

# Key claims made by thrasymachus in book i



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What are the key claims made by Thrasymachus in Book I? Is he consistent?

Thrasymachus makes several claims regarding the definition of justice in Book I, namely that: "Justice is nothing but the advantage of the stronger (338c). "Justice is obedience to laws" (339b) and finally "justice is nothing but the advantage of another (343c). I will be making the case that these three statements are not inherently harmonizable, but instead that Thrasymachus is expressing a different proposition. Thrasymachus is arguing primarily that "justice is the advantage of another". I will further highlight that his argument is consistent and without contradictions.

Firstly, it is important to detail what Thrasymachus is truly defining as "justice", there is often debate between whether Thrasymachus defines justice as "the advantage of another", or that "justice is the advantage of the rulers". It appears that Thrasymachus is set up to be viewed as greedy, selfish and of the appetitive part of the soul that is revealed in "The Republic book IV" (perhaps also the spirited part that seeks out valour and triumph). Thrasymachus' demanding of payment and dominating tone as a sophist surely support this notion, "He listened, burst out laughing scornfully and said / "Heracles! Here is the habitual irony of Socrates..."(337a), therefore it seems sensible to presume that Plato is setting him up for failure, however, interestingly Socrates fails to convincingly crush him in debate, leading Glaucon to follow up from Thrasymachus, this detail alone appears to suggest that Thrasymachus is to be taken more seriously than we might intend at a first glance, despite his controversial claims (especially to a modern western thinker), he seems to be offering a valid and coherent definition of justice.

Thrasymachus appears to be arguing that justice “ as the advantage of another” is the most important element to his philosophy. As Nicholson (1972) points out, it is odd that many commentators seek to bring in a political element to the Republic so early in the book, considering that most prior discussion appears to be largely on a more ethical basis. Indeed, justice is introduced as more of a wide-ranging and general aspect of character, and not just a political activity. It is indeed Socrates who seems to thrust the conversation into the political realm, with the analogy between justice in the state and of the individual “ There is, we say justice of one man; and there is, surely justice of the whole city too?” (368E). Thus, I contend that the political explanations of Thrasymachus’ viewpoint appear to be misguided.

The main argument that supports the notion that Thrasymachus’ definition(s) of justice contradict is that he asserts that both “ justice is the advantage of the stronger” namely the rulers and those in positions of power, and that “ justice is the advantage of another”. The reasons that these two, held in unison, may contradict is because only for those that are not in positions of power, is the “ advantage of the stronger” the same as “ the advantage of another”. Nicholson uses the example of a tyrannical ruler levying a tax to pay for his orgies. According to Thrasymachus this is a just act if it is to the ruler’s benefit, and unjust if it is to another’s benefit. There are several scholars who point out this objection, for example, Jowett (1870) who claims that Thrasymachus is a “ mere child in argument”, thus, is not attempting to express a coherent and logically sound theory. A possible objection to this is that simply “ advantage of another” is equal to “ the advantage of the stronger” and that Thrasymachus is semantically

expressing equal propositions and due to his role as a sophist, is perhaps purposefully ambiguous with his rhetoric, he articulates that “ you are unaware that justice and the just are really someone else’s good, the advantage of the man who is strong and rules, and a personal harm to the man who obeys and serves.” Taken in its wider context, it is apparent that Thrasymachus is not talking merely of rulers, but instead of man as a whole, his analogies include those not of a ruling class, therefore “ another” may include those other than a person in a position of power. This seems to undermine the claims that Thrasymachus is contradicting himself with two opposing definitions of justice. However, it seems tenuous that Thrasymachus so clearly advocates a form of “ natural right” in which the strong rule over the weak. There are those that see Thrasymachus’ provocation of an “ infallible” ruler as a precursor to Machiavelli’s “ The Prince” in which one employs underhand and perhaps immoral actions to achieve their own desires. For example, Wilamowitz (1920) asserts that Thrasymachus is clearly advocating the proposition that “ justice is the advantage of the stronger”, else he wouldn’t so clearly have expressed it – and followed it with examples of the infallibility of a ruler. Thus, it appears that we need a stronger explanation to substantiate the claim that Thrasymachus is advocating “ justice as the advantage of another.”

Secondly, and perhaps more convincingly, we can attempt to forego the attempt to harmonize both the “ stronger” with “ another”, and instead avoid the contradiction by prioritizing one definition over another.

Thrasymachus’ primary assertion is that the “ advantage of the stronger” comes before the secondary definition that “ justice is the advantage of

