elizabeth Brake.

- **P5. If S acts justly, then S acts in the interest of someone other than S**

(My reasons for reading P5 as a conditional rather than a biconditional will become clear shortly.) P5 seems incompatible with P1, since in one case – the case where S is himself one of the stronger/rulers – S’s acting justly will count as self-regarding by P1 but as other-regarding by P5. Yet Thrasymachus evidently sees no conflict between them, since he happily *equates* justice as the advantage of the stronger/rulers with justice as the advantage of another, while *contrasting* justice as the advantage of the stronger/rulers with injustice as one’s own advantage:

*Justice and the just are really the good of another, the advantage of the stronger and the ruler. (343c)*  
*The just is the advantage of the stronger, while the unjust is the profit and advantage of oneself. (344c)*

By virtually identifying the advantage of the stronger/rulers with the advantage of another, Thrasymachus seems to assume that the stronger/rulers are always someone *other* than the person whose justice or injustice is being assessed.

Why might he do this? One reason could be that Thrasymachus might regard the notions of justice and injustice as somehow applicable only to the conduct of the weaker/ruled;<sup>1</sup> but on the contrary, we have seen that he is perfectly willing to describe the stronger/ruled as acting unjustly. The explanation must therefore lie elsewhere.

I wish to suggest a different reason: the apparent inconsistency between P1 on the one hand and P4 and P5 on the other is to be explained by Thrasymachus’s having a *relational* conception of the notion of stronger/ruler. To act in the interest of the stronger/ruler, in the sense intended by P1, is to act in the interest of someone *stronger-than-oneself*, of a *ruler-over-oneself*. The cause of our confusion about Thrasymachus’s meaning, on my interpretation, is the mistaken assumption that his phrases ‘stronger’ and ‘ruler’ always refer to the same person or group of people regardless of context, whereas in fact to be the stronger/ruler is always to be the stronger/ruler in relation to somebody (specifically, somebody *else*). And this would explain why Thrasymachus uses the comparative – the *stronger* rather than either the *strong* or the *strongest*.

The superficial similarity between Thrasymachus’s view and that of a class theorist like, say, Karl Marx is thus misleading. Marx, at least on a common interpretation, regards justice as determined by the interests of the ruling class,

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<sup>1</sup>Barker (1906) tries to help Thrasymachus out by explaining that ‘for everybody other than the ruler, justice may really and in truth be defined ... as “another’s good”.’ (95; emphasis added) Irwin (1995) likewise suggests that Thrasymachus’s definition ‘is concerned with behaviour by subjects, not behaviour by rulers’ (175); and Reeve (2006) offers a similar maneuver. (18) But of course Thrasymachus himself makes no such explicit restriction.

so that workers who respect capitalist property claims are behaving ‘justly,’ while capitalists who expropriate surplus value from the workers are likewise behaving ‘justly.’ In short, actions that serve the interests of the capitalist class are just (within capitalist society) regardless of whether the agents are bourgeois or proletarian. It can be tempting to read Thrasymachus the same way; but as we have seen, such a reading won’t work – since Thrasymachus denies that the self-serving actions of the rulers count as just.

Thrasymachus is not identifying justice, then, with behaviour that serves the interests of a particular identifiable ruling class regardless of whose behaviour it is; rather, Thrasymachus’s example of benefiting an identifiable ruling class is intended as a specific *instance* of benefiting the stronger, not as a redescription of it. Indeed Thrasymachus *infers* the broader thesis from the narrower one:

*This, then, sir, is what I say the just is, alike in all cities – the advantage of the established rule. And since the latter is what exercises power, it follows for anyone who reasons correctly [sumbainei tōi orthōs logizomenōi] that the just is the same thing everywhere – the advantage of the stronger. (338e-339a)*

I take ‘the same thing everywhere’ (*pantakhōu ... to auto*), *i.e.*, in all contexts, to be broader than ‘alike in all cities’ (*en hapasais tais polesin tauton*), which specifies a political context; I likewise take ‘the stronger’ (*tou kreittonos*) to be broader than ‘the established rule’ (*tēs katestēkuias arkhēs*). The general thesis that justice involves deference to the interests of a superior is thus being inferred from the specific relation between what is called just within a city and the ruling class within that city, rather than being a theory of that relation exclusively.

Hence, on my interpretation, when a subject acts to benefit the ruler, he acts justly, by putting a superior’s interests before his own; but when the ruler acts in his own interest, he acts unjustly, since he pursues his own interests and defers to no superior. The ruler could act justly only by submitting to *some still further ruler over himself*.

