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Thrasymachus in Plato's *Politeia* I¹

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ABSTRACT

This is part of a forthcoming book analysing Plato's *Politeia* as a philosophical drama, in which the participants turn out to be models of various types of psychic constitution, and nothing is said by them which may be considered to be an opinion of Plato himself (with all that that entails for Platonism). The debate in Book I between Socrates and Thrasymachus serves as a test case for the assumptions that the Socratic method involves searching for truth or examining the opinions of interlocutors and that Socrates is the mouthpiece of Plato. Socrates and Thrasymachus are usually assumed to be arguing about justice. In fact, they are going through the motions of an eristic debate, where the aim is not to discover the truth about the matter under discussion but to defeat the opponent by fair means or foul, but especially foul. The outrageous wordplay used by both men is not so obvious in translation, and in any case tends to be ignored or explained away by scholars who assume that Plato the philosopher was writing a philosophical treatise (an exposition of philosophical ideas) and not a philosophical drama (a presentation of philosophically interesting models, to be compared and contrasted by the reader).

1. THE NATURE OF POLITEIA I

Book I of Plato's *Politeia* opens the dialogue with three increasingly extended discussions apparently pertaining to the subject of justice. Socrates converses firstly with an old acquaintance, Cephalus (328c-331d); then with that man's son, Polemarchus (331e-336a); and finally with the sophist Thrasymachus (336b-354b). Book I is often regarded as featuring the non-philosophical scene-setting and the cut and thrust of dialectical debate typical of an early aporetic dialogue. Its style is widely acknowledged to contrast strongly with that of the following nine books. The "Socratic" Socrates of the early dialogues thus appears to be transformed into the "Platonic" Socrates of the middle dialogues in one and the same dialogue.² This would be unusual for a dramatist of Plato's calibre, to say the least, and the exercise is certainly not repeated in other dialogues.

K.F. Hermann proposed as long ago as 1839 that Plato had adapted an early dialogue on justice to serve as the first book of the *Politeia*.³ In 1895, the hypothetical early dialogue even received the name *Thrasymachus*, after its major protagonist.⁴ While the theory has had its proponents,⁵ many scholars have disputed this view, arguing that Book I was never intended to be an independent work, and could only ever have existed as part of the *Politeia*.⁶ Charles Kahn has noted that stylometry, formerly used to support the *Thrasymachus*

¹ The present paper is an adaptation of the second chapter of my almost completed analysis of Plato's *Politeia* as a philosophical drama. I have chosen to follow Latin rather than Greek transcription of names (Plato, Glauco, Adimantus, Thrasymachus, not Platon, Glaukon, Adeimantos, Thrasymachos), but Greek transcription of Greek terms, such as *Politeia*.

² Annas (1981) 4: "The *Republic* is [...] overtly transitional. Book I has the form of a Socratic dialogue like the early ones; but the rest of the book is a continuous exposition of what we can only take to be Plato's own views on people and society."

³ Hermann (1839) 538-40.

⁴ Dümmler (1895) 229ff..

⁵ E.g., Friedländer (1962) 50, and 305 n1 for a brief discussion; Smith (2000) 113.

⁶ E.g., Burrell (1916) 61: "The point of view of Socrates coincides exactly with his point of view in what follows, for practically all the main principles of the *Republic* are anticipated, if not distinctly laid down, in Book I." In a stimulating article on proleptic composition in this dialogue, Kahn (1993) provides many references to earlier proponents of an independent *Thrasymachus*, but fails to mention forerunners of his own contrary position; on some of these, see Harrison (1967) 37-38, who refers, among others, to a Dutch article by Henderickx (1945) which he describes as showing, on a larger scale than previous attempts, "how the developments of the later books are here foreshadowed" (38). On the dispute, see further, Blondell (2000)

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thesis, actually does no more than place Book I between the early dialogues and the remaining books of the *Politeia*;⁷ furthermore, Book I contains “massive anticipation of the following books”, without which little would remain to constitute an earlier independent dialogue.⁸ Kahn is referring to the many topics and comments in Book I which become truly relevant or intelligible only in the later books. Hence Kahn’s designation of Book I in particular as “proleptic”.

The stylistic anomaly between the first book and the remaining nine books remains. The apparently didactic style of Books II-X is often attributed to Plato’s recognition of the shortcomings of Socratic dialectic, used in Book I but explicitly abandoned at the beginning of Book II for the style Plato now appears to favour. Kahn suggests an alternative: “Book I is Socratic not because Plato is leaving the philosophy of the earlier dialogues behind, but because he wants to recall these discussions as vividly as possible, as background and context for his new undertaking.” Plato, he argues, is now equipped with solutions to problems raised in earlier dialogues, and wishes to remind the reader of those earlier dialogues and the problems raised there.⁹ Far from establishing the organic unity of the *Politeia*, Kahn’s argument appears to confirm the stylistic anomaly, and indeed supports the view that the *Politeia* is not one organic work, but a philosophical treatise sandwiched between two books (I and X), which may be detached without detracting from the import of the central portion.¹⁰ Were Kahn correct, it would be necessary to conclude that Plato has never shown such dramatic ineptitude as he manifests in what is widely regarded as his masterpiece, the *Politeia*.

Plato himself obviously thought that he was still writing drama in the later books of this work, as some scholars have recently pointed out: Socrates continues, for example, to engage in dialectic, and he uses the opinions of his interlocutors, for the most part Glauco and Adimantus.¹¹ If, as is sometimes claimed, the dynamics or ground-rules of this drama have changed between the first and second books,¹² then Plato would be guilty of a serious breach of the dramatic consistency he adheres to in other dialogues.¹³

2. APPROACHING THRASYMACHUS

In the view of many scholars, Thrasymachus is the key to understanding Plato’s intent in the *Politeia*.¹⁴ By the end of Book I, Thrasymachus has been silenced, and Socrates,

128, and references there.

7 Kahn (1993) 133-34.

8 Kahn (Ibid.) 136.

9 Kahn (Ibid.) 136.

10 Kahn (Ibid.) 136: “Book 1 is the formal counterpart to Book 10: both are autonomous units, detachable from the rest of the work and almost exactly the same in length.”

11 Observed and discussed by, e.g. Stokes (1987); Glucker (1989); Arieti (1991) 231-246; Blondell (2000) 130-144. Kahn, like many other distinguished scholars, does not regard the dialogue as a drama, at least in this sense, since he regards the philosophical views expressed as being those of Plato himself.

12 Blondell (2000) 128: “Book 1 of the *Republic* resembles the ‘early’ or ‘elenctic’ dialogues, and as such deploys dramatic form and character very differently from the remainder of the work. Since Books 2-10 were clearly composed as a continuation of Book 1, we may expect the stylistic shifts to tell us something about Plato’s own shifting attitudes towards philosophical method and its literary expression.” Cf. Annas (1981), n. 1 above.

13 My book on the *Politeia* will show that Book I is an organic part of the whole dialogue, and furthermore, that the dialogue is one consistent drama. While his positions may be inconsistent, Thrasymachus himself behaves in a manner consistent with the character he represents. The change in style between Book I and the later books is simply due to the new demands placed upon Socrates by the two major protagonists of the later books, Glauco and Adimantus.

14 Julia Annas (1981) 34-35 describes research on the *Politeia* as it was twenty five years ago, but the description applies almost as well to the present state of affairs: “The arguments with Thrasymachus are in some ways odd; everyone agrees that what he says is extremely important, for the rest of the *Republic* sets out

who is narrating the conversation, claims that at this point he considered the discussion over. He continues his narrative, however, at the beginning of Book II, with an account of the subsequent challenge by Glauco, who wishes to see Socrates defeat Thrasymachus more convincingly. To this end, Glauco presents the position which he says Thrasymachus and many like him usually advocate, a position somewhat different from anything said in Book I. It is, then, the Thrasymachaeian challenge as presented by Glauco which Socrates purportedly addresses in the remaining books of the *Politeia*. Many scholars, however, seem to prefer the Thrasymachaeian challenge of Book I, where, whatever it is that Thrasymachus appears to be saying, it is this which they consider to be Thrasymachus' true position, and not the one reported by Glauco.

Yet Thrasymachus in Book I has been notoriously difficult to pin down, partly because he appears to advance contradictory positions during his conversation with Socrates. Depending on how one resolves these apparent contradictions, or fails to resolve them, various positions may be, and have been, attributed to him.¹⁵ Since the 1960's, analyses of Thrasymachus in Book I often begin with the listing of three positions perceived to be held by Thrasymachus in the course of his conversation with Socrates:

- a) Justice is the advantage of the stronger¹⁶
- b) Justice is obedience to the laws¹⁷
- c) Justice is another's good, one's own hurt¹⁸

These accounts of justice, goes the argument, are mutually incompatible. From the point of view of the stronger, justice cannot be the advantage of the stronger (himself) and also another's good (a, c). From the point of view of the weaker, considered as the weaker subject of a stronger ruler, justice as obedience to those laws disadvantageous to the ruler conflicts both with justice as the advantage of the stronger (a, b) and justice as another's good (b, c).

Many attempts have been made to show that one or other of the statements reflects the position which Thrasymachus is really meant to be holding in Book I, while the other statements are subsumed under the identified consistent position.¹⁹ A subsequent cause for debate is the question whether the statement chosen to represent Thrasymachus' consistent position is intended to be descriptive or prescriptive. Furthermore, there is no agreement over the cause for the consistency: some, for example, seem to regard the identified

to answer the challenge set by what he claims. This is made explicit at 358b-c. Unfortunately, there is much less agreement over what it is that Thrasymachus says."

15 Kerferd (1947) 19 lists Ethical Nihilism, Legalism, Natural Right and Psychological egoism as positions previously attributed by scholars to Thrasymachus, of which he chooses Natural Right as the correct attribution (27). Kerferd's article seems to have been the forerunner for a spate of articles in the same vein, whereby lists of attributed positions are examined and whittled down to one or other correct attribution. Lists can vary widely; e.g. Chappell (1993) 2 identifies previous interpretations according to which Thrasymachus: 1. makes no clear point; 2. is a revolutionary; 3. is a Thucydidean cynic; 4. agrees with Callicles in the *Gorgias*; 5. is a Nietzschean immoralist; 6. believes that justice means obedience to the laws; 7. means to recommend injustice as a way of life.

16 Explicitly stated by Thrasymachus at 338c, 339a, 341a, 344c.

17 Inferred from the argument at 339b7. Hourani (1962) seems to have been the first to formalize this apparent position (see his presentation below). It is now customary to mention this along with the other two contradictory positions if only to explain it away; but see, e.g., Chappell (1993) 3 for a slightly different list which replaces this position with two others drawn from statements made by Thrasymachus at 338e in his first set-piece argument.

