LUISS

Department of Political Sciences

History of Political Thought (Distributive Justice)

An analysis of Thrasymachus' definition of justice in Plato's “Republic”

Candidate

Rebecca Andreucci

ID: 092532

Supervisor

Prof. Gianfranco Pellegrino

Academic Year 2021/2022

Index

Introduction 3

Chapter 1: Plato's methodology, the Republic and Thrasymachus' affirmations on justice 5

The influence of the Socratic Method and the importance of dialogue 5

The contents of the Republic 8

Book I and the topic of justice 10

Thrasymachus' intervention 12

Chapter 2: different interpretations 16

Doubts on the coherence of Thrasymachus' speech 16

Annas: Thrasymachus the immoralist 18

The rejection of conventionalism and justice as "doing another's good" 20

Nicholson and Henderson against a "monolithic" definition of justice 21

Henderson's defense 26

Chapter 3: evaluating the interpretations of Thrasymachus' arguments 28

Issues with Annas' interpretation 29

The relevance of the character 31

Thrasymachus' coherence 32

Conclusion 35

Bibliography 39

Riassunto in lingua italiana 40

Introduction

"And the different forms of government make laws democratical, aristocratical, tyrannical, with a view to their several interests; and these laws, which are made by them for their own interests, are the justice which they deliver to their subjects, and him who transgresses them they punish as a breaker of the law, and unjust. And that is what I mean when I say that in all states there is the same principle of justice, which is the interest of the government; and as the government must be supposed to have power, the only reasonable conclusion is, that everywhere there is one principle of justice, which is the interest of the stronger"[1].

The passage above is taken from Plato's *Republic*, arguably one of the most influential texts in the history of philosophy. It is the book which illustrates the full development of his theory: on the one hand, for what concerns political thought, through the presentation of the ideal city and the qualities its inhabitants must possess – hence discussions on issues like morality, virtue and justice – and on the other, through the Theory of Forms Plato explains his own personal conception of existence and how it came to be. These truths about life and society are to be revealed to men with the help of philosophical inquiry and through active exchange, i.e. dialogue, among individuals. The importance given to the achievement of knowledge is exemplified in several passages; among them, the most well-known is perhaps the Myth of the Cave contained in Book VII, an allegory representing the process of learning and discovery through philosophical investigation.

This thesis focuses in particular on the section of Book I which deals with the concept of "justice", and more specifically what emerges during the exchange between Socrates and Thrasymachus. Before addressing the core of the argument, it is worth understanding the importance of methodology, and in particular how Plato uses dialogue in his works, more generally, and in this particular text, more specifically. The *Republic* is in fact organized as a discussion taking place in the house of Cephalus, a foreign *parvenu*, and his sons Polemarchus and Lysias. The premise is an invitation for dinner which the former extends to Glaucon, Adeimantus, Cleitophon, Thrasymachus and Socrates.

[1] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Moscow, Idaho: Roman Roads Media LLC, 2013), 31

The fundamental role that lively exchange between interlocutors plays in philosophy has been inspired in Plato's works by Socrates' teachings. According to the doctrine of "maieutics", a proper thinker is not he who is knowledgeable and teaches others from a place of privileged wisdom, but rather he who is interested in an interaction with others in order to generate new ideas. The figure of Socrates and his influence on the author of the *Republic*, in terms of content and methodology, is investigated in chapter one of this thesis.

After clarifying the peculiarities of the Socratic method, it is necessary to properly understand the contents and importance of the *Republic*. This goal is achieved through an explanation of the setting in which the dialogue takes place, and a summary of the content of all ten books – including essential features of Plato's thought such as the Theory of Forms and the Myth of the Cave. Since the attention of this thesis is focused on Thrasymachus' contribution, however, it is proper to analyze the initial passage of his speech in greater detail. A brief paraphrase of the character's words will then be followed by an overview of how the dialogue between him and Socrates develops, including the reformulations that Thrasymachus provides throughout it with regards to this conception of justice.

Chapter two discusses the analyses brought forward by three groups of scholars: those labelling Thrasymachus as an incoherent character with a confusing argument, those – such as Julia Annas – believing that despite expressing himself in an unusual manner he manages to reach a conclusion, and finally those who – like Henderson – defend the coherence and cohesiveness of the entirety of his speech. The latter specifically is the position which will be supported in chapter three, on the basis of the following argument: despite Socrates' questioning shakes the foundation of his interlocutor's beliefs, the latter manages to defend himself and leave the discussion without having to declare defeat. The controversy of Thrasymachus' arguments is also their strength, a strength which is not lessened by the challenge posed by Plato's mentor.

CHAPTER 1 – Plato's methodology, the Republic and Thrasymachus' affirmations on justice

The influence of the Socratic Method and the importance of dialogue

Plato is generally considered as one of the most prominent figures in the history of philosophical thought, and the first "systematic"[2] thinker who created the discipline as it is known today.

Born from an old Athenian family – allegedly descending from the 6th century statesman Solon, whose reforms contributed to the establishment of the first democracy – Plato has dedicated his life to his studies from a very young age. He was especially influenced by the figure and the teachings of Socrates, considered among the most relevant Greek thinkers, despite his philosophical activity is rather difficult to define. Due to the fact that he has never published any of his works in writing form, in fact, there is an absence of direct sources. The majority of what is now known about Socrates has later been extrapolated from Plato's contributions. Most of them are structured in dialogue form; in a given setting, a group of characters engages in discussion on a specific topic, usually proposed by the most prominent of them; in his early works this is usually Socrates.

Sometimes these exchanges can be defined as *direct*: this means that the author writes directly reporting the "voices" of the interlocutors, as if in a play. Other times they are instead *indirect*, i.e. the content of the discussion is narrated by a character who was supposedly present – either others or Socrates himself[3]. The latter does not display consistent characteristics throughout Plato's work: at times he expresses his opinions directly – as in the *Republic* – while in other dialogues his role is to merely dispute those of others without actively proposing his views. His character's function in Plato's bibliography is essential and extremely specific; he represents the figure of the ideal philosopher who has devoted his life to inquiry, carried out through constant exchange with others[4].

[2] Julia Annas, *Plato; A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 2003), 24
[3] Annas, *Plato; A Very Short Introduction*, 21
[4] Annas, *Plato; A Very Short Introduction*, Ibid.

In particular, the author of the *Republic* appears to have been influenced by two pillars of Socrates' teachings, namely the doctrine of "maieutics" and the deriving conception of the use of dialogue in philosophical practice. The former is the methodology that his mentor preferred when discussing a topic in a conversation. It is based on the assumption that the interlocutor already possesses the truth within him, i.e. the answer to the question. The task of the thinker is not so much different from that of the midwife[5], a metaphor inspired by the occupation of Socrates' mother; just as she used to help women give birth to their children, the philosopher helps others in "birthing" their ideas. According to this interpretation, therefore, teaching philosophy as any other discipline would be nearly impossible. The teacher's task would in fact not be that of communicating indisputable knowledge to his students, but rather assist them in formulating their own opinions[6].

In Plato's eyes, no wise man should approach a confrontation excessively confident of the validity of his beliefs. There is always the possibility of learning from the other if they are more knowledgeable; if not, *they* could learn something from the discussion[7]. None of this is possible, however, if one of the two interlocutors – or both – interprets an occasion for fruitful exchange as a chance to prevail over the other. This principle, embedded in the Socratic method that Plato will employ both in his writings and teaching style, reflects a core belief in the nature of the philosophical discipline as a constant investigation leading to new discoveries. Philosophy, is in fact not a list of precepts and commandments[8], but rather carried out through constant exchange; perhaps philosophy *is* the exchange itself.

One of the methods which Plato employs often when using the Socratic method, including in the *Republic*, is the *elenchos*[9]. This is a pattern which emerges in many of his early writings, and it is structured as follows: at first, Socrates will ask the other character in the dialogue a question on a specific moral dilemma, which will usually take the form of "What is F-ness?"[10]. This, however, is not a nominal definition; when Socrates asks Thrasymachus what would he say justice is, he would not want him to limit his answer to the meaning of the *word*. He is looking to receive a real definition: what his interlocutor thinks is the "essence and

[5] Annas, *Plato; A Very Short Introduction*, 31
[6] Annas, *Plato; A Very Short Introduction*, 25
[7] H.H. Benson, "Socratic Method*"* In *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, ed. Donald R. Morrison (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 182
[8] Julia Annas, *An introduction to Plato's Republic*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 20
[9] Benson, "Socratic Method", 182
[10] Benson, "Socratic Method", 184

essential nature" of what he is being asked [11]. Socrates' interest in what a certain moral dilemma is, what it can be condensed as, is in other words a concern with a "property or nature susceptible in principle to multiple instantiations"[12]. When discussing a complex concept, which can be interpreted and defined in many different ways, Socrates wants to understand the individual interpretation that his interlocutor has. If he reputes it wrong, he will proceed in proving so.

This is usually the case, as in no Socratic dialogue Plato has ever made another character prevail in the discussion – although there are some instances, as in Book 1 of the *Republic* where this appears to be more difficult, i.e. in the confrontation with Thrasymachus. After having obtained a clear definition of the topic from the interlocutor, which is telling of his intelligence and wisdom, Socrates proceeds in asking progressively more specific questions in order to lead them to somehow negate their original response[13].