By analogy, consider a possible definition of filial piety as *reverence for the parents*. One might make the mistake of thinking that who counts as ‘the parents’ is independent of context, so that there is some specific group of persons called ‘the parents,’ reverence toward whom counts as filial piety. And that would in turn imply that these persons, ‘the parents,’ would manifest filial piety by expressing reverence for *themselves*. But in fact filial piety means reverence for *one’s own* parents, so that which people one must show reverence toward shifts depending on who one is. Athena can express filial piety by revering Zeus, but Zeus can express filial piety only by revering somebody *other* than Zeus. Analogously, then, on the interpretation I am suggesting, I can express Thrasymachean justice by acting in the interest of *my* rulers, but *they* can express Thrasymachean justice only by acting in the interest of some yet further rulers.

The source of the ambiguity is the fact that P1, Thrasymachus's definition of justice, is ambiguous between P6 and P7:

- **P6. S acts justly iff S acts in the interest of the stronger/rulers, i.e., the dominant party in S's political community.**
- **P7. S acts justly iff S acts in the interest of the stronger/rulers, i.e., those who are stronger than, or rulers over, S.**

When P1 is interpreted as P6, then it entails P2 and P3, and is inconsistent with P4; but when P1 is interpreted instead as P7, then while it still entails P2, it no longer entails P3, and is now consistent with P4 (so long as 'stronger/rulers' in P4 is still understood *non-contextually*). Since Thrasymachus endorses P2 and P4 (so understood) while rejecting P3, it makes better sense to interpret Thrasymachus as intending P1 in the sense of P7 rather than in the sense of P6.

### Expertise and Mutual Deference

Thrasymachus famously holds that the stronger/rulers count as stronger/rulers only when they are acting in their own interest; call this the Expertise Thesis:

*Do you suppose that I call the person committing an error stronger at the time when he errs? ... The ruler, insofar as he is a ruler, never errs – and, not erring, he decrees what is best for himself. (340c-341a)*

Introducing the Expertise Thesis is of course a fair enough move for Thrasymachus to make when debating Socrates, since Socrates himself believes something similar (if not so clearly time-indexed), namely that only those with wisdom count as genuine rulers (Plato, *Minos* 317a-318b; Xenophon, *Mem.* III.9.10-11; cf. Plato, *Euthd.* 292a-d) and that only those who understand their true interests count as having genuine power (Plato, *Gorgias* 466b-470b).

Now Thrasymachus's definition of justice, once it is understood as P7, turns out to have a non-accidental connection to the Expertise Thesis. For if a ruler were to rule in his subjects' interests, as Socrates advises, then by subordinating his own interest to theirs the ruler would, by Thrasymachus's lights, be deferring to his subjects' authority, treating their interests as authoritative for him, and thus setting them up as something like rulers and authorities *over him*; no wonder, then, that rulers count as rulers only when they do not defer to their subjects' interests.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Weiss (2007) comes close to my interpretation when she asks whether a ruler who obeys his own laws will be acting justly (since his laws are supposedly passed in his interest), and

Yet matters are a bit more complicated. For when the Expertise Thesis is conjoined with P7, it yields P8:

- **P8. S acts justly only if S acts in the interest of those who are acting in their own interest.**

Suppose, then, that Arthur is Morgana's nominal ruler, but defers to Morgana by subordinating his interests to hers. Then there are two possibilities. One is that Morgana responds by taking advantage of Arthur's subordination for her own benefit; in that case it seems that by Thrasymachus's lights it is now Morgana who is ruler over Arthur, rather than vice versa.

But the other possibility is that while Arthur defers to Morgana's interests, Morgana takes no advantage of this but instead defers in turn to Arthur's interests. The possibility of this sort of mutual deference, as it happens, is acknowledged by Thrasymachus in his very first intervention, when he asks Socrates and Polemarchus: 'Why do you act like simpletons by yielding to one another?' (336b-c) If Arthur is deferring to Morgana's interests then (for so long as he does so) he is acting like a simpleton and has clearly lost his title to be ruler/stronger; but if Morgana is deferring in turn to Arthur's interests then she has no claim to the title of ruler/stronger either. And if neither is the ruler/stronger, then neither, in deferring to the other's interests, is deferring to the advantage of a ruler/stronger – and so *neither is behaving justly*.

Since they are not pursuing their own interests, presumably neither is behaving *unjustly* either; but that by itself is no problem, since justice and injustice can be regarded as contraries rather than contradictories. But if pursuing another's good were *sufficient* for being just, then we would have a contradiction; Arthur and Morgana would count as just by the deferring-to-another criterion, yet also as nonjust (albeit not unjust) by P8's deferring-to-a-non-deferrer criterion. Thrasymachus never explicitly says, however, that deferring to another is sufficient for being just, so on grounds of charity we should decline to saddle him with such a claim; and that is why I made P5 a conditional rather than a biconditional. And since Thrasymachus thinks only a foolish few would be such simpletons as to respond to deference with like deference, deferring to another will *ordinarily*, even though not exceptionlessly, involve deferring to a non-deferrer; thus Thrasymachus's near-equation of P1 with P5 will be justified despite one's being a biconditional and the other not.