18 Explicitly stated by Thrasymachus at 343c.

19 Thrasymachus essentially advocated:

a) Justice is the advantage of the stronger: Nettleship (1901) 28; Barker (1959) 95; Crombie (1962) 81-85; Cross & Woosley (1964) 32-60; Guthrie (1969) 88-90; Irwin (1977) 289 n23; id. (1995) 174-75.

b) Justice is obedience to the laws: Hourani (1962); Anscombe (1963); c) Justice is another's good, one's own hurt: Kerferd (1947); Sparshott (1966); Henderson (1970); Nicholson (1974); Annas (1981) 46; Reeve (1985) 247; Chappell (1993); Scaltsas (1993).

consistent position as historical fact, being that of the actual sophist, Thrasymachus;²⁰ others require from Plato nothing less than a consistent position to serve as decent opposition for the serious arguments presented by Socrates-Plato.²¹ Not everyone has argued for a consistent Thrasymachus. Many have found Plato's Thrasymachus inconsistent, but again there is much disagreement, this time over the nature of the inconsistency.²² Whether arguing for consistency or for inconsistency, scholars tend to share the assumption that the matter is to be settled by subjecting Thrasymachus' arguments to logical analysis, as if this would determine Thrasymachus' level of comprehension or confusion. In other words, scholars on both sides of the divide tend to treat Thrasymachus as a thinker, or even philosopher,²³ who is fairly or unfairly treated by Plato the dramatist.²⁴

3. IS THRASYMACHUS CONFUSED?

A brief survey of a logical analysis of Thrasymachus' first argument should suffice to show that judging Thrasymachus according to the criterion of logic is misguided.

Thrasymachus begins the argument proper with an assertion which he enunciates in one form or another four times in all (338c, 339a, 341a, 344c). It is usually translated as "Justice is the advantage of the stronger".²⁵ To distinguish this from many other assertions which Thrasymachus makes, I shall call it the slogan. It is with this slogan, in one form or another, that Thrasymachus concludes his major arguments. This slogan, in the form "Justice is the advantage of the stronger", is transformed in modern philosophical analyses into the first of the three "accounts of justice" listed in the previous section. Hourani's

20 E.g., Henderson (1970) 218: "I believe that the interpretation I shall give is the position Thrasymachus held, that Plato understood it in this way, and that in the dialogue Socrates addressed himself to it directly. If his arguments fail to refute Thrasymachus, as I think they do, it is *not* because the disputants are arguing at cross-purposes, but rather because Socrates' arguments are defective." Reeve (1985) 263: "Plato doesn't tell us in so many words whether he thinks these Thrasymachean arguments are successful or not, but his subsequent practice in the *Republic* suggests that he thinks they are."

21 Annas (1981) 35 argues that creating a confused Thrasymachus would be a pointless procedure for Plato to follow, and continues (35-36): "It is clear from the beginning of Book 2 that Plato took Thrasymachus to be defending a theory which was a real and dangerous alternative to what he took to be the truth about justice. If he were deliberately presenting the opposition as being weaker than in fact he took it to be, he would be guilty of intellectual dishonesty." Chappell (1993) 1: "Thrasymachus' statement of an alternative to standard views about justice in *Republic* Bk. I sets the challenge which *Republic* Bks. II-X must answer. If this is not a serious challenge, if Thrasymachus' alternative view of justice is not interesting, plausible or coherent, it is not clear why moral philosophers should bother with *The Republic* at all. Here I will offer an interpretation of Thrasymachus' alternative view of justice which does make his view out to be interesting, and plausible, and coherent."

22 E.g., Sparshott (1966) notes two inconsistencies. He maintains that Thrasymachus' fundamental position is that just action is action good for another (430) but (432) "he really does begin by saying that justice depends on law (and is therefore conventional)"; secondly, "he maintains to the end the coincidence of 'another's good' and 'the interest of the stronger' in the sense of the rulers' interests, even while adducing examples of just action that refute the equation."

Guthrie (1969) 94: "But what consistency, it may be asked, is there in contending that (a) justice is the interest of the ruling power (which Thrasymachus states simply and without qualification), but (b) it is not just for the ruler to seek his own interest, i.e. justice?" Maguire (1971) 163: "(Thrasymachus) third assertion, 'right is another's good, or advantage', adapts the first, 'right is the advantage of the stronger' (which is a consequence of the second, 'right is obedience to the laws') to state a moral theory. This third assertion is quite incompatible with the other two, and does not, in fact, belong, by origin, with them. It is, rather *Plato's* device to move from political statements about 'right' to the very different question, whether observance of 'right' (i.e. justice), is more or less advantageous than non-observance (i.e. injustice)."

23 So, e.g., Scaltsas (1993) 261.

24 An outstanding exception is Klosko (1984).

25 338c1-2 τὸ δίκαιον ("the just", "what is just", "justice") is nothing other than τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον ("the advantage of the stronger/superior").

influential analysis of Thrasymachus' first supporting argument (338d7-339a4) well exemplifies the modern philosophical mode of interpretation in which this transformation takes place:²⁶

The explanation is given briefly (338-339a) in three premisses and a conclusion.

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

Certainly.

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

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

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

Hourani restates this argument schematically on the next page:²⁷

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

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

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

[Conclusion]:

Therefore justice is the advantage of the stronger.

Hourani's third premise, the definition of justice as obeying the laws, is henceforth in the literature the second "account of justice" held by Thrasymachus, an account usually explained away or subsumed to one of the other two "accounts of justice". Thrasymachus, however, proposed no such definition in the first place. It has been read into the text in order to make logical sense of the argument, as becomes more apparent at the end of Hourani's analysis:

Although the definition is not very clear in this premiss as stated by Thrasymachus, we know that it is present — as a definition — for these reasons: (a) It is basic to the argument, which would collapse without this link; for *without it there would be no connection between justice and the rulers*. (b) In the passage which follows immediately afterwards (339b-e), Socrates in cross-questioning Thrasymachus makes it plain that he understands obedience to law as *one* of the supposed definitions offered by Thrasymachus...²⁸

Ever since Hourani's article, this definition of justice has been generally accepted as part of Thrasymachus' argument, whether it is treated as Thrasymachus' "true" position or not. Logic requires its presence, whether Thrasymachus gave this definition or not. The

26 Hourani (1962) 111.

27 Hourani (1962) 112.

28 Hourani (1962) 112-13. The emphases are Hourani's.

argument falls logically without it. Is Thrasymachus so confused that he failed to provide such an important link in the chain? Or could it be that his argument does not actually require this definition? A comparison of Hourani's scheme with what Thrasymachus actually says is instructive:

3. 1. Thrasymachus vs. Hourani's step [i]

We recall that Hourani's step [i] was, "The rulers in each city are the stronger, [Fact of politics]." Is Thrasymachus simply presenting a fact of politics here? A literal translation of the first part of Thrasymachus' argument runs as follows (338d7-11):²⁹

Don't you know then, said he, that of cities, some are "tyrannized", some are "democratted", and some are "aristocratted"?
How could I not?
Therefore this "crats" (rules over others) in each city, the governing power (*to archon*)?
Quite.³⁰

We may note immediately that had Thrasymachus simply been describing a fact of politics, as Hourani designates his step [i], he could have begun with the second question, that it is the governing power (*to archon*) which rules in every city. This he does not do. He feels the need to begin with another question.

What, then, is the point of the first question? Thrasymachus observes interrogatively that cities are tyrannized, democratted and aristocratted. Thrasymachus wishes this first observation to appear to lead to the conclusion that what rules in each city is the governing power. This first question, therefore, is intended to appear to be general and applicable to every city. Indeed, it refers to the rule of the individual (tyrant), the rule of the many (demos), and the rule of the few (aristocrats). Why, however, are the verbs Thrasymachus employs not more general in scope? Instead of τυραννοῦνται ("are ruled by a tyrant"), Thrasymachus could have chosen to say μοναρχοῦνται ("are ruled by one"), to denote all forms of rule by one person.³¹ In the same way, ὀλιγαρχοῦνται ("are ruled by a few") would have been more general than ἀριστοκρατοῦνται ("are ruled by aristocrats"), the verb which Thrasymachus chooses to use. Consider the following exchange, using the more general verbs, which Thrasymachus should have done had he been aiming at a logical argument:

Don't you know then, said he, that of cities, some are "monarchied", some are "democratted", and some are "oligarchied"?
How could I not?
Therefore this "crats" (rules over others) in each city, the governing power (*to archon*)?
Quite.

The verbs now stress not ruling over others (*krat*), but governing (*arch*), and it would

29 338d7-11: εἴτ' οὐκ οἴσθ', ἔφη, ὅτι τῶν πόλεων αἱ μὲν τυραννοῦνται, αἱ δὲ δημοκρατοῦνται, αἱ δὲ ἀριστοκρατοῦνται; πῶς γὰρ οὐ; οὐκοῦν τοῦτο κρατεῖ ἐν ἐκάστη πόλει, τὸ ἄρχον; πάνυ γε.

30 The passage may sound forced in English, but it sounds perfectly natural in Greek.

31 Furthermore, in being specific, Thrasymachus preferred τυραννοῦνται to βασιλεύονται ("are ruled by a king"). Both verbs can be used together, and are, e.g., at *Resp.* 576d2. Thrasymachus clearly wished to stress the tyrant.

indeed have been a more natural observation to make, that the governing power (*to archon*) in each city governs (*archei*), an observation which could easily have followed upon the use of the more general verbs with the *arch* suffixes. Rather than use the more natural coupling of a cognate noun and verb (*to archon, archei*), Thrasymachus has chosen to insinuate that the governing power (*to archon*) rules over others (*kratei*).³² This is particularly interesting since the coupling is not submitted to scrutiny in Thrasymachus' questioning. The verb *kratei* follows from Thrasymachus' choice of verbs in the first question: rule by a tyrant implies *kratos*, power over others,³³ while the other two verbs have *krat* suffixes. The order of the verbs, ending with the two *krat* verbs, allows the smooth verbal transition to the second question. The second question asks whether what *krats* in each city (apparently a given that something "crats") is *to archon*. Attention is directed to answering what the thing is which "crats" (rules over others) in every city, and away from the unasked question whether something does indeed "crat" in each and every city.

The notion that something does rule over others in every city has been slipped in (using the verb *kratei*) while asking whether it is the governing power that rules over others in every city. Furthermore, the second question moves the governing power from being over the city (it is the city which is tyrannized, etc., in the first question) to being in the city, and now ruling over — it may be inferred already — subjects, the other inhabitants, in the city. This small change prepares the way for the subsequent claim that the ruled in the city are exploited by the governing power.

3. 2. Thrasymachus vs. Hourani's step [ii]

Hourani's step [ii] was, "The laws are always made by the rulers for their own advantage. [Fact of psychology]." Here, however, is a literal translation of Thrasymachus' argument (338e1-3)³⁴

Each regime (*arche*) lays down the laws with a view to the advantage for itself, a democracy democratic (laws), a tyranny tyrannical (laws), and in this way the other (regimes).

The argument concerns the governing power (*to archon* is now *he arche*), and not, as Hourani claims, the rulers (*hoi archontes*). The ruling power is conceived to be the constitution itself, such as a democracy or a tyranny.