The validity of the Socratic method in Plato's works and beyond has been widely discussed. Some have argued that it is not effective and is indeed fallacious, as it may lead the dialogue in a way which is convenient exclusively to the main character – a critique reflective of Plato's bias towards his mentor, whose voice actually incorporates more and more of his individual opinions as he matures in his writing style and thought. Authors such as Gregory Vlastos have questioned the validity of the method, arguing that the issue is "how Socrates can claim ... to have proved that the [apparent] refutand is false, when all he has established is its inconsistency with premises whose truth he has not tried to establish in that argument"[14]. This issue has been raised in a few passages across Plato's works, including in the Republic where Thrasymachus joins the discussion. His interpretation of justice is not wrong simply because Socrates disagrees with it. In fact, the "dialogue" does not lead to any real conclusion because Plato's mentor never explicitly states what he thinks justice is; therefore, there is no proper exchange.

With time, Plato has developed his own understanding of the Socratic method. Despite dialogue still maintaining his position as ideal philosophical tool, his "dialectic" definitely presents its own features. He abandons his mentor's pedagogical approach, and instead chooses

[11] Benson, "Socratic Method", 194
[12] Benson, "Socratic Method", Ibid.
[13] Benson, "Socratic Method", 184
[14] Benson, "Socratic Method", 185

to develop the use of discourse in strict philosophical terms[15]. Socrates focused mainly on more "trivial" concepts with respect to what is traditionally discussed in philosophical writings, concepts that are rarely investigated because they are taken for granted – justice, virtue, courage and so on. Plato is influenced by this attitude towards discovery, however he decides to use it to understand deeper existential questions. His development of the concept of the hyper-uranium, of which Earth and all the things that live on it are a mere copy, is the result of his inquiry.

The contents of the *Republic*

It is in light of this development that the *Republic* must be understood. This is arguably the most prominent among Plato's works, where he introduces and explains the concept of the ideal city, a political utopia presented through a direct dialogue in which the characters discuss various issues of "morality, politics, knowledge and metaphysics" [16].

The setting is the house of Cephalus and his sons Polemarchus and Lysias, members of a wealthy family migrated from Syracuse. The former, a *parvenu*, who has grown rich from trade, is allowed to stay in Athens without enjoying all the rights and duties of citizens[17]. His way of living is therefore rather private, focused mainly on the business and the revenues he makes from it; a kind of "shallow" existence which Plato greatly despises. The other active participants are Thrasymachus, Glaucon, Adeimantus and Socrates, who voices Plato's point of view and introduces the discourse.

The *Republic* is divided into ten books, each dealing with a specific topic. In Book I and the first half of Book II, the characters discuss the notion of justice without – as it often occurs – reaching a definitive conclusion. In the second half of Book II, the conversation evolves into Socrates' description of the "first city", i.e. a hypothetical and utopian just society where all the citizens' basic needs are met. In an arguably Hobbesian fashion, he supposes that men have taken the decision to build the first city because it was more convenient to live in group, as no man is self-sufficient[18]. Following criticism from Glaucon who argues that this initial state of society sounds no different than a "city of pigs", Socrates introduces the

[15] Fiona Leigh, "Platonic dialogue, maieutic method and critical thinking", *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 41, No. 3 (2007), 318
[16] Annas, *An introduction to Plato's Republic*, 16
[17] Annas, *An introduction to Plato's Republic*, 18
[18] Antonis Coumoundouros, "Plato: The Republic", Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed May 5, 2022 [available at: Plato: The Republic | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (utm.edu)]

hypothetical image of a more organized "luxurious city". Naturally, this society would require a greater level of guardianship; this shared assumption prompts the discussion on education.

It is also in Book II that the topic of art, in particular poetry, is introduced, and further developed in Book III[19]. Here Plato, through Socrates' character, condemns all forms of artistic expression that are in any way detrimental to the formation of good character, a quality essential particularly for the defenders and rulers of the city. The latter must be carefully selected among the most honest and virtuous citizens; they must have only the common interest in mind, and not be corrupted by greed. In order to explain the appropriateness of this "order", Socrates proposes for a myth to be told to the public, i.e. the famous "myth of metals". According to it, humans can be divided into three groups: those who have gold within them, those who have silver and finally those who have bronze. The former are naturally suited to be rulers; the "silver" are instead made to be guardians, while the latter serve the city best by being farmers and craftsmen[20].

Book IV contains the well-known comparison of the ideal city and the ideal individual, based on the four essential virtues that they both possess, namely justice, wisdom, courage, and moderation (428a)[21]. When all of them are well balanced, both the city and the man achieve stability and equilibrium, a condition necessary for justice to exist. Injustice, on the other hand, is visible when the elements of the city – and the soul, with respect to the individual – are in contrast with each other. When challenged by Glaucon about the feasibility of the just city in Book V, Socrates defends the model as useful to understand essential moral values like justice and injustice, albeit the ideal city itself is not necessarily a realistic project. The essential requirement would be for the rule of philosophers to come into being, as this would be the only way to create a stable government which brings happiness to all citizens, in both public and private life[22].

The other five books of the Republic also include important elements. It is in Book VII, for example, that Socrates' character illustrates the well-known Platonian "myth of the cave", an allegory which stands for the moment where the man is freed from the chains of ignorance through philosophical inquiry and discovers the real truth. In Book VIII, there is the analysis of all the different regimes that originate as a deviation from the ideal order of aristocracy,

[19] Coumoundouros, "Plato: The Republic"
[20] Coumoundouros, "Plato: The Republic"
[21] Coumoundouros, "Plato: The Republic"
[22] Coumoundouros, "Plato: The Republic"

namely timocracy – a government where the pursuit of honor is preferred to that of justice, oligarchy – which places emphasis on wealth, tyranny and democracy[23], which he criticizes as a heavily polarizing form of state. Here, public office is not awarded to those with greatest merits but to whoever wishes to occupy it – thus putting the common wellbeing at risk with incompetent rule[24].

Book IX deals with the figure of the tyrannical individual, which Plato presents as a "degenerated" man who cannot control his passions and desires; sometimes, it is possible that he seizes power and becomes a tyrant. It is also in this section that Socrates illustrates the reasons why a just life is generally happier than an unjust one[25]. The last Book features an analysis of poetry and its condemnation on the basis of the Theory of Forms; the concepts of immortality and the afterlife are also discussed here[26].

Book I and the topic of justice

It can be interesting, however, to focus the attention exclusively on Book I, and in particular on the discussion about justice as one of the pillars of Plato's philosophy. This book is unique with respect to the rest of the *Republic*. While from Book II onwards the character of Socrates engages in what is essentially a monologue, the first one's form is closer to earlier works, organized as a Socratic dialogue where the author's mentor discusses a specific moral issue and attempts at proving the irrationality of his interlocutor's arguments[27]. The other Books, however, reveal growth in Plato's writing style, as he develops his own philosophy. In this sense, it appears as if Socrates' character were speaking in a way contrary to what his beliefs would have been. These differences suggest that Plato may have written the first book in a previous period as a dialogue on justice, and that he later decided to add it to the *Republic*[28].

The opening of the Book features the arrival at Cephalus' house of Socrates and Glaucon, who have been invited for a banquet. Here, the discussion on justice takes place, prompted by the host's considerations on how wealth can positively contribute to a person being just[29]. In replying to Socrates questioning him about whether the tranquillity he has achieved at his age depends on his possessions, he argues that justice – without which the

[23] Coumoundouros, "Plato: The Republic"
[24] Coumoundouros, "Plato: The Republic"
[25] Coumoundouros, "Plato: The Republic"
[26] Coumoundouros, "Plato: The Republic"
[27] Annas, *An introduction to Plato's Republic*, 16
[28] Annas, *An introduction to Plato's Republic,* 17
[29] Annas, *An introduction to Plato's Republic,* 19

former cannot exist – is more easily achieved when one is wealthy. He tells Socrates that material possessions are not essential, however they do help in avoiding debt and wrongdoings in general. Cephalus is not presented as a greedy or unjust person, because he is concerned with how to employ his belongings in a proper way. His conception of justice is, however, very limited; it is based on simple, external rules of behaviour rather than the achievements of a virtuous soul[30]. His idea of righteousness is performative: regardless of one's character, it is enough to do certain things in order to be considered having done "right".

The position adopted by Cephalus is further developed by his son Polemarchus once the host leaves the discussion with an excuse. It is here that the dialogue evolves into Socrates versus the ordinary person's limited and trivial point of view. The new interlocutor claims that justice can be defined as "giving everyone what is owed"[31]. However, as already set with the precedent of Cephalus, defining a specific moral quality merely as a list of actions is inaccurate, because depending on the context they can be harmful or counterproductive. A proper definition would have to be valid in any situation. Moreover, according to Socrates, this interpretation is extremely general and it is not linked to a specific field of knowledge or mastery. A just man who does "good to his friends and bad to his enemies" is not an expert on his own because there is no specific situation in which his contribution would be useful[32].

Socrates succeeds in leading Polemarchus to the same conclusion with a set of challenging questions that become gradually more specific, a feature typical of the Socratic method. He first asks his interlocutor to define the purpose of "justice" and, after concluding that to be just does not equal possessing a skill comparable to that of the sailor or the doctor – which are employable according to specific needs – Polemarchus admits that a man which such quality is an ideal partner in a contract[33]. Here too, however, Socrates unveils the excessively broad scope of his interlocutor's contribution; for depending on the nature of the agreement, one normally prefers the company of an expert in the field rather than someone who possesses the general quality of being just.

