

Thrasymachus's Challenge to Justice in Plato's *Republic*

David Novitsky
University of Virginia, 2008

Thrasymachus's position on justice in Plato's *Republic* presents one of the more interesting puzzles in the history of political thought. The reason it is a puzzle is that he seems to offer three conflicting positions: (I) Justice is the advantage of the stronger (338c, 341a, 344c), (II) Justice is obeying the laws (339b) and (III) Justice is another's good (343c). Because of this ambiguity deciphering this puzzle has become the source of much scholarly debate. This paper has three objectives in response to this puzzle. First, I will offer my own solution. Second, I will argue the merits of my interpretation vis-à-vis the dominant positions in the literature. Third, I will offer some thoughts on the challenge that Thrasymachus's position posed for Plato in the *Republic*.

I.

On my interpretation there are three main tenets to Thrasymachus's position. It will be helpful to lay them out beforehand and then turn to the relevant text in order to clarify and defend this interpretation. The three tenets are: (I) "justice" is defined politically, as a system of laws that produce norms which, in combination, promote mutual cooperation among subjects, (II) any such system is a means for those he calls "the stronger" to achieve their ends, and (III) he adopts a relativistic stance in regard to both the substantive content of any particular system (laws and norms) and the ends that the system of justice is a means to. The major implication of this line of thought, which I will argue in the conclusion bears directly on the overall argument of the *Republic*, is that no system of justice is in everyone's interest or to everyone's advantage in the same way or extent; every system of justice is a disadvantage to some. Keeping these tenets in mind lets turn to the real work of exegesis.

Thrasymachus's entrance into the dialogue of the *Republic* is one of the more memorable moments in all of political thought: "He coiled himself up like a wild beast about to spring, and he hurled himself at us as if to tear us to pieces (336b)." The reason for such an outburst is that Thrasymachus had been watching in annoyance as Socrates and the other interlocutors engaged in a jovial and courteous elenchus – "giving way to one another (336b-c)." Instead of this game Thrasymachus wants Socrates to give his own account of justice not just ask questions and refute answers. But he knows this demand will go unsatisfied: "I knew and I said to these people earlier, that you'd be unwilling to answer and that, if someone questioned *you*, you'd be ironical and do anything rather than give an answer (337a)." What Thrasymachus really wants then is to demonstrate his superiority over Socrates in two ways: by offering an answer, something Socrates has not done, and avoiding refutation, which is to beat Socrates at his own game (338a, 341b).

Along these lines the first articulation of Thrasymachus's position is unfulfilling. Justice, he says, is simply "the advantage of the stronger (338c)". But what sort of advantage is he talking about? And who are the stronger? Socrates is quick to pick up on these deficiencies (338c-d). So in order to beat Socrates Thrasymachus must clarify his position. This he does at 338d-339a, the first of two major clarificatory speeches. All three of the tenets I outlined above can be found here.

The basic idea of this first speech can be broken up into three parts: (1) some cities are ruled by a tyranny, some a democracy, and some an aristocracy, (2) in each of these cities the stronger is the ruling body ("established rule"), and (3) each of these ruling bodies creates a system of justice, different in substantive content and codified in

laws, which works to their own advantage. By “the stronger” then we find out that he means the “established rule” in a city, those who have created and put a system of justice into place. While the specific “advantage” is left unclear (more on this below) we know that it is an advantage which flows from the ability to create a system of justice and sustain it through the sanction of laws: “democracy makes democratic laws, tyranny makes tyrannical laws, and so on with the others (338d-e).”

There are two further claims to take note of here. First, Thrasymachus claims that any system of justice, no matter what form it takes, shares (at least) this one thing: that the rulers have created it so that it works in some way to their advantage. This is, of course, most obviously seen in reference to tyrannies, but he makes no distinction between systems of justice produced by tyrannies and those produced by democracies or aristocracies. Indeed the clarification is exactly meant to point out the ways in which they are the same – they are all to the advantage of the ruler. This reflects (II) above – systems of justice are a means to the ends of the rulers and these ends are to their advantage. And this association of justice with established rules in cities reflects (I) above: justice refers to a system of laws and norms (here created by laws) for the mutual cooperation of subjects.

Secondly, we can note that the specific “advantage” that each system of justice is a means to is purposefully left vague. This is because his stance is relativistic. In connecting such divergent systems of justice (democracy, aristocracy, and tyranny) and their attendant laws and norms the implication must be that the actual substantive content of justice and the ends or aims of the system which this reflects are merely contingent for Thrasymachus. Substantive justice is in this sense self-contained within a system; it is

merely the product of a system which serves the interest of the rulers. If we were to judge which system was “better” the point of comparison for Thrasymachus would not be the specific ends of the system, nor the extent to which it reflects an objective, universal conception of “justice.” Rather, as we come to find out later in the dialogue, it would be the extent to which the laws serve the interest of the ruler, or advantages the ends of the ruler: “a ruler insofar as he is a ruler, never makes errors and unerringly decrees what is best for himself, and this his subjects must do (341a).”

We can recognize here that this relativistic position is extremely crafty in regard to the competition between Thrasymachus and Socrates alluded to above. This conception of justice can be applied to seemingly conflicting systems: (1) to a system where both the ruler and the ruled are subject to the law and each rule and are ruled in turn, (2) to a system where the ruler and the ruled both agree with and see themselves as subject to the same laws, even though the ruler and ruled may never change places, (3) to a system where the ruler is simply out to enhance his particular reputation, power, or wealth: a stable community is essential to these ends on a grand scale (which is what Thrasymachus has in mind. See 348d), or (4) to a system which is strongly theocratic or based on a conception of universal morality (Forms even): stability allows what the rulers take to be the “true” vision of the world to be realized, gain permanency and be spread. And all of these are, of course, a disadvantage to those who would like to see another conception of justice, one more in line with their own ends, in place.