A democracy does always lay down democratic laws, but only in the sense that the laws are those laid down by a democracy, regardless of any advantage or disadvantage accruing therefrom to the democracy. Similarly, tyrannical laws are always tyrannical in that they are laid down by a tyranny, regardless of any advantage or disadvantage accruing therefrom to the tyranny. Thrasymachus, however, clearly wishes his audience to confuse this sense of the adjectives, "pertaining to a democracy/tyranny", with another sense, "advantageous to a democracy/tyranny". This is achieved by mentioning advantage before using these adjectives in the argument.

It is, however, a historical fact of politics that a democracy can lay down undemocratic laws, leading to the downfall of that democracy; similarly, a tyranny can lay down untyrannical laws, leading to the downfall of that tyranny. This argument, therefore, has nothing to do with a fact of psychology (indeed, there are no people involved), nor even a fact of politics, but rather an argument based on simple wordplay. It continues the construction of an argument which has the appearance of a general truth regarding all

32 On the distinction, see Glucker (1987) 142-45.

33 Plato's Thrasymachus would no doubt have used **τυραννοκρατέω** had there been such a verb, but he had to make do with what there was.

34 338e1-3: τίθεται δὲ γὰρ τοὺς νόμους ἐκάστη ἢ ἀρχὴ πρὸς τὸ αὐτῇ συμφέρον, δημοκρατία μὲν δημοκρατικούς, τυραννὶς δὲ τυραννικούς, καὶ αἱ ἄλλαι οὕτως

regimes.

3. 3. Thrasymachus vs. Hourani's step [iii]

We turn now to Hourani's step [iii], "Justice is obeying the laws. [Definition]". Here is Thrasymachus' argument (338e3-6):³⁵

In laying down [these laws], [the regimes] have made it apparent that *this* is [what is] just for those ruled, the advantage to themselves (i.e., the regimes' advantage), and they punish anyone transgressing it (i.e., the regimes' advantage) as someone both lawbreaking and unjust.

We have already seen that Hourani acknowledges that the alleged definition is not actually in the text. To be more precise, I submit, the definition is deduced from a misinterpretation of the text. Hourani regards the ruling power as rulers who intentionally and arbitrarily define their own advantage as just. Hourani is not alone in this interpretation. Scholars have usually taken the verb ἀπέφηναν ("made apparent") to mean "declared", "called", etc.,³⁶ adducing a parallel passage which is to be found in *Legg.* IV. 714c-d. While the argument there is indeed yet another one supporting the advantage of the superior, the superior in that instance is the superior man, and it is the superior man there who expressly *calls* his laws just. This is not the case in our passage, despite the apparent similarities.³⁷ The verb ἀποφαίνω may mean "declare" in certain contexts, but it cannot have that meaning here. Simply by laying down laws peculiar to its type of constitution, and punishing those who transgress those laws, a political regime does not *declare* that its own advantage is just for the ruled; rather, by doing so, it *reveals, quite unintentionally*, that its own advantage is just for the ruled. It is, furthermore, inconceivable that regimes in the abstract would look to their own interest, let alone declare what is to their own advantage. The superior man of the *Laws* passage, being human, is able both to look to his own advantage and declare it to be just for the ruled. The sense of the sentence in our passage requires ἀπέφηναν to have its more usual meaning of "they made apparent".

The argument, then, is as follows. Regimes lay down laws to their own advantage; for, as we see, laws are peculiar to the type of regime which laid them down (we have already noted the wordplay in step [ii]). By this action, the regimes (unintentionally) make apparent that *this* is just for the ruled, the advantage to the regimes themselves; and furthermore (here comes another observation), the law-breaker is punished as unjust.

Even on this interpretation, it might be argued, it is necessary to supply Hourani's deduced definition in order to make sense of the argument. As Hourani suggests, without obedience to the laws being considered just, there is no connection between justice and the rulers. It might be added that if the law-breaker (mentioned) is punished as unjust, the law-abider (not mentioned) is surely not punished, and is considered just for obeying the laws. Therefore, the argument would go, obedience to the laws is itself just, and by the same token, the laws themselves might be considered just. The fact is that in his first argument, the only thing Thrasymachus describes as just is the advantage to the regime, and this advantage is not the laws themselves, nor is it obedience to them. Laws are only a means to

35 338e3-6: θέμεναι δὲ ἀπέφηναν τοῦτο δίκαιον τοῖς ἀρχομένοις εἶναι, τὸ σφίσι συμφέρον, καὶ τὸν τοῦτου ἐκβαίνοντα κολάζουσιν ὡς παρανομοῦντά τε καὶ ἀδικοῦντα.

36 E.g., Hourani (1962) 111: "In laying down these laws they have made it plain that what is to their advantage is just for their subjects."

Kerferd (1964) 13: "... 'Justice is obedience to the laws' is something which the rulers have brought about by declaring it to be the case, cf. ἀπέφηναν in 338e3, ὀνομάσαι in 359a3 and *Laws* 714d." Guthrie (1969) 93: "All governments make laws in their own interest, and call that justice..."

37 To quote, e.g., Sparshott (1966) 421: "Plato is in any case discernibly a philosopher of multiple connections and ambiguities: arguments and analogies are repeated from dialogue to dialogue with changed emphasis and point."

the end, the advantage of the regime.

Thrasymachus gives two reasons why the advantage of the regime is just. One is that the regime lays down laws to its own advantage. The assumption here is that the laws are laid down to promote what is just; hence, since the laws promote the regime's own advantage, what is just turns out to be the regime's own advantage. The second reason is the observation that anyone transgressing the law is punished as someone unjust. This second reason seems to have been added to make the link with justice explicit. If someone not carrying out the advantage of the regime is considered unjust, then this shows — so Thrasymachus with superficial plausibility — that the advantage of the regime is just. We may ask ourselves why Thrasymachus prefers to point to the unjust man rather than the just man, and why he does not say that obedience to the laws is just, or that the laws themselves are just. The answer might be that were he to do any of these things, he would no longer be able to call the advantage of the regime τὸ δίκαιον (“the just thing”, “what is just”, “justice”), but only δίκαιον (“just”, “something just”), one of a plurality of things that are just.³⁸

3. 4. Thrasymachus vs. Hourani's Conclusion

And finally, Hourani's fourth step: “[Conclusion]: Therefore justice is the advantage of the stronger.” Thrasymachus' argument is as follows (338e6-339a4):³⁹

This, then, O best of men, is what I say is the same just [thing] in all the cities, the advantage of the established regime (*arche*); and this [i.e., the regime] anywhere “crats” [*kratei* — rules over others], so that it follows for anyone reasoning rightly that everywhere the same [thing] is just, the advantage of the superior (*to kreittonos*).

Having already insinuated into the argument that the regime (*he arche*) or ruling power (*to archon*) rules over others (*kratei*) in the city, and having argued that what is just is the advantage of this regime, Thrasymachus now restates in his peroration firstly, that in every city the same thing is just, the advantage of the established regime, and secondly, that the regime anywhere rules over others (*kratei*). From these premises he concludes that everywhere the same thing is just, the advantage of the superior (*to kreittonos*), which is the slogan the argument is intended to prove. He appears to have proved it, but this does not mean that he has proved it logically.

The first point to note is that the earlier insinuation that the governing power rules over others (*kratei*) is now vital to the argument. It is part of the second premise from which the conclusion appears to be drawn, and a listener could be forgiven for thinking that it was a premise based on the earlier argument.

The second point to note is that the conclusion which follows from this premise should pertain to the advantage of the power that rules over others (*to kratoun* — “the thing which rules over others”). However, instead of the more logical conclusion that justice is the advantage of that which rules over others (*to tou kratountos sumpheron*), Thrasymachus substitutes *to tou kreittonos sumpheron*, the advantage of the superior.⁴⁰

38 The slogan supported by this argument is about τὸ δίκαιον, “the just thing”, or “justice”: the definite article does not appear, following Ancient Greek usage, in the predicate. In any case, even if the present passage might appear to be referring only to “something just”, the word “just” is predicated of the one and only thing called just in this argument — the advantage of the superior, and the intent is that this exclusively is what is just.

39 338e6-339a4: τοῦτ' οὖν ἐστίν, ὃ βέλτιστε, ὃ λέγω ἐν ἀπάσαις ταῖς πόλεσιν ταῦτόν εἶναι δίκαιον, τὸ τῆς καθεστηκυίας ἀρχῆς συμφέρον · αὐτὴ δὲ που κρατεῖ, ὥστε συμβαίνει τῷ ὀρθῶς λογιζομένῳ πανταχοῦ εἶναι τὸ αὐτὸ δίκαιον, τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον.

40 Instead of τὸ τοῦ κρατοῦντος συμφέρον we are given τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον.

The whole argument depends upon our conscious or unconscious acceptance of this substitution. The slogan pertained to the superior, yet Thrasymachus has chosen throughout the argument not to mention the superior, only substituting it for the *krat*-verb in the very last stage, the final conclusion. The *krat*-verb was insinuated early into the argument in order to be substituted at the last minute. The similarity between *krat*-stem words and *kreitt*-stem words, both in meaning and in sound, eases the transition from one to the other. Yet in Attic they are not identical. Indeed, had they been identical, there would have been no need for the subterfuge: Thrasymachus could have used *kreitt*-stem words throughout to prove his slogan. Thrasymachus has been careful to insinuate that the regime everywhere “crats” without asking Socrates whether every regime is *kreiton* (“superior”). Had he done so, it is unlikely that Socrates would have agreed without first settling the identity of the inferior. Thrasymachus’ argument identifies the inferior as all those who are subject to the laws. In a democracy, the democratic regime comprising the citizens of the polis would turn out to be superior to (some of) themselves — and this would have ruined Thrasymachus’ argument. Partly in order to avoid exposing this absurdity, Thrasymachus has taken care not to identify the “superior” with the rulers, and offers an argument which effectively equates the “superior” with the similar sounding “ruling power”.

Is Thrasymachus confused? It would seem that he is not. His subterfuges, word-games, equivocations and subtle hints all serve one grand design, to make his slogan appear true. Whatever it was that Thrasymachus wished to prove by his first argument, he has not proved it by philosophical means. The argument is intended not to be logical, but persuasive.

4. THE SLOGAN

The slogan itself still eludes our understanding. It is the truth of this slogan which Thrasymachus would have his audience persuaded of by his first argument, but we have seen that the argument itself is not a reliable indicator of the meaning of the slogan. The conclusion to the first argument, strictly speaking, should apply to the ruling power; but this is clearly not what Thrasymachus has in mind, since had it been the case, he would have had no reason to switch from “the ruling power” to “the superior” precisely in the conclusion. Furthermore, the slogan, first enunciated before the argument we have analysed, referred to “the superior” and not “the ruling power”. It is this earlier slogan which the first argument is intended to prove, and it is “the superior” rather than “the ruling power” which Thrasymachus wished to prove something about. The “superior”, therefore, remains something of a mystery. If the first argument is unreliable, perhaps we can learn more from the rest of the discussion, especially the Socratic elenchus. After all, Socrates is always attempting to reach the truth, is he not? A brief examination of the debate, focussing on the substitutes for “the superior”, reveals that it is not only the first argument of Thrasymachus which persuades at the expense of logical consistency.