In this section of the Book, Plato refers to what has been by some translated as "justice" with the Greek word *δικαιοσυνη* (dikaiosune). The definition of the term goes beyond the concept of juridical or moral justice and can be considered more similar to the idea of

[30] Annas, *An introduction to Plato's Republic*, 20
[31] Annas, *An introduction to Plato's Republic,* 23
[32] Annas, *An introduction to Plato's Republic*, 24
[33] Plato, *The Republic,* 23

righteousness or morality; Socrates calls the search for "δικαιοσυνη" as the quest for the "right way to live"[34]. Plato never explicitly clarifies what he means for it, in doing so leading to different interpretations, both in a broad and a narrow sense. Aristotle himself, in his *Nicomachean Ethics,* refers to Platonian *δικαιοσυνη* as a word which can be intended either as purely "law-abidingness" – as Polemarchus and Thrasymachus do – or more specifically as the opposite of *πλεονηξια* (pleonexia), i.e. the desire to have more than needed[35].

Thrasymachus' intervention

The dialogue between Socrates and Polemarchus is abruptly interrupted by Thrasymachus, who interrogates the character of Plato's mentor on the reason why he systematically criticizes the beliefs of others without ever explaining his own; "I say that if you want really to know what justice is, you should not only ask but answer, and you should not seek honor to yourself from the refutation of an opponent, but have your own answer"[36]. The attitude of the new interlocutor appears to frighten Socrates; the strength of Thrasymachus' character will gradually emerge during the course of the exchange, which occupies the most of the first Book and *de facto* makes him the most challenging opponent that Socrates faces. This dialogue is undoubtedly the most relevant in the Republic; Thrasymachus' definition of justice, which he shares upon request of all the participants present, differs greatly from those provided by either Cephalus or Polemarchus. Theirs are in fact not revolutionary in any form; Plato considers them superficial, and his distaste is reflected in Socrates' attitude towards the two characters, but other than that they are nothing more. Thrasymachus' contribution instead deserves more attention on his interlocutor's part; it not only contrasts with the rest of the dialogue, but negates the moral pillars of Greek society as a whole, i.e. that justice is a value all citizens should aspire to.

After his violent manifestation of dissent, Thrasymachus is asked by Socrates to finally provide his own definition of justice. To this request, he replies with one of the most iconic lines in the entire Republic, a controversial insight which will set the tone for the rest of the discussion and provide the most interesting exchange between Socrates and another character. He says:

[34] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 12
[35] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Ibid.
[36] Plato, *The Republic,* 28-29

"And the different forms of government make laws democratical, aristocratical, tyrannical, with a view to their several interests; and these laws, which are made by them for their own interests, are the justice which they deliver to their subjects, and him who transgresses them they punish as a breaker of the law, and unjust. And that is what I mean when I say that in all states there is the same principle of justice, which is the interest of the government; and as the government must be supposed to have power, the only reasonable conclusion is, that everywhere there is one principle of justice, which is the interest of the stronger" [37].

In this passage, Socrates' interlocutor presents his interpretation of the concept of justice, which he stresses is "what is advantageous for the stronger". He begins by highlighting the fact that each political regime is governed by its own set of rules, meaning that a democracy is protected by democratic laws, tyranny by tyrannical ones and so on. However, despite such structural differences, a common denominator can be identified across all governments: the rules that are in place are nothing but the expression of the interest of those in power in maintaining their privileged role and the stability of the system. This goal is achieved through positive and negative reinforcement: those who break the rules will be punished as deviants, while those who follow them will live unharmed or perhaps even praised. In doing so, Thrasymachus is broadening the scope of the discussion which had to that point been limited to the role of justice in the way of living, by focusing on the political relationship between the ruler and the ruled[38]. This "expansion" may be justified by the fact that in Plato's context, differently from contemporary political thought, the distinction between public and private or moral and political was rather blurred[39].

As positive law is always imposed by the authority of the powerful, it is inevitable to reach the following conclusion: the former is always the direct consequence of the latter and is always serving its interests. Thrasymachus therefore holds that both justice and injustice, respectively meaning what is and is not permitted by law, are universal concepts: although the specific rules to follow or break change contextually, they are regardless an expression of the strength of the authority which uses them for self-preservation. This means that rarely, if ever, being "just" is in the interest of the ruled who may find it more convenient to act according to their own needs regardless of the legal code. Rather, Thrasymachus argues that being lawful is counterproductive and inconvenient for the common man, who would be playing nothing but

[37] Plato, *The Republic,* 31
[38] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic,* 40
[39] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic,* Ibid.

his master's game. Therefore, he sets meaningful boundaries between being just towards oneself – and unjust towards others – and being just towards the community by following the rules.

The authority's self-preservation instinct manifests itself in an equation where deviance, unlawfulness and unjustness are all subsequent to each other. Whatever action or behavior would, if performed by a large enough number of individuals, disrupt the order of a society – therefore deviating from the norm – is labelled as unlawful because it is not inscribed among what the rules allow. This is necessary because, were this not discouraged, the *status quo* could not possibly be safeguarded. When questioned by Socrates on the matter, Thrasymachus confirms that the concept of unjustness is a natural derivation of unlawfulness. If something goes against the laws, it goes against justice and thus no just man would engage in such activities. Justice is thus conservative, and the lawful man is a conformist who abides by his government.

This is a groundbreaking and perhaps revolutionary sentiment for ancient Greek political thought; whether justice were considered as the possession of a skill, a list of requirements or a synonym for lawfulness, it was generally held as a virtue that the most illustrious men ought aspire to. Socrates himself, in the *Republic*, expresses his agreement with the affirmation that a just life is one well lived and one to be highly regarded. Other characters in the dialogue too, such as Cephalus and Polemarchus, argue that regardless of whether their own definitions of justice are correct that is still an ideal skill to possess. Thrasymachus, on the other hand, presents his listeners with the possibility that to behave honestly might in fact be a detriment to the agent, who would in doing so not be pursuing his best interests. His thesis states that the rules in place, if followed, prevent from taking advantage of others for one's own profit, *de facto* favoring other people's interests over personal ones; any intelligent man who reaches the same conclusion would, according to him, consider ignoring the law and prioritize his own wellbeing instead. The most admirable members of society are not, by his logic, the καλόι και αγαθόι (kalòi kai agathòi), who can conduct themselves with virtue and balance in all aspects of life. He will later argue that the most intelligent men are those who can exploit any opportunity to take advantage of the "other", i.e. the just and lawful. This is precisely why the perfect "ruler" is also the stronger in the community, he who can systematically take advantage of his subjects for his own interest.

Thrasymachus' initial contribution on justice as the good of the "stronger" sparks a long and heated discussion between him and Socrates. Almost immediately, the latter questions him on whether he intends for justice to mean "obeying the rules" and, upon agreement by the former, it is possible to understand his interpretation as following: if the stronger in the political context is he who rules, and the laws are for the protection only of his selfish interests, then he who follows them is not doing the good of the community but only of his governor[40]. When Socrates forces Thrasymachus to deal with the fact that his initial definition ("justice is what is advantageous for the established rule") and his subsequent elaboration ("justice is obeying the laws") appear to conflict, the discussion moves in an interesting direction. Plato's mentor leads his interlocutor to admit a fallacy in his reasoning: the argument that following the rules established by the authorities is always in the latter's own interests stands only assuming that they never make mistakes – thus that every single measure they adopt serves their needs of which they must be therefore always aware of[41].

Since an infallible ruler cannot exist, the "eternal" validity of Thrasymachus' point is questioned; Socrates then asks him whether in situations where the governors make mistakes they could possibly act in a way which benefits their subjects and not them. This would mean that, in those cases, following the rule would be convenient for the latter, who would be taking care of their own interests. When Thrasymachus agrees with this possibility, it appears that he has been "defeated" by Socrates as quickly as his predecessors. The latter is in fact revealing the error that the former has apparently made in tying the two definitions (justice as the interest of the stronger and as lawfulness) together and treating them as synonyms; there are cases in which what it legal and what is in the interests of the ruler do not coincide[42]. Here, the men in power are not the stronger because they cannot impose their own will by law.

At this point, another character intervenes: Cleitophon. Speaking for the first and last time, he naively attempts at reconciling the two formulations of Thrasymachus' justice, by suggesting that by "the interest of the stronger" he might have meant what the stronger thinks his interest would be[43]. Hence, even in cases in which the ruler makes an obvious mistake in his calculations of what law would best serve him, he might still be convinced that is the best course of action – even if that specific rule is constructed in a way which helps his subjects rather than himself. Cleitophon adds that, by conforming to this interpretation, Thrasymachus

[40] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 40
[41] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Ibid.
[42] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 40-41
[43] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 41

would naturally intend the just as "weaker", and justice as "what he must do"[44]. According to him, justice is mere lawfulness: whatever the institutions enforce, regardless of whether that is truly in their own interest or not. This is a conventionalist position which Thrasymachus immediately rejects, thus "choosing" his initial interpretation of justice as the stronger's interest[45].

CHAPTER 2 – different interpretations

Doubts on the coherence of Thrasymachus' speech

Due to its relevance, Thrasymachus' account of justice has been quite the object of study, producing different interpretations. Scholars can be divided into three macro-groups: those who discard his argument as a whole due to the apparently incoherent nature of the discourse, i.e. the fact that he reformulates his account of justice several times; those who argue that one or two of the various reformulations actually count as the proper definition – dismissing the others as mistakes or attempts at reaching the final conclusion; and finally, those who believe that Thrasymachus' intervention can be taken as a coherent and cohesive whole, and that his interpretations are all equally valid and can coexist.

