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Socrates' Refutation of Thrasymachus

Rachel Barney

Nobody is very satisfied with the arguments Socrates presents against Thrasymachus in Book I of the *Republic*.[1] Certainly not Thrasymachus, who is left grumpy, rude, and obviously unconvinced. Not Glaucon and Adeimantus, who, equally unconvinced, demand that Socrates begin all over again at the start of Book II. And not Socrates himself: he not only accepts their demand, but complains of frustration with his own procedure and results at the end of Book I (354a13–c3). Plato must share the discontent of his characters: for if the Book I arguments really did what they purport to, namely show that "the just person is happy, and the unjust one wretched" (354a4), the *Republic* could in principle have ended there.[2] Given this consensus, it is no surprise if most interpreters have agreed that the arguments fall somehow short.[3]

But what *exactly* is wrong with Socrates' arguments? Clearly they are rhetorical failures: they fail, that is, as attempts at persuasion directed towards Thrasymachus (and Glaucon and Adeimantus, and most readers). But whether this is due to their being *philosophical* failures – by being logically invalid, say, or based on false premises, or irrelevant or question-begging – is another question. I will try to show that Socrates' arguments are somewhat more promising than interpreters have tended to suppose. Some of their premises are controversial, and a few key inferences confused or under-argued; but there is no obvious fatal flaw with the basic line of argument. Moreover, the arguments are not the disconnected grab-bag of objections they might seem, nor do they depend on assumptions peculiar to Plato's Socrates. Rather, they work through a systematic chain of reasoning intended to show that Thrasymachus' own commitments – in particular, his claim that ruling is a craft, *technê* – should lead him to consider justice preferable to injustice. This defense will suggest that Plato intends Socrates' arguments to be read as *in a way* philosophically successful and satisfactory. However, our sense that the arguments fall short, and that Plato recognizes as much, is not an optical illusion: we will see at the end why their strengths are still not enough.

Thrasymachus on Justice

Before turning to Socrates' arguments, we need to be clear about the position he is attempting to refute. Exactly what Thrasymachus means to claim about justice has been much discussed by interpreters.[4] He enters the discussion with what is clearly intended as a startling and impressive pronouncement: "Justice is the advantage of the stronger" (338c2–3). What he means by this, he explains, is that different ruling parties in each city make the laws for their own advantage, and decree that following those laws is "just." So Thrasymachus treats "the advantage of the stronger" and "the advantage of the ruler" as equivalent (338e6–339a4); later, he adds a third formulation, claiming that justice is "the advantage of another person" rather than oneself (343c3–4). In a general way his point is clear: if you behave justly, others will reap the benefits of your behavior, the "stronger" ruling faction above all. The problem is that Thrasymachus' three formulations are not really equivalent, if taken strictly as definitions of justice. There are cases in which they seem to conflict: for instance, if *you* are the ruler, is it just for you to act for your own advantage or that of "another person"? Thrasymachus' opening slogan might suggest that he holds a conventionalist or positivist account of justice: justice is whatever the rulers decree through their legislation, and an examination of the evidence shows that they decree whatever is to their own advantage. But in that case the decrees of a tyrant would be as just as any others; yet later on Thrasymachus will go on to describe tyranny as "the most complete injustice" (344a4).

There has been much scholarly debate over what to make of Thrasymachus' formulations. The solution, I think, is to see that Thrasymachus is not giving a definition of justice, but rather is debunking it by pointing out the standard *effects* of justice as usually understood (see Chappell 1993; Barney 2004). He is in fact presupposing a commonplace and traditional conception of justice, one famously set forth by the early poet Hesiod in one of the central works of the Greek moral tradition, *Works and Days*. One of Hesiod's concerns in the *Works and Days* is to denounce unjust behavior: he condemns a range of misdeeds including bribe-taking, dishonesty, cheating one's neighbor, perjury, and fraud. In general, injustice seems to be behavior which, motivated by greed (*pleonexia*; see below, and also Balot 2001 for discussion of this concept) and arrogance, involves violating laws and social norms (*nomoi* or sing. *nomos*, "law"). Justice is understood to be a matter of obeying the law, practising honesty and self-restraint, and keeping your hands off the property of others; it is the virtue which makes us good citizens and neighbors.

Now as David Furley (1981: 81–2) has pointed out, there are two different ways in which ancient thinkers may challenge a normative concept like Hesiodic "justice." One is to revise the scope of the term; for instance, Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* argues that really, "according to nature," it is just for the strong to take

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whatever they want from the weak (482c–486d). The other option is to leave the traditional extension of the term in place while changing its *value*. This second operation is what Thrasymachus is up to here. When he speaks of "justice" he has in mind the same behavior as Hesiod has when he uses the word: his point is that justice so understood is *worthless* to the person who possesses it. This is a radical rejection of Greek moral tradition. According to Hesiod, justice is the key to a good and successful life: for law (*nomos*) was allocated to humans by Zeus, and he rewards those who uphold it and punishes the unjust.[5] Thrasymachus not only says nothing about any divine status for justice, he implicitly suggests that the tradition is something of a scam: when the ruling faction dictates that to follow its laws is "just," they are relying on credulous citizens thinking that Zeus will reward their obedience. The moral tradition represented by Hesiod is merely a tool of exploitation used by the ruling power.