4. 1. Preliminaries

Before Thrasymachus presents his slogan for the first time, he pretends for a while that he wants Socrates to say what justice is. He forbids Socrates to give simple definitions such as “the beneficial”, “the profitable”, “the gainful”, or, finally, “the advantageous” (*to sumpheron* — “advantage”, 336d2). His own slogan, however, says that justice is nothing other than the advantage of the superior (*to tou kreitonos sumpheron* — 338c1-3). After Thrasymachus’ first argument, Socrates will begin his cross-examination by drawing attention to Thrasymachus’ simple addition of “of the superior” to one of the forbidden definitions “the advantage” (339a6-9). Having drawn attention to this, however, he does

not immediately ask what “the superior” signifies, but merely wonders whether the resulting claim — that justice is the advantage of the superior — is true (339b2-3).

The strategy Socrates adopts in his cross-examination is to show that justice is the advantage of the inferior, or that justice is no more the advantage than the disadvantage of the superior; but his “superior” is as slippery as that of Thrasymachus, and no attempt is made to clear this point up. One might almost imagine that the term is left deliberately vague. It is Clitopho who finally mentions “the superior” in the masculine singular (340b7), clearly signifying “the superior man”, and this in a political context, but he appears to assume that this has been the subject of the slogan all along. We shall see later that all the participants have assumed this to be the case.

4. 2. The Superior — not the physically stronger man

When Thrasymachus introduces his slogan (“For I say that what is just is nothing other than the advantage of the superior” 338c1-2), he clearly expects his audience to be impressed by it. It is as if he assumes that his audience understands what he means by it, and that what he means by it is something clever, even astonishing. Indeed, they should be astonished were they to know Thrasymachus’ usual position. And in fact, at least Glauco knows Thrasymachus’ usual position — on which more later (§5).

Socrates’ first reaction upon hearing the slogan is to feign incomprehension; but he appears to know what Thrasymachus has in mind, since he successfully annoys Thrasymachus with his counter-example (338c6-d2):⁴¹

“I don’t suppose you mean that if beef gives advantage to the body of Pulydamas the all-round athlete who is superior/stronger than us (ἡμῶν κρείττων), this food is both an advantage to us and just for us who are weaker than him”.

Thrasymachus thereupon indulges in some name-calling, and accuses Socrates of interpreting the *logos* where he could do it most harm (d3-4). Such an accusation could not be made without it appearing that Socrates knew exactly what Thrasymachus actually intended. Furthermore, it would seem that Thrasymachus does intend something specific, even if it is hard to pin him down by sheer philosophical analysis of the argument.

Among the points which Socrates may have misinterpreted, we may note the following:

- a) Thrasymachus was making a general claim about justice, or what is just; the whole of what is just is the advantage of the superior. Socrates does identify “just” with “advantage”, but these terms are particular, being merely predicated of the subject “beef”.
- b) Socrates construes what is of advantage to the superior to be of advantage (not only just) also to the inferior. Had Thrasymachus intended the advantage to be to both the superior and the inferior, he would not have specified only the superior.
- c) Socrates posits a physical, common and mundane, advantage. We do not yet know what sort of advantage Thrasymachus had in mind, but it was probably somewhat more than mere beef.
- d) Socrates uses *kreitton* in the sense of *ischuroteros* — “physically stronger”. The ambiguity between “superior” and “physically stronger” is the basis for an entire argument in Plato’s *Gorgias*,⁴² but the opportunity for a thorough

41 338c6-d2: οὐ γάρ που τό γε τοιόνδε φής· εἰ Πουλυδάμας ἡμῶν κρείττων ὁ παγκρατιαστής καὶ αὐτῷ συμφέρει τὰ βόεια κρέα πρὸς τὸ σῶμα, τοῦτο τὸ σίτιον εἶναι καὶ ἡμῖν τοῖς ἥττοσιν ἐκείνου συμφέρον ἅμα καὶ δίκαιον.

42 In the *Gorgias*, Socrates finds himself eventually arguing with his host, Callicles, on a theme very

philosophical examination seems to have been thrown away here.

Thrasymachus, therefore, intends his slogan to pertain to the advantage specifically of the superior, where the superior is not a physically stronger man. Socrates appears to know what Thrasymachus means, by stating explicitly that his counter-example, the beef of Pulydamas, is probably not what Thrasymachus had in mind. Socrates' counter-example leads to Thrasymachus' first argument in support of his slogan.

4. 3. The Superior — the ruling power

We have already seen in our examination of Thrasymachus' first argument (§3) that although the conclusion matches the slogan (...it follows for anyone reasoning rightly that everywhere the same [thing] is just, the advantage of the superior [*toū kreittonos*] — 339a2-3), “the superior” is a late substitution for “the ruling power” which has been the superior entity throughout the argument proper. The established regime (*arche*), identified with the ruling power (*to kratoun*), becomes in the conclusion the superior (*to kreitton*). Apart from the similarity in sound and in sense (*krat-kreitt*, ruling over others, superior), we may suspect further word play here. Logically, Thrasymachus has been talking about the superior thing. His argument, however, pertains to the superior man.⁴³ He can get away with this sleight of hand because the form of the genitive case — “of the superior” — is identical for all genders; *toū kreittonos* may be interpreted by the audience as masculine, in alignment with their expectations, although it is logically neuter according to the argument supporting the slogan.

4. 4. The Superior — the rulers

Thrasymachus has presented his first argument in support of his slogan, and by sleight of hand has substituted throughout the argument “the regime” and “the ruling power” for “the superior” which only appears finally in the conclusion. Socrates' refutation is swift and easily achieved. He begins by asking Thrasymachus whether it is also just to obey the rulers, and Thrasymachus agrees that it is (339b7-9). It appears to be assumed in the subsequent argument that the rulers are superior, and the ruled are inferior; but this is not made explicit. By observing that while it is just to obey the laws, rulers mistakenly make laws not to their own advantage, Socrates arrives at the conclusion (339d1-3):⁴⁴

“So it is just (*dikaion*) according to your argument not only to do the advantage of the superior (*toū kreittonos*), but also the opposite, [namely to

similar to that offered by Thrasymachus, and it takes Socrates a while to push Callicles to express his true opinion regarding the superior man. Having shown that Callicles does not distinguish between the terms “superior” (*κρείττων*, opposed to *ἥττων*), “better” (*βελτίων*, opposed to *χείρων*), or “worthier” (*ἀμείνων*, opposed to *φαιλότερος* — *Gorgias* 488b2-6), Socrates finds that Callicles also fails to distinguish between “superior” and “physically stronger” (*ισχυρότερος*), even when Socrates reasons that the Many, being numerically stronger than an individual, are “superior”, and their laws are therefore those of the naturally superior and better. Finally, when Socrates reaches the logical conclusion that, since the Many are those who establish laws in pursuit of equity (*τὸ ἴσον ἔχειν*), and since the (numerically) stronger are naturally superior, the just thing both by convention and by nature is to strive for equity (489a8ff.), it is only then that Callicles declares that he means by “the superior” “the better”, and not a group of “worthless good-for-nothings” (489b7ff.). Callicles had allowed the physically stronger to be the superior, but now backs away from this identification, as it threatens to undermine his position, that the just thing by nature is not to strive for equity, but to outdo, at the expense of others.

43 That this is the case will become clearer in §5 below, but we have already noted in §4.1 that Clitopho assumes that “the superior” of the slogan is the superior man.

44 339d1-3: οὐ μόνον ἄρα δίκαιόν ἐστιν κατὰ τὸν σὸν λόγον τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον ποιεῖν ἀλλὰ καὶ τούναντίον, τὸ μὴ συμφέρον.

do] what is not the advantage [of the superior]”

This is considered a refutation of the slogan, since justice is now associated not only with the advantage but also with the disadvantage of the superior. Interestingly, the refutation refers to the superior in the singular, although it was Socrates who had shifted the discussion from the ruling power to the rulers themselves. The singular superior entity is treated in this argument as the plural rulers.⁴⁵

Thrasymachus reacts to this refutation in a fairly predictable way (“What are you saying?” d4). Unfortunately for him, it allows Socrates to recapitulate his argument (e1-8). This time he explicitly identifies the rulers with “the superior” in the plural (*tois archousi te kai kreittosi* — 2), but remarkably, this does not prevent him from reverting to the singular form of “superior” in his conclusion, made all the more remarkable by the appearance there of “inferior” in the plural (339e6-8):⁴⁶

“Then, most wise Thrasymachus, doesn’t it necessarily follow that it is just (*dikaion*) to do the opposite of what you say? For it seems that it is the disadvantage of the [singular] superior which is laid upon the [plural] inferiors to do.”⁴⁷

This restated refutation is even stronger than the original, since the conclusion, taken on its own, appears to prove that the inferior subjects are (always?) commanded to do what is to the disadvantage (never the advantage) of the superior ruler.

The debate between Socrates and Thrasymachus breaks down here, allowing the intervention of members of the audience. Polemarchus, for one, seems satisfied by this refutation.

4. 5. The Superior — a superior man, a ruler

Polemarchus sides with Socrates. He repeats the plural to singular phenomenon, mentioning “the superior” in the plural during the argument (*tous kreittous* — 340b2), but reverting to the singular in his recapitulation of the refutation (340b4-5):⁴⁸

“the advantage of the superior [*tu kreittonos*] would be no more just than the not-advantage.”

Clitopho in a cameo performance pitches in to help out Thrasymachus. His interpretation of what Thrasymachus means is that what is just is what seems to the superior man to be the advantage of the superior, whether it is actually advantageous or not (340c1-5). Thrasymachus immediately rejects this appeal to mere appearance, and offers his own counter-proposal. In the process, a new element introduced by Clitopho is implicitly accepted. On the way to his proposal, Clitopho referred for the first time in this dialogue to the unambiguously masculine form *ho kreitton* (ὁ κρείττων 340b7), meaning the superior man. This is remarkable, given that the previous arguments have been dealing with the

45 We might note in passing some of the other underhand manoeuvres Socrates executes. He has somehow obliged Thrasymachus to agree that more than one thing is just (obedience to the laws is also just); but the slogan is about the one thing that is just, the advantage of the superior. Why Thrasymachus has to agree to this will become apparent later (§§4.7, 6.4 below). Furthermore, Socrates has shifted the significance of what is just, from being to doing. This is a shift which is reflected in subsequent formulations of the slogan.

46 339e6-8: ἄρα τότε, ὦ σοφώτατε Θρασύμαχε, οὐκ ἀναγκαῖον συμβαίνειν αὐτὸ οὕτως, δίκαιον εἶναι ποιεῖν τοῦναντίον ἢ ὃ σὺ λέγεις; τὸ γὰρ τοῦ κρείττονος ἀσύμφορον δήπου προστάττεται τοῖς ἥττοσιν ποιεῖν.

47 I.e., the inferior subjects are commanded to perform what is actually to the disadvantage of the superior ruler.

48 340b4-5: οὐδὲν μᾶλλον τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον δίκαιον ἂν εἴη ἢ τὸ μὴ συμφέρον. The formulation “no more X than Y” is a common mode of refutation in eristic debate, on which see §6.1 below.

regime or with rulers in the plural. Could it be that Clitopho (along with the rest of the audience) has been aware all along that “the superior” of the slogan is intended to be the superior man?