The first set of scholars focuses on the contrast between his first definition of justice as the interest of the ruler and his final speech where he suggests the idea of "another's good". The main reason for this criticism is that, apparently, the two affirmations are irreconcilable: how can justice be defined as both the interest of the stronger and that of a (general) other?[46] According to the first interpretation, in fact, the ruler and the stronger are the same person. He who governs has in fact been able to exploit all the opportunities he was presented with and take advantage of others to the point where he could climb the social ladder and become their ruler.

On the other hand, if justice is to be defined as doing "another's" good, the issue of who this *other* is would emerge. If one were to consider it merely as someone else other than oneself, then also the ruler would be just if he maximized the advantage of someone other than

[44] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Ibid.
[45] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 42
[46] G. J. Boter , "Thrasymachus and Pleonexia [Greek]", *Mnemosyne* , Vol.39, Fasc. 3/4 (1986): 262

himself, i.e. his subjects[47]. However, the possibility that the capable ruler intentionally acted in favor of his community is not contemplated by Thrasymachus; at best, he could be so incompetent as to be unaware of the best way to satisfy his interests and therefore fail to exploit the subjects. Most of those who support the incompatibility of the two claims attribute the issue to the core of the argument – which is fallacious – and the fact that Thrasymachus is not able to articulate it properly. In this context, Plato would be using the sophist's character to finally dispute similar affirmations[48].

It is precisely Thrasymachus' need to reformulate multiple times leading some to admit that perhaps he had failed in giving an accurate account of what justice is in the first place[49]. Since his interpretation is not grounded in some shared and common belief, its counter-intuitiveness makes the lack of convincing elaboration a relevant absence[50]. Thrasymachus' apparently inconsistent accounts of justice are not even worthy of being considered valid philosophical contributions due to their scattered and confusing nature. The argument is also presented backwards; his proclamation of justice as the "advantage of the established rule" appears to be the conclusion of the reasoning which Thrasymachus develops further in the Book[51], spurred by Socrates' questioning.

Another issue emerges from the pages of Book I: all the four accounts of justice that Thrasymachus gives appear to be definitional, i.e. intended to be definitive formulations of what the concept is[52]. If one considers them to have the same force and value in the argument, then they are obviously in sharp contrast with each other and cannot coexist – especially considering the first definition which is "justice is *nothing other* than the interest of the stronger", which implies that all other actions and features that will be discussed are not, in fact, justice. But even if they were not in "competition", to the very least they all limit each other's scope[53]. For example, at some point it appears that Thrasymachus is equating the "ruler" with the "stronger" as beneficiaries of other people's just actions. In particular, this becomes obvious when he associates the two accounts upon Socrates' questioning him: "since the established rule is surely stronger, anyone who reasons correctly will conclude that the just is

[47] Boter , "Thrasymachus and Pleonexia [Greek]", Ibid.
[48] Boter, "Thrasymachus and Pleonexia [Greek]", ibid.
[49] S. Everson, "The incoherence of Thrasymachus*", Oxford studies in ancient philosophy* 16 (1998), 99
[50] Everson, "The incoherence of Thrasymachus", 102
[51] Everson, "The incoherence of Thrasymachus", Ibid.
[52] Everson, "The incoherence of Thrasymachus", 104
[53] Everson, "The incoherence of Thrasymachus", 105

the same everywhere, namely, the advantage of the stronger" (338e-339a)[54]. Some have interpreted this addition as a contradiction with respect to the previous statements; others have argued Thrasymachus is merely expanding his initial definition of justice as the interest of the "ruler".

The initial conventionalist position of justice being equal to lawfulness, which Socrates "extracts" from Thrasymachus' speech is never truly negated nor modified. This is an issue which emerges later on in the dialogue, when the immoralist stance of "doing another's good" is introduced as an apparent elaboration of all previous formulations[55]. This particular contribution is brought forward by Thrasymachus after the discussion on the art of ruling and its proper practice, which seems to destabilize his argument up to that point. By claiming that the stronger is unjust, and with his actions triumphs over the naively selfless just, motivated solely by his own interests, he is *de facto* admitting that the reason why injustice is preferrable is that it allows the safeguard of selfish needs – regardless of legality. "The tyrant is unjust not because he acts illegally – his own mastery of the craft of ruling will have ensured that he does not need to do that – but because he is both selfish and powerful"[56]. While this argument stands on his own, it has been by some labelled as inconsistent with the initial conventionalist idea of justice and injustice being *exclusively* defined by what is and is not legal at any given moment.

Julia Annas: Thrasymachus the immoralist

Among those defending Thrasymachus by designating one of his various accounts of justice as the proper definition there is the interpretation provided by Julia Annas in her 1981 book "An Introduction to Plato's *Republic*". She identifies great disagreement among scholars with regards to this fundamental passage which sets the tone for the rest of the discussion. In particular, she acknowledges that upon a superficial analysis Thrasymachus' contribution is constituted by "several things which together form an inconsistent set"[57]. First, he claims justice is nothing but the ruler's advantage; then, he seems to equate "ruler" with "stronger". After being questioned by Socrates, he is lead to admit that justice is, to some degree, obedience to law; and finally, he admits that it can be defined as "doing another's good"[58]. This

[54] Everson, "The incoherence of Thrasymachus", 106
[55] Everson, "The incoherence of Thrasymachus", 115
[56] Everson, "The incoherence of Thrasymachus", 116
[57] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 35
[58] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Ibid.

inconsistency can be interpreted as either superficial or deep, that is: do his arguments fundamentally stand, so that he just needs to be redirected by Socrates towards a more coherent formulation of them, or rather is his logic so deeply flawed that his speech can only come across as confusing?[59] Rejecting the idea that Plato is using Thrasymachus' incoherence to attack sophist philosophy, she identifies two possible answers to these questions: conventionalism and immoralism.

Interpreting Thrasymachus as a conventionalist means defending his equation of justice and lawfulness. This "legal positivist" position is based on the idea that justice is forced conformity to the law; besides rules there is no other criterion for defining appropriate or inappropriate acts, and the very term "justice" is misleading because it suggests the existence of a higher and independent moral code which overrides the power of the authority[60]. Illegalism instead holds that justice and injustice are concepts that exist outside of the strict confinement of law, and in particular that the latter is more profitable[61] – this is the position which to Annas appears closer to what Thrasymachus says. She believes that he initially expresses his ideas in quite a confusing manner, which appears to lead to conventionalism, and it is only after intense questioning by Socrates that he fully develops his immoralist interpretation[62].

An element that might support this reading of Thrasymachus' argument is the way in which he develops the claim that justice is "nothing other than the interest of the stronger". This is an inaccurate reduction of the concept to power relationships between he who exploits and he who is exploited. However, the sophist specifies how this makes justice the same everywhere, because in every regime – democracy, tyranny, oligarchy and so on – it is expressed in the form of laws suitable for the protection of the interests of those in power[63], the epitome of the "stronger". This addition achieves two goals: firstly, it equates the definition of justice as the stronger's advantage to justice as "being lawful"; moreover, it expands the scope of the concept from a series of precepts for the appropriate way to live, i.e. Glaucon's and Polemarchus' definitions, to a political idea determining the relationship between the ruler and the ruled[64].

---

[59] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Ibid.
[60] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 36
[61] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Ibid.
[62] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 37
[63] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 40
[64] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Ibid.

The rejection of conventionalism and justice as "doing another's good"

At this point, Thrasymachus and Socrates engage in an interesting exchange: the former holds his position because of his inherently nihilistic belief in a society of selfish individuals in competition against each other. The latter questions him, however, on his association of "stronger" with "ruler", which he believes to be fallacious, and forces his interlocutor to clarify his interest specifically in the strength of the authority, i.e. the resources it possesses to exploit the subjects[65]. This is also the moment which prompts Cleitophon's intervention, and Thrasymachus' subsequent clear rejection of conventionalism.

This passage has been interpreted in different ways: according to some scholars, it would have been better for Thrasymachus to agree with Cleitophon and accept his suggestion; in doing so, he would have maintained a good level of coherence without having to reformulate his argument further[66]. He would have also clarified what he meant by "stronger", which in this interpretation is always the "ruler"; him refuting this possibility makes it much harder for the reader to understand what he truly means[67].

What follows is, according to Annas, the revelation of Thrasymachus' honest position with regards to justice. In violently rejecting conventionalism, i.e. the equation of "just" and "lawful", he explains that as taking care of the flock ultimately benefits the shepherd and not the sheep, doing just acts works for "another's good" rather than one's own[68]. The former feeds and pays attention to the animals' health, but that is far from selfless – he has his own good, i.e. profit, in mind. Much like the shepherd, the unjust man seeks his own satisfaction at the expense of the others that he exploits, purely because the latter allow him by not taking every opportunity to cheat, because the law does not allow that – and the just man is lawful. Prevailing over others is quite inevitable in a society where conflicts of interest may arise, as there are no sufficient resources to satisfy all. The unjust man is merely he who decides to ignore the needs of others in order to maximize his own utility[69]. Any intelligent man who recognizes that it is far more beneficial for him to protect his interests will ultimately conclude that the unjust life is preferrable, regardless of whether he has to take advantage of others to do so.

---

[65] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 41
[66] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 42
[67] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 43
[68] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 44
[69] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Ibid.

