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**Socrates, Thrasymachus, and Competition among the Unjust: *Republic* 1.349a–350c**

<EXT>Jane Feltes: And you think you got to keep your job because you're smart? You got to keep your job because you guys got bailed out. You guys got bailed –

Bar Patron 2: No, no, no, no, no. That's not what happened with my job. I mean, survival of the fittest.

Bar Patron 1: Because I'm smarter than the average person.

Adam Davidson: And even if the government bails out your industry that failed, you still say it's because you're smarter.

Bar Patron 1: No. The government bailing out an industry was out of necessity for whatever the situation was. The fact that I benefited from that is because I'm smart. I took advantage of a situation. 95% of the population doesn't have that common sense. The only reason I've been doing this for so long is because I must be smarter than the next guy. *This American Life*, 24, September 2010, episode 415, ‘Crybabies’</EXT>

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**Abstract**

In *Republic* 1, Thrasymachus makes the radical claim that being just is ‘high-minded simplicity’ and being unjust is ‘good judgment’ (348c–e). Because injustice involves benefiting oneself, while justice involves benefitting others, the unjust are wise and good and the just are foolish and bad (348d–e). The “greedy craftsperson” argument (349b–350c) attempts to show that the unjust person’s desire to outdo or have more than (*pleon echein*) everyone is a symptom of her ignorance. Many commentaries have found the argument problematic and unclear. However, this paper argues that the greedy craftsperson argument defends plausible constraints on the nature of justice and wisdom.

**Keywords**

Plato; *Republic*; Thrasymachus; Moral Expertise; Moral Agreement; Greed

**1. Introduction**

In *Republic* 1, Thrasymachus makes the radical claim that being just is ‘high-minded simplicity’ and being unjust is ‘good judgment’ (348c–e).[[1]](#endnote-1) Because injustice involves benefiting oneself, while justice involves benefitting others, the unjust are wise and good and the just are foolish and bad (348d–e). Socrates defends the value of justice against Thrasymachus’ attack through several counterarguments. The “greedy craftsperson” argument (349b–350c) attempts to show that the unjust person’s desire to outdo or have more than (*pleon echein*) everyone is a symptom of her ignorance. Many commentaries have found the argument problematic and unclear. Rachel Barney, for example, states that the ‘argument is probably the most confusing and least satisfactory’ of Socrates’ arguments against Thrasymachus (2006: 53). Allan Bloom (1991: 335) refers to the argument as a ‘complicated, specious, and amusing chain of reasoning’, and C. D. C. Reeve (1988: 20) calls it ‘grossly fallacious’.To many, the argument appears sophistical: Socrates not only appears to equivocate and to use a strawman style argument, but also seems intent on humiliating Thrasymachus – hardly the method and attitude of a noble and sophisticated philosopher (see Cross and Woozley 1964: 52). The task of this paper is to unpack this subtle argument and to see what philosophical merit it has. Ultimately, I will argue that the greedy craftsperson argument defends plausible constraints on the nature of justice and wisdom – constraints that we ought to take seriously.

**2. Clarifying the Greedy Craftsperson Argument**

**a. Background**

<T>In order to understand the greedy craftsperson argument, we must examine the context in which it arises. In Book 1, Thrasymachus defends the view that justice is the advantage of the stronger (338c). Thrasymachus appeals to the fact that in every kind of political constitution, the ruling group (the stronger) makes rules to its own advantage (338d–339a). However, Thrasymachus faces difficulties when he accepts that it is just that subjects obey their rulers (339b) and that sometimes rulers mistake their own advantage in dictating what their subjects should do (339c). This is problematic because it means that it is sometimes just to do what is disadvantageous for the stronger (339d). Thrasymachus amends his view by qualifying what it means to be a ruler: ‘A ruler, to the extent that he is a ruler, never makes errors and unerringly decrees what is best for himself, and this his subject must do’ (340e8–341a3). This is an instance of the general principle that no expert makes errors with respect to their craft when they act *qua* craft-expert (340c–e). Socrates will eventually utilize this admission to constrain what expertise means in the greedy craftsperson argument.

<NP>The discussion continues with Socrates responding that crafts do not aim to benefit the possessor of the craft, but the weaker. Hence, a ruler does not seek his own advantage, but that of his subjects (341c–343a). In response, Thrasymachus identifies negative aspects of being just and positive aspects of being unjust. He says that

<EXT>justice is really the good of another, what is advantageous for the stronger and the ruler, and harmful to the one who obeys and serves. Injustice is the opposite, it rules those simpleminded – for that is what they really are – just people; and those it rules do what is to the advantage of the other who is stronger, and they make the one they serve happy, but they do not make themselves the least bit happy. (343c3–d1)</EXT>

Thrasymachus appeals to the fact that when just and unjust people are in relationships with each other, the unjust person always comes out ahead (343d–e). This is why injustice, not justice, ‘is fine and strong’ (348e9–349a1).

<NP>Thus, for Thrasymachus the craft of ruling involves knowledge of what is advantageous for oneself – the stronger (i.e. the ruler) – and to implement this knowledge successfully is to be unjust. Since the completely unjust live the best lives and have knowledge of how to acquire the greatest amount of external goods, the completely unjust are wise and good (348e). Since being just involves being weaker than and exploited by the unjust, the just are ignorant and foolish (348d–e). The greedy craftsperson argument seeks to undermine these claims.

**b. Overview of the Argument**

<T>Let us begin with a general overview of the argument. For the time being I will translate *pleonektein* and its cognates as ‘overreach or do better than’. “Overreaching” emphasizes quantity (having more than), while “doing better than” emphasizes competition (winning). I will include both translations to avoid suggesting an interpretation prematurely. Later in the paper, I will offer an interpretation of the passage that preserves both meanings of this term.