4. 6. The Superior — a strictly expert ruler

Thrasymachus strongly disagrees with Clitopho’s suggestion (340c6). His counter-proposal implicitly introduces yet another new element, expertise, and it is this, rather than the implicitly accepted shift to the superior individual, which becomes the centre of attention. Thrasymachus gives examples of various craftsmen, and he slips easily from craftsman to expert to ruler (*demiourgos, sophos, archon*).⁴⁹ His new argument is as follows. While rulers in the loose sense make mistakes, the ruler *qua* ruler⁵⁰ does not make mistakes. Mistakes betray a lack of expertise in the agent at the moment that the error is made, and a person lacking expertise is not an expert.⁵¹ The ruler worthy of the name of ruler is the one who is not mistaken when he legislates; this is what Thrasymachus meant by the ruler who legislates what is best for himself, and it is this (the best for the ruler) which must be done by the ruled (singular!).⁵² Thrasymachus concludes (341a3-4):⁵³

“So that I say what I said from the beginning was just, to do the advantage of the superior”

Thrasymachus appears to have successfully countered Socrates’ refutation. Those who legislate to their own disadvantage are mistaken, and hence not rulers at all. Those who legislate to their own advantage are not mistaken, but rather are expert rulers, and hence rulers *tout court*. No ruler, therefore, legislates to his own disadvantage. And since the ruler is the superior, what Thrasymachus originally claimed still stands.

Thrasymachus clearly wishes his audience to believe that he is making the same claim that he made originally. He asserts that what he said then is what he says now. Indeed, the slogan — *to tou kreittonos sumpheron* — is still discernible, and an inattentive listener might not spot the differences. However:

- a) an additional word has been inserted into the slogan, the infinitive “to do” (*poiein*). It was Socrates who shifted the field of justice from being to doing (§4.4 above), and Thrasymachus has adapted. Of course, being the advantage of the superior is not the same as doing it; yet Thrasymachus has now asserted that each of these is (exclusively) what is just.
- b) the argument supporting the slogan has shifted from treating the superior as a regime to the superior as a ruler in the strict sense. Neither substitute for the superior is what is really intended by the term.

4. 7. The Superior — crafts, a craft in the strict sense

Socrates does not question the notion of ruler *qua* ruler. On the contrary, he

49 340e4-5: δημιουργός ἢ σοφός ἢ ἄρχων...

50 340e8-341a1: τὸν ἄρχοντα, καθ’ ὅσον ἄρχων ἐστίν... “the ruler, so far as he is a ruler...” The point Thrasymachus is making is that a craftsman who makes a mistake is not, strictly speaking, a craftsman at the moment that he makes a mistake. The mistake arises from a lack of knowledge.

51 The argument is sophistic and relies on the acceptance of a black and white dichotomy: a person when performing something without error is an outright expert in that field; but when performing with error is entirely lacking in that expertise, and undeserving of the name associated with that expertise.

52 341a2: τῷ ἀρχομένῳ. This ruled individual is explicitly identified with the inferior (τῷ ἥττονι) for the first time only at 341b7, and by Socrates, but again apparently incidentally, in a question designed to clarify whether the individual superior ruler under discussion is a ruler in the loose sense or in the strict sense.

53 341a3-4: ὥστε ὅπερ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἔλεγον δίκαιον λέγω, τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος ποιεῖν συμφέρον.

develops the idea of craftsmen in the strict sense of the word, and crafts (*technai*) in the strict sense — and an already bizarre conversation becomes positively surreal (342c8-d2):⁵⁴

“Yet indeed, Thrasymachus, crafts govern (*archousi*) and rule over (*kratousi*) that of which they are crafts (*technai*).”

He agreed with great difficulty.

“So no body of knowledge (*episteme*) looks to, or demands, the advantage of the (singular) superior (*to tou kreittonos sumpheron*). but rather the [advantage] of the (singular) inferior ruled by it.”

He also agreed to this eventually...

What might appear at first sight surprising is that Thrasymachus actually agrees to these claims, albeit with difficulty. The terms of reference have never been so remote from what Thrasymachus intended by “the superior”. But Socrates seems to be playing the same game that Thrasymachus has been playing, using substitutes instead of the real thing, substitutes which may be replaced by “the superior” in the conclusion, in such a way that the arguments of Thrasymachus and Socrates appear respectively to support and refute the slogan. Since they are playing the same game, Thrasymachus cannot but accept Socrates’ blatantly outrageous claims. We may note that:

- a) Socrates manages to retain the impression that he is still talking about Thrasymachus’ original claim by using terms which have already been used by Thrasymachus, including part of the slogan itself (“the advantage of the superior”) and the verbs “govern” and “rule over others”.
- b) *techne* is variously translated as “art”, “craft”, “trade”, or “skill”. I have elsewhere observed that it would be more useful to consider *techne* as the synthesis of *mathema* and *epitedeuma*, a learned knowledge and its practice.⁵⁵ The knowledge, once acquired, is *episteme*, which is what Socrates refers to here. Socrates has Thrasymachus agree that the theoretical side, the knowledge, exists not for the benefit of the craft itself, but for the thing practised by the craft: for example, the theory of horsecraft does not benefit horsecraft, but horses. This claim appears even more reasonable since Socrates has earlier emphasized that he is talking about craft in the strict sense (342b5-7), just as Thrasymachus had earlier postulated a ruler in the strict sense. Craft in the strict sense is perfect, with anything less being no craft at all, and as such, it can receive no benefit from anything, not even its own theoretical side. Socrates is paying back Thrasymachus in his own sophistic currency, not just because it is a form of poetic justice, but because this is, as it were, a currency which Thrasymachus must honour because of his own heavy stake in it.
- c) Socrates portrays craft in the strict sense as superior to its subject which he portrays as inferior to it. This he achieves by portraying craft as somehow governing or ruling over its subject. Thrasymachus used the same verbs to establish the superiority of the regime over those ruled by it. In the context of a craft, the use of the verbs is somewhat strained. Are horses ruled over by horsecraft, or rather by more mundane horsemasters? Is a ship ruled over by shipcraft, or by a captain?
- d) The subject treated by a craft is assumed to derive benefit from that craft. This assumption is questioned neither by Socrates nor by Thrasymachus.⁵⁶ One

54 342c8-d2: ἀλλὰ μὴν, ὃ Θρασύμαχε, ἄρχουσί γε αἱ τέχναι καὶ κρατοῦσιν ἐκείνου οὐπὲρ εἰσιν τέχναι. — συνεχώρησεν ἐνταῦθα καὶ μάλα μόγις. — οὐκ ἄρα ἐπιστήμη γε οὐδεμία τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον σκοπεῖ οὐδ’ ἐπιπάττει, ἀλλὰ τὸ τοῦ ἥττονός τε καὶ ἀρχομένου ὑπὸ ἑαυτῆς. — συνωμολόγησε μὲν καὶ ταῦτα τελευτῶν...

55 Ludlam (1991) 39. The formulation is based on what is said by Socrates in Plato’s *Laches* 185b1-4.

56 The assumption here that crafts only benefit may be contrasted with an earlier assumption

need only think of a doctor skilled in poisons and working as an assassin to wonder whether the recipient of such a craft would agree. In fact, a craft is neutral, since it may be used for good or ill.⁵⁷ Socrates, however, here emphasizes advantage, since his present intent is to refute Thrasymachus by demonstrating that the advantage falls not to the superior (as claimed by Thrasymachus) but to the inferior.

4. 8. The Superior — a craftsman in the strict sense

Socrates is nearing his refutation of the slogan. He continues to ask questions which Thrasymachus finds increasingly difficult to answer. The gist of the argument is this. Just as crafts, strictly speaking, look to the advantage of the subjects over which they rule, so too do craftsmen in the strict sense look to the advantage of their subjects. Socrates portrays each craftsman as the ruler (*archon*) of his subject, and indeed his field of expertise is called his *arche* — a word which in Thrasymachus' first argument we translated as "regime". Here "domain" might make better sense. For the Greek audience, however, there is only the one word *arche*, and they might be forgiven for thinking that Socrates is referring to the same thing that Thrasymachus was. We could perhaps interpret this wider notion which includes "regime" and "domain" as, for example, the dominion of the *archon* or ruler. The final stage of the argument before it is curtailed appears at 342e6-11.⁵⁸

"Therefore," I said, "O Thrasymachus, neither does anyone else in any dominion (*arche*), so far as he is a ruler (*archon*), look to, and demand, the advantage to himself, but rather the [advantage] to the (singular) ruled and whatever he is a craftsman of; and looking to that, and to what is an advantage and fitting to that, he says all the things which he says, and does [all the things] which he does.

The refutation of the slogan, had it followed, would have mentioned justice. Socrates has already demonstrated that the superior is concerned not with his own advantage but with that of the inferior, and the refutation is imminent. Indeed, Socrates now remarks that at this point it was clear to everyone that the argument about what is just had been turned upside down (343a1-2). That is, even the audience could anticipate the next couple of steps which would have ended with the refutation "What is just is the advantage of the inferior".

The reasoning behind the refutation might have been as follows: the ruler of a polis is also a ruler of his craft, a craftsman in the strict sense, and as such is superior. By virtue of his craft, he makes laws which are always to the advantage of the subject of his craft, the inferior; justice, therefore, is the advantage of the inferior.

This refutation would not be all that consistent or realistic, of course, but we have seen throughout that logic, reality, and a philosophical desire for truth are not major factors in this debate:

- a) It has not been determined that the ruler of a polis has a craft, which he requires in order to be — according to the argument — superior.
- b) Even if the ruler of a polis is a craftsman, and hence superior, it has not been determined what is the inferior. The tendency in this argument would be to assume that the other inhabitants of the polis are inferior to the ruler, as in Thrasymachus' first argument, but that type of inferiority would be political,

prominent in the discussion between Socrates and Polemarchus that craftsmen are beneficial to friends, but harmful to enemies (332d10-e2).

57 See the many examples in Plato's *Hippias Minor*.

58 342e6-11: οὐκοῦν, ἣν δ' ἐγώ, ὧ Θρασύμαχε, οὐδὲ ἄλλος οὐδεὶς ἐν οὐδεμιᾷ ἀρχῇ, καθ' ὅσον ἀρχῶν ἐστίν, τὸ αὐτῷ συμφέρον σκοπεῖ οὐδ' ἐπιπάττει, ἀλλὰ τὸ τῷ ἀρχομένῳ καὶ ὧ ἂν αὐτὸς δημιουργῆ, καὶ πρὸς ἐκεῖνο βλέπων καὶ τὸ ἐκεῖνῳ συμφέρον καὶ πρέπον, καὶ λέγει ἃ λέγει καὶ ποιεῖ ἃ ποιεῖ ἅπαντα.

while the craft argument has used “inferior” to describe that to which a craft is applied (as horsecraft is applied to horses). Is statecraft applied to citizens, or is it applied to the polis as a whole? Are the laws to the advantage of the inhabitants of the polis, or rather to the polis in all its aspects?