Annas considers this last affirmation, i.e. justice as the good of another, as a generalization of the first, i.e. that justice is the interest of the stronger. To her, Thrasymachus has recognized that his initial account was extremely specific and, as the discussion proceeds, decides to expand its scope in order to include everyone who is not a ruler, thus to whom the beginning of his speech could not apply. Because of the fact that this last interpretation conflicts with the first, however, Annas considers Thrasymachus' last portion of the speech as substituting the beginning in giving a more complete account of what he believes justice to be[70]. Thus, she belongs to the group of scholars arguing that it is not possible to support the validity of all the definitions given in this section of Book I, and that one among all emerges as the fittest.

Nicholson and Henderson against a "monolithic" definition of justice

The other interesting position is that of those who wish to defend the entirety of Thrasymachus' contribution, arguing that all his several accounts of justice are extremely cohesive and coherent. It is indeed true that identifying the unjust man exclusively as the ruler and the just as the subject limits the analysis of the concept to the political sphere, because such relationships only occur there. Besides the ruler, there is no other citizen who plays the same role, therefore the same axiom is not valid in all sorts of private relationships between individuals. However, assuming a distinction between the association among the ruler and the ruled and that among private parties by saying that justice can simultaneously be "the interest of the stronger" is not incoherent[71]; the two assumptions are merely best suited for the two different contexts.

Reinterpreted in light of this "discovery", Thrasymachus' attempt at reconciling all his definitions could be defined as follows: rules prevent each from taking advantage of the other for their own personal gain. This is the case because the ruler, who is the one responsible for lawmaking and acts according to what conveniences him the most, finds it easier to rule over obedient subjects who do not bring chaos in the community by acting individualistically. Being just means acting against personal advantage and in favor of another's, while being unjust is exactly the opposite; in summary, "the rules of justice thus favor those who break them"[72]. Any

[70] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, p. 46
[71] P.P. Nicholson, "Unravelling Thrasymachus' arguments in the Republic*", Phronesis* 19, No. 3 (1974), 214
[72] Nicholson, "Unravelling Thrasymachus' arguments in the Republic", 223

intelligent man who understands this may conclude that injustice is indeed more profitable, because "the consistently unjust man comes off better than the consistently just man; and he is therefore called stronger, referring to both his strength of mind (i.e. his knowledge) and the strength of his consequent position (i.e. the advantages he gains)"[73]. At the same time, justice is also the advantage of *another*, which may be alternatively referred to as the stronger where he manages to exploit his position so as to prevail over the just. The stronger in general, and the ruler in particular, may still act in a way which in the short term apparently favors the just, in the same way that the shepherd who is ultimately interested in his own profit does care for his flock[74].

Here, Nicholson has proposed a reading of Thrasymachus' contribution which does not force one to choose among the statements that which resembles most a coherent but eternally "partial" definition. He does so by arguing that the accounts of justice the sophist presents are parts of the same argument exposed backwards, the first category being contained in the second and so on. He starts off claiming that justice plays to the ruler's advantage because of two reasons: first of all, it is in the political sphere that matters of justice and injustice are most frequent and most pressing (Sparshott)[75]. Moreover, it is the best example he can use to help his listeners understand what he means by "another's advantage" – the ruler is just one of the many 'others' benefitting from injustice[76]. The category of the ruler is contained within that of the stronger – all rulers are strong but not all strong men are rulers. They are all, however, some sort of "other", thus this group of people is introduced last as the most comprehensive. A just action might be performed by a subject with regards to his ruler or one of his peers, but regardless they are all "another".

Nicholson's interpretation has however been considered faulty by some. Boter, in particular, lists a few reasons why he believes the reinterpretation he provides is not the most ideal defense Thrasymachus needs. Most importantly, it is worth noting that Nicholson legitimizes his claims on the basis of a previous analysis made by Kerferd; both agree that "justice is the advantage of the stronger, i.e. the ruler" is not a definition, rather believing that Thrasymachus means it being "another's good"[77]. In his paper, Nicholson however describes

[73] Nicholson, "Unravelling Thrasymachus' arguments in the Republic", Ibid.
[74] Nicholson, "Unravelling Thrasymachus' arguments in the Republic", 226
[75] Nicholson, "Unravelling Thrasymachus' arguments in the Republic", 227
[76] Nicholson, "Unravelling Thrasymachus' arguments in the Republic", 228
[77] Boter, "Thrasymachus and Pleonexia [Greek]", 264

the latter as a "characterization" with universal validity and not a proper definition[78]; this "universality" wrongfully labels justice as *always* being another's good and one's detriment, and injustice as exactly the opposite. This interpretation is not correct, because it disregards the clarification made by Thrasymachus himself regarding those unjust acts which are revealed and thus no longer work to the agent's advantage[79]. Moreover, justice is not always one's own advantage at another's expense; naturally, this is the case for a relationship between a just and an unjust man – not in an hypothetical situation where all are just, something which Thrasymachus does not consider[80]. If critics of the reconciliation attempts can be accused of excessive generalization, the same may be supposedly received by the "other side" of the debate.

Moreover, Nicholson does not address the fact that Thrasymachus mentions the two definitions of justice, i.e. the advantage of the stronger/ruler and another's good, as synonyms, *de facto* excluding the possibility that this "other" may be the subject. The issue is that the author interprets the first affirmation as applicable only to the latter – meaning that they are the ones who, through acts of justice, can do their governors a favor[81]. In addition, Thrasymachus reiterates, towards the end of his speech, that to him "justice is the advantage of the stronger"; his lack of further elaboration seems to validate the hypothesis that this affirmation applies equally to both the ruler specifically and the "other" in general[82].

Nicholson's attempt at reconciling this evidence with his claims consists in presenting the "ruler" as a specific type of "other"; the latter becomes the stronger when taking advantage of the just. This possibility however assumes that there are instances where the "stronger" does not exploit others, an idea which wholly contradicts Thrasymachus' qualification of strength as a natural derivation of "taking advantage". Were he not to do so, a man would be counted as weak because someone else, i.e. the stronger, would be using him[83].

Another reading of Thrasymachus' speech which overrides these issues is perhaps available. In his essay "In defense of Thrasymachus", Henderson attempts at reconciling Kerferd with the original text of the Republic arguing in favor of the consistency and coherence of the sophists' discourse. First of all, the illustrates how the dialogue between him and Socrates

[78] Boter, "Thrasymachus and Pleonexia [Greek]", Ibid.
[79] Boter, "Thrasymachus and Pleonexia [Greek]", 265
[80] Boter, "Thrasymachus and Pleonexia [Greek]", Ibid.
[81] Boter, "Thrasymachus and Pleonexia [Greek]", 265
[82] Boter, "Thrasymachus and Pleonexia [Greek]", Ibid.
[83] Boter, "Thrasymachus and Pleonexia [Greek]", 266

revolves around two key issues: what the nature or essential quality of justice is, and whether the just or the unjust life is more profitable for the agent[84]. He claims to defend the fact that, despite Socrates forcing Thrasymachus to reformulate his definitions several times, the latter ultimately triumphs because he maintains the core of his original point intact: "not only do I believe that Thrasymachus is consistent in essentials throughout the dispute with Socrates […]; I shall also argue that Socrates' most vigorous attacks fail completely to refute, or even seriously to damage, Thrasymachus' position"[85].

He also addresses the three main reasons why Thrasymachus is often accused of inconsistency, namely: that he formulates his conception of justice differently throughout the text, that he defends the role of the ruler as the strongest man in the community who can validate his unjust acts through law – without considering when mistakes occur and laws may actually be just, and finally for his consideration of ruling as an "art", which he compares to shepherding in a manner that is inconsistent, according to Socrates, due to the fact that he ignores his own advice to discuss the art and not the person of the practitioner[86] (something which Thrasymachus has advocated for when refuting Socrates' claims on the potential mistakes of rulers). However, Henderson believes these are not sufficient elements to consider the whole discourse as confusing and incoherent.

With regards to the second issue, he defends Thrasymachus' response to Socrates. The former does admit that rulers may make mistakes when legislating, thus not protecting their interests. However, as he explains further in the text, these mistakes are not what defines a ruler. To support his thesis, he compares the art of governing to other professions, such as that of the doctor or the accountant[87]. No one would question the validity of such titles were the former to prescribe the wrong medicine or the latter to make a mistake in his calculations. In expressing himself in such manner, Thrasymachus is doing something extremely modern in the history of philosophical reasoning, i.e. the separation of a role from the individual who plays it[88]. Since professionals are not defined by the mistakes they might make while practicing, the same sentiment has to be granted to rulers. They might do wrong in legislating by passing a law which does not prioritize their own interests – because they were not aware of them or made a miscalculation – but that does not mean that if the two do not coincide the rule (or the ruler)

[84] T.Y. Henderson, "In defense of Thrasymachus", *American Philosophical Quarterly 7* , No. 3 (July 1970): 218
[85] Henderson, "In defense of Thrasymachus", Ibid.
[86] Henderson, "In defense of Thrasymachus", 219
[87] Henderson, "In defense of Thrasymachus", 224
[88] Henderson, "In defense of Thrasymachus", Ibid.

are now any more "altruistic" than before. In the specific case, justice may not be the interest of the ruler, but the argument still stands because *ruling*, if properly exercised, is inherently exploitative and selfish regardless of the particular individual who holds office at any given moment.