Thus it seems fair to class Thrasymachus as an "amoralist" or "immoralist":[6] i.e., someone who argues that we have no good reason to abide by the dictates of justice or morality as such (that is, in the absence of punishments or restraints), on the grounds that it is injustice which contributes to making a person *eudaimôn* or happy.[7] He presents this position as a matter of cynical realism and sociological insight. Just look around, he says, and you will see that the unjust flourish while the just harm themselves (a point vividly hammered home by Glaucon later on), and further that talk of "justice" is no more than a tool of exploitation. However, it is important to see that there is a gap between these cynical observations and the immoralist conclusion. Thrasymachus presents himself as a tough-minded, realistic observer, impatient with abstractions (336c6–336d4), but like most people who strike that pose he is enslaved to philosophical assumptions he has never really thought about. His central assumption is that a person's "advantage," "good," and "happiness" (all are equivalent terms in this context) must be understood in worldly terms, and in particular as a function of money and power. Moreover, these goods are assumed to be "zero-sum": that is, for one member of a community to have more of them is for another to have less, so that if my justice serves your advantage it must work against my own. Thrasymachus also seems to assume that everyone is naturally motivated by *pleonexia*, the drive to "have more" (*pleon echein*) of these goods – indeed to have as much of them as possible, which given their zero-sum nature can only be at others' expense – a principle made explicit in Glaucon's more systematic account in Book II (359c4–6).[8] That is why governments, according to Thrasymachus, uniformly make laws to serve their own (perceived) advantage, and why justice can only be a kind of simple-mindedness (348c12). (Thrasymachus actually waffles on the rather important question of why anyone is just. At another point he suggests that justice is more a matter of hypocrisy than gullibility: "Those who reproach injustice do so because they are afraid not of doing it but suffering it" (344c3–4).) This cluster of assumptions about the good explains why for Thrasymachus the tyrant represents an ideal: for the tyrant has

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succeeded in acquiring *all* the political power in his city, which enables him to monopolize its wealth as well (344a4–344c9).

Thrasymachus thus silently excludes two related possibilities. One is that justice might have other effects as important as those he reports. He says nothing about the psychological effects of justice on the just person, or its operation within the family and on personal relations, or how it affects our relations with the gods. This is perhaps natural enough if our horizons are restricted to wealth and power, but what if (and this is the second possibility) other goods matter at least as much to us? Thrasymachus is simply assuming – and this is really his most bold and important claim, unstated though it is – that his analysis of justice captures the most important facts about it. The following nine books of the *Republic* will be, among other things, a demonstration of just how much he is leaving out.

Thrasymachus and the Ruler in the Strict Sense

Before Socrates' arguments against this position can get underway, an important clarification is called for. Socrates begins by getting Thrasymachus to agree that, according to him, (1) justice is the advantage of the stronger, aka the rulers; (2) it is just to obey the rulers (this is part of Thrasymachus' claim about the language of justice serving as a tool of exploitation: because of the traditional association of justice with *nomos*, what counts as "just" in a community depends on what the rulers decree); (3) rulers sometimes err, and command what is not to their own advantage. This yields the contradictory result that (4) it both is (because of (2)) and is not (because of (1)) just to do what the rulers command in such a situation (339d–e).

This is a classic Socratic elenchus, i.e., an argument which, using only premises endorsed by the interlocutor, derives a contradiction from them. In Plato's early "Socratic" dialogues, such as the *Laches*, the elenchus is used to show that since Socrates' interlocutor is committed to claims which entail a contradiction, at least one of which must therefore be false, he cannot be wise on the subject in question. In this case, however, it is not hard for Thrasymachus to adjust his statements so as to avoid self-contradiction; so here the elenchus functions as at best a preliminary refutation, and a tool of clarification. In fact, Plato indicates that there are several escape routes available to Thrasymachus. Two young bystanders to the argument, Polemarchus and Cleitophon, leap into the fray, and Cleitophon supplies the obvious way out: surely what Thrasymachus means is that justice consists in what the stronger or ruler *believes* to be his advantage, since this is what the weaker is commanded to do (340b6–8).

But Thrasymachus pointedly rejects this option. Instead, surprisingly, he eliminates the contradiction by rejecting the indisputable-looking (3). Strictly speaking, he claims, a "ruler" is an expert, like a doctor or grammarian, and an expert

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as such never makes a mistake: "each of these, insofar as he is what we call him, never errs, so that, in the strict sense (since you are a great one for speaking strictly), no craftsman ever errs" (340d8–340e3). So too in the case of ruling: "a ruler, insofar as he is a ruler, never makes errors and unerringly decrees what is best for himself" (340e8–341a2).

This is a fascinating twist. For Thrasymachus has now changed the subject, and is no longer offering to describe the empirical realm – how actual rulers behave – in value-neutral "sociological" terms. Instead, he is putting forward a norm for our approval: he turns out to be a kind of idealist, full of admiration for the perfect scientific tyrant of his imagination. This concept of the "real ruler" or ruler in the strict sense of course points forward to the rest of the *Republic*: Plato's own version of the real ruler is eventually revealed as the Guardian of Books III–IV and the philosopher-king of Books V–VII. The fact that Plato's version of this ideal is completely different makes it all the more interesting that he uses Thrasymachus to introduce the concept in the first place. He shows that while Socrates and Thrasymachus are polar opposites, they can agree on a single crucial point: ruling is a craft (or art, or area of expertise: *technê*), and only the ruler who exercises power in a fully expert way deserves the name. This shared hypothesis that ruling is a craft provides Thrasymachus and Socrates with a way of bringing the immoralist challenge into focus. The question raised (and answered in the affirmative) by the immoralist is whether it is rational for us, in order to pursue our self-interest, to reject the demands of justice or morality. For Thrasymachus and Socrates, the crafts provide a model of expert, fully informed rational action. The real ruler is imagined by both as having the kind of knowledge, decision-making ability, and power to attain his ends as ordinary craft-practitioners do – not about some specialized area, though, but about the general conduct of life. So the immoralist challenge can be posed as the question: *what would the expert ruler do* – in particular, would he be just or unjust? The answer will at the same time be an answer to the more general question of which way of life it is rational for all of us to prefer. As Socrates says, in urging Thrasymachus to continue the debate, "do you think it is a small matter to determine which whole way of life would make living most worthwhile for each of us?" (344d7–344e3). And lurking underneath this debate about rational agency is a dispute about the nature of happiness or the good, which is understood to be the rational person's aim.