<NP>The argument can be broken down into three main stages. The first stage compares the attitudes and behaviors of just and unjust people. Socrates begins by asking Thrasymachus if the ‘just person would want to overreach or do better than [*ethelein pleon echein*] another just person’, to which Thrasymachus replies, ‘Not at all. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be the polite and naïve person that he actually is’ (349b2–5). Socrates then asks if the just person would overreach or do better than the just action, which Thrasymachus denies (349b6–7). Now Socrates turns the conversation to the just person’s relationship to the unjust person, asking, ‘would he [viz. the just person] believe that it is appropriate and just for him to overreach or do better than the unjust person, or not?’ (349b8–9). Thrasymachus agrees, holding that not only would the just person want to overreach or do better than the unjust person, but that he thinks he deserves to (though he adds that it would be impossible for the just person to achieve this due to his inferiority) (349b).

<NP>Next, Socrates begins to explore the unjust person’s relationship to everyone else. He asks whether the unjust person thinks it is appropriate to overreach or do better than the just person and the just action, which Thrasymachus replies, ‘Of course, he does; since he thinks he deserves to overreach or do better than everyone’ (349c6). From this, Socrates generalizes and says that ‘a just person doesn’t overreach or do better than someone like himself, but someone unlike himself, whereas an unjust person overreaches or does better than both his like and unlike’ (349c11–d2).

<NP>Socrates gets Thrasymachus to confirm that he thinks that the unjust person is wise (*phronimos*) and good (*agathos*) and that the just person is the opposite (349d4–6). Socrates asks if it follows from this that the unjust person is like wise and good people, while the just person is like bad and ignorant people (349d7–8). Thrasymachus agrees, ‘Of course. How could he fail to be like people who have such qualities, when he has their qualities, while the other isn’t like them?’ (349d9–10). This idea is restated at the end of the argument by Socrates: ‘Moreover, we agreed that each has qualities of the one he resembles’ (350c7–8). When we put these two statements together, we get the following principle of resemblance:

<EXT>Principle of Resemblance: *A* and *B* resemble each other if and only if they share a quality *Q*.</EXT>

<NP>The second stage of the argument examines the attitudes and behaviors of expert and non-expert craftspeople. Experts in craft *X* are intelligent and good with respect to *X*, while non-experts in craft *X* are unintelligent and bad with respect to *X* (349e). Socrates begins by examining expert musicians. Socrates and Thrasymachus agree that expert musicians do not want to overreach or do better than other musicians in the tightening and relaxing of strings on a lyre, but want to overreach or do better than non-musical people (349e). Similarly, when prescribing food and drink, doctors do not try to overreach or do better than other doctors, but try to overreach or do better than non-doctors (349e–350a).

<NP>Using these two examples, Socrates generalizes:

<EXT>In every branch of knowledge and ignorance [*epistēmēs te kai anepistēmosunēs*]*,* do you think that a knowledgeable person would intentionally choose to do or say more than what another knowledgeable person would do or say, and not rather exactly what the one like himself would do in the same situation? … But what of the ignorant person? Doesn’t he want to overreach or do better than [*pleonektēseien*] the knower and the ignorant? (350a6–b1)

Thrasy.: Probably. (350b2)</EXT>

<NP>This leads to the third and final stage of the argument, which derives a conclusion from the previous stages. Since the knowledgeable person is wise and wisdom is good, it follows that the wise (*sophos*) and good (*agathos*) person doesn’t want to overreach or do better than those like herself, but those unlike herself. In contrast, the ignorant (*amathēs*) and bad (*kakos*) person wants to overreach or do better than everyone (350b). The just person is like the wise and good person, while the unjust person is like the ignorant and bad person (350c). Using the principle of resemblance, it follows that the just person is wise and good and the unjust person is ignorant and bad (350c). Therefore, justice is virtue and wisdom, while injustice is vice and ignorance (350d).

**3. Interpretive Issues**

<T>In what follows, I will examine and reply to four objections to this argument.

**a. Desire, Achievement, and Worth**

<T>The first problem is that the argument changes terminology at a variety of places, making it appear invalid. For example, when the discussion begins, Socrates phrases the question in terms of what the just and unjust person thinks she deserves and desires to do (349b–c), but the conversation makes a subtle shift to what they will do (349c) and back again to what they want to do (349d–350a). Since what we desire, believe we deserve, and actually do, are not always the same thing, this needs some explaining.

<NP>Fortunately, this problem is easily resolved once we consider the context in which the argument develops. Before the greedy craftsperson argument begins, Socrates asks Thrasymachus if he considers unjust people to be wise and good and Thrasymachus replies: <EXT> Yes, if they commit complete injustice and can bring cities and whole nations under their power. Perhaps, you thought I meant pickpockets? Not that such crimes aren’t also profitable, if they are not found out. But they are not worth discussing by comparison to what I have described. (348d5–9)</EXT>

<NP>This passage informs us that we are comparing the complete or extreme form of the just person to the complete or extreme form of the unjust person (see 340e–341a, 2.360e–361a). This excludes the possibility that a person desires to φ (where φ is an action), but fails to φ or does not think she deserves to φ. Such a person would not be fully committed and successful at being just or unjust, respectively. Rather, the complete or extreme version of the just or the unjust person is someone whose desires, judgments, and actions are all uniform. Thus, it makes sense that the discussants freely move from talking about judgments of desert, to desires, to actions, since in the complete version of the just and unjust person these are not disconnected. Moreover, since the craft-expert and non-expert are supposed to be analogous to the just and unjust person in the argument, we can assume that the same things hold for the craft-expert and non-expert.[[2]](#endnote-2)

**b. Non-Experts**

<T>The greedy craftsperson argument describes non-experts as individuals who try to exceed or do better than everyone. This is strange. Even if the non-expert *did* overreach everyone (which is unlikely), it is odd to think that they *intend* to overreach everyone. As Rachel Barney explains, ‘Socrates repeatedly speaks of agents as being “willing” (*ethelein*) to *pleonektein* (349e11, 350a1, 350a7, 350b7), as if it were a choice or decision. But the non-expert misses the mean involuntarily, because he makes mistakes in trying to do what the expert does successfully’ (Barney 2006: 53). For example, I don’t know how to play the piano, but I have always wanted to learn. When I attempt to play the piano, I try to mimic pianist but because I don’t know what pianist do exactly, the sound that comes out is far from melodic. If my experience is common among the non-expert community, then the greedy craftsperson argument fails to describe non-experts.