In addressing the third point, i.e. the discussion on the "art of ruling", Henderson doubts the validity of Socrates' reasoning. The latter is at this point questioning Thrasymachus' association of "stronger" with "ruler", arguing that if governing is to be considered as any other profession then the same reasoning must be applied to it[89]. In particular, he is referring to an essential feature of the majority of "arts", i.e. that of being performed for the benefit of the other. Requiring the assistance of a doctor, for example, only favors the sick; the former may earn a wage as a result of his contribution, which would work in his interest, but that is certainly not what he is known and respected for. Thus, if governing is a skill as much as curing others, something on which Thrasymachus had insisted, the ruler is not working for his own benefit but for that of his subjects because that is what those who exercise a profession do[90].

There is one issue with this rebuttal: Socrates is wrongly assuming that all professions work in the advantage of those who require their assistance when practiced properly. He does not explain how competent ruling would be beneficial for the ruled, but he merely deduces so from such premises. But what if they are false[91]? There are, in fact, several examples of professions which, if conducted properly, do not work to the receiver's advantage, but rather to their detriment. This is the case of the "art" of torture, which is skillfully mastered by he who is able to extort information from a victim while inflicting them pain[92]. Naturally this practice does not help he who is tortured, regardless of the fact that the agent of the torture knows what he is doing. This seems to partially refute the validity of Socrates' point.

Nevertheless, the argument for which ruling is far from a self-interested activity irritates Thrasymachus, who feels trapped by his own reasoning. He is able to clarify his stance through a long speech which is typical of sophist philosophy – also defined as *μακρολογία* (macrologhìa)[93]. This method contrasts with Socrates short and concise contributions, which have two objectives: first of all, it is easier to destabilize the interlocutor with a fast-paced series of questions dissecting his argument. Moreover, where his method clashes with the

[89] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 49
[90] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Ibid.
[91] Henderson, "In defense of Thrasymachus", 226
[92] Henderson, "In defense of Thrasymachus", Ibid.
[93] Nicholson, "Unravelling Thrasymachus' arguments in the Republic", 220

magniloquent speeches of other characters, it shows how linear and simple reasoning is the winning form of philosophical argument which leaves little space to complex rhetoric[94]. Thrasymachus' methodology suggests Plato's disdain for sophists; it is supposed to reveal the lack of serious commitment to the discussion and to honest inquiry[95]. The complexity of his arguments make it however rather difficult to jump to this conclusion.

Henderson's defense

After addressing the three key arguments of Thrasymachus' critics, Henderson proceeds in providing his own account of why the sophist's speech is in truth coherent. To do so, he makes two assumptions[96]: both interlocutors agree with justice being an inherently human and social phenomenon, which does not take place outside of organized communities. Be it appropriate or inappropriate, convenient or not, it is a criterion for the judgment of reciprocal actions and relations among individuals. This is not the only common ground for both characters; despite the lack of textual evidence in this sense, Henderson argues that it is possible to assume the "widest possible range of shared views"[97] between the two on the pillars of the discussion. For example, on which actions count as just – paying debts, honoring contracts, paying taxes and so on. What they argue over is the "essential property"[98] of these acts, i.e. who gains the most from performing them and thus whether they are convenient to the agent.

As Nicholson did, Henderson believes that Thrasymachus is expressing himself "backwards", beginning with providing the conclusion and then developing the argument throughout the dialogue. The author is focusing on two key definitions of justice[99]:

a. "I declare that justice is nothing else than that which is advantageous for the stronger"
b. "Justice and the just is really the good of another, the advantage of the stronger who rules, but the self-inflicted injury of the subject who obeys"

With regards to the first account, he writes: "I think that Thrasymachus means that in the context of an ongoing, dynamic society, when two or more people (or groups) have dealings with one another, if one person (or group) acts justly toward another or others, the very act of

[94] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 44
[95] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Ibid.
[96] Henderson, "In Defense of Thrasymachus", 219
[97] Henderson, "In Defense of Thrasymachus", Ibid.
[98] Henderson, "In Defense of Thrasymachus", Ibid.
[99] Henderson, "In Defense of Thrasymachus", 218

justice renders the just agent vulnerable and susceptible to being taken advantage of'[100]. He does not make his own interests and needs a priority; thus, he is prone to exploitation from those who do not hold the same regard for him as he does for them and are willing to exploit him for their own personal gain.

In order to explain what he means by justice being another's advantage, Thrasymachus himself uses the example of a business partnership between a just and an unjust man. The latter's profit would be higher not only because he refuses to pay taxes, but also because he is willing to exploit any opportunity, including the naivety of his partner[101]. In this equation, there is no reference to strength. This is a quality which the unjust man acquires if he manages to be unjust in the most effective way possible, by seizing every opportunity for exploitation and thus becoming more "powerful" than others. According to Henderson, Thrasymachus is therefore judging the quality of actions not on the basis of their causal, but their *logical* consequences[102].

While his interlocutors may agree with the prospect of the unjust man as he who exploits others without mercy, it is on the qualitative connotation of such individuals that the positions differ. As already mentioned, the sophist here introduces a groundbreaking question in Greek political thought: what if justice and honesty were not convenient? What if the selfish maximization of interests were the desirable life to lead? Naturally, such possibility strikes the other participants in the dialogue, and perhaps the majority of the readers at the time. He is defending the idea that the unjust and unlawful man is admirable: he is not a deceitful traitor who betrays his community, but rather an intelligent man who understands his needs and puts them above all else, taking every opportunity he finds to exploit the naïve honesty of his "just" counterparts. He might, indeed, admire criminals for their capacities: not those committing occasional or insignificant acts, but those who have the intelligence and skills to use their position at the expense of others – thus becoming the *stronger*[103].

[100] Henderson, "In Defense of Thrasymachus", 220
[101] Henderson, "In Defense of Thrasymachus", Ibid.
[102] Henderson, "In Defense of Thrasymachus", 220
[103] Henderson, "In Defense of Thrasymachus", 223

CHAPTER 3 – evaluating the interpretations of Thrasymachus' arguments

Thrasymachus' account of justice has long been discussed among scholars as perhaps the most controversial passage in the *Republic*. There are two particular reasons as to why this could be the case: on the one hand, he presents an extremely challenging argument, not comparable in the slightest to the simplified logic of his companions, Cephalus and Polemarchus in particular. Their definitions were easily refuted by Socrates as straightforward and complacent – perhaps "naïve", at worst. To say that justice is being truthful and paying debts, or rather "the art which gives good to friends and evil to enemies"[104], is reductive. Such an admirable virtue cannot be mastered as a list of precepts. Cephalus and Polemarchus can however count on one essential advantage: they do not feel the need to thoroughly elaborate and explain their positions; they are common men, holding traditional beliefs that the majority of their peers would share. They are not introducing a groundbreaking point of view which requires contextualization and an incredibly solid basis to stand on. Plato certainly does not agree with their conformism, but it takes him – and Socrates – little time to dismiss them.

Thrasymachus, on the other hand, is not as straightforward. He presents an extremely difficult and challenging argument: what if justice were not as admirable and profitable as it is generally believed? Not only doubting such "established truth", but most importantly proposing the opposite interpretation, i.e. that injustice is "better", is revolutionary with respect to the political and philosophical thought at the time. This might be the main reason why Thrasymachus is never truly "defeated" by Socrates; while the two interlocutors agree on some concepts such as which acts can be considered just and which not, the qualitative analyses they give to a just (or unjust) life are irreconcilable.

The complexity of Thrasymachus' arguments makes it almost impossible for Socrates to definitely refute them. The latter does achieve the goal of presenting the former as incoherent with his persistent questioning, but a more attentive analysis of their dialogue dismisses this as a successful triumph in the argument. Considering that both Socrates and Thrasymachus are, in this case, characters written by Plato, it is possible to interpret their exchange as an inner

[104] Plato, *The Republic*, 22

debate, where the former represents the philosophical theory of the author, and the latter any doubts or self-criticisms that he is not able to fully address.

Naturally, the long history of the *Republic* requires in to understand it a minimum degree of interpretation, largely influenced by the reader's background and beliefs and thus not necessarily immune to mistakes. This lack of clarification on the meaning of the words, accessible on the other hand to readers of contemporary texts, does however have an advantage: no point of view is truly and absolutely wrong. Considering that Plato is not able to provide modern audiences with the truth, anyone who approaches the *Republic* is free to read it as they best see fit. Therefore, it is not possible to judge scholars who have discussed the topic as being entirely wrong or right; some interpretations may simply be more or less convincing than others.

As discussed above, there is three main ways to interpret Thrasymachus' speech on justice: either as an incoherent and inconsistent set of contradicting affirmations, as an apparently confusing argument which leads to the final definition despite a few mistakes along the way, or as a cohesive whole where every piece counts. The first category dismisses Thrasymachus and his controversial insight as the nonsensical ramble of a character that cannot express himself properly. Plato might certainly disagree with sophist philosophy, and he may be using the character to show the flaws of its logic, but that is not a ground solid enough on which to build the basis for Thrasymachus being less articulated than the other guests. This is the most challenging opponent Socrates deals with in his exchange on justice; while the dialogues with Cephalus, Polemarchus, Glaucon or Adeimantus are rather short – because he is able to quickly reveal how shallow and naïve their ideas are – his discussion with Thrasymachus occupies most of Book I and does not even result in a clear "victory" for him.

Issues with Annas' interpretation

Scholars who recognize the importance of Thrasymachus' character and contribution are also those who defend one of his accounts of justice as "definitional" while criticizing in some form all the others. Among them, Julia Annas, who advocates to consider his position as immoralist, rather than conventionalist. She argues that the core of the argument is the final account of justice provided, i.e. that it means doing "another's good"[105], an opinion which she classifies as immoralist because it implies that injustice is better as it allows the agent to maximize his wellbeing, albeit at the cost of that of the just man which he exploits.