- c) The ruler in this argument is infallible, since he is a ruler in the strict sense; it is only when his actions conform with his craft that he is a ruler.
- d) His craft, being a craft in the strict sense, is perfect (anything less would not be a craft).

4. 9. The Superior — injustice, the unjust man

When Socrates notes that it was clear to everyone that the argument about what is just had been turned upside down (343a1-2), “everyone” must have included Thrasymachus, for the latter is immediately described as launching into an unpleasant exchange with Socrates, which leads to his second speech in support of his slogan. Thrasymachus had intended to leave after his speech, but he is restrained by the audience (344d1-5). That is to say, Thrasymachus’ strategy was to avoid the refutation following his first argument, provide new persuasive support for his slogan, then leave before Socrates could threaten him again with a second refutation.

It is the second speech which yields the “position” that justice is another’s good, one’s own hurt (position c on p. 420). While this indeed can be consistent or inconsistent with the first “position”, that justice is the advantage of the superior (the slogan), depending on the point of view of the one performing justly in each case (the superior or the inferior), it should be noted that Thrasymachus intends the argument as a whole to support the slogan (“and as I said from the beginning” 344c6-7). The speech is long enough (343b1-344c8) to allow “the superior” to assume a variety of guises, some already familiar to us, and some new:

343b1-c1: [Implicit] The superior = the rulers (*archontes*) in the strict sense.

Shepherds look not to the advantage of their animals but of their masters and of themselves. Similarly, in cities, the rulers in the strict sense (here “those truly rulers”) look to their own advantage, not of those ruled by them.

c1-5: [Explicit] The superior = the ruling power (*archon*).

Socrates is so far from understanding justice and injustice that he does not know that justice is really another’s good, the advantage of the superior and the ruling [element] (*tou kreittonos te kai archontos sumpheron*), the hurt of the [element] obeying and serving...

c5-6: [continued] ... and injustice is the opposite.

That is, injustice is one’s own good, but still the advantage of the superior.

c6-7: [Implicit] The superior = injustice (*adikia*).

Injustice rules (*archei*) “the truly simpleminded and just” (plural).⁵⁹

c7-d1: [Explicitly superior man, vague designation] The superior = the ruler? the unjust man?

“The ruled do the advantage of that (man), him being superior, and make that (man) happy by serving him, but themselves [they make happy] not at all.”⁶⁰

In the context, “that man” would logically be the ruler, the one served by the ruled; but injustice has just been mentioned, and “that man” could well be the unjust man; an unjust man is indeed about to be mentioned explicitly in the next sentence, although not

59 343c5-7: ἡ δὲ ἀδικία τούναντίον, καὶ ἀρχεῖ τῶν ὡς ἀληθῶς εὐθηκῶν τε καὶ δικαίων. (“but injustice is the opposite, and rules the truly simpleminded and just”).

60 343c7-d1: οἱ δ’ ἀρχόμενοι ποιοῦσιν τὸ ἐκείνου συμφέρον κρείττονος ὄντος, καὶ εὐδαίμονα ἐκείνον ποιοῦσιν ὑπηρετοῦντες αὐτῷ, ἑαυτοὺς δὲ οὐδ’ ὀπωσιοῦν.

immediately in the context of ruling. Finally, “that man” could mean the unjust ruler.

d1-6 [Explicit] An inferior = a just man

“It must be looked at in this way, O most simpleminded Socrates, that a just man is everywhere inferior to an unjust.”⁶¹

d6-e6 The just man always gets a bad deal in every transaction with an unjust man. Even when he holds a position of power (*arche*) he loses out, if only because he neglects his personal business.

343e7-344a1 [By Inference] The superior = the unjust man

“The unjust man has all the opposite of these. For I mean by the one I’ve just mentioned the one who can outdo (*pleonektein*) in great things.”⁶²

344a2-b1 [Implicit] The superior = the most perfect injustice, tyranny

To assess how much more worthwhile it is to be unjust than just, Thrasymachus recommends going to the most perfect injustice (ἐπὶ τὴν τελεωτάτην ἀδικίαν — a3). This thing is tyranny (ἔστιν δὲ τοῦτο τυραννίς). It is this tyranny itself, rather than the tyrant, which Thrasymachus describes as performing the greatest injustices.

b2-c2 [Implicit] The superior = the perfect tyrant

While petty criminals, the unjust on a small scale, are condemned when caught, “someone” who performs the most extreme acts of injustice openly, instead of base names, “they are called happy and blessed” (the change from singular and plural is in the text), not only by [his citizens], but by all who realize that he (singular) has committed the complete injustice (τὴν ὅλην ἀδικίαν ἠδίκηκότα).

c3-4 [Implicit] The inferior = those too weak to prevent injustice to themselves = the just

“For those who criticize injustice criticize it because they are afraid, not of doing acts of injustice, but of suffering them.”⁶³

This reflects what Glauco portrays as Thrasymachus’ usual position.

c4-8 [Conclusion] The superior = injustice, unjust tyranny?

“Thus, O Socrates, injustice is something stronger, freer and more masterful than justice, when it has come about sufficiently, and, as I was saying from the beginning, what-is-just happens to be the advantage of the superior, and what is unjust is profitable and advantageous to itself.”⁶⁴

This is where Thrasymachus ended his speech and intended to get up and leave. He appears to have justified his slogan (underlined), but as usual, what stands in for “the superior” during the argument is not necessarily what Thrasymachus or his audience intend or expect it to designate.

The others listening to the debate between Thrasymachus and Socrates physically restrain Thrasymachus so that Socrates can refute him properly. The refutation is easy, employing terms already agreed upon in the earlier cross-examination. Socrates reverts to

61 343d1-3: σκοπεῖσθαι δὲ, ὃ εὐηθέστατε Σώκρατες, οὕτωςι χρή, ὅτι δίκαιος ἀνὴρ ἀδίκου πανταχοῦ ἔλαττον ἔχει. It follows that an unjust man is everywhere superior to a just man. We may note in passing that Thrasymachus, in calling Socrates most simpleminded, is mockingly insinuating that Socrates is most just.

62 343e7-344a1: τῷ δὲ ἀδίκῳ πάντα τούτων τάναντία ὑπάρχει. λέγω γὰρ ὄνπερ νυνδὴ ἔλεγον, τὸν μέγαρα δυνάμενον πλεονεκτεῖν. We shall see later that Thrasymachus consistently equates injustice with *pleonexia*, outdoing; that is, gaining at the expense of others.

63 344c3-4: οὐ γὰρ τὸ ποιεῖν τὰ ἄδικα ἀλλὰ τὸ πάσχειν φοβούμενοι ὄνειδίζουσιν οἱ ὄνειδίζοντες τὴν ἀδικίαν.

64 344c4-8: οὕτως, ὃ Σώκρατες, καὶ ἰσχυρότερον καὶ ἐλευθεριώτερον καὶ δεσποτικώτερον ἀδικία δικαιοσύνης ἐστὶν ἰκανῶς γινομένη, καὶ ὅπερ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἔλεγον, τὸ μὲν τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον τὸ δίκαιον τυγχάνει ὄν, τὸ δ’ ἄδικον ἑαυτῷ λυσιτελοῦν τε καὶ συμφέρον.

the position that the ruler/craftsman *qua* ruler/craftsman is concerned with the advantage of what is ruled by him. Strictly speaking, any payment accruing to himself is the result of the wage-earning craft, which he has along with the craft by which he is known as a craftsman. It is interesting that Thrasymachus feels obliged to agree to this, albeit with great difficulty (esp. 346c9-12).

Socrates eventually turns to another point Thrasymachus had raised during his second account (345a), and claims that he regards it as more important:

“To this, then, I in no way agree with Thrasymachus, that what is just is the advantage of the superior. But we shall examine this on another occasion. What seems to me greater by far is what Thrasymachus now says, asserting that the life of the unjust man is superior to that of the just man” (347d8-e4).

What does Socrates mean by saying that they will examine Thrasymachus’ first claim on another occasion? Has Thrasymachus’ slogan not already been examined and found wanting? Socrates is implying that the claim has not been examined at all, and we are now in a position to see that indeed, the slogan has been dealt with in such a way by both antagonists that nothing of substance has been clearly stated, defended, or refuted. Is Thrasymachus’ claim, then, not worthy of examination in this of all dialogues? To answer that question, we would need to know what exactly the slogan meant. And, of course, there’s the rub.

5. THRASYMACHUS IN BOOK II

It should be fairly clear by now that Thrasymachus does not say what he means, but is prepared to use verbal trickery to appear to support his slogan. Worse still, there is no reason to believe that he even takes his slogan seriously. To cap it all, Socrates is no real help to us, as he is just as willing as Thrasymachus to play word games, and appears intent only on refuting the slogan by any means. Having refuted it, he is prepared to abandon it.

So what does Thrasymachus mean? What does he intend by his slogan? We already have reason to believe that his slogan is understood in a certain way by at least some of his audience, although we do not yet know what that way is, beyond the notion that the superior is a man (so Clitopho, §4.5 above). Bearing in mind that our questions refer not to the historical Thrasymachus, but to Plato’s dramatic character, Thrasymachus, we should look to the drama for our answers.

5. 1. Who Speaks for Thrasymachus?

Near the beginning of Book II, Glauco states that he will go over Thrasymachus’ account once again.⁶⁵ It is sometimes doubted whether Glauco gives an accurate account of Thrasymachus’ views; but Thrasymachus is still in attendance during Glauco’s presentation.⁶⁶ Had Plato the dramatist wished the reader to understand that Thrasymachus objected to Glauco’s presentation of his views, he could have had Thrasymachus object to them, or have Socrates describe members of the audience restraining an irate Thrasymachus in the manner of his description of Thrasymachus preceding the debate between them in Book I, or any other elementary dramatic device of this sort. For the

65 358c1-2: ἐπανανεώσομαι τὸν Θρασυμάχου λόγον, καὶ πρῶτον μὲν ἐρῶ δικαιοσύνην οἷον εἶναι φασιν καὶ ὄθεν γεγονέναι.

66 Having been restrained when he intended to leave earlier (344d1-5), he is listening, and even enters the conversation for a few lines in Book V (450a-b). Contrast the early exit of Cephalus, “leaving the way open to a new phase in the discussion to which he is not similarly suited” — Harrison (1967) 29. On entrances and silent presences in Platonic dialogues, see Liebersohn (2005) 309-10 and n. 16.

purposes of the drama, the position Glauco attributes to Thrasymachus is the one Thrasymachus is normally considered to hold.⁶⁷ The dramatic Thrasymachus' true position, as expounded by Glauco in Book II, should be regarded as the criterion by which to assess Thrasymachus' performance in Book I.