<NP>This is only problematic if the argument is meant to cover all non-experts, but it isn’t. The non-expert Socrates has in mind here is the typical Socratic non-expert: the one who professes to know that which he does not know. Let’s call this type of character, “the pseudo-expert”. There are two variants of pseudo-experts. The first kind of pseudo-expert sincerely takes herself to be an expert despite sufficient evidence against this claim. Such a person, in taking herself to be an expert, does try to overreach or do better than everyone else, since she believes that what she is doing is correct and anyone with a different opinion is incorrect. Euthyphro would be an example of this. He sincerely professes to know what piety is despite facing widespread disagreement (*Euthphr*.3b–c) and he uses his account of piety to justify an unusual (and typically impious) activity (4a–5a). Let’s call this type of pseudo-expert, “the fool”.

<NP>The second kind of pseudo-expert primarily cares about the appearance of looking like an expert and winning debates, but not about the truth. Thrasymachus, being highly combative and eager to win, is an example of this. Thrasymachus’ emergence in the conversation is likened to a wild-beast roaring (336b–c) and after he is defeated (350c–d) he relegates himself to nodding yes and no (350d–e, 351c), thereby ceasing to be an actual interlocutor (351c–354c).[[3]](#endnote-3) Let’s call this type of pseudo-expert, “the eristic”. Because eristics are primarily interested in winning arguments and looking clever, it is clear that they are interested in doing better than everyone else does. Given the prevalence of both types of pseudo-experts in Plato’s dialogues, these are likely the relevant non-experts. In the next section, I will explain in detail how both types of pseudo-experts “overreach”.

**c. Terminology**

<T>The third objection is that the argument uses “overreach" equivocally. The Greek words *pleonektein* (infinitive) and *pleonexia* (noun) are difficult to translate into English.[[4]](#endnote-4) These words are the combination of *pleon* which means “more” and *echein* which means “to have”. Sometimes these words are used in an ethically neutral sense to convey that *X* is better than *Y* or that *X* exceeds *Y* in some capacity. For example, in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle says, ‘Wherefore, by the employment of this fallacy, the defendant always has an advantage [*pleonektein*] over the accuser’ (2.25.1402b24–6).[[5]](#endnote-5) In his *Natural Faculties*, Galen writes, ‘If it was not these that caused it, then it was excess of heat [*thermasias pleonexia*] (for these two symptoms occurred besides the bubo – an alteration in the arterial and cardiac movements and an excessive development of natural heat [*phusin thermasias pleonexia*])’ (2.8.119).[[6]](#endnote-6) In both of these uses, there is nothing ethically or morally bad denoted by these terms; rather, in the former example the word signifies that using a particular fallacy gives the defendant an advantage over the accuser, while in the latter example the word signifies that something has exceeded a limit. The former example shows more of the competitive sense of the word, while the latter shows more of the quantitative sense of the word.

<NP>However, the Greeks usually use *pleonektein* and *pleonexia* in a morally loaded way. We see this in the *Gorgias*, when Socrates says to Callicles:

<EXT>I believe that you don’t pay attention to these facts, even though you’re a wise [*sophos*] man in these matters. You’ve failed to notice that proportionate equality [*hē isotēs hē geōmetrikē*] has a great power among both gods and men, and you suppose that you ought to practice getting the greater share [*pleonexian*]. That’s because you neglect geometry. (508a4–8; see also, 483c)</EXT>

Here, Socrates contrasts *pleonexia* with proportionate equality. Accordingly, the word has the negative connotation of greed.

<NP>In the beginning of the greedy craftsperson argument, the term seems to have more of a quantitative sense. Socrates and Thrasymachus have been having a disagreement over whether the just or the unjust person is the true master of the craft of ruling. Thrasymachus argues that it is the unjust person since he is able to acquire the greatest amount of external goods in any situation, while Socrates argues that it is the just person since he benefits others.

<NP>Thrasymachus’ use of“overreach” highlights the self-interested aspects of this term. We see this most directly in Thrasymachus’ initial defense of the value of injustice. Thrasymachus offers three examples in which the unjust person does better than the just person. First, when a just person and an unjust person form contracts and the partnership ends, the unjust person always comes out ahead (343d). Second, when it comes to paying taxes, it is always better to be unjust. The just person pays more taxes than the unjust person does, but the unjust person gets a larger refund than the just person does (343d–e). Third, when a just person holds public office, his private affairs suffer so that he can benefit the public, but with the unjust person, the inverse happens (343e). In each of these examples, the unjust person exceeds the just person in the acquisition of external goods.

<NP>However, during the discussion of craft-experts and non-experts, Socrates appears to shift the meaning of “overreach”, for if the term does not shift meanings, the craft examples make no sense. Socrates explains that the difference between a musician and a non-musician can be found in how they tighten their strings, but we don’t think that the person who plays out of tune is trying to get more music than the person who plays in tune. Likewise, when we consider a doctor who overprescribes the amount of food and drink required for a patient, it is not to acquire more material goods. Of course, there are doctors who prescribe unnecessary drugs or conduct unnecessary surgery for the sake of profit, but nothing in Socrates’ examples suggest that this is what he has in mind. Rather, the thought is that experts follow the same prescriptions with respect to their craft, while non-experts do not (350a–b).