It is also important to note here that just because Thrasymachus claims that these systems of justice are to the advantage of the established rule does not *necessarily* mean that they are a *complete* disadvantage to the ruled. This is not only in the sense that some

stability is better than chaos for everyone, but also in another more substantial way as we will see below. For now we should just keep in mind that nowhere does Thrasymachus claim that a system of justice is a *complete* disadvantage to the ruled.

From this first speech of Thrasymachus's then we have several important clarifications of his initial statement all of which line up with the three tenets I outlined above. The stronger are the 'established rulers' in a city because they have created a system of justice which serves their interests. The substantive content of these systems are merely contingent products of them, one is only "better" than another to the extent that it enhances the interest of those who created them, the rulers. Abstractly and universal to all systems, justice is a means to stabilize and perpetuate a system of mutual cooperation among subjects through laws and norms because this system is ultimately a means to the ruler's ends.

After this first speech the elenchus begins in earnest and one can not help but have some sympathy for Thrasymachus as Socrates does his best to attack this position. First, he attacks the idea of justice as obedience to the laws, which would seem to be an implication of Thrasymachus's position (339b-340c). If it is just to obey the laws, Socrates argues, then when the rulers unintentionally order what is bad for themselves justice (obedience to this law) is not to their advantage. This line of argument leads to the clarification I mentioned above regarding comparisons between systems of justice. Rulers are rulers, Thrasymachus says, only to the extent that they decree what is to their advantage (341a). Another way to look at this claim is that we can tell who "the stronger" are in a given system by looking at who it advantages. If a ruler sets up a system to

advantage someone else, then he is clearly not the stronger, and on Thrasymachus's account not actually a ruler because he serves others.

Next, and no dialogue would be complete without it, Socrates offers a craft analogy to attack Thrasymachus's position (341c – 342e). Some crafts do not seek their own advantage, he argues, but the advantage of that over which they rule. The craft of ruling is of this kind in that it seeks the advantage of that over which it rules – the subjects. His examples here are doctors and ship's captains, whose crafts seem to seek the advantage of the bodies of patients or the sailors under their command. Thrasymachus counters this argument with the example of shepherds, who take care of their sheep inasmuch as it is to their advantage to do so. But at this point the elenchus has been successful insofar as Socrates has successfully muddled the position, so Thrasymachus feels compelled to offer another, longer, clarificatory speech.

This second speech occurs at 343a-344c and is the source of much of the confusion surrounding Thrasymachus's position. "Justice," Thrasymachus says, "is really the good of another, the advantage of the stronger and the ruler, and harmful to the one who obeys and serves... A just man always gets less than an unjust one (343c-d)." The source of confusion is apparent: Thrasymachus introduces here three subject positions or relationships to a system of justice when previously we had only one. We have the original "advantage of (...) the ruler," but he has also added another "advantage of the stronger," and "harmful to the one who obeys and serves." It is these additions which produce the confusion regarding Thrasymachus's position so making sense of them and their fit with his initial speech is crucial to any interpretation. This second speech is also

important because here Thrasymachus offers not simply a re-clarification but also a quasi-defense of the claims made in the first clarificatory speech.

The best way to sort this out is to first take note of Thrasymachus's expansion of the idea of the "advantage of the stronger" found in his initial articulation. This addition comes in a crucial part of this second speech:

If someone commits only one part of injustice and is caught, he's punished and greatly reproached—such partly unjust people are called temple-robbers, kidnappers, housebreakers, robbers, and thieves when they commit these crimes. But when someone, in addition to appropriating their possessions, kidnaps and enslaves the citizens as well, instead of shameful names he is called happy and blessed, not only by the citizens themselves but by all who learn that he has done the whole of injustice (344b-c).

In unpacking what Thrasymachus is getting at here I will call the first character, who "commits only one part of injustice," the petty strong man; the latter, who has committed "the whole of injustice," is our original ruler (sometimes for clarity's sake I will refer to this character as the truly strong man). Two aspects of this clarification—the introduction of the petty strong man and the characterization of the ruler as having committed "the whole of injustice"—are of the utmost importance in understanding how this second speech coheres with the first speech and enhances the initial articulation of justice as the advantage of the stronger.

Justice, Thrasymachus argues in this second speech, is also an advantage to the petty strong man who utilizes a system of justice which he has not created in order to gain profit for himself. He is a familiar figure: the one who "gets ahead" of others in

contracts, pays less taxes than honest people, and uses public office to benefit his friends through unjust acts (Thrasymachus' examples—343d). There are two crucial things to keep in mind with this petty strong man. First, to do all of these things, to be “stronger” in this sense, requires and presupposes a stable system of law and order, a stable conception of “justice” which they can use to their advantage.¹ In fact, the more stable the system is the more the petty strong man can take advantage of it. Justice and injustice here refer then to judgments of acts based upon the substantive product (laws and norms) of a given system. The petty strong man operates within this production in order to achieve his ends. This is what I alluded to above as the more substantial way (besides avoiding chaos) in which justice can be advantageous to the ruled on Thrasymachus's account.

Second, we can see that while justice is to his advantage in this way it is also a burden because the petty strong man must wear the costume of a just man in order to profit. This costume-wearing is a burden because he constantly faces the risk of becoming known as “unjust” within the system (being called temple-robber, kidnapper, thief), of being punished, and thus of losing his advantage and profit (344b).

We should note explicitly here that this does not conflict with Thrasymachus's initial articulation or the first clarificatory speech. In reference to the latter, we already noted that Thrasymachus never explicitly ruled out *some* possible advantage to the ruled. And this also accords with his initial sparse articulation in that it again casts justice as advantageous to the stronger (be it a system set up in the ruler's interests or a situation that someone can take advantage of), as a means which allows the strong to gain advantage over the weak (344c).

¹ This explanation is similar to Piper's (2005).