5. 2. Thrasymachus' account of justice

Here is the relevant part of Glauco's presentation in which he describes the account of justice given by Thrasymachus and "tens of thousands of others" (358c7-8). I give a fairly literal translation (358e3-359b6):

"It has come about by nature (πεφυκέναι), they say, that to commit injustice (ἀδικεῖν) is a good thing (ἀγαθόν, henceforth "benefit"), and to suffer injustice (ἀδικεῖσθαι) is a bad thing (κακόν, henceforth "harm"),⁶⁸ and the harm in suffering injustice exceeds the benefit from committing injustice, so that when people mutually commit and suffer injustice, and have a taste of both, it seems to those who are unable to escape the one and choose the other, that to agree amongst themselves to do neither is profitable; then (they continue) they began to lay down their own laws (νόμους) and agreements (συνθήκας), and called what is demanded (τὸ ἐπίταγμα) by the law (ὁ νόμος) customary (νόμιμον) and just (δίκαιον); and this (they say) is the origin (γένεσις) and the essence (οὐσία) of justice (δικαιοσύνη) — that it is between what is best, namely, not to pay the penalty for committing injustice, and what is worst, namely, being unable to avenge oneself for injustice suffered; (they say that) the just thing ("what is just" — τὸ δίκαιον), being in the middle of these two, is loved not as something good, but — because of a weakness [i.e., because they are too weak] to commit injustice — as something honoured; for the one who is able to do it, and is truly a man, would never (they say) make any agreement with anyone not to commit or suffer injustice; he would be mad. So this and such is the nature (φύσις) of justice (δικαιοσύνη), Socrates, and from which things such things have come about by nature (πέφυκε), so the argument goes."

Thus injustice (*adikia*) was the natural condition subsisting between all men, until, by a natural evolution, weaker men, for whom the harm of suffering injustice outweighed the benefit of committing injustice, made agreements among themselves to desist from injustice. The agreements were laws. What was demanded by the law they called customary and just (*dikaion*). What is just (*to dikaion*) is neither a harm nor a benefit, but something neutral, and preferable to suffering injustice. Weaker men prefer to do what is just not because they are forced to do so by the law, but because of their natural (individual) inability to control injustice and commit it without suffering it. Injustice (*adikia*) is the original natural condition; but justice (*dikaionsune*) is the natural condition subsisting between weaker men accepting laws designed to prevent injustice.⁶⁹

67 For claims of misinterpretation, see, e.g., Sparshott (1966) 431: "But Glaucon and Adeimantus plainly misinterpret Thrasymachus on the issue of the conventionality of justice, for they take him to hold that the just man can be unjust if he dared (360c), whereas in fact he had attributed justice to 'an honest simplicity' (*panu gennaia euetheia*, 348c12)."

68 "Harm" and "benefit" were the normal senses of κακόν and ἀγαθόν in presocratic usage: cf. e.g. the opening argument of *Disoi Logoi*.

69 Thrasymachus' account as presented by Glauco emphasizes the prior natural state of injustice (πεφυκέναι 358e3) and the natural evolution of justice: φύσις δικαιοσύνης 359b4 πέφυκε 359b5. Thrasymachus does not seem to be bothered by the discrepancy between the chronological priority of injustice to justice and the logical priority of justice to injustice (injustice is the negation of justice, in Greek as

Glauco has now fulfilled the first task he had set himself, to present Thrasymachus' usual account of the nature of justice. He now moves on to the second task, to present Thrasymachus' argument that the just man would behave exactly like the unjust man were he able. He proceeds to tell the famous myth of the ring of Gyges, during which we learn a little more about the nature of justice and injustice as seen by Thrasymachus and tens of thousands of others. Injustice is equated with *pleonexia*, which is often translated as greed or self-seeking. What needs to be emphasized is the connotation of gaining at the expense of others. Sometimes “outdoing” will do. Injustice is contrasted with justice, which is equated with honouring equity (*to ison* = the equal).⁷⁰

According to Glauco's report in this second section, it is claimed that the pursuit of *pleonexia* is natural, while the pursuit of equity is forced by *nomos* (359c2-6). What is meant by *nomos* here? Many sophistic accounts of oppositions between what is real and what is conventional oppose things which are “by nature” with things which are “by convention”. The word for convention is *nomos*, the same word we have seen used in the first section of Thrasymachus' account to mean “law”. Thus the opposition here between *pleonexia* and equity seems to be between the natural and the merely conventional. Yet in the first section, the naturally inferior individuals are forced — by their inability to prevent suffering injustice — to come to a mutual agreement (henceforward the law) to cease committing injustice and pursue equity instead; the new relationship between men is as natural as the old, although they are mutually opposed. It might appear, therefore, that the opposition in the second section is between the natural and the merely conventional, but the actual opposition might well be between that which “all nature naturally pursues as a good”,⁷¹ and what is forced by law, a naturally evolving agreement between weak men, a natural second best for the naturally inferior.

We see, therefore, that the “notorious *nomos/physis* antithesis”,⁷² the convention/nature antithesis, when it finally appears, is not so clear-cut as it is in some other sophistic accounts of justice.⁷³ Injustice and justice are both natural, although it is less natural to be just than unjust. Given the opportunity (such as a ring of invisibility⁷⁴), the just man would commit *pleonexia* to the same degree as the unjust man (360b3-c3).

Interestingly, the account does not refer to the superior individual explicitly, but the unjust man is the one everyone would like to be; they praise justice out of fear of being the victim of injustice. We may equate the inferior with the just (those unable to derive more benefit than harm from injustice), and the superior with the unjust (the individual who somehow manages to get away with his *pleonexia*).⁷⁵ In these terms, justice is clearly the

in English). Thrasymachus is using injustice loosely to refer to *pleonexia* in general, and it is really *pleonexia* which he regards as naturally prior to equity.

70 The equation was not uncommon at the time; the term ἴσα in democratic political contexts meant something like “equal [rights]” and could appear in conjunction with δίκαια, e.g. Demosthenes 21. 67; cognates of πλεονεξία are to be found opposed to cognates of ἰσότης, e.g. οὐ μόνον ἴσον, ἀλλὰ καὶ πλεόν ἔχειν Isoc. 17. 57. It is not accidental that the only appearance of the word ἰσότης in the *Politeia* occurs at the end of the account of democracy which is portrayed there (flatteringly or unflatteringly according to one's inclinations) as providing blanket equality to equal and unequal alike (ἡδεῖα πολιτεία καὶ ἄναρχος καὶ ποικίλη, ἰσότητά τινα ὁμοίως ἴσοις τε καὶ ἀνίσοις διανέμουσα — 8. 558c5).

71 359c5: ὁ πᾶσα φύσις διώκειν πέφυκεν ὡς ἀγαθόν...

72 Harrison (1967) 33.

73 E.g., in Antiphon the Sophist, *On Truth* (B44 DK), injustice is by nature, justice is by convention. In Plato's *Gorgias*, Callicles distinguishes between two types of justice, natural and conventional.

74 The ring of invisibility (359c6-360b2) is essentially another way of acting without witnesses. Cf. Antiphon the Sophist's recommendation to follow the laws when there are witnesses, but to follow nature when there are not (B44 col. 1, lines 12-23 DK).

75 Cf. the superior individual and the inferior individuals in Callicles' account. The inferior, he says, equating them with the Many, are those who establish the laws. The laws and the pursuit of equity, he continues, are just by convention, but what is just by nature is for the better man (ὁ ἀμείνων) to outdo the

advantage of the inferior, and not of the superior. Thrasymachus is explaining the origin of justice. Justice came about when the inferior, for their own good, mutually agreed to desist from *pleonexia*.

We may now appreciate the novelty of the actual slogan in Book I, that justice is the advantage of the superior. Not only is it a complete reversal of his usual position, but it also removes the *nomos/physis* antithesis, at least to the extent that it is precisely the naturally superior individual who is actually deriving benefit from *nomos*. The law is working in favour of primal nature, rather than being opposed to it. The lack of a *nomos/physis* antithesis according to the slogan would explain why no such antithesis appears in Book I, but does appear in Book II in the absence of the slogan, and in the context of Thrasymachus' usual position.

Who is Thrasymachus' superior individual? Who is the naturally unjust individual who is supposed to be hampered by the laws of the inferiors seeking equity? Thrasymachus in his second speech in Book I regards the most perfect practitioners of injustice to be tyrants. These would seem to be extreme and successful examples of the more usual naturally superior individual hemmed in by obstructive law-abiding democrats and oligarchs,⁷⁶ namely the aristocrat.⁷⁷

6. RETURNING TO BOOK I

To conclude this paper, we shall attempt to appreciate the novelty of Thrasymachus' slogan in Book I, and the ingenuity of the arguments he uses to support it. Once we understand Thrasymachus' slogan (Book I) together with his usual position (Book II), we may finally be able to decide whether the rest of the dialogue is indeed — formally at least — a reaction to a Thrasymachaeon position, and what this position might be. The behaviour of Socrates should be of some concern to us. Logic seems not to be uppermost in the minds of the participants in this debate, and it is unlikely that we will understand it through logical analysis of the arguments alone.

6. 1. Eristics

The debate between Thrasymachus and Socrates is eristic, a battle of words in which the outcome is decided by the audience. Sophists taught eristics to those who wished to gain an edge in debates, for example in the context of the lawcourts, or in the public assembly. The techniques were aimed at tripping up the opponent and refuting him with all the means at one's disposal, on the understanding that the judges of the debate would not detect any trickery, or if they did, would accept it as par for the course. The more that sophists taught eristics, the more aware people were of the tricks. Thrasymachus expected

worse (ὁ χείρων), the superior man (ὁ κρείττων) to outdo the inferior (ὁ ἥττων). Calicles regards the superior man as the frustrated aristocrat (like himself), shackled by the democratic, conventional, laws of the Many; it is the law of nature that he should burst his bonds and rule as a tyrant. This "law of nature" (another way of overcoming the *nomos/physis* antithesis) is exemplified by Xerxes and his father (*Gorgias* 483a8-484c3). This is the first extant appearance of the expression "law of nature": Plato may have invented it himself, but he may alternatively have taken it along with the general argument presented by Calicles from a sophistic source lost to us.

⁷⁶ Not only democrats but also oligarchs sought equity, according to Isocrates, *Nicoles* 15: αἱ μὲν τοῖνυν ὀλιγαρχαὶ καὶ δημοκραταὶ τὰς ἰσότητας τοῖς μετέχουσι τῶν πολιτειῶν ζητοῦσι, καὶ τοῦτ' εὐδοκίμει παρ' αὐτάς, ἦν μηδὲν ἕτερος ἑτέρου δύνηται πλέον ἔχειν. — "Oligarchies and democracies seek the equalities for those participating in the constitutions, and it is considered a good thing among them [the constitutions] if no one can outdo (*pleon echein*) another."