<NP> We see that “overreach” initially expresses some kind of quantitative victory over others. To overreach or do better than someone else is to end up with more stuff. Nevertheless, Socrates uses “overreach” prescriptively in the craft-experts. To overreach or do better than someone is to offer a different prescription than they would offer. If Socrates is equivocating on key terms, then the argument is invalid. The only hope for preserving the validity of the argument is to show that the word “overreach” retains the same meaning throughout the entirety of the argument.

<NP>One might attempt to resolve this worry by translating *pleonektein* as “to do better than” in the competitive sense (see Bloom 1991: 335–6; Dorter 1974: 36–7). The advantage of this reading is that it can capture the quantitative sense of wanting to acquire more, since one way *A* can do better than *B* is for *A* to have more external goods than *B*. Moreover, such a reading appears to overcome the awkwardness of the craft examples since a painter can want to paint better pictures than his competition without also wanting more external goods. Hence, at first glance this reading appears to accommodate both senses of “overreach”.

<NP>However, this interpretation faces three difficulties. First, as a historical fact the craftspeople in ancient Greek culture were competitive. Rachel Barney points out that this ‘truth has been recognized in Greek culture ever since Hesiod, whose *Works and Days* opens by praising the “strife” involved in productive competition’ (2006: 53). In light of this, it would be odd for Socrates and Thrasymachus to agree that craft-experts are somehow less competitive than non-experts (see Hes. *Op*.19–24). Second, as a philosophical idea, it doesn’t seem very plausible that what differentiates an expert craftsperson from a non-expert is that the non-expert is more competitive than the expert. Indeed, in most crafts it appears that experts are generally more competitive than non-experts. Third, and most damning, the musician and doctor examples have nothing to do with competition, but with how one makes a prescription.

<NP>In order to overcome these difficulties, we must broaden our conception of *pleonektein* to something like “overreaching a limit”.[[7]](#endnote-7) Getting it right or achieving excellence with respect to a craft is about hitting a “golden mean” and “overreaching” is anything that misses that mark (Barney 2006: 53; *Phlb*.24e–26d, 55d–58d; *Plt.* 283a–284e; Arist. *Eth.* *Nic*.2.6) A target board is useful metaphor, with the bullseye representing the golden mean and everything outside it is “overreaching” (see Foot 2001: 75). The previously mentioned passage from Galen’s *Natural Faculties* is helpful here. In the passage (2.8.19), Galen suggests that one cause of disease is excessive heat. Galen is following a basic principle of ancient medicine: health requires a balance or proportionate equality of various elements and conditions, and disease occurs when an element or a condition exceeds a natural limit (see, for example, Alcmaeon DK24B4; Hippocrates *Ancient Medicine*,ch. 9–11, 19; *On The Nature of Man*,ch. 7). Indeed, we find Plato adopt this position in the *Timaeus* when he writes, ‘How diseases originate is, I take it, obvious to all. Given that there are four kinds of stuff out of which the body has been constructed – earth, fire, water, and air – it may happen that some of these unnaturally increase themselves at the expense of the others [*para phusin pleonexia kai endeia*]’ (81e6–82a3; *Symp*. 188a–d). In the *Laws*, Plato directly connects *pleonexia* as the cause of disease to *pleonexia* as the cause of injustice:

<EXT>But I suppose our view is that this evil [*hamartēma*] we’ve named – *tēn* *pleonexian*, is what is called “disease” when it appears in the flesh and blood, and “plague” when brought by the seasons or at intervals of years; while if it occurs in the state or society, the same evil turns up under yet another name: “injustice” [*adikian*]. (10.906c2–6; see also *Resp*.10.609a–611a) </EXT>

<NP>These passages provide evidence that Plato is thinking of *pleonexia* as exceeding a limit. However, this notion is still opaque. To help clarify what it means, I will discuss two broad ways one can “exceed a limit”. One can exceed a limit by following the wrong prescriptions or by not adopting the appropriate standards and values. For example, one can “overreach” prescriptively by over-or-under watering a plant, over-or-under prescribing medicine, or over-or-under tightening a musical instrument. Experts *qua* experts agree about the appropriate prescriptions governing their respective subject of expertise.

<NP>Alasdair MacIntyre’s notion of “goods of practice” can help elucidate what it means to “overreach” the standards and values of a subject. Practices are coherent and complex cooperative activities that have standards of excellence that are appropriate to and partially constitutive of the activity (2007: 187). Consider a child who is motivated to play chess because the instructor gives the child candy when he or she wins. If the child is solely motivated to win so that he or she can receive candy, ‘the child has no reason not to cheat and every reason to cheat, provided he or she can do so successfully’ (2007: 188). However, the instructor’s hope is that the child will eventually learn to appreciate and enjoy the particular skills, strategies, and competition of playing chess. ‘Now, if the child cheats, he or she will be defeating not me, but himself or herself’ (2007: 188). The idea is that there are goods that inhere in the practice of chess itself and cheating will only allow the child to acquire those goods that are contingently associated with this activity (e.g. candy), but it will not allow the child to acquire the goods of chess. Experts *qua* experts accept and pursue the same inherent goods of their subject of expertise.[[8]](#endnote-8)

<NP>These two ways of exceeding a limit elucidate how the two forms of pseudo-experts overreach everyone and how the expert overreaches them. The eristic overreaches the expert by adhering to standards that are external to the craft. This is like the child who sees chess as primarily a means to candy acquisition or like Thrasymachus who sees discussion as a means to defeat others. The expert overreaches the eristic by disagreeing with her about the norms governing a craft, but does not overreach the expert since they agree about these things. Unlike the eristic, the fool doesn’t overreach the expert by aiming at goods external to the craft; rather, the fool overreaches the expert by positing the wrong prescriptions. For example, the “eristic cobbler” approaches cobbling with an eye towards making money, while the “foolish cobbler” disagrees with all other cobblers about how to make shoes. The expert overreaches the fool by disagreeing with her about the prescriptions governing a craft, but does not overreach the expert since they agree about these things.