This characterization of the petty strong man, specifically this idea of wearing the costume of the just to get ahead, sticks to and helps to flesh out the original strong man, the “established rule.” We now see him (or them) as enacting “the most complete injustice,” while the petty strong man “commits only one part of injustice (344a).” This distinction, part and whole of injustice, needs explanation. As we saw Thrasymachus’s claim is that justice is, substantively speaking (laws and norms), a product of a system and a means of stability and perpetuation of that system. And “one part of injustice” is cast as the precarious manipulation of a system of justice, which does not conduce to one’s ends, in order to promote one’s ends. If we take this position seriously then *complete* injustice would be the overturning, or overcoming of one system of justice and the installation of a new system of justice – the replacement of one system of justice with another. This is *injustice* because justice, on these terms, can only be conceptualized in reference to an already existing system of justice – what is just for a democracy is unjust for a tyranny and vice versa. It is *complete* in that it represents the overturning of one system of justice, which conduced to the ends of a ruler or rulers, and the installation of another, which conduces to the different ends of a new ruler or rulers. In effect this would be the petty strong man becoming the truly strong man by setting up a system of justice which conduces to his ends – he would be able to take off his costume of justice because he would have no reason to feign just actions in order to profit, just actions would be conducive to his ends (keep in mind here Thrasymachus’s stipulation of an ideal ruler).

Thus from the perspective of the previous system of justice which has been overcome (or could be overcome) any system of justice represents this type of complete injustice, but from the perspective of the new system installed it is the beginning of

justice. Such a dual perspective on the same system of justice is alluded to in the statement above: “But when someone, in addition to appropriating their possessions, kidnaps and enslaves the citizens as well, instead of these shameful names [the names of the unjust: kidnapers, robbers, thieves, etc. at 344b] he is called happy and blessed, *not only by the citizens themselves, but by all who learn that he has done the whole of injustice* (my italics, 344b-c).” Note here the subtle contrasting of citizens on the one hand and those who see this setting up of a system of justice for what it really is—complete injustice—on the other. For the citizens (who do *not* see that this is a complete injustice, those whom he calls “simple and just (343c) the ruler(s) is called happy and blessed for installing any system of justice. Perhaps, we could argue because it alleviates chaos or it is more stable than the former system. Others, who realize that any system of justice is to the advantage of the rulers, see this for what it really is – the overcoming of one system of justice with the installation of another: complete injustice.

The point here then, as I see it, is that in installing a system of justice injustice overcomes justice by making itself the image of justice (See 349a-c). Because Thrasymachus is a relativist we can think here of either a tyranny taking over a democracy or a democracy taking over a tyranny: since both systems make laws and establish norms to the advantage of the rulers, both are equally unjust in relation to the other – when one overcomes the other some recognize this for what it is, others call those who achieve this complete injustice happy and blessed. This is of course, as Thrasymachus points out, much easier to see in the former case of a tyranny overcoming a democracy (344a).

Again if we take this position seriously then the petty strong man demonstrates an injustice (from the perspective of the petty just man who desires to overcome the present system) inherent in all systems of justice. In this way the petty strong man, which can be found in any system, becomes a quasi-defense of the claims that Thrasymachus is making in his initial articulation and first clarificatory speech. We see in the petty strong man that all strong men strive to the complete injustice that the established rule has achieved: they realize they need to be known as being just, they need to avoid the names of the unjust, in order to gain advantage without worry of punishment or receiving the names of the unjust. All petty strong men desire then what the truly strong man has gained: being called happy and blessed (by those who do not see this as complete injustice) for their injustice, for overcoming the old system of justice and setting up their own which is to their advantage. Through the burden of the petty strong man we see that there is this injustice in every system: created to fulfill the ends and aims of some (the rulers) every system of justice remains burdensome to those who must feign justice and hence act unjustly in order to achieve their ends. After all they could be called just for these same acts in another system created by them.

The petty strong man is introduced then to clarify two important aspects of Thrasymachus's definition: first, that all systems of justice are a complete injustice in reference to other systems—relativism. If justice is a product of and a means to the perpetuation of a system which enables (calls blessed and good) the aims and ends of some people and restricts and prevents the aims and ends of others, then unjust acts performed by the petty strong man within the system are simply a reflection of their desire to gain their aims and ends in the same fashion as the truly strong, the established

rule. Second, we reiterate that the substantive reality of justice will always be advantageous to some (it promotes their ends no matter what these are) and burdensome to others (in attaining their ends they must negotiate the risks of becoming the “unjust” within the system).

These points are reiterated in the expanded conception of the just man and the relation of justice to harm. As we saw above Thrasymachus makes a third introduction: petty just men—the citizens who do not know that the rulers have committed complete injustice. They live within a stable system but do not use it to their personal profit, they “reproach injustice because they are afraid not of doing it but of suffering it (344c).” We can see this petty just man in two ways: they are afraid of chaos, or being worse off than they are, and because of this they consistently forego their own interests and serve the interest of the stronger (both the petty strong man and the established rule). Or, they are simply deceived by the idea that a system of justice is equally in everyone’s interest and does not serve the interests of one group (or person) more than others. This Thrasymachus calls “high-minded simplicity” (348d). These petty just men thus serve the interest of both the truly strong man (the established rule), by reproaching that which would destabilize the system, and the petty strong man, by being a prop for the system from which he parasitically profits.

Just as the truly strong man was reflected in the costume-wearing of the petty strong man we can also see here the truly strong man (the established rule) reflected by the petty just man. In reference to the system he has overcome and reflected in the petty unjust man we saw him as having attained complete injustice, but in reference to his own system he is the completely just man – “called happy and blessed” by the citizens who do

not realize that he has done the whole of injustice (344b-c). He can act justly and still gain advantage because he is profited by the just actions taken within the system he has set up, as well as by the stability and perpetuation of that system. And this accords nicely with Thrasymachus's point about the ideal ruler.