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concludes that 'at those times such a man will have ceased to be a ruler,' since 'the true ruler operates above the law and outside justice.' (96) But although it will presumably in many cases be in the interests of the ruler to break the laws he requires his subjects to obey, it will not *always* be so (a ruler might wish to impose on his subjects a law against unduly risky or suicidal behaviour, for example, in order to be assured a healthy work force to tax and conscript; but it doesn't follow that the ruler would benefit by breaking this law in his own case); hence Weiss's law-centered way of drawing the distinction seems finally unpromising.



### The Problem of Mutual Justice

I've argued that Thrasymachus's position is not initially inconsistent. Later in the discussion, however, Thrasymachus makes a fatal concession when Socrates raises the question (351c-352a) of whether the stronger/rulers who are inflicting injustice on others will need to act justly toward one another in order to maintain effective cooperation. Socrates' main goal here, which he achieves, is to get Thrasymachus to concede that justice can be in the interest of those who act justly; but what easily goes unnoticed is Thrasymachus's logically more basic concession that there can even *be* such a thing as people exercising justice *toward one another* (be this in their interest or not).

I don't think the significance of this concession goes unnoticed by Plato; I suspect it was not by accident that Plato initially has Socrates ask Thrasymachus whether the stronger/rulers couldn't cooperate better with one another by *not being unjust* toward one another (rather than asking in positive mode whether the stronger/rulers couldn't cooperate better with one another by *being just* toward one another). :

*Does it seem to you that a city, or an army, or robbers or thieves, or any other group of people joined together in some common unjust endeavour, would be able to accomplish anything if they were unjust toward one another?...What if they were not unjust toward one another? Would they not accomplish more? (351c-d)*

This way of wording the question is perhaps intended to lure Thrasymachus into a more crucial concession than he realises, by making the looming contradiction less apparent.

But Socrates soon slides from talk of mutual refraining-from-injustice to talk of mutual justice, and Thrasymachus raises no protest:

*For injustice, Thrasymachus, brings about factions and hatred and conflicts toward one another, while justice brings about unity of purpose and friendship [viz., toward one another]. – Let it be so, said he [= Thrasymachus], in order not to disagree with you. (351d)*

Once Thrasymachus has granted, however half-heartedly, that it's possible for people to act justly toward one another (*en allēlois ... dikaiosunē*), the *asymmetry* required by P7 can no longer be consistently retained. And this nicely prepares the way for Glaucon's theory in Book II, since Glaucon's theory is in the spirit of Thrasymachus but *without asymmetry*. (Glaucon also replaces the simple question of whether or not justice is beneficial to the just with the comparative question, beneficial relative to which alternative?)

But should Thrasymachus have made this concession? If justice involves sacrificing one's own interests to those of others, while injustice (presumably – though Thrasymachus never explicitly defines injustice) involves sacrificing others' interests to one's own, then mutually beneficial cooperation would



logically have to count as *neither* just nor unjust. Thus Thrasymachus could consistently grant the benefits of mutual *non-injustice* without thereby granting so much as the *possibility* of mutual *justice*. If, then, Thrasymachus had resisted Socrates' slide from non-injustice to justice, could he have held on to his theory without inconsistency?

Technically, perhaps. But the slide from mutual non-injustice to mutual justice goes by so easily precisely because it is so natural. Refraining from theft, murder, trickery, *etc.*, so obviously counts as justice (and not merely as refraining from injustice) when practised by the ruled toward the rulers that it is hard to justify denying its status as justice when practised by the rulers toward one another. If Thrasymachus were to deny its status as justice merely because those who practice it are benefiting from it, his position, while consistent, would be blatantly question-begging.

### *Conclusion*

Thrasymachus's theory of justice, then, is in the end not defensible. But it is not subject to the glaring inconsistency that has traditionally seemed to beset it when Thrasymachus's relational, contextual use of terms like 'stronger' and 'ruler' is erroneously interpreted non-relationally and non-contextually. The apparent inconsistency between justice as benefiting the stronger/ruler and justice as benefiting the other – criteria that seem to generate opposite results whenever one is oneself the stronger/ruler – is dissolved once we realise that one *never is* oneself the stronger/ruler in Thrasymachus's sense, since "stronger/ruler" is defined as stronger than, or ruler over, oneself. Once we see how Thrasymachus avoids this inconsistency, we gain a better understanding of what Thrasymachus's view of justice actually is.

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