<NP>Now one might object that since unjust people share the same principles, they do not “overreach” each other. As C. D. C. Reeve (1988: 20) says:

<EXT>Now it is true that the Craftsman does not try to “outdo” his fellow Craftsmen in that he does not try to go beyond the principles of his (and their) Craft. But the Unjust man does not try to “outdo” his fellows in that way either. Instead, he tries to get the better of them by practicing the Craft of Injustice as well as possible.<EXT>

Although it is true that all unjust people agree that acquiring more external goods is always better, the structure of this agreement differs in three important ways from the kinds of agreement found among craft-experts and just people.

<NP>First, although extremely unjust people have a theoretical agreement that overreaching others is always better, they always have a practical disagreement in that they each think that they – themselves – should have more than others should. Thus, the unjust person is always in a state of competition with others, including both just and unjust people. Felipe and Jessica might share the correct general norm that physicians ought to care for their patients, but this is insufficient for expertise. For at the level of action, Felipe, the fool, might treat the body like a game of *Operation*, while Jessica might conform to the recommendations of standard medical textbooks. In other words, a necessary condition for expertise is the agreement about general principles, but this isn’t a sufficient condition since there needs to be some amount of practical agreement concerning particular prescriptions. Likewise, Joe and Alice might share the general principle that more is always better; nevertheless, they disagree about the allocation of goods: Joe believes that they should go to him, while Alice believes that they should go to her. So while it is true that unjust individuals agree about the value of greed, they disagree about particular actions.

<NP>Indeed, this is how Plato is thinking about craft-expertise in the greedy craftsperson argument. Craft-experts agree about particular actions (the tightening of strings and the prescription of medicine) (349e–350a). If we think of *pleonexia* just at the general theoretical level, then we cannot account for these examples. In addition, in various places in Plato’s corpus, expertise not only includes general knowledge, but also understanding of how to handle specific cases. Based on their experience, flute-players grasp how flutes should be made (*Resp*.10.601d–e). The physician not only cares for her patients, but knows what foods are best for them (*Grg*. 484c; *Prt*.314a–b).

<NP>Second, the theoretical agreement between unjust people doesn’t allow for collaboration with respect to the “craft” of injustice in the same way that all other crafts do. To draw out this point, let us compare an overtly competitive craft, boxing, to unjust people interacting. It might appear that two expert boxers are in perpetual conflict in the same way that two “expert” unjust people are – in both cases, the individuals aim at defeating each other – however, this isn’t so. Boxers aim to achieve the excellences that inhere in boxing and they constrain their behaviors to achieve these goods. Both boxers must agree to a set of rules and values of this activity; in other words, they must collaborate. Indeed, when athletes thank and praise their opponents, it is not always false humility – athletes require things of their opponents in order to achieve the goods of that practice. For a boxer to raise his level of performance, he needs his opponent to raise his level of performance, and because of this, rival boxers can not only appreciate the skills of their rivals but also desire that their rivals hone their skills. None of this is true of extremely unjust people – people who reject constraints. Since the primary aim of the completely unjust person is to dominate others and to secure the most amount of external goods possible, an essential quality of being completely unjust is being non-collaborative (see Joseph 1935: 34). (Unless one thinks that a master dominating a slave is a form of collaboration – I do not.) This is one of Socrates’ main points in the *Republic*: ‘injustice causes civil war, hatred, and fighting, while justice brings friendship and a sense of common purpose’ (351d4–5); the completely unjust live a friendless life surrounded by enemies (8.576a, 578e–579b; *Grg*. 507d–508a, 510b–e).

<NP>Third, it is very difficult – perhaps impossible – to distinguish the goods associated with the “practice” of injustice from the goods contingently related to it. The problem stems from the fact that the goods that “inhere” in the “practice” of injustice are identified with what are typically the external goods of other practices, such as power, money, and reputation. As we saw above, the goods that inhere in a practice involve collaboration and restraint between those who skillfully engage in that practice. Because there is no real collaboration and constraint in the “practice” of injustice, it isn’t clear how there could be goods inherent to it. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates says that ‘the virtue of each thing is something structured and ordered by structure’ (506e1–2). If the activity has no structure, how can it have goods and excellences internal to it? Therefore, the structure of the agreement between unjust people is substantively different from the agreement between craft-experts.

<NP>Now one might worry that this account of “overreaching” has abandoned the selfish aspects that Thrasymachus has in mind when he uses *pleonexia*. Nonetheless, this is not the case. My interpretation of “overreach” explains Thrasymachean self-interest in the same way that violating Kant’s “Formula of Universal Law” explains selfishness (G. 4.421; see Jowett and Campbell 1894: 48).[[9]](#endnote-9) For a Thrasymachean, the ideal situation is where you are unjust towards everyone and everyone is just towards you. In such a situation, one is benefiting from the norms and prescriptions of justice without partaking in them (see Korsgaard 1996a: 100–101). Both the greedy craftsperson argument and the “Formula of Universal Law” diagnose the wrongness of this greedy person by examining how her attitude is irrational. The former says that such a position is unintelligent since it is contrary to all clear cut examples of intelligence, while the latter says that such a position is irrational in that it is (in some sense) contradictory (Korsgaard 1996a: chap. 3).