[105] Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* ,35

Using the adjective "immoral", however, implies that Thrasymachus' discourse is based on the rejection of a specific moral code according to which just acts are more appropriate than unjust ones. His "rebellion" to the status quo is not inspired by an *ideal*, but by mere utilitarianism. Arguing in a similar sense in his essay "Civil Disobedience", Henry-David Thoreau proposes unjustness, i.e. breaking the law, as the only honourable path for the honest man who finds himself dealing with rules that do not align with his moral code – *de facto* implying that morality overrides legality when the two are in conflict.

However, Thrasymachus does not justify his affirmations in favour of injustice in the same manner; he argues that the reason why it is more "convenient" than justice is purely logical: if the just man is he who allows others to take advantage of him, while the unjust man – the one taking advantage – is constantly increasing his wealth and wellbeing because he exploits every possible opportunity with no remorse, then anyone reasonable enough will recognize that "injustice, when on a sufficient scale, has more strength and freedom and mastery than justice"[106] and will choose to pursuit it. There is no appeal to a moral code, only the consideration that injustice is more *profitable.* It would be therefore more appropriate to define Thrasymachus as an a-moralist than an immoralist.

Another issue with Annas' account, as well as with all the other scholars agreeing on a partial justification of Plato's discourse, is the construction of a cohesive critique while purposefully excluding entire sections of the dialogue that are not considered "compatible". This is the dilemma which she faces when addressing the claim that "justice is what is advantageous for the established rule"; she argues that, analyzed independently, it may seem as a reductive account of justice limited to power relationships between a ruler and his subjects[107]. Considering instead this interpretation as merely the most "obvious", but still interconnected with the others, allows for clarification. As anticipated in the discussion on Nicholson, it is possible to recognize the importance of defining justice as the ruler's advantage without rejecting the other points of view, which analyze it in private relationships among individuals.

One particular element about Annas' argument is however understandable: claiming that one of the definitions of justice provided by Thrasymachus is his real opinion implies that the others are either completely nonsensical, therefore he was confused when he expressed

[106] Plato, *The Republic*, 38
[107] Annas, *An introduction to Plato's Republic*, 39

them, or that – as she claims – he had not formulated his final argument yet and they were merely failed attempts. Both of these justifications are not, however, compatible with the nature of Thrasymachus' character in the *Republic*. The protagonist is certainly Socrates, Plato's mentor and one of the greatest authorities in the history of philosophy. His interlocutor is, by comparison, quite insignificant. He was a sophist, belonging to a school of thought which Plato greatly despised for its beliefs and its methods. To him, Thrasymachus was perhaps an opponent rather than a companion in dialogue for Socrates. Yet, his contribution is the most significant in the *Republic*, even more than Socrates' who in Book I intervenes only to refute the opinions of those around him.

The relevance of the character

His speech on the nature of justice occupies most of the first Book, with the following ones centered around its rejection through the presentation of the ideal city and the Theory of Forms. He is the only character which Socrates is not able to "defeat", who walks away from the discussion with the foundations of his argument still intact. Plato gives him a great responsibility, which cannot be a sign of lack of respect towards him: he is the interlocutor who has the purpose of presenting a point of view which is not only in sharp contrast with those of the other participants, but most importantly *revolutionary*. To imply that injustice might be more profitable than justice, in the context in which Plato wrote and also in which the *Republic* is set, is groundbreaking; it questions the very foundations of classical political and philosophical thought.

The author may not agree with the core of the speech, but giving Thrasymachus this much space on the "stage" is certainly not a sign of disregard towards him. Claiming that he is incoherent because either incapable of expressing a sound argument or of reaching a conclusion without committing grave mistakes beforehand is not compatible with the role of the character. Others, bearing opinions that Plato did not respect at all, are dismissed quite early on in their interventions. Thrasymachus is given more time, because his insight is complex and controversial; this is not a character who cannot express his opinions in a clear manner. Constant reformulation is not necessarily a sign of uncertainty, but can also indicate that the subject matter is multifaceted and must be discussed from different perspectives.

Thrasymachus' coherence

A certain degree of confusion regarding Thrasymachus' accounts of justice is indeed understandable: after all, in no section of the dialogue does he explicitly admit that part of what he said was wrong, nor does he reveal to the reader that his affirmations are linked to each other. Analysing the text literally thus means facing the doubt of whether the various definitions of justice that he provides, i.e. the advantage of the ruler, of the stronger, the act of being lawful and finally doing another's good, are all pieces of the same puzzle or rather separate and contradicting ideas. However, a similar misunderstanding on the reader's part is not to be confused with an actual incapability of Thrasymachus, and by reflection of Plato, of expressing such a complex theory of justice. Some have argued, quite successfully in comparison, that all that the sophist says in his exchange with Socrates is actually cohesive: the interpretation of all the definitions as that of an harmonious whole is not backed up by any textual evidence in the *Republic*, but it still is more convincing that admitting otherwise.

Thrasymachus himself seems to defend the coherence of his arguments. In replying to Socrates' persistent questioning, he says: "you are so far from understanding about justice and what is just, about injustice and what is unjust, that you do not realize that justice is really the good of another, the advantage of the stronger and the ruler, and harmful to the one who obeys and serves. Injustice is the opposite, it rules the truly simple and just, and those it rules do what is to the advantage of the other and stronger, and they make the one they serve happy and the other not at all" (343c)[108].

The three concepts of unjust man, strong man and ruler must not be confused. While the stronger is always unjust, this is not the only requirement. He must also be aware of the fact that unjust actions are advantageous for him, and be intelligent and astute enough to know how to perform them systematically without facing consequences. Besides, he must also be courageous enough to turn his plan into action. These strict requirements exclude from the list of admirable strong men all the minor criminals who are not able to do injustice on a "grand scale"[109]. The best example of a man who meets all the requirements is a capable ruler; while some, Socrates among all, would describe him as he who is able to understand what is good for the community and to act free of corruption and dishonesty, to Thrasymachus the ideal ruler

[108] Everson, "The Incoherence of Thrasymachus", 114
[109] Henderson, "In Defense of Thrasymachus", 223

is the exact opposite; he is a man who understands how injustice can serve him and uses the means he is provided with by his role to protect his interests[110].

Rulers are not strong because of their profession; they are rulers because they are strong enough. They are able to advance their social position and career because they have the intelligence and the courage to (unjustly) exploit every possible opportunity to do so. This strength is not the be found only among merciless tyrants who exercise their power in a regime of terror; as Thrasymachus mentions in the beginning of his speech, for each type of government there is a type of law, and even in democracies the ruler can improve his condition at the expense of others[111]. Indeed, a just ruler can exist; he is however, for Thrasymachus, not ideal and uncapable of properly filling his role; he is "not failing something which he ought to do, if he is to be a ruler in the strict sense. On Thrasymachus' view, he is merely being stupid"[112].

In fact, in Henderson's interpretation, it is not incoherent to assume that a just and an unjust ruler might enact similar sets of laws: if the advantage of the stronger – with the ruler being arguably the strongest in the community – is other people acting lawfully (because the laws do not allow unjust action) it would be counterproductive to impose excessively repressive rules which either prevent or discourage the subjects from acting justly towards each other[113]. This is all a matter of illusion; if the common man believes in the righteousness of the laws and his ruler, therefore thinking justice is most profitable for himself, he will be more prone to lawfulness and less of a threat to the stability of the system, and the safeguard of the ruler's selfish interests.

The good ruler is he who, for Thrasymachus, is able to act unjustly in a manner so subtle that he convinces his subjects of his pure intentions and the subsequent honesty of his acts, including the laws he enacts. For a mad ruler who behaves like a merciless tyrant will only attract resentment and eventually he would be forcefully removed from his role. Perhaps, this same argument could be used for the "usefulness" of propaganda in totalitarian regimes; the people must be persuaded of the legitimacy of the institutions for the sake of the latter's survival, because such level of legalized violence and oppression cannot persist without constructing a narrative around it which persuades the people to the point of creating an alternative reality.

[110] Henderson, "In Defense Of Thrasymachus", Ibid.
[111] Henderson, "In Defense Of Thrasymachus", 221
[112] Henderson, "In Defense Of Thrasymachus", 223
[113] Henderson, "In Defense Of Thrasymachus", 222

Just actions can be advantageous both for the stronger and the general "other"; in the first case, because he is the one who selfishly – a quality which in this context does not have a negative connotation – takes advantage of opportunities at the expense of the just. In the second case, because the "other" is he who benefits from the naivety of the just man who allows anyone else to "cheat and defraud him"[114]. These two statements may coexist and defending them both is not at all incoherent, according to Henderson. A confirmation of the validity of such claims can be found in the text; albeit nor Thrasymachus nor Socrates openly announce the former's victory in the argument, the opposite is not true either. The sophist is never admittedly defeated by the Socratic method; despite him hesitating in the face of a few difficult questions he still does not admit to have made a mistake in the argument. He leaves the discussion with the same ideas on justice that he joined it with. Because he never "surrenders" to Socrates, Plato leaves it up to the reader to decide whether his definition of justice has survived the discussion or not.