To sum up: on my interpretation Thrasymachus's second speech does not conflict with either his first clarificatory speech, or with his initial sparse articulation and it reconfirms the three tenets I laid out initially. Justice is still a system of laws and norms which promotes mutual cooperation (**I**) and this is in accordance with the first clarificatory speech. Now, through the introduction of the petty strong man we see that systems of justice are to the advantage of the stronger in a multitude of ways, which is in accordance with the initial articulation.

This introduction of the petty strong man also backs up (**II**) by showing that systems of justice are a means for achieving ends not only for rulers but for some subjects who are "strong" enough to take advantage of the petty just men. Justice is a means for both to achieve their ends it is simply a better means for the ruler than it is for the petty strong man who must wear the costume of justice and in doing so support a system which does not fully support his ends. This is in accord with both the initial articulation and the first clarificatory speech.

Finally, it enhances (**III**) in that it casts the unjust acts of the petty strong man and the just acts of the ruler(s) as different only in that the latter was able to set up the system to his advantage, while the former always runs the risk of being caught and punished in seeking his ends. Thus, the particular, substantive content of a system of justice and the end which this reflects are merely contingent. The real point of comparison for

Thrasymachus is the extent to which a system of justice advantages the ends of those in it. This is also in accord with the initial articulation and the first clarificatory speech and backs up the implication I drew from Thrasymachus's "ideal" ruler refutation of Socrates's craft analogy above.

Having outlined what I take to be Thrasymachus's position I now want to turn to the major positions in the literature in order to argue for this interpretation against the alternative interpretations found there.

II.

There are four main positions in the literature: (1) that Thrasymachus's "real" position is that justice is another's good (Kerferd, 1947), (2) that Thrasymachus's "real" position is that justice is obedience to the laws (Hourani, 1962), (3) that these two positions are both advocated but are inconsistent and cannot be reconciled (Maguire, 1971) and (4) that Thrasymachus offers us a consistent theory of immoralism (Piper, 2005).² I will take each of these up in turn showing that they miss either the importance of the introduction of the petty strong man, the importance of the way in which the petty unjust and petty just men reflect on the ruler, or both. Further, we will see that when we take account of these aspects of Thrasymachus's position we can clear up or avoid problematic aspects of their interpretations.

Kerferd (1947) argues that Thrasymachus is setting up a theory of natural right: "This idea is that of injustice, which consists in seeking one's own interest on all occasions (27)." For Kerferd this ideal results in the following schema (25):

² The scholarly literature on Thrasymachus's position on justice in the *Republic* is extremely vast, so a complete survey would be too big a project for this paper. Thus, I have chosen widely-cited, extremely well-argued examples of what seem to be the major positions.

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

On Kerferd’s account then justice for Thrasymachus cannot be in the interest of the stronger as ruler, it is always another’s good. This obviously conflicts with my interpretation because as I have it Thrasymachus consistently argues that justice is in the interest of the stronger as ruler. Kerferd’s position suffers, however, from a substantial deficiency: in order to arrive at it he must overlook or explain away several important aspects of Thrasymachus’s view. My interpretation, on the other hand, fits these same moments into a coherent whole.

First, Kerferd must dismiss Thrasymachus’s initial articulation which defines justice as the interest of the stronger and then clarifies “the stronger” as “the established rule.” This obviously conflicts directly with the schema outlined above. To get around this complication Kerferd writes, “the statement that Justice is the interest of the stronger cannot be treated as a *definition* in Thrasymachus’ eyes—rather it is a deliberate paradox framed in terms such as to arrest the attention (26).” His evidence to back up this claim is two-fold. First, he cites the scornful tone which Thrasymachus uses in reference to justice in his initial speech at 338b. Second, and more substantially, he argues that this definition is from the point of view of the ruled and not the ruler: “If Thrasymachus had meant to describe a just ruler he would surely have said something like ‘justice is the oppression of the weaker’ (26).” Let me take these two points up in turn.

In response to the first we saw above that Thrasymachus is scornful of justice, but only when one is not using it to their advantage. This is backed up by his statements

about the “ideal” ruler: a ruler who does not decree what is best for himself is akin to a “craftsman who errs (340e – 341a).” As always his position on the utility of justice depends upon the relationship between an agent and the particular system of justice that agent occupies. Thus, in his second speech he is clearly not scornful of what he calls “the whole of injustice” which, as we saw, “enslaves” subjects by becoming “justice” itself.

Kerferd also warns that we should “not wrongly attribute to [Thrasymachus] the doctrine that it is just for the ruler to seek his own interest.” But this is to imply that the system of justice itself does not conduce to the ruler’s interest. Within their own systems it is exactly Thrasymachus’s position that it is just for the ruler to seek their own interest. This is recognized by Thrasymachus’s petty strong man, and is reflected in his unjust actions: he recognizes and represents the crucial necessity and advantage of appearing just, something the rulers achieve in the course of attaining their ends. The logical development of this need, to appear just, is to become justice itself. Thus, it is a simple tautology for Thrasymachus that it is just for rulers to seek their own interest, justice just is in their interest. Again, recall here Thrasymachus’s claims about the ideal ruler at 341a: when a ruler sets up a system of justice he will necessarily be seen as just in seeking his own interests because the system advantages those interests, if not, he has erred.

Kerferd has difficulty explaining what my interpretation explains because his schema overlooks the two strong man distinction introduced by Thrasymachus in the second major speech. For the petty strong man his schema does not hold because for them, as ruled, injustice is still in their interest, it is to their profit. It might still be argued that his schema does work because it does not seem as if justice rules this “stronger” man because he acts unjustly. But that is to miss the point and prove it. It misses the point

because the petty strong man is still dependent or parasitic upon the system. He needs to appear to conform to the system, to appear to act justly. He must choose the time and place of his actions carefully and warily, constantly paranoid of being termed “unjust.” In doing so he helps perpetuate a system which does not truly serve his interests. This becomes clearer when we compare this man to the truly strong man who revels openly in the reflection of the same injustice. Having overcome the past system and set up their own these truly “stronger” are called blessed and good for their “complete injustice,” for the system they set up to serve their own interest. This also proves the point then because the petty strong man could become “just” in the same way if he proved strong enough to overcome the current system and install his own.