**d. Principle of Resemblance**

<T>The fourth objection is that it is fallacious for Socrates to infer that because the just person is like the wise and good person the just person *is* wise and good, and because the unjust person is like the foolish and bad person, the unjust person *is* foolish and bad. The problem with this inference is that the principle of resemblance only establishes that the just person shares a quality with the wise and good person and the unjust person shares a quality with the foolish and bad person, it doesn’t establish what the quality is. Thus, it is formally fallacious to infer identity from mere resemblance (see Shorey 1969: *ad loc*. 349d; Allan 1940: 106). However, if we take this to be an abductive argument, then it is no longer formally fallacious. Moreover, this is a reasonable inference in light of the various background assumptions in place. In order to resolve their dispute, Socrates and Thrasymachus agree that craft-experts provide the model of intelligence and measure the attitude and behavior of just and unjust people against this model. If all knowledgeable people follow a particular pattern and no ignorant people do, it is reasonable to infer that the pattern is casually relevant to intelligence. When we observe that just people follow that pattern and unjust people do not, it is then reasonable to infer that just people are knowledgeable people and unjust people are not.

**4. The Complete Argument**

We are now in a position to restate Socrates’ argument and to assess its merit.

**a. The Argument**

<T>The argument can be reconstructed as follows:

<EXT>1. Principle of Resemblance: *A* and *B* resemble each other if and only if they share a quality, *Q*. (Agreed by both parties)

2. Extremely just people agree to a certain set of norms and prescriptions governing human interaction, while extremely unjust people do not. (Stated by Thrasymachus)

3. Craft-experts agree to a certain set of norms and prescriptions governing their craft, while pseudo-experts do not. (Agreed by both parties)

4. For any subject, *X*, that involves knowledge, knowledgeable people agree to a certain set of norms and prescriptions governing *X*,while ignorant people do not. (Generalized from 3)

5. A person is knowledgeable in *X* if and only if a person is wise and good with respect to *X*, while a person is ignorant in *X* if and only if a person is foolish and bad with respect to *X*. (Assumption)

6. Therefore, wise and good people with respect to *X* agree to a certain set of norms and prescriptions governing *X*, while foolish and bad people do not. (From 4 and 5)

7. The just person resembles the wise and good person in that both share the quality of agreeing to certain sets of norms and prescriptions, while the unjust person resembles the ignorant and bad person in that both share the quality of not agreeing to certain sets of norms and prescriptions. (From 1, 2, and 6)

8. A reasonable explanation for why the just person resembles the wise and good person and the unjust person resembles the ignorant and bad person is that the just person *is* wise and good and the unjust person *is* ignorant and bad. (Abduction 1–7)</EXT>

<NP>Put in this revised fashion, the greedy craftsperson argument overcomes many of the structural concerns raised by scholars. Nonetheless, we still haven’t explored whether it is saying anything worthwhile. I will do this in what follows.

**b. The Goals of the Just and Unjust**

<T>Julia Annas argues that even if the argument could be reconstructed in such a way to avoid equivocation, it still faces a more pressing concern:

<EXT>[W]hat is wrong with the argument is not a simple mistake located in one word, but something rather deeper that would persist even if the argument were reformulated … [Socrates] wants the unjust man to be trying unsuccessfully to be what the just man is; but this can only be done by presenting them as competing in the same race, with the just man winning. (1981, 51–2)</EXT>

I take Annas’ point to be that Socrates’ argument cannot succeed because it treats the just and unjust person as having the same goals and same standards of excellence, which is an unwarranted assumption.

<NP>I agree with Annas that Socrates’ argument treats the just and the unjust as having the same goals, but I fail to see why this is problematic. Both Thrasymachus and Socrates are debating what the best life is, whether it is the just or unjust life. So, from the perspective of both interlocutors, the just person and the unjust person share the same goal of living well and being good. Moreover, they agree that having knowledge is good and being ignorant is bad. Hence, they share the same goals; they merely disagree about which type of life achieves these goals. Indeed, one of the strengths of the argument is that it uses a mutually agreed upon conception of expertise and intelligence to analyze the qualities of justice and injustice. By examining the structure of craft-expertise, Socrates demonstrates that the just person is similar to craft-experts and the unjust person is similar to pseudo-experts (see Joseph 1935: 33).

<NP>Now there are three ways Thrasymachus could push back. First, if craft-experts make mistakes, then craft-experts will not agree with each other (denial of premise 3). Nonetheless, this option is ruled out at 340c–e; moreover, neither party wants the “erring expert” to count as an expert since they are using this as the standard of intelligence.

<NP>Second, Thrasymachus could argue that craft-experts can disagree with each other because craft-expertise is subjective (denial of premise 3). Certainly a philosopher like Plato, who both believes in the interconnectedness of goodness, truth, and beauty and rejects democracy because it treats everyone as experts, would dismiss this idea. But given that Thrasymachus holds a radical view of morality, would it be out of place for him to argue that two expert cobblers could, without either being wrong, completely disagree about the norms and prescriptions of cobbling? I suspect that Thrasymachus doesn’t appeal to the subjectivity of crafts for three reasons. First, it would undercut the practical force of his claim that the just person is a fool since the just person would only be a fool from a particular perspective – a perspective that the just person might not have.[[10]](#endnote-10) Second, underlying Thrasymachus’ anger towards Socrates is a rather strong commitment to a particular type of life – a type of life Thrasymachus thinks is objectively better than the one Socrates presents. Third, given that we are considering idealized agents and that crafts have constitutive ends, it is quite plausible that there would be convergence among craft-experts. Perhaps there is room for some differences regarding the exact details among idealized experts, but there certainly isn’t room for the vast disagreement characteristic of the unjust person.