Socrates' Refutation of Thrasymachus

In the remainder of Book I, Socrates and Thrasymachus explore these issues through five arguments. The first group (arguments I–III below) investigate the shared hypothesis that ruling "in the strict sense" is a craft; in them Socrates sets out the features of craft so as to show that they belong to the just person rather

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than the unjust Thrasymachean tyrant. The second round of arguments (IV and V) then set out some central properties of justice which explain why this is so. Taken collectively, the arguments are thus an ambitious, systematic attempt not only to undermine Thrasymachus' attack on justice but to establish the opposed Socratic position: it is justice, not injustice, which makes us happy. As we will see, however, the arguments stop short of *defining* justice, and in Plato's eyes this means that they can only have a preliminary status.

I The "nature of craft" argument (341c–342e)

Socrates begins by getting Thrasymachus to agree, on the basis of the examples of medicine and being a ship's captain, that every craft has a distinctive object or subject matter (e.g., the human body in the case of medicine), and is "by nature set over this to seek and provide what is advantageous to it" (341d8–9). Like Thrasymachus, Socrates is happy to talk of the real ruler as being "stronger" than his subjects, but he thinks that strength properly understood means self-sufficiency: the craft-practitioner shows his "strength" precisely by serving the advantage of the "weaker" subject rather than his own.

With a little tidying up, Socrates' argument can easily be represented as a valid one:

1 Every craft has a distinctive end, which consists in serving the good of its subject matter; thus the craft-practitioner "in the strict sense" serves the good of the subject matter, not his own.
2 A Thrasymachean ruler (i.e., an unjust, self-serving tyrant) serves his own good, not that of his subject matter (the ruled).
3 Therefore, a Thrasymachean ruler is not practicing a real craft.

The crucial thesis here is clearly (1), with its claim that crafts as such have "ends" distinct from the particular motivations which might lead individuals to practice them. This seems reasonable enough: while one doctor might be driven to his work by a sense of religious obligation, another by money, and a third by a craving for praise, the end of medicine is not any of these things, but the health of the patient. We might say that this end is *internal* to the practice of medicine, whereas the motivations that drive people to take it up are (or may be) *extrinsic* to it. Whatever her motivations, a doctor *qua* doctor, i.e., one acting as the craft of medicine prescribes, takes for her goal in acting the health of the patient. Of course she *may* benefit from her work in various ways, but that is incidental; she acts as a doctor just as much if she does it to her own detriment. Real craft is not self-interested but *disinterested*; therefore, Socrates concludes, Thrasymachus' self-serving ideal ruler is not practicing a craft.

One reason Socrates' concept of the internal end seems plausible is that we do treat categories like "doctor" and "captain" as establishing norms of their

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own: a "good doctor" is the one who is good at serving the end of medicine, rather than a good person who happens to be a doctor, or somebody who is good at using medicine to get whatever he wants. Nonetheless, (1) is eminently debatable. Socrates depends heavily here on the examples of the doctor and the ship's captain, presented in a brief *epagôgê* or "induction": that is, a survey of cases belonging to some general kind, leading to a general conclusion about that kind (or, via an implicit general conclusion, to a conclusion about another, more controversial case); for instance, a survey of a few kinds of craft used to support a claim about crafts in general. Aristotle speaks of this method as one of Socrates' specialities (*Metaphysics* 1078b28), and it is used frequently in Plato's early dialogues (e.g., *Apology* 25b; *Gorgias* 460a–461a). The limitations of induction are obvious, however: unless every possible case is covered, it can never have the status of a demonstrative proof. The fact that a few examples of crafts are disinterested does not entail that *all* crafts are – as Thrasymachus now argues.

Thrasymachus responds with a powerful tirade (343b–344c) in which he works himself up into a sort of frenzied hymn to tyranny. Practiced on a grand scale, injustice is not scorned but envied, and "injustice, if it is on a large enough scale, is stronger, freer, and more masterly than justice. And, as I said from the first, the just is what is advantageous to the stronger, while injustice is to one's own profit and advantage" (344c5–9). Thrasymachus' rant confirms that he is not a mere sociological observer, but has strong views about how an intelligent man *should* live. It also includes a powerful rebuttal of Socrates' argument (I). Thrasymachus sarcastically accuses him of childishness and naivëté: "You think that shepherds and cowherds seek the good of their sheep and cattle, and fatten them and take care of them looking to something other than their master's good and their own" (343b1–4). The shepherd shows that Socrates' induction was unreliable. Shepherding is not a version of zookeeping or animal rescue, aiming at the welfare of the sheep themselves; it is a practice in which the sheep are exploited for the benefit of the shepherds or their masters. This shows that there are crafts in which the end is the advantage not of the "subject matter" operated upon, but of the practitioner; and Thrasymachus is free to maintain that ruling is one of them. Moreover, the ruler is sometimes symbolized as a shepherd in ancient Greece, as in ancient Judaism and many other cultures; so this is not just a random counterexample, but one with a built-in claim to relevance.[9]