A second prevalent position in the literature came as a response to Kerferd. Instead of justice as another’s good Hourani (1962) argues that Thrasymachus’s position is that justice is obedience to the law. Mirroring Kerferd Hourani can only arrive at this view by dismissing Thrasymachus’s initial statement. ‘Justice as the interest of the stronger, is not a definition he argues rather, the underlying premise ‘justice as obedience to the laws’ is the true definition (110). Hourani offers two major arguments for this view: (1) without this underlying premise there would be no connection between justice and the rulers (113), (2) if justice was defined as the real interest of the stronger strange consequences would follow: it would be just for subjects to disobey the laws when they were not really in the interest of the stronger and it would be unjust for subjects to obey the laws when doing so would be in their own interest (115).

Before I directly address these claims it is important to note a major weakness of this interpretation: it is derived mainly from one of Socrates’s attempts at refutation.

Nowhere in Thrasymachus's own speeches does he actually present this as the whole of his conception of justice, at most it is a part. The idea of obedience to the laws is introduced by Socrates at 339b *after* Thrasymachus's first clarificatory speech. Further, Thrasymachus consistently calls Socrates's formulations during the elenchus into question. In his eyes Socrates is constantly introducing and attacking weak characterizations of his position, not his true position. He calls this Socrates's "trick" to win arguments: "You disgust me, Socrates. Your trick is to take hold of the argument at the point where you can do it the most harm (338d)." Or another example, which follows the "obedience to law" attempt at refutation: "That's because you are a false witness in arguments, Socrates (340d)." Or, "Now practice your harm-doing and false witnessing (341b)." And of course the dialogue ends with Thrasymachus simply playing along because Socrates will not allow him to make any more speeches (354a). Further, Plato consistently alludes to the reluctance of Thrasymachus during the elenchus (342c, d, e, 346c, and 350c-e, for example). Although we can reasonably assume that some of this complaining is hot air and for public consumption, it is clear that in Thrasymachus's eyes Socrates's attempts at refutation pick out partial, weak characterizations of his position. Given my interpretation this does seem to be the case. We should be wary then of attempts to derive his position from these characterizations. Instead, his position should be derived from what Thrasymachus consistently takes to be their full presentation: his own statements.

That being said, justice on Thrasymachus's account does involve obedience to the law. But the extent of this involvement is exaggerated if we overlook the two strong man distinction that appears in Thrasymachus's final speech. Justice simply as obedience to

the laws cannot capture Thrasymachus's idea that justice is also advantageous to the petty strong men who use a system of justice for their own profit. For this we need an ideal of injustice similar to Kerferd's position above: justice as another's good even for the ruled within a system of justice.

What Hourani's position offers however is what Kerferd misses, that the lawgiver will be just when he lives within his own laws, and unjust when he flouts them (120).³ This is the way in which obedience to the law becomes a part of Thrasymachus's position. But again, taken too far this misses another aspect of justice as another's good: the greatest injustice is not simple flouting but overturning and replacing a system of justice, being called happy and blessed for this injustice by making it over into justice itself. Thus, as Hourani suggests, we do miss the connection between the rulers and justice when we take out the idea of obedience to the laws, but he misses the way in which for Thrasymachus this can be seen, in relation to the system of justice overcome, as the whole of injustice. Thus, the idea of justice as another's good is also essential to the complete picture—simple obedience to laws is not enough.

When we do take Thrasymachus's position as a whole we can also explain the "strange consequences" that Hourani points to as resulting from the position of "another's good" which lacks reference to law. The first strange consequence was that it would then be just for subjects to disobey the laws when they were not really in the interest of the stronger. This ignores however Thrasymachus's assumption of the ideal ruler. Given that assumption it would never be "just" for the subjects to disobey laws when they were not really in the interest of the stronger, because the truly stronger make justice itself serve

³ Of course, if he needed to flout the laws to pursue his ends he would be considered by Thrasymachus to be a petty strong man and not the ideal ruler he has in mind (for petty strong men as part of the ruling body see 343e).

their interests; justice and just actions are, on Thrasymachus's account, simply always in their interest. To disobey a law *and* do what is in the interest of the stronger would mean that the rulers did not adequately set up the system of justice in their interest and thus they were erring craftsmen, not the rulers Thrasymachus has in mind. We must keep in mind the assumption of the ideal ruler.

But we can explain this strange consequence in another way which serves to highlight Thrasymachus's conception of justice as a means to one's own ends. Let us say that the subjects do disobey the laws in order to do what they believed was "really" in the interest of the stronger. If this were to happen Thrasymachus would probably say that the "subjects" are now obeying themselves. This is because the idea here would have to be that the subjects are acting in the ruler's interests but the rulers deny these actions are in their interest. After all the rulers on Thrasymachus's account, inasmuch as they are actually rulers, have set up the system of justice in their interest. This situation of disobedience would present a paradox of paternalism. If the subjects of a system do what they believe is really in the interest of another when this violates the laws and norms of their society, which that other has set up, then they are obeying themselves. If this is the case it must be that they see the system of justice the rulers have set up as insufficient or invalid, their own conception of justice as the "real," and they actively attempt to institute this system for themselves and others. For Thrasymachus this must be a case of injustice in reference to the system of justice that such actions oppose. It would, on his account, be equivalent to the case of the unjust man disobeying laws for his own profit. If the subjects are doing what they believe is in the interest of the stronger in disobeying them then they are following a different system of justice, which ideally they would want instituted in

the same way as the petty strong man also wants an alternative system of justice, one which is to his advantage, set up.