<NP>The third option involves denying that the two craft examples generalize to all domains of learning (denial of premise 4). Thrasymachus could take a cue from ethicists who maintain that there is a difference between “facts” and “values”. He could then argue that knowledge with respect to facts is fundamentally different from wisdom with respect to values. This argument takes a number of forms in contemporary ethics but at its heart is the claim that when it comes to ethical matters the facts are not “out there” in the same way as they are with scientific matters (see Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*: Book 3, part 1, sec. 1). If we idealize, scientists would converge on what the facts are, but no such convergence would occur about values.[[11]](#endnote-11) Adopting such a position would allow Thrasymachus to explain why wisdom with respect to ruling and interpersonal relationships differs from other domains of knowledge.

<NP>However, I have three responses. First, as I pointed out above when discussing the subjectivity of crafts, such a position is unlikely to satisfy Thrasymachus. Thrasymachus’ ambition is to prove that injustice is superior to justice full stop and not merely establish that it is superior from a particular standpoint. The advantage of using crafts to explore the wisdom or folly of injustice is that it provides a standpoint-independent standard of wisdom and folly by which all interlocutors can measure injustice. Thus, this position is (somewhat) self-defeating.

<NP>Second, I could appeal to the work of philosophers that argue that there would be full or almost full convergence among idealized individuals concerning ethical matters, thereby preserving premise 4 (see Parfit 2011: vol. 2, sec. 34; Shafer-Landau 2002: chap. 9; Smith 1994: 187–89).

<NP>Third, I could concede that the values of idealized agents do not fully converge, but argue that there is still more agreement among them than between the Thrasymachean unjust person and everyone else. There are three forms of this rebuttal. First, I could point out that at a general level there is convergence of ethical beliefs. Even Bernard Williams concedes that ‘there are some ethical beliefs, universally held and usually vague (“one has to have a special reason to kill someone”), that we can be sure will survive at the reflective level’ (1985: 148).[[12]](#endnote-12) Second, internal to any particular outlook there must be some particular convergence from within that outlook or else it isn’t an ethical outlook (see Williams 1985: chap. 8; Foot 2002: chap. 7 and 8; and Gibbard 1990: part 3). For instance, perhaps fully rational and coherent Spartans and Persians will not converge on their ethical beliefs; however, the Spartans themselves must have some degree of convergence about the norms and prescriptions governing their behavior or else they do not have an ethical framework. Third, when we compare the various ethical outlooks, even though there is disagreement between them, there is still agreement that there are structured principles and values that constrain one’s behavior. For example, fully rational and coherent Athenians, Spartans, and Persians disagree about particular norms and prescriptions, but they have a meta-agreement about what normative discourse and theory involves.[[13]](#endnote-13)

<NP>Admittedly, this (hypothetical) concession involves weaker notions of agreement. However, this still spells trouble for Thrasymachus’ argument since he has made the unjust person so unprincipled and disagreeable. For a particular society to be a particular society there must be some level of agreement. But couldn’t there be a society of Thrasymacheans? This is unlikely since even Hobbesians like David Gauthier (1986) and error theorists like Joyce (2006) and Mackie (1977: part 2, chap. 5) recognize that some level of agreement and restraint must exist in society. Moreover, as I argued earlier, the agreement between Thrasymacheans is substantively different from the agreement between craft-experts; and, in this section, I suggested that the disagreeable nature of Thrasymacheans differs from relative or parochial ethical perspectives. In many ways, the Thrasymachean outlook resembles a child who ignores the rules and values of a practice and simply does what he wants. Not only does this child not appear to be an expert, it isn’t clear that he is actually involved with a practice – but he is certainly doing something.

<NP>In response to these claims, Thrasymachus has two options. Either, he can weaken his conception of the unjust person, such that he is less greedy and disagreeable, or he can insist that wisdom and goodness in ethics amount to nothing more than self-interest narrowly construed. Insofar as Thrasymachus hoped to prove that the extremely unjust person had achieved a notion of wisdom and goodness that went beyond mere self-interest, the greedy craftsperson argument is successful. Did Thrasymachus hope to prove this (cf. 340c–e)? It is difficult to say, but as Nicholas White (2008: 170) observes, in describing the just person as a ‘high-minded’ simpleton, Thrasymachus is acknowledging that *some* people pursue justice as a good independent of narrow self-interest since there is nothing high-minded about directly pursuing one’s own good (see Foot 2001: chap. 4). If this is right, Thrasymachus cannot demonstrate that such people are foolish by merely showing them that justice doesn’t promote their narrow self-interest since they already accept this. In order to unmask their foolishness he must prove that they fail on some broader conception of wisdom or he must establish that ethical wisdom is nothing more than the narrow promotion of one’s self-interest. The greedy craftsperson argument blocks the former attempt and as far as I can tell, Thrasymachus doesn’t offer any normative argument for the latter.

<NP>Still, the effectiveness of the greedy craftsperson argument is limited: it doesn’t address the qualities of the moderately just and unjust nor does it explain how injustice harms oneself (see Irwin 1995: 178).[[14]](#endnote-14) With these limitations in mind, I’d like to suggest three ways Plato builds upon this argument in the *Republic*.First, Socrates’ theory of the Forms explains how different domains of learning are interconnected in a rational and systematic way. When philosophers learn the Form of the Good, they learn how the abstract ideas of goodness, harmony, and oneness relate to particular actions. Additionally, when philosophers gain knowledge of the Form of the Good, they understand how other Forms and objects connect to the Form of the Good. Second, Socrates’ account of psychology explains that in all domains of knowledge, we apprehend reality and become wise through the same faculty – namely, reason (see especially, 4.443e and 10.602c–604d). Both claims support premise 4 by explaining how different domains of learning have similar structures. Third, Socrates’ account of psychology explains how justice, rationality, limit, and well-being are all interconnected. Justice involves having one’s soul parts arranged in a harmonious way, respecting natural limits, and allowing reason to lead (4.434d–444e). For one’s soul parts to exist in a harmonious way is to flourish and for them to exist in a disharmonious way is to flounder (1.352d–354a, 4.444d–445b, and Books 8–9). This not only involves showing how a tyrant is foolish and unhappy (Book 9), but also involves showing how less extreme forms of injustice detract from one’s wisdom and happiness (Book 8).