Henderson supports the first option which sees Thrasymachus not as a triumphant winner, but rather a worthy survivor. He writes: "I believe that Plato views Thrasymachus' account of the nature of justice as plausible and persuasive and as one which, as far as it goes, is accurate"[115]. To him, one of the reasons for the lack of clarification as to the outcome of the debate could be that the writer himself was not capable of finding strong arguments against his own character's groundbreaking account of justice. All of Socrates' questions, albeit insisting, do not shake the foundations of Thrasymachus' reasoning; they reveal that it has been presented to the audience in an unusual manner which makes it appear confusing at first glance, but this element alone is not sufficient to rule out the argument as a whole and dismiss it as an incoherent and meaningless piece. After all, it is precisely on Thrasymachus' controversial accounts of justice that the rest of the book develops, setting the tone for the entirety of the *Republic*[116].

Considering the premise that no interpretation of the Republic is clearly wrong or right, and that defending one or the other means standing for what appears more coherent to the reader, and given the points of view expressed by different scholars, it appears that the line of thinking which attempts at reconciliation does greater justice to the text and Thrasymachus' character. His discourse is certainly constructed in a peculiar manner: rather than introducing the premises to gradually develop a conclusion, he first presents the "end" of his reasoning,

[114] Henderson, "In Defense Of Thrasymachus", 221
[115] Henderson, "In Defense Of Thrasymachus", 227
[116] Annas, *An Introduction To Plato's Republic*, 34

and the arguments at a later time. While a reader might find this methodology confusing, this sentiment is not to be attributed to a presumed incapability of the author and his characters to properly express themselves. Those who have attempted at labelling Thrasymachus as either completely nonsensical or as a hasty thinker whose *hubris* tricks him into defending an argument beyond his abilities, have failed in explaining his central role in the narrative. Moreover, those such as Annas who defend one account of justice over the others – while justifying him as a reliable and respectable philosopher – encounter the following contradiction: if Thrasymachus is so important, and if his opinion is so relevant to the rest of the Republic, then how come he is not able to give a full and cohesive account of it?

The answer lies in rejecting both of the aforementioned interpretations; thinkers such as Henderson, who have explained the different but equally valuable roles that Thrasymachus' various accounts of justice have in Book I, are able to properly defend the magnitude of the character and the opinions he possesses.

Conclusion

The discussion on the topic of justice is certainly among the most relevant sections of the *Republic*. It is inspired by Cephalus, who discusses the role of his material possessions in the achievement of peace and enjoyment at his old age. Socrates questions him on such affirmations, leading him to formulate his opinion on justice, i.e. that it is "to speak the truth and to pay your debts"[117]. His son, Polemarchus, walks down a similar path, arguing that justice is "the art which gives good to friends and evil to enemies"[118]. It is here, after Socrates dismisses both claims as excessively simplistic and complacent, that Thrasymachus intervenes introducing arguably the most relevant and controversial opinion in the entire book. He is initially frustrated with Socrates because the latter appears to never clearly express his position on the matter and he limits himself to question the validity of his interlocutors' claims.

Encouraged by the other guests, Thrasymachus reveals his own interpretation on the issue: "I proclaim that justice is nothing else than the interest of the stronger"[119]. This is a rather shocking claim, for two key reasons: firstly, it contrasts with the more traditional insights

[117] Plato, *The Republic*, 20
[118] Plato, *The Republic*, 22
[119] Plato, *The Republic*, 31

provided by both Cephalus and Polemarchus, who preceded him. Secondly, the difference is to be attributed to the inherently "revolutionary" nature of the statement. Mainstream political thought, at the time, held virtues like justice to the highest regard; it was undisputable that to live honestly and fairly was admirable and that any just man ought to be respected. Plato himself, despite rejecting unchallenged tradition as limited and complacent, agreed with such precepts. This is the element which unites all guests, besides Thrasymachus.

Socrates focuses his attention on him; in a rather lengthy exchange, the two discuss the basis of such complex reasoning, with Plato's mentor attempting at refuting it using his well-known "Socratic method" – a series of pressing questions aimed at testing the validity and soundness of the interlocutor's claims. As emerges, to Thrasymachus, "justice" must be looked at from different perspectives: it can be defined as the interest of the stronger, of the ruler, being lawful and as doing another's good.

The method which Socrates uses to debate Thrasymachus is to be taken into consideration as an extremely relevant factor. The very way in which the argument is organized, i.e. the contrast between sophist *μακρολογία* (macrologhìa) and Socratic rapid questioning is supposed to challenge Thrasymachus and force him to negate his own premises. This is not necessarily the wrong approach, considering that it led to the expected outcome in the dialogues with the other characters. As already anticipated, however, Thrasymachus' argument is unique: its complexity and multifaceted nature does not accommodate the attempts at destabilization of Plato's mentor. Authors such as Vlastos have discussed the inherent flaws of the Socratic method, which emerge clearly in more complex discussions – such as the one under analysis. He argues that all this approach does is merely to establish that the argument of the interlocutor contrast with ill-defined premises that are never openly clarified[120]. Thus, the discussion does not lead to a proper conclusion, and naturally Thrasymachus cannot be said to lose purely because Socrates disagrees with him.

Nevertheless, the frequent reformulations of his version of what justice is, often prompted by insisting questioning, have led some scholars to believe that Thrasymachus did not, in fact, express a sound argument but rather an incoherent and confusing one. They do not hold him to a higher standard than the other characters, because just as Cephalus, Polemarchus or their other guests were not able to provide a satisfying definition, Thrasymachus was not

[120] Benson, "Socratic Method", 185

even capable of expressing his opinion in a linear and coherent manner. Thus, his intervention as a whole must be judged as nonsensical, without an excessively thorough analysis.

Other authors, such as Julia Annas, defend instead his contribution as fruitful. Thrasymachus might express himself in a manner which at first appears confusing, but that is only because he struggles initially in reaching the conclusion of his argument, which he does only after Socrates' questioning refutes the incomplete or faulty claims he had mistakenly expressed before. Within this group, scholars argue in favor of different accounts to be called "definitional"; Annas, for example, holds that Thrasymachus ultimately means for justice to be the good of another, a position which she considers "immoralist".

This is however a faulty interpretation, because it presupposes an attachment to some moral code independent of lawfulness which Thrasymachus does not have. When he argues that injustice is more convenient for the agent, he is not doing so on the basis of altruism or rebellion to the discriminatory rules that an unreasonable tyrant might impose. His goal is not to reject justice in the present moment, intended as compliance with the rules, in order to create a "better" future in which being respectful of norms will not imply being complicit to violence or exploitation. In fact, he does not envision this possibility; authority and its products, i.e. laws, will always be the outcome of selfish self-preservation instincts, and never of preoccupation for the wellbeing of the community. Choosing injustice is not a moral decision, it is purely an utilitarian one.

A third group of authors provides a more convincing insight: the sophist's contribution on justice is in reality coherent and cohesive, if analyzed accurately. At first it might appear indeed as a confusing and scattered set of affirmations with no link to each other whatsoever. What Thrasymachus is actually doing is however the presentation of an extremely challenging and controversial point of view which must be explained from different angles. The issue of justice is indeed relevant in all areas of life, from the political field (where it defines the relationship between the government and its subjects, representing here the interest of the ruler), in the relationships among individuals, i.e. between the unjust "stronger" and the just, and in that between citizens and the law.

Authors such as Nicholson and Henderson argue that Thrasymachus presenting all the aforementioned accounts of justice as equally important is not a ground solid enough to label him as confused. There are indeed passages, throughout Book I, in which Socrates' questioning undermines the stability of his claims, but in the end he manages to conclude the discussion

with the core of his argument still intact[121]. Plato's mentor is not able to lead his interlocutor towards thoroughly refuting his initial claims, i.e. that justice is always the benefit of the strongest in power and that injustice is convenient for the ordinary man. As the result of a long discussion, Thrasymachus only admits that *sometimes* that may not be the case; negating the absolute validity of his belief is a partial victory for his interlocutor. However, the latter is not able to refute that in some other circumstances the sophist may be right instead.

While in confronting other characters, such as Cephalus and Polemarchus, Socrates appears clearly triumphant – the former frantically exits the scene with an excuse as soon as he understands that his simplistic definition has failed to be convincing – with Thrasymachus this deduction is not as easy to make.

By the end of Book I, Thrasymachus can be considered as extremely successful not because he has led Socrates to admit defeat, but rather because he has achieved what the other characters have not: he has not refuted his own argument. This proves that his idea of justice is far from scattered and incoherent, and that his reasoning can be read as a cohesive whole. He does appear more confused than his counterparts, who are less hesitant in explaining themselves, but that is to be attributed to the latter's hubris and their banal opinions which do not require a lengthy explanation. Hence, the apparent incoherence of his speech must not be dismissed as incapability, but rather as a sign of complex and innovative beliefs that require a thorough analysis.

[121] Henderson, "In Defense Of Thrasymachus", 218

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Annas Julia, *An introduction to Plato's Republic*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1981

Annas Julia. *Plato; A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 2003

Benson, Hugh H. "Socratic Method In The Cambridge Companion to Socrates", edited by Donald R. Morrison, 179-200. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009

Boter G. J. "Thrasymachus and Pleonexia [Greek]". *Mnemosyne* , Vol. 39, Fasc. 3/4 (1986): 261-281

Coumoundouros, Antonis. "Plato: The Republic" , Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed May 5, 2022. [available online at: Plato: The Republic | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (utm.edu)]

Everson, Stephen. *The Incoherence Of Thrasymachus.* Oxford studies in ancient philosophy, 16:99-131 (1998)

Henderson, T.Y. "