My assumption then is that Thrasymachus would consider anyone who advocates a system of justice that is not in their own interest to be lying to trick the ‘high-mindedly simple’ (348c), or a fool, for this just opens up room for the abuses of the petty strong, or the conquest of another truly strong man, which is a disadvantage to those who advocate the new system of justice. All this is just to point out that for Thrasymachus systems of justice are set up as a means to one’s ends. This is the case for whoever sets them up and for whatever purposes they set them up. If this is not the case then the craftsmen has erred.

We can also explain the second strange consequence that Hourani mentions (it would be unjust for subjects to obey the laws when doing so would be in their own interest) by looking at the relationship of the petty strong man to the system of justice he parasitically uses. Obedience to the laws even when they are in one’s own interest would be seen as unjust in reference to the petty strong man because he obeys only to further his own interest, and since that interest is in contradistinction to the system he is in, it is an unjust act. What I mean by this is that he only appears to be “just” (wears the costume of justice) when following the laws; he acts justly only to be able to engage in unjust actions for profit when he can. Just and unjust acts, as they refer to the substantive content of a system of justice, depend for Thrasymachus on one’s relationship to the system one is in. This is most apparent in that for Thrasymachus even rulers in some systems must engage in unjust acts to further their own interest. (It is clear that for Thrasymachus a ruler can also be the petty strong man (343e).) This could be consistent with Thrasymachus’s

position only if just and unjust acts referred to the relationship individuals have with the system of justice they are in. This is why the tyrant is the ideal: the system he is in bends to his will alone, it solely serves his interests and it does this through becoming justice itself. He has no need to pretend to be just; he can simply create the meaning of justice.

To sum up the first two positions in the literature we can say that they both take one aspect of Thrasymachus's position for the whole and exaggerate it. But, as I have shown, both of these aspects can be consistently connected to a whole through an account of the two strong man distinction found in my interpretation. In doing so we need not dismiss the importance of the first statement of Thrasymachus as both Kerferd and Hourani do.⁴

The guiding thread throughout the review of the literature thus far has been that Thrasymachus articulates a consistent position. But a third position in the literature challenges this assumption arguing that Thrasymachus actually presents two incompatible accounts of justice. Maguire (1971) argues this position cogently. Thrasymachus, he argues, says three distinct things about justice: (A) "advantage of the stronger", (B) obedience to the laws, and (C) "another's good, one's own hurt" (143). We can see that roughly the combination of A and B are Hourani's position while C is Kerferd's. Maguire's contention is that while A and B can be seen as compatible (although he resists even this), A and C are not: "advantage of the stronger" cannot be a broadening of "another's good (145)." Contra Kerferd and Hourani then, Maguire argues that Thrasymachus's position is not consistent and that there are in fact two distinct conceptions of justice here. He makes his argument in two stages.

⁴ This criticism is similar to Piper (2005) although he addresses only Hourani.

Maguire's first stage argues against the idea of consistency: C cannot be a broadening of A, because as interpreted by A and B, rulers and subjects cannot both be brought into C. This is because if we interpret A with B then attempt to render this compatible with C we can only arrive at justice as the ruler's advantage, because A combined with B was justice as obedience to law, which must be to the advantage of the ruler. B by itself would of course share this same problem (147-148). But these must be incompatible because C refers only to subjects. That this is the case is brought out in the second stage of the argument.

At the second stage Maguire presents the fundamental character distinction which renders the positions incompatible. Maguire argues, correctly, that in the initial statement A "interest of the stronger" (and B) Thrasymachus's position is political in character: the substance of justice is concerned with political structures and institutions, particularly "with the laws and institutions which will insure the *stability* or the particular regime in power (146)." While in the second statement C, "another's good," Maguire argues, we have moved from the political to the moral context: here justice is identified "not with a relation between the individual and the law, but with a quality of regulating the relation between individuals (151)."

My response to Maguire will be familiar: justice for Thrasymachus is in one sense a product of one's relationship to the system. The "ruler" is not left out of C when interpreted by A because C presents the idea that it is in fact to the ruler's advantage that they obey the laws, or act justly, along with the subjects. In the first place in being just they are obeying themselves and serving their own interests, after all the system was set up with their interests or ends in view. The advantage of justice here is stability and

perpetuation of the system that the ruler's have put in place, which ultimately serves their interests. But as we also saw, for Thrasymachus, "justice" is the whole of injustice: overcoming a past system, creating and installing a new system of justice and thereby appearing just through the very act of injustice. Justice then is always a relationship that one has to a system of justice: the current system presupposes a past injustice meaning an overcoming of a prior system of justice. It is only when we read B, obedience to the laws, as a complete explanation of A, the advantage of the stronger, that C seems to conflict. (We saw this same move with Hourani as well where I noted the problem of relying on this formulation of the idea as articulated by Socrates during his attempt at refutation.) Within the system of justice the ruler(s) have created it must be to his advantage to be just, but Thrasymachus claims to see this for what it really is—the whole of injustice—unlike the 'high-mindedly' simple citizens.

Secondly, when we take account of the two strong man distinction the supposed switch from the political to the moral can be rendered coherent. For Thrasymachus one reason that the petty strong man is petty is that he is constantly concerned with being seen as just when in fact he is unjust in relation to the current system. Thrasymachus introduces the petty strong man in order to reflect this conception of injustice onto the ruler. In this way he can demonstrate that justice always refers to a relationship with a system of justice: within his own system the ruler is just, but in setting it up he has enacted the whole of injustice by overturning a previous system (acting unjustly in relation to that system's laws and norms); he is the petty strong man who has never been caught and is in fact praised. Having overcome the system which was burdensome to him, he is the perfection of the petty strong man who parasitically relied on it. Thus, the

moral switch to the petty strong man helps Thrasymachus bring out what he sees as the true advantage of the established rule: being praised for one's injustice, for overcoming one system of justice and installing another that is to the advantage of the established rule. Maguire misses this because he sees only two partners to the relationships in question: the individual to individual (moral) and the individual to law (political). But for Thrasymachus the relationship is always three-fold: the individual to individual and their respective relationships to the system (moral) and the individual to laws and norms and his relationship to the system (political). Thus, the moral and political blend consistently because at the moral level Thrasymachus takes the political relationship the individuals have to the system into account. After all, on Thrasymachus's account, it is the political which produces the norms found in the moral dimension.