**5. Conclusion**

<T>The greedy craftsperson argument has mostly been ignored and ridiculed by scholars. In this paper, I have presented an interpretation of the argument that is interesting and plausible. The underlying idea behind the argument is that all domains of learning have an internal rational structure, such that all experts agree with each other on the norms and prescriptions of their domain of learning, while non-experts do not. The fact that just people are in agreement with each other about the norms and prescriptions governing justice suggests that they are wise and good, while the fact that unjust people are incapable of agreement suggests that they are foolish and bad. The argument is effective at limiting the ways in which a greedy person can justify the “intelligence” of his position. When the greedy person claims that he is smarter than other people are, he cannot mean he is “smarter” in the way experts are smarter than pseudo-experts are. He can only mean that he is better at pursuing his own narrow self-interest. The larger task of the *Republic* is to show that the greedy person fails on this front too.[[15]](#endnote-15)

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**Notes**

1. . Translations of Plato follow those in Cooper and Hutchinson (1997), with slight modification (e.g. the *Gorgias* follows Zeyl; the *Laws* follows Saunders; and the *Republic* follows Grube/Reeve). The Greek follows Burnet (1900–1907) with the exception of the *Republic*, which follows Slings (2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . Thrasymachus claims that the just person desires to “overreach” the unjust person but is incapable of doing this (349). One might object that this contradicts my claim that the completely just person’s actions match her desires. I have two responses. First, in saying that the just person is incapable of “overreaching” the unjust person, Thrasymachus means that the unjust person always achieves more power, wealth, honor, and general success than the just person does. Notice that this doesn’t entail that the completely just person’s desires, judgments, and actions do not match one another. Rather, it is a statement about the achievements or outcomes of those actions. Second, as I argue in section 3.c, the just person does “overreach” the unjust person under Socrates’ description of “overreach”. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . Other examples include Gorgias (*Grg*.459a–c), Callicles (*Grg*.494e–459a), and Euthydemus and Dionysodorus (see especially, *Euthyd*.275a). Thrasymachus accuses Socrates of being an eristic at 336a–c and 340c–341a. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . For a philological discussion of this word, see Gutglueck 1988. For a philosophical discussion of Thrasymachus’ perspective, see Nawar 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Translation follows Freese (1926). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . Translation follows Brock (1916). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . Versions of this perspective were common in older scholarship; see Jowett and Campbell 1894, 47–9; Adam 1902: *ad loc*.349e–350a; Allan 1940: 106–7; Nettleship 1901: 36–41; Joseph 1935: 33; and Cornford 1941: 32–3. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Agreement is as a sign of expertise for Plato, see *Alcibiades 1*: 111a–113d and *Meno* 95b. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . There are two connections to Kantian ethics in the greedy craftsperson argument. First, just as Kant uses the formal structure of reason to derive moral norms (see Korsgaard 1996b), Socrates uses the formal structure of crafts qua intelligent subjects to derive the content of ethics. Second, in Kantian ethics, rational agents are in harmony with each other (see G. 4.433; Rawls 1971; Korsgaard 1996a: chap. 7, 1996b: chap. 4). Those who make themselves an exception to the rule – and thereby disregard this harmony – are irrational. Likewise, the extremely unjust person is foolish and bad because they cannot cooperate with anyone. This connection to Kant becomes more apparent when one contrasts the way Socrates is using the craft analogy with how Annas (2011) uses it in her account of virtue ethics. Annas uses crafts to explain how the virtuous person cultivates virtue, reasons, and acts, but not as a means to constrain and develop a notion of intelligence. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . This is a common argument presented to relativistically inclined undergraduate students, see Rachels and Rachels 2015: chap. 2. Note also that many anti-realists think that normative language purports to be objective. To judge that something ought to be done or that it is rational is to make a claim that goes beyond one’s personal preferences or judgments; see Joyce 2006, chap. 2; Mackie 1977: part 1, chap. 1, sec. 7; and Gibbard 1990: part 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . There are many versions of this argument, see Schiffer 2003: chap. 6; Mackie 1977: part 1, chap. 1, sec. 8; Stevenson 1963: chap. 1; Williams 1985: chap. 8; and Hume, *An Enquiry into the Principles of Morals*: sec. 9, part 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . This is also a common argument presented to undergraduate students who are drawn towards relativism, see Rachels and Rachels 2015: chap. 2. On cross-cultural morality, see Joyce 2006: chap. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. . Gibbard (1990: part 3) offers a rather sophisticated account of how this is possible. He explains how norm-expressivism can develop normative objectivity (of a sort) from various conversational demands. With these conversation demands in mind, Nozick (1981: 434) says that when ‘Thrasymachus says that justice is the interests of the stronger, and Socrates starts to question him about this, Thrasymachus should hit Socrates over the head. He concedes too much when he enters an activity, discussion, that assumes that there is some mark of correctness and rightness other than (and superior to) strength’; see also, MacIntyre 2007: chap. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. . I do not think that one can reflectively endorse being half-way just or unjust, but my position is controversial, see Paytas and Baima 2019; Foot 2002, chap. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. . I thank the following people for their help with this paper: Kelly Arenson, Anne Margaret Baxley, Eric Brown, Ashley Kennedy, Sarah Malanowski, Ian McCready-Flora, Matt McGrath, Tyler Paytas, Naomi Reshotko, J. Clerk Shaw, Nick Schuster, Roslyn Weiss, the anonymous referees, and *Dialogoi*’s editorial staff. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)