In response, Socrates refuses to budge: he insists that even in the case of shepherding, any benefit to the practitioner of the craft is incidental to it (345c1–345d5). Thrasymachus cannot really refute this, as opposed to ridiculing it; so we are left with a stalemate between two radically different conceptions of craft, each of which can call on plausible supporting examples. And it is striking that, although we now phrase the issues somewhat differently, the conflict – and the stalemate – between these conceptions of craft endures today, with real social battles being fought over a number of professions.[10] A good example is journalism. What is the end of the craft of journalism, which the good news-

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paper editor (for instance) successfully serves? Is the good newspaper the one which maximizes its own financial health, or the one which serves some disinterested end distinctive to journalism, such as making the public better informed about important political and social questions? Most journalists hold the latter, Socratic view; but proprietors, publishers, and the investors increasingly take the Thrasymachean one. Medicine too is now in practice a contested field, with doctors and profit-oriented healthcare companies often dividing along Socratic and Thrasymachean lines. Plato was not in a position to have Thrasymachus use the jargon of "maximizing return to shareholders," but he would easily recognize it as an updating of the Thrasymachean ideal, with the difference that instead of the individual, the agent practising the craft of journalism or medicine is now often a corporate entity whose "advantage" is construed in terms of profit margins and stock price. Socrates is here taking what seems to be the normal standpoint of individual craft-practitioners themselves (at least in such fields as journalism and medicine), and arguing for the autonomy of the crafts: they serve distinctive ends of their own, he insists, which impose certain goals on their practitioners and set norms for what counts as success. For Thrasymachus the crafts are heteronomous, all identical in their subordination to the extrinsic self-interested motivations reliably supplied by human *pleonexia*. He stands for those who see all lines of business as just business, with the "bottom line" the same in every case.

To reaffirm and clarify his conception of craft, Socrates now offers a supplementary argument.

II The "wage-earning" argument (345e–3457d)

Real crafts (such as medicine and, Socrates insists, shepherding too) only benefit their practitioners if extrinsic "wages" are given in return: that is why craft-practitioners get paid. In the case of rule, Socrates adds, the best "wage" for a ruler is not to be governed by someone worse than himself. The crucial move is to establish that wage-earning is distinct from the crafts it accompanies:

1 Every distinct craft has a particular distinctive end, different from the ends of the others.
2 Medicine and navigation are distinct crafts.
3 Wages can result from the practice of both medicine and navigation.
4 Therefore, wages are the end of neither medicine nor navigation.
5 Therefore, wage-earning must be the end of a third craft distinct from medicine and navigation, and practiced by the doctor and navigator in common, namely wage-earning.

There are a few steps missing here: notably, (4) does not follow from the previous premises without some further assumptions, and (5) bypasses the obvious possibility that, though wages may *result* from the practice of various crafts, they

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are not the *end* of any craft at all. (This is in fact the option Socrates should prefer, given the difficulties with wage-earning as a craft, which I will note in the next paragraph.) Still, the argument raises a telling point: if crafts as such were beneficial to their practitioners, why *would* they get paid? Thrasymachus' assumption that crafts are self-interested seems to be based on a sloppy failure to distinguish the craft itself from its incidental rewards.

On the other hand, the argument does not really do anything to disarm Thrasymachus' counterexample of the shepherd. Worse, the introduction of "wage-earning" as a distinct craft creates more problems than it solves. For Socrates' central thesis about craft is his opening claim in argument I, that every craft benefits not its practitioner but what it is "set over." And for the craft of wage-earning to fit that model, it would have to somehow, mysteriously, benefit the wages themselves. If instead it is admitted to be an instance of a Thrasymachean craft, one which directly benefits its practitioner, why should ruling be any different?

So taken together, arguments I and II are fraught with difficulties and deficiencies. Still, they do succeed in showing that an alternative to Thrasymachus' conception of craft (and of ruling "in the strict sense" in particular) is available, if not that it applies to every case. What Socrates now needs, and attempts to provide, is an argument which breaks the stalemate by showing that what the Thrasymachean tyrant practices *could not* be a craft.

III The "non-pleonectic" argument (349b–350c)

Socrates argues, with appeal to examples from medicine and music, that a craftsperson does not seek to "outdo" or act pleonectically towards fellow craft-practitioners, but rather to do the *same* as they do, i.e., to perform whatever action the craft requires (I will discuss just what *pleonektein* means in a moment). Thrasymachus had presented his "ruler in the strict sense," the infallible tyrant, as the practitioner of a craft – as someone who literally raised injustice to an art form. Socrates' claim is that injustice is structurally or formally unlike a craft precisely inasmuch as it is pleonectic, whereas justice *does* have the structure of a craft. He then (in (4)–(6) below) presses the point, edging down a slippery slope from the likeness of justice and craft to an identification of justice with wisdom.

1 In practicing the recognized crafts, one expert does not act pleonectically in relation to another, but only in relation to the non-expert; the non-expert acts pleonectically in relation to everyone.
2 An unjust person acts pleonectically in relation to everyone, whereas a just person is pleonectic only towards the unjust.
3 Therefore, the unjust person is not the practitioner of a craft; and inasmuch as he resembles the expert, a just person is like a good and a clever one, and an unjust person like an ignorant and a bad one.

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4 Each person, the just and the unjust, "is such as the one he resembles" (349d, 350c7–8)
5 Therefore the just person is good and clever, and an unjust one ignorant and bad.
6 Justice is virtue and wisdom and injustice is vice and ignorance.

This argument is probably the most confusing and least satisfactory of the whole series. An initial problem is that Socrates may seem to be claiming that craft-practitioners are not competitive with each other. That is obviously false, and the truth had been recognized in Greek culture ever since Hesiod, whose *Works and Days* opens by praising the "strife" involved in productive competition. Part of the solution is to see that *pleonektein* is here not simply to outdo in competition but to maximize one's possession of some good in a zero-sum context – to have more (*pleon echein*), that is, or to strive to have more, *by virtue of someone else's having less* (see LSJ, under *pleonekteô*, esp. senses I.3, II.1–2). And so understood, Socrates seems to be right that craft-performance is not pleonectic, however competitive it may be in a broader sense. If one musician plays in tune, so may another; if I navigate safely to shore, so can you. Since the goals aimed at in the practice of a craft do not exclude each other, craft is not competitive in the "win/lose" or "zero-sum" way characteristic of Thrasymachean *pleonexia* and the practice of injustice.[11]

What remains puzzling is that in Socrates' examples, "acting pleonectically" seems to be a matter of somehow overshooting the mark in the performance of a craft itself, as by tuning the strings of a lyre too high (349e). This suggests that expert action is here to be understood as involving the attainment of some kind of natural measure or limit, like the "mean" in Aristotle's doctrine of the virtues (*Nicomachean Ethics* II.6; and cf. Plato, *Philebus* 24e–26d, 55d–58d). But this raises as many puzzles as it solves. It is odd to describe the non-expert who fails to hit the mean as "acting pleonectically," as if novice doctors always prescribed *too much* (which is anyway straining the possible meaning of *pleonektein*), and odder still to describe the expert as pleonectic in relation to the non-expert (349e15, 350b7–8). Moreover, Socrates repeatedly speaks of agents as being "willing" (*ethelein*) to *pleonektein* (349e11, 350a1, 350a7, 350b7), as if it were a choice or decision. But the non-expert misses the mean involuntarily, because he makes mistakes in trying to do what the expert does successfully; pleonectic and non-pleonectic agents differ, by contrast, in their motivations and aims (cf. Annas 1981: 51–2).

Perhaps these oddities are deliberate, though, and designed to draw attention to a valid contrast lurking here: the contrast between a genuine craft-practitioner and one corrupted by *pleonexia*. For what the argument brings out is that, since the internal ends of crafts are not possible objects of pleonectic action, to "act pleonectically" *within* the actual practice of a particular craft could only mean to deviate from those ends because of the extrinsic motivation of *pleonexia*, in a

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way which would be indistinguishable from making a mistake: a doctor who orders irrelevant tests or pointless surgery out of greed is behaving exactly as a non-expert might do inadvertently. Socrates' examples are misleading in that not all non-experts are pleonectic (and experts are not really pleonectic towards non-experts at all); but he may reasonably insist that the pleonectic person, when acting as such, acts like a non-expert.[12] So once again, Thrasymachean tyranny does not fit the profile of a craft; whereas, Socrates now claims, justice does.

With the corollaries added in (4)–(6), Socrates gradually pushes Thrasymachus from the admission that the just person is *like* the clever one to the conclusion that justice *is* wisdom. Thrasymachus may be powerless to draw the line here, but for us to have confidence in Socrates' inferences he would have to tell us much more about exactly how craft, cleverness, and wisdom are related. As it stands, his sleight of hand is an important source of Thrasymachus' and the reader's dissatisfaction: for the final argument of Book I (argument V below) will rely crucially on this claim that justice is virtue, and Thrasymachus seems to have simply made a mistake (as a non-expert attempting to act pleonectically against an expert might do?) in assenting to it.

At any rate, Socrates now takes these arguments about craft to have shown that it is justice, not injustice, which is to be classed with the virtues (see Socrates' summary of the debate quoted in the Conclusions of this chapter, below). He now turns to consider the "power" (*dunamis*) of justice, taking on Thrasymachus' claim that injustice is "stronger and more powerful" (351a2, cf. 344c5–6).

IV The "gang-of-thieves" argument (351b–352b)

Socrates argues that injustice is, in groups, a cause of disunity, conflict, and impotence. Whether joined together in a city, an army, or a band of thieves, a group of human beings can only function successfully when they treat each other justly. (This would have struck Thrasymachus, and Plato's readers, as a truth vividly taught by history: in Greek warfare, every *polis* risked being undermined by factions among its citizens who felt unjustly treated by the status quo, and who might ally themselves with the enemy to gain power.) And, Socrates continues, similarly within the human soul: justice is what unifies and empowers us in action. The argument is thus a simple one:

1 In groups, justice unifies, empowers, and enables successful action, while injustice does the opposite.
2 Justice within a single individual must have the same effects on the soul as it does in groups.
3 Therefore, justice within a single person must unify and empower that person's soul, while injustice does the opposite.

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The most obviously questionable move here is (2). The problem is not that we can never draw inferences from groups to individuals (often such analogies are fair enough) but that in this particular case the inference requires a large unstated assumption. Socrates' argument distinguishes between what we may call *internal* and *external* justice, and his thesis is that internal justice is what makes for successful action (just or otherwise) externally: the gang members must be just towards each other in order for the gang as a whole to be successfully unjust towards everyone else. Internal justice is thus the state of a system each of whose parts is *externally* just to the others: the members of the gang must each show justice towards each other, where that justice is the same property the gang as a whole lacks towards the rest of the world. So Socrates' thesis can apply to an individual only on the assumption that a human being is a system with component parts, analogous to the members of the criminal gang, each of which can be just or unjust towards the others. Book IV will of course argue that our souls do have three such parts, and the argument serves to spur us into thinking about the question; but Socrates does not here defend this crucial assumption, nor is it yet clear what it would *mean* for psychological parts to practice justice. (And he had better not be assuming that *anything* capable of external justice must be capable of internal justice, since that would lead to an infinite regress of parts.) A further problem is that this shift to internal justice leaves it unclear what has really been proven. Justice as commonly understood – as praised by Hesiod and denounced by Thrasymachus – is justice towards others, external justice; and the gang of thieves case shows that internal justice does not imply the external kind. So Socrates' argument that we need internal justice has not shown that justice in the traditional, external sense is empowering or otherwise useful for us as individuals. (When Socrates turns to explain internal justice in Book IV, many commentators would say that this problem only gets worse, and that the relation of Platonic internal justice to justice as traditionally understood remains unclear; however, Plato does there provide some argument that an internally just person will behave in an externally just way (442d11–443b6).)

At any rate, Thrasymachus responds with bad-tempered irritation (352b4–5): defeated in argument, and forbidden to launch into the speech-making he prefers, he has now largely given up, and has already made several sulky remarks to the effect that he is merely humoring Socrates (350d8–350e4, 351c5, 351d6). So Socrates may as well complete his argument with a proof of the superiority of the just life:

V The "function" argument (352d–354a)

This argument begins with a long induction to support the claim that the function of anything is "that which one can do only with it or best with it" (352e3–4, 353a9–11). From there, its structure is simple:

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1 The virtue of anything is what enables it to perform its function well.
2 The function of the human soul is "taking care of things, ruling, deliberating and the like," and indeed living itself (353d3–10).
3 Justice is the virtue of the human soul (conclusion of argument III).
4 Therefore, justice enables a human soul to deliberate and live well.
5 Whoever lives well is happy.
6 Therefore, "the just person is happy, and the unjust one wretched" (354a4).

This argument completes the transition begun by the gang-of-thieves argument, placing the focus firmly on the effects of justice *within* the human soul.[13] The functional theory of virtue announced in (1) seems to be introduced largely for its intrinsic interest and importance later on;[14] the heavy lifting of the argument is done by (3), the claim imported from the conclusion of argument III, that justice is the virtue of the soul. The major weakness of the argument is imported with it, for as I noted at the time, more needs to be done to show why Thrasymachus, or we, should accept it. However, argument IV should have served to make this claim much more plausible: for it argued that justice is what enables human beings to act effectively, which is close to what (1) claims the virtue of anything does for that thing.

To sum up, I have tried to bring out that Socrates' arguments are organized around a series of claims which are both plausible and important: that the crafts have internal ends distinct from their wages or the motivations of their practitioners; that injustice or tyranny, since it is pleonectic, cannot be counted as a craft; and that human virtue, as what enables us to function effectively, may plausibly be identified with "internal" justice, which unifies and empowers its possessors. Still, we have also seen a number of points which give grounds for dissatisfaction. Socrates' account of the nature of crafts leans heavily on induction over a few examples, and his notion of a craft of wage-earning actually undermines it. The crucial assumption that justice can operate the same way in the soul as it does in society is never defended. Worst, the all-important thesis that justice is a (or even the) virtue of the soul is slipped in as a corollary to argument III, which does not directly establish it. These are serious weaknesses, and although most of them look like errors of omission I would not want to maintain that Plato is aware of them all or would find them easy to repair. Still, as we will see, they are less significant than another, more general weakness to which he himself draws our attention.

Conclusions: The Function and Limitations of the Arguments

Nothing in Plato is simple, and the debate between Socrates and Thrasymachus can be read on many levels. One could read it as merely a trailer for the argu-

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ments to come in the rest of the *Republic*.[15] The ideal of the "real ruler" as the rational expert (arguments I–III); the understanding of justice as what unifies and empowers, both in human society and in the individual soul (argument IV); the claim that it is what enables someone to function well and be happy (argument V) – these are more than nods and gestures forward, they are the central planks of the moral and political theory to come in Books IV–IX.

Another way to read the arguments is as a deliberate exercise in failure. Every reader notices a radical change of method between Books I and II of the *Republic*, and Glaucon's challenge to Socrates makes it explicit that we are to see Book II as a necessary fresh start (357a–b, 358b). The change is epitomized by the change in interlocutors: in place of the opinionated, arrogant, and bad-tempered Thrasymachus, we have the talented and tractable youths, Glaucon and Adeimantus, who share Socrates' fundamental moral allegiances and are eager to help him construct his theory. Obviously Thrasymachus would be a hopeless interlocutor for the kind of slow, constructive exposition that will occupy most of the *Republic*. So one might think that Book I is as it were programmed to fail, the better to illustrate the need for a radically different method with an essentially different interlocutor. (An extreme version of this reading is that Book I was actually first written as an independent dialogue – the *Thrasymachus*, say – and that only later did Plato's dissatisfaction with it lead him to write the rest of the *Republic*, for which he retained it as a sort of springboard.[16])

Both these readings have a grain of truth; but they need to be made more precise. To do that, we need to look more closely at the clues Plato gives us. He twice suggests that the arguments are impaired by a general flaw. When Adeimantus urges Socrates to offer a more convincing argument in Book II, he says: "Don't, then, give us only a theoretical argument (*endeixé monon tô logô*] that justice is stronger than injustice, but show what effect each has because of itself on the person who has it – the one for good and the other for bad – whether it remains hidden from gods and human beings or not" (367e1–4). And Socrates himself ends Book I with a complaint about his method. He has behaved like a glutton at a banquet, he says, snatching at each new dish before properly enjoying the previous one. With a somewhat misleadingly tidy summary of the discussion so far, he complains that they have come to be distracted from the fundamental question of *what justice is*:

> Before finding the answer to our first inquiry about what justice is, I let that go [at 347e, presumably] and turned to investigate whether it is a vice and ignorance or a kind of wisdom and virtue [argument III]. Then an argument came up about injustice being more profitable than justice, and I couldn't refrain from abandoning the previous one and following up on that [at 350d5–7, but hearkening back to 344c5–7, 347e2–7, and 348b8–10]. Hence the result of the discussion, as far as I'm concerned, is that I know nothing, for when I don't know what justice is, I'll hardly know whether it is a kind of virtue or not, or whether a person who has it is happy or unhappy. (354b3–354c3)

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Now Socrates' arguments, as I have read them, have offered us plenty of important information about justice, notably that it is unifying, craft-like, the virtue of the soul, and is what enables us to live happily. We might say that the arguments set out significant clues or *markers* for justice: features or properties which justice must possess, and roles it must be able to play. They do so, however, without identifying *what justice consists in* or essentially *is* (Socrates' point at the end of Book I), and therefore without showing in a vivid and convincing way *how* it is able to do these things (Adeimantus' complaint). Contrast the account to be given in Book IV of the *Republic*. Here we do learn what justice is: it is the state in which each part of a complex system (a city or a soul) does the work for which it is best suited without interfering in the work of the others, and, in particular, one in which the non-rational parts of the system accept the rule of a rational part. And because this account specifies the nature or essence of justice, it enables us to see *how* justice is indeed a virtue, beneficial, and so on.

This contrast between the "markers" and the essence of a thing has a profound role to play in Plato's epistemology. Socrates' complaint at the end of Book I is familiar to readers of Plato's earlier dialogues as the principle that until I know *what* something is – its nature or essence, as expressed in a definition – I cannot know anything about it (cf. *Meno* 71b; *Euthyphro* 11a–b; *Protagoras* 361d).[17] This principle, taken strictly, threatens to land Plato with the "problem of inquiry" expressed by the famous paradox in the *Meno* (80d–e): how can I inquire so as to gain knowledge about something if I don't already know it? For how can I recognize what I have been searching for, if I haven't encountered it before? Plato's solution to the paradox, I believe, leans heavily on distinguishing between the *knowledge* that we have of a thing when we have grasped its essence, and the merely true beliefs we have about its roles, properties and effects (the "markers") which may lead us to that essence.[18] I can gain knowledge about the natures of things by using the markers as specifications, and looking for what possesses them – just as I can find Meno in the market place, without having met him before, if I correctly believe that he is the tallest man there (cf. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* II.1, 1220a15–22).

Without a full, Book IV-style account of the essence of justice, we cannot really *know* that justice is what enables us to function, or that it is the virtue of the soul, or even that it is better than injustice. But conversely, without some grasp of the properties of the thing, how can any account of it ever be developed and assessed? Socrates does not exactly prove in Book IV that justice must be what he says it is; but whatever plausibility his account has comes from the fact that justice so defined can be seen as having all the "markers" set out in the arguments with Thrasymachus. (And, for that matter, those set out elsewhere in Books I–IV. For instance, the pre-philosophical definitions of justice offered by Cephalus and Polemarchus both revolve around the intuitive notion that justice is somehow a matter of *rendering what is due*, whether that means straightforwardly paying your debts (Cephalus) or giving friend and enemy the differing treatment they deserve (Polemarchus). And in Book IV, justice turns out to be

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the state in which each part of the soul or city is given the role which is due to it.)

This is the grain of truth in the "trailer" reading, which was however too general and weak. The Book I arguments are not just gesturing towards Book IV as a nice artistic touch, or softening us up for it as a rhetorical gambit: they are a philosophically necessary preparation for us to recognize justice when we encounter it there. And the grain of truth in the "programmed-to-fail" reading likewise can now be put in its place: the defects of the arguments, and in particular their failure to address the essential nature of justice, are intrinsic to them precisely because of this role as preparation for the essential account. According to Aristotle, Plato thought it was important to distinguish between arguments "on the way to first principles" and "from first principles": it is like the difference between the race to the turning point and then back to the finish line (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.4, 1095a30–30b4). The Book I arguments are arguments on the way to the first principles (that is, the full account of justice in Book IV), and we can only really appreciate them when we have seen how they serve that function – which means, when we come to them again *after* reading the book as a whole. They show that the *Republic* is (as you already knew) a book to be read more than once.

Notes

1 Thrasymachus was a real person, a famous sophist (i.e., a professional intellectual and teacher, especially of public speaking). However, we have no evidence that the position of Plato's character was ever advanced by the historical Thrasymachus. His views sound rather (but not exactly) like the beliefs of another contemporary Sophist, Antiphon, in the surviving fragments of his *On Truth*. (For the fragments of *On Truth*, see Gagarin and Woodruff 1995 or Pendrick 2002.)

2 Quotations are in the translation by G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve, in Cooper 1997, in some cases with revisions.

3 E.g. Annas: "Socrates' arguments . . . [against Thrasymachus' principal thesis] are all weak and unconvincing to an amazing degree" (1981: 50); and Reeve: "Book I emerges as a brilliant critique of Socrates, every aspect of which is designed to reveal a flaw in his theories" (1988: 23).

4 See e.g. Chappell 1993, which includes a survey of other possible interpretations. An earlier version of the interpretation which follows is presented in Barney 2004; this includes a comparison of Thrasymachus to Plato's other great spokesman for immoralism, Callicles in the *Gorgias*.

5 However, it is not always the unjust individual who is singled out: a man's descendants, or his whole community, may be punished for his behavior (*Works and Days* 276–327). Later poets relocate these rewards and punishments to the afterlife of the unjust individual; in Book II of the *Republic*, part of Adeimantus' case against justice is that the poets are not consistent about this, and that loopholes are left for the unjust to bribe the gods or for cult initiates to get special treatment (362d–366e).

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6 On the philosophical significance of immoralism, see Williams 1985: 22–32; 1993: 3–13.

7 Two clarifications are called for here. First, ancient Greek has no word exactly corresponding to "moral" or "morality." However, ancient concerns about "justice" often overlap with modern philosophical discussions of "morality," since justice is the virtue which requires that we restrain our self-interest and respect the rights and interests of others. Second, the Greek concept of *eudaimonia* is rather different from our "happiness." It is a long-term condition, involving much more than conscious feelings and moods: to say that someone is *eudaimón* is to say that she is flourishing and successful, that as a matter of objective fact her life is going well. So Thrasymachus' version of the "immoralist" claim, more precisely put, is that injustice promotes the flourishing of the person who practices it, and that we therefore have no good reason to be just.

8 Socrates and Plato may agree with Thrasymachus, not that human behavior is always pleonectic (that is, aimed at maximizing wealth and power and the goods they can provide), but that it is in a more general way self-interested or egoistic. For Socrates' argument about wage-earning seems to assume that no one would practice a craft unless it did benefit him through "wages" of some sort (347a–d). Moreover, the argument of the *Republic* as a whole is framed in egoistic terms: it aims to vindicate justice by showing that it benefits the just person. It is debated among scholars whether Plato thinks that our reasons for action could ever be *ultimately* disinterested – in particular, whether a Guardian might act simply to further the good as such, rather than his own good or happiness.

9 Cf. Adam 1902 on 343a7. For Plato's own use of the image, and his reservations about it, see *Statesman* 265d–268d, 274e ff.

10 See Gardner et al. 2001.

11 Of course, we can specify the aims of the craft-practitioner in ways which *sound* exclusive; for instance, a doctor might strive to be the *best* doctor in her city. But consider what forms this "competition" might take. First and most obviously, she might compete simply by practicing medicine as well as she can. For under normal circumstances, she can have no effect on whether other doctors do their work well or badly: she can only strive to be the best she can be, letting the comparative results take care of themselves. This sort of normal and healthy craft-competition then turns out to be no different from the non-comparative efforts of practitioners to attain the end of the craft. If alternatively she decides to compete by hiding her rivals' medical equipment or teaching them nonsense, it seems fair to say that she is no longer acting *qua* doctor at all – for she would be acting *against* the end of medicine, which is the patients' health.

12 I here pass over the question of how particular craft-operations (prescribing the right dosage, hitting the right note) relate to the higher-order internal ends of the crafts (health, beautiful music). Perhaps we are to assume that those higher-order ends are also to be understood in terms of a mean. This is not an unreasonable assumption: Plato might well think that the *reason* there is a right dose in medicine is that health itself consists in a mean state, so that the right dose is one which establishes it in the patient.

13 It is odd that Socrates here speaks of the soul as if it were an instrument which "we" use: for who are "we," anyway, if not our souls? In other dialogues Plato is more

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inclined to suppose that the soul *is* the person, and the *First Alcibiades* explicitly argues for this (130a–c). (The *Alcibiades* may well not be an authentic work of Plato; perhaps a later Platonist noticed that Plato relies on this identification without ever arguing for it, and set out to make good the deficiency.) But perhaps we are to see Socrates as here playing fair with Thrasymachus; *he* could not be assumed to share this conception of the self as the soul, especially since for Plato it entails that the good of one's soul is far more important than physical health or wealth. So what Socrates shows here is that *even if* you think of yourself as something distinct from your soul, using it as a tool, you must admit that the soul is such an *important* tool that your welfare depends on its being in a good state.

14 For an account of the *Republic* which brings out the centrality of the idea of function to its moral and political theories, see Santas 2001. Aristotle will explicitly use the idea of a human function as the fundamental principle of his account of virtue and happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in the famous "function argument" of *NE* I.7. (However, Aristotle's understanding of a function differs importantly from Plato's concept, as I hope to show in a future paper.)

15 E.g., White 1979: "Book I is a kind of prologue to the *Republic*" (p. 61); "the purpose of Book I is to raise issues" (p. 65).

16 For the history of this hypothesis, and a convincing refutation of it, see Kahn 1993.

17 Confusingly, Plato seems to see this as true on two levels, which he does not always keep distinct. First, if I have no acquaintance *at all* with something, I can know nothing about it. If the name "Meno" means nothing to me, I cannot know, or even believe, that Meno is handsome or rich (*Meno* 71b). More interestingly, knowledge (not mere belief) about the properties of something depends on knowledge of what it really, by nature is – in Aristotelian terminology, its "essence." Plato seems to think of this knowledge of essences as also a kind of acquaintance – as if only by knowing Meno first-hand can I really know that he is handsome, and as if knowing the essence of something is somehow first-hand in the same way.

18 This is a controversial claim, and would have to be supported by a full interpretation of the *Meno*; it is fairly explicitly Aristotle's solution to the problem in the *Posterior Analytics*.

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