A final position in the literature comes from Piper (2005). His interpretation is closest to my own in that he argues for a consistent coherent whole (with one exception addressed below). This interpretation (although there is more to it) can best be understood as an attempt to reconcile two of Thrasymachus's three supposed positions – that justice is (A) the interest of the stronger and (B) the good of another. In order to see how these can be reconciled, Piper argues, we need to understand two important aspects of Thrasymachus's position. First, by "justice" Thrasymachus is referring to just and unjust *actions*. Specifically just action is "adhering to norms that proscribe taking advantage of others by fraud or force; unjust action is synonymous with breaking the norms that proscribe taking advantage of other people by fraud or force in order to benefit oneself (31)." Second, Piper argues, Thrasymachus holds a conception of human happiness as maximization of external goods "such as money and power (32)." Combining these two

propositions leads Piper to assert that Thrasymachus offers a consistent position of immoralism: “if doing unjust acts allows us to maximize our acquisition of external goods and if we have the power to be unjust without fear of negative repercussions – that is, if we are ‘strong’ – we should be unjust (33).” This resolves the conflict between A and C in a fashion similar to my introduction of the petty strong man. Justice is in the interest of the stronger in that it allows them to take advantage of others who act justly. And it is in this sense, from the perspective of those acting justly because they are too weak to be unjust, that justice is the good of another.

While this is a clear advance over the previous literature Piper admits that his interpretation leaves us with “irksome incongruities” and uncertainties (38, 44). The first of these is similar to the same problem we saw in Kerferd and Hourani’s accounts regarding the initial articulation and the first speech. Why did Thrasymachus begin by presenting his views in a political way, Piper asks, when as his interpretation has it Thrasymachus’s position applies to the interaction between subjects and subjects as well? Piper’s answer is to argue that Plato was attempting to portray sophists in a negative light, as rash and unsystematic (38 – 39). This is certainly a plausible argument, although a bit odd given that Piper is attempting to demonstrate that Thrasymachus held a consistent, coherent position. I think there is a better way to answer this question wherein we can avoid this incongruity (more on this below).

But even if we were to accept Piper’s argument we are still left with two further uncertainties. How are we to understand the nature of the ‘norms’ of justice mentioned above that proscribe taking advantage? Are they the product of civic laws, tacit cultural laws, or even natural laws? A possible answer could refer to the first speech which sees

the nature of these norms as a result of civic laws. But this answer will not suffice for Piper because on his account Thrasymachus would term civic laws which exploited the subjects as unjust actions. Finally, Piper admits, given his interpretation we are not able to account for Thrasymachus's position on the origin of justice. So given Piper's interpretation there are three problematic areas. How do we explain the political nature of the first speech? How do we understand the nature of the 'norms' of justice? How do we account for the origin of justice?

My interpretation can answer these incongruities and uncertainties and in doing so will demonstrate the substantive differences between my account and Piper's. In regard to the first problematic area Piper gets into difficulties because he equates 'justice' exclusively with a particular norm of 'just actions'. This conflation results because he relies heavily on Glaucon's interpretation of Thrasymachus's position in Book II.⁵ There Glaucon offers a proto-social contract argument – 'justice' on this account is the product of those too weak to do injustice forming a community – the weak come together to create a system of justice. It follows that people are unwillingly just – they only come

⁵ Piper notes that much of his interpretation is only suggested indirectly by Thrasymachus (34-35). Because of this he turns to Glaucon's interpretation of Thrasymachus's position in Book II to defend his interpretation. But as I argued above there are reasons to be wary of interpretations offered by the other interlocutors. In regard to Glaucon there is also some evidence that the same wariness is warranted. First, it seems reasonably clear that Thrasymachus does not respect the intellectual capacity of the other members of the group. Recall that his entrance into the dialogue is due to frustration with them (336b-c). Second, Thrasymachus rejects the help of the others when offered (340b). Finally, there is the dramatic dynamic of Thrasymachus's withdrawal throughout the dialogue of Book I. This withdrawal picks up much of its momentum after the second clarificatory speech and comes to a head at 350 d-e, where Thrasymachus states that he will simply say "all right" to all of Socrates's questions and "nod yes and no, as one does to old wives' tales" because he is not allowed to make any more speeches. And of course Book I ends with Thrasymachus giving Socrates his feast of Bendis and disappearing from the dialogue. Of course much of this evidence is weak, but there seems to be some indication that Thrasymachus would resist interpretations based on the other interlocutor's impressions of his position, especially at the end of Book I where it seems he has more to say but withdraws from the dialogue. Thus, I think it only helps my interpretation vis-à-vis those who rely on the interlocutor's interpretations because mine shows a consistent, coherent position and relies only on Thrasymachus's own speeches.

together to avoid suffering injustice. But on this conception the norm of justice as proscribing taking advantage of one another operates, is intelligible, outside of a political community. Again he gets this from Glaucon, not Thrasymachus. This leads to the second problematic area in that the nature of this conception of justice cannot then be a product of civic laws, for a conception of just and unjust actions exists prior to civic laws – to avoid unjust actions, being taken advantage of, is why a community with laws was formed.