⁷⁷ As already noted above, Calicles chose to exemplify his aristocratic superior individual with two Persian kings, tyrants in all but name (*Gorgias* 483d6-7). He sees the rise of the tyrant to power as the triumph of natural justice over conventional justice; Thrasymachus in his usual account sees this rise as the triumph of natural injustice over natural justice.

his slogan and consequent eristic display to delight the crowd and earn him some money, demanded by him up front.⁷⁸

6. 2. The intent of the slogan

“Justice is nothing other than the advantage of the superior” (338c1-3). We have already seen that Clitopho had assumed that the superior was a superior man, despite Thrasymachus’ first argument in support of this slogan (§4.5), and in Book II we realize that Glauco is also well aware of Thrasymachus’ usual understanding of “the superior” in such arguments: namely, the unjust man, possibly an aristocrat, or preferably, tyrant, unshackled by the laws to which the inferior democrats or oligarchs have committed themselves (§5.2). According to Thrasymachus’ usual position, justice is the advantage of the inferior (the weak who created law to prevent *pleonexia*). The slogan is apparently declaring the opposite.⁷⁹ Since the usual position is not only that of Thrasymachus, but also that of tens of thousand of others, according to Glauco, it would seem that Plato’s Thrasymachus is justified in his confidence that the slogan will be understood as expressing the opposite of a widely held view. His slogan, then, has novelty — even shock — value.

6. 3. Why anti-logical arguments are required to support the slogan

Thrasymachus’ account (as delivered by Glauco in Bk. II) of the origin of justice quite clearly places the initiative for the creation of law on the inferior. Justice is abiding by the law and desisting from *pleonexia*, and there is no doubt that this is to the advantage of the inferior who could not avoid suffering injustice otherwise.

Thrasymachus (in Bk. I) sets himself the task of claiming the opposite; but what exactly? Is he claiming simply that, given the laws and system of justice which the inferior have developed, the unjust man can take advantage of justice for his own unjust ends? This would be a truism, and could even fit in with his usual account. But “justice is *nothing but* the advantage of the superior”, as he introduces his slogan, suggests a stronger claim, in which justice is never at all the advantage of the inferior.

What Thrasymachus is proud to present is the claim that justice has come about through the agency of the perfectly unjust man for his own unjust ends. He could make a realistic case for a limited instance of this claim by pointing to the tyrant, his ideal unjust man. Justice, he could argue, is abiding by the laws. There are tyrants who make laws which allow them to gain at the expense of their subjects. Such a tyrant is unjust, and the unjust man is superior to those who obey laws. Therefore justice is the advantage of the superior. This, however, is not enough for Thrasymachus. He claims that always, everywhere (339a2-3, cf. §4.3), justice is the advantage of the superior. That is, all law has been made by the unjust man for his own gain at the expense of those who obey the law; and the just, in obeying the law, are playing into his hands — not just in a tyranny, but in oligarchies and democracies as well.⁸⁰ This is a strong claim, and one which would make an audience sit up and take note. They would want to hear how Thrasymachus defends such a perverse and counterintuitive claim. Thrasymachus’ first set speech is designed to satisfy that expectation. The speech overcomes the facts of the matter with an impressive display of sophistry.

78 For another view of eristic in this debate, and in Plato generally, see the outstanding article by Klosko (1984), esp. 16ff.

79 “Justice is the advantage of the superior” (...τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον). Thrasymachus had forbidden Socrates earlier to define justice as merely “advantage” (336d2, see §4.1), and it is his addition (“of the superior”) which he must think makes his own reply “very fine” (ἀπόκρισιν παγκάλην 338a7); Socrates and Thrasymachus discuss the fact of the addition at 339a5-b5.

80 Cf. Isocrates, *Nicoles* 15, quoted in n. 76, p. 32 above.

The main problem which Thrasymachus must overcome in his speech is that in fact not all superior unjust people are in a position to pass laws to their own unjust advantage. His solution is to pass off as the superior for most of the argument the general concept of the regime which passes laws in every city. The superior person (*kreitton*) appears only in the concluding slogan as a late substitution for the ruling power (*kratoun*), but the transition is concealed by the similar sense and sound of the words, and by the use of the genitive, a case in which there is no difference in form between the masculine and the neuter. The ruling power (*kratoun*) is a transitional bridge between superior (*kreitton*) and regime (*arche*), and Thrasymachus has had to begin his presentation with some specious arguments demonstrating that the regime in every city does indeed rule over (*krat*) something in the city. Another problem to be addressed is that regimes in fact do not always pass laws to their own advantage. Thrasymachus has cleverly demonstrated that they do by playing on an ambiguity in adjectives (e.g., “democratic” meaning “pertaining to a democracy”, which is always true of a law passed by a democracy; and “of advantage to a democracy”, which is not always true). Thrasymachus inclines his audience to assume that the adjectives he uses mean “of advantage to...” by prefacing the descriptions of laws passed by various regimes with the bald statement that all regimes pass laws to their own advantage.⁸¹

When Thrasymachus sees that Socrates is about to refute his slogan, he changes tack and produces another speech designed, as was the first, to prove that justice is nothing but the advantage of the superior man. This time, however, he abandons the regime in every city as his path to a universal truth, and chooses instead to generalize using every unjust man in every transaction with a just man. Then, having established that in every transaction the unjust man outdoes the just man, Thrasymachus leaps to the best example of the unjust man, which just so happens to be the tyrant who not only outdoes everyone in his transactions with them, but is even admired by everyone for succeeding where they do not dare (since they are weak and for that reason just). Thus, justice yet again is seen to be the advantage of the superior. In the jump to the tyrant, who appears merely to be the best example of a general rule, it might seem that Thrasymachus has somehow forgotten that many criminals are actually caught and punished, that indeed some tyrants are removed from power, and that not all tyrants are as unjust as Thrasymachus would like. Thrasymachus, however, seems to be talking about unjust people in the strict sense — successful criminals throughout the time that they successfully exploit naive just people and escape being caught and punished for their crimes.⁸² This argument differs significantly from the first in that justice is only exploited, but not created, by the superior. Justice is indeed always the advantage of the superior, but only because the unjust (in the strict sense) always succeeds in outdoing the just in transactions and flouting the laws.⁸³ The first, prepared, argument was stronger, in that the laws were actually made by the superior unjust individual for his own unjust ends, and the very obedience of the just inferiors led to the unjust superior individual outdoing them. The weaker claim of the second argument is compensated for by the apparently stronger content, including the notion that injustice itself is superior to justice, the reference to the supremely unjust tyrant and the spectacular

81 On Thrasymachus' first speech, see §3 and §4.3.

82 Sophistic claims serve their immediate argument but should not be pressed too hard. For example, we have already seen that the ruler in the strict sense is someone who acts only in accordance with the ruling craft in the strict sense. Whenever he makes a mistake in ruling, he is at that moment not a ruler. Thus a ruler in the strict sense never makes mistakes in the ruling craft. Pressing the parallel, it should be argued that an unjust man in the strict sense is someone who acts only in accordance with the craft of injustice, and if he makes a mistake (such as being caught and punished), he is not at that moment an unjust man.

83 This is to ignore all those transactions in which only just people are involved. In such instances, justice is surely the advantage of the inferior. Such an objection, however, is beside the point, since Thrasymachus is not arguing about facts. He has engineered the appearance of a general claim precisely by ignoring the wider context.

crimes he commits with impunity, and the generally stronger language which was unnecessary in the first speech. Thrasymachus, who intended to leave immediately after his second speech, may have hoped that the pyrotechnics would create the impression that he had proved here exactly what he had proved the first time (“as I was saying from the beginning” 344c6-7, §4.9).

6. 4. The Thrasymachaeon challenge

We return now to the passage considered at the end of §4.9:

“To this, then, I in no way agree with Thrasymachus, that what is just is the advantage of the superior. But we shall examine this on another occasion. What seems to me greater by far is what Thrasymachus now says, asserting that the life of the unjust man is superior to that of the unjust man” (347d8-e4).

It should be clear by now that Thrasymachus’ slogan, intended merely as a shocking inversion of part of his usual position, can only be supported by sophistic arguments, is easily refuted sophistically, and were it not for the eristic debate, would not be considered a serious challenge at all. If Socrates returns to the theme of justice and its advantage to the superior man later in this dialogue, he does so implicitly.

Although Thrasymachus makes many things superior in his second argument (cf. §4.9), he does not refer explicitly to the life of the unjust man as superior. This, however, may be inferred from his claim that the most perfect injustice (we may understand this to mean injustice in the strict sense) makes the unjust man most happy, and those suffering injustice most miserable (344a4-6). Thrasymachus frames the claim with depictions of *pleonexia* on a grand scale. In this argument, happiness is predicated upon continuous large scale profiteering, at the expense of others, with impunity.

Working towards an apparent proof of his slogan, Thrasymachus introduced the tyrant as if he were merely the clearest example of the unjust man (and not the unjust man in the strict sense he actually is in this argument). Socrates appears willing to go along with Thrasymachus’ sophistic intentions, extrapolating from the example of the tyrant that all unjust men live lives superior to those of all just men. Socrates does not call the life of the unjust man simply more profitable, but actually superior, and this may be justified if he is also supposed to be happier. Glauco emphasizes the element of profit. Socrates introduces the new claim during an interlude with Glauco (347a7-348b7). When Socrates asks him which life he thinks [is superior], Glauco states that he thinks that the life of the just man is “more profitable” (347e5-7). When Socrates reverts to questioning Thrasymachus, he begins by asking whether perfect injustice is more profitable than perfect justice (348b9-10).

The bulk of the dialogue is formally a reply to the challenge set by Glauco and Adimantus at the beginning of Book II. The presentation of Thrasymachus’ usual position by Glauco reveals that the slogan is an inversion of part of the usual position. Can the claim which Socrates has just introduced, derived from an argument supporting the slogan, be compatible with Thrasymachus’ usual position?

6. 5. Socratic elenchus?

As if it is not enough that we have on our hands an antagonist prepared to pervert logic and the Greek language simply in order to prove the opposite of his usual position, Socrates lets us down from the point of view of logical refutation. He appears to understand as soon as he has heard the slogan for the first time that Thrasymachus is playing with words, and he indulges in the same tactics himself. He engages Thrasymachus

not with careful analysis of the arguments, but with counter-arguments as outrageous as those of Thrasymachus, in keeping with an eristic debate (cf. §§4.2, 4.4, 4.7-8). And for the most part, Thrasymachus is obliged to accept this nonsense. His gallant attempt at extricating himself from the imminent refutation of his slogan by means of a second speech supposedly supporting the same slogan in the same way, after which he has every intention of escaping, indicates how seriously Thrasymachus takes Socrates' arguments; they are sophistic enough to cause Thrasymachus to lose the eristic debate. His answers come with increasing effort, until, eventually, sweating profusely as he does so, he blushes — something Socrates had never seen him do before (350c12-d3). This is clearly a significant event, and we may suspect that this comes instead of an aporia. Although there has been no serious philosophical debate in the usual sense of the term, something serious has happened; something perhaps even more serious than many an aporia in other dialogues.⁸⁴

In order to discover the significance of the eristic debate, the display of such a wide range of emotions, and many other features besides, the dialogue needs to be analysed not as a philosophical treatise comprising arguments of varying degrees of consistency and clarity, but as a conversation between characters with motives and feelings. Such an analysis does not thereby ignore the philosophical content of the dialogue, but actually takes a step towards its discovery as an organic, working, whole.

7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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84 The blush is significant, but beyond the scope of this paper.

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