another". Using Thrasymachus' own analogy of "contacts" and business deals, (343D), Thrasymachus' main point is that not all contracts are directly beneficial to the ruler. Indirectly, however, they might be. This is potentially a challenging expression to deal with, as if we were to follow the argument that "justice is the advantage of the stronger" then we may indeed be left scratching our heads as to how a deal can be considered "just" or "unjust" if its benefits are not directly applicable to the "stronger". Furthermore, this notion is difficult to reconcile, as Nicholson points out, due to the fact that "it involves sophisticated and contentious ideas, yet Thrasymachus provides no special explanation of them such as he gives with other unusual ideas,". I would argue that whilst this argument in favour of Thrasymachus primarily supporting "justice as the advantage of the stronger" appears more widely accepted, it is perhaps overlooking, as Kerferd explains, that Thrasymachus more wholesomely argues that "justice is the advantage of another", as it is the fullest account of his views on justice and injustice which we have". This is because it provides a singular notion of justice - which is that it is to another's benefit and that injustice is to our own advantage. Perhaps, as Kerferd continues, Justice for the stronger is but one example of a wider "doctrine". The reason that Thrasymachus prefers "injustice" is that "since justice is the advantage of another [the ruler], justice for the ruler must be the subject's advantage". Thus, Thrasymachus is claiming that it is more beneficial to "another" to be unjust, and he offers a far stronger definition of justice about "another" than of the "stronger" thus rendering the explanation that "another" is subordinated by the "stronger" as useless.

We can take Thrasymachus' explanation of justice, therefore as consistent if we pursue the line of thought that justice is to the advantage of "another". Therefore, it might be simpler for us to understand what he is aiming to assert in the expression of this. I subscribe to the view of Nicholson, and others, that Thrasymachus appears more to be more of an ethical thinker, in the leagues of Ethical Nihilism, Legalism or Psychological Egoism. With perhaps more of an emphasis on Psychological Egoism, this is because Thrasymachus asserts that justice is the good of another, and therefore, in accordance with Psychological Egoism (such as that described by Max Stirner (1844) it is unsuited to the actions of self-interest (of which all actions are), the implications of this theory also support the aforementioned assertion that Thrasymachus is largely an ethical philosopher, and not exactly a political theorist in the same way Socrates is, because the emphasis is largely on the singular actions of an individual, and not the implementation of the theory on a larger scale. Nicholson further suggests that Thrasymachus does not assert that we have a "moral obligation" to be unjust, as it is not a virtue, but "good judgement" (384C-D). One might object to this theory if they were to suppose that instead, Thrasymachus argues that justice does not objectively exist - instead, that he is an "ethical nihilist". This is the view of scholars A. E Taylor (1960) and Burnet (1964), there appears to be some truth to this interpretation, as clearly Thrasymachus operates on a temporal level - with his definitions as purveying real-life examples, and clearly "real" analogies, whereas Socrates, as we later discover offers a definition of justice that is "other-worldly" namely that of the Forms. Therefore, it seems logical to assert that Thrasymachus is indirectly opposing the possibility of a realm of the forms,

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thus there are no objective morals to subscribe to and the concept of justice is arbitrary, many scholars link this view as a precursor to Nietzschean moral nihilism. Therefore "justice is the advantage of the stronger" is a purposefully arbitrary attempt to define justice in a temporal manner. Whilst this appears strong, I feel that perhaps it is assuming too much of Thrasymachus, and misses the notion that he clearly, and objectively attempts to define justice, surely, if he were to assert that there are no objective morals, and advocate a form of nihilism, then he would state as such. As he does not, he appears not to clearly support this view.

Finally, we may also view that Thrasymachus is not intending to make his most substantial claims about justice, perhaps more perceptively, we can see that it is instead meant to express his distaste at "the Socratic method" namely the idea that one must question everything to its fullest extent and not offer one's own interpretation in response. Clearly, Thrasymachus as a rhetorician is a skilled orator and is best suited to his long spiels (343b). Sidgwick (1905) claims that Thrasymachus is the "least inept" at Socratic discourse and that as he was the initial instigator of that form of discourse, that he was of course naturally the best. Thus, it is not entirely unusual that Thrasymachus was to object to it, "why do you simpletons truckle and give way to one another". In this way, Thrasymachus is not truly trying to define justice but instead trying to criticize Socratic dialogue and preserve the role of a Sophist. This notion, however, seems misguided, insofar as it attempts to claim that Thrasymachus' main role is to criticize the Socratic dialogue, however surely, in the context of the Republic as a whole, which almost entirely deals with the concept of justice, Thrasymachus is more than

just an obstacle to the Socratic Dialogue, and his opinion of justice has some meaningful value to the book. Therefore, whilst part of his role may be to question the validity of Socratic Dialogue, and his criticism of Socrates' unwillingness to provide an answer of his own, is invariably strong, it is not his only role, and definitely not his primary role.

In conclusion, it can be asserted that Thrasymachus makes a plethora of different claims in Book I, however, I have argued that not all of these are valid and that he makes the strongest case for justice being the advantage of another, if we take this to be the case, then we can clearly argue that his definition of justice is consistent, because he appears to outline a psychological egoists view of justice, in that if we are to take justice as the benefit of another, and injustice, adversely as a benefit to oneself, then justice is a form of altruism not compatible with the pursuit of our own interest. Perhaps the strongest argument in favour of the supposed contradiction is similar to the view of Kerferd, that overall Thrasymachus is not consistent, but he offers a definition that advocates some form of "immoralism", as justice is defined as "another's good". However, I believe that with a degree of intellectual honesty we can assume that Thrasymachus isn't attempting to hold all claims as truly independent of each other and that the "stronger" is more likely in reference not just to rulers, but of society as a whole. Thus, Thrasymachus is able to assert his definition of justice consistently, and without an inherent contradiction.

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