My interpretation eschews this difficulty. Because I do not rely on Glaucon and his proto-social contract my interpretation can offer the answer that the norms of justice are a product of civic laws. This is, I think, one of the reasons why Thrasymachus introduces his conception of justice in a political way. The argument would go something along these lines: strong men (the established rule) create systems of justice because they are a means to their ends; they are to their advantage. These systems of justice allow subjects to cooperate, to avoid chaos. This then produces norms which proscribe certain actions and allow others. Combining this with Thrasymachus's relativism (his connection of vastly different systems of justice – tyrannies, democracies, and aristocracies) the point here is, I take it, not that some conception of justice exists outside of political communities but exactly the opposite – political communities create conceptions of justice (because they are to the advantage of the established rule). There is not then one universal valid conception of just and unjust actions, what is just in one system and hence what 'justice' means is unjust in another and hence 'injustice'. Piper runs into difficulties then because he misses this sense of Thrasymachus's relativism due to his reliance on Glaucon.

If I am right about this we are still left with an additional question however, why create systems of justice at all, why produce norms which lead to the mutual cooperation of subjects? The answer to this also refers to Thrasymachus's initial articulation and first speech. When he talks about the truly strong man, the established rule, he has large-scale, grand ends in mind. In order to achieve the grand ends that he has in mind on a large-scale one needs the resources of others, of the community. This would also answer the question of the origin of justice – some strong man figured out that he needed to instill a conception of justice through laws in order to utilize the resources of the community to accomplish large-scale, grand ends. That Thrasymachus holds this idea can be inferred from many points in the text aside from the first speech. For instance, in the second speech he distinguishes those who commit part of injustice (the petty strong man) from those who commit the whole of injustice (the established rule) and has more admiration for the latter because they are able to “enslave” the citizens with their conception of justice (344b). Thus, at 344c he says, “So, Socrates, injustice, *if it is on a large enough scale*, is stronger, freer, and more masterly than justice [my italics].” More masterly here meaning the ability to overturn one system of justice and make itself over into justice. Also, at 348d, he writes, “Perhaps, you think I meant pickpockets? Not that such crimes aren't also profitable, *if they're not found out*, but they aren't worth mentioning by comparison to what I'm talking about [my italics].” Again, he is not talking about mere pick-pocketing (one part of injustice) but grander ends. This statement also indicates that what he has in mind comes about when one can pursue one's own ends and be called just for it – not to have to worry about being “found out.”

The main difference between my interpretation and Piper's then is that he misses the two strong man distinction but in the exact opposite way of the other scholars – he misses the ruler, the truly strong man. The rulers on Thrasymachus's account are interested in grandiose, large-scale ends, not a mere petty interest. This is what requires the setting up a system of cooperation for subjects and which results in the development of norms which proscribe petty strong men from taking advantage of petty just men (of course the petty just men do not see that the ruler is using them for his own interests). Piper misses this idea of the truly strong when he argues that if rulers exploited their subjects these actions would be considered unjust. For Thrasymachus a ruler is the truly strong man if the norms they set up conduce to their interests, whatever those happen to be. Just and unjust actions are a product of the system and are to the advantage of the ruler. Rulers, if they have to act unjustly in their own systems, are not really the ideal rulers he has in mind. Instead they are the petty strong men that Thrasymachus points to who hold office in some systems (343e). Every political system just does exploit its subjects on Thrasymachus's view in that they are set up to the advantage of the rulers.

This idea would put some pressure then on Piper's contention that human happiness for Thrasymachus is solely equated with money and power. Thrasymachus would probably see these people as, for the most part, petty strong men. Thrasymachus's position is, I think, much more radical than Piper allows and this is brought out in his relativistic standpoint – Plato's philosopher-king's would be as just as the Thirty Tyrants were. If I am right about this then Thrasymachus's position aims more at the heart of Plato's theory than the other scholars we have looked at allow, which brings us to the final reason for supporting my interpretation.

III.

Any salient interpretation of Thrasymachus's position should not ignore the fact that it is part of a larger dialogue. If, on the one hand, it seems to be a strange fit with the whole then the interpretation should be considered suspect. If, on the other hand, it seems to fit with the whole some weight is put on the side of the interpretation. Along these lines I would like to present a final defense of my interpretation in the form of a suggestion as to how it might consistently fit the whole that is the *Republic*.

An adequate response to Thrasymachus's position as I have interpreted it would require, at least, three things. First, it would have to show that a certain form of government, and its attendant conception of justice, was not to the advantage of the established rule in the sense of directly conducive to their ends. As is well known Socrates makes an argument along these lines – the philosopher-kings would be, Socrates argues, unhappy that they have to rule in that it takes them away from time spent philosophizing. Indeed such unwillingness to rule is a prerequisite for ruling on Socrates's account. Second, an adequate response would have to show that the petty strong men, which can be found in any system of justice, are confused about what is really in their interest when they commit acts of injustice within the system advocated. Socrates can be seen to address this very issue with the famous analogy of the cave – the petty just men are looking at mere shadows of their real interests. Finally, an adequate response would have to show that there is a universally valid conception of justice which is equally in the interest of everyone. Once again Socrates can be seen to address this

point with the theory of Forms and his ultimate formulation of justice as (roughly) everyone in their proper place.

This alignment between Thrasymachus's position (as I have interpreted it) and the rest of the argument of the *Republic* after his withdrawal provides some evidence then that Plato was not using Book I as a polemic against the shoddy arguments of sophists. Rather, we can see that Thrasymachus's position posed a legitimate and important challenge to Plato's political theory.

Bibliography

- Hourani, George F. "Thrasymachus' Definition of Justice in Plato's Republic." *Phronesis* 7 (1962): pp. 110- 120.
- Kerferd, G. B. "The Doctrine of Thrasymachus in Plato's Republic." *Durham University Journal* 9 (1947): 19-27.
- Maguire, Joseph "Thrasymachus - - - or Plato?" *Phronesis* 16 (1971): pp. 142-163.
- Piper, Mark. "Doing Justice to Thrasymachus." *Polis* Vol. 22. No. 1 (2005): pp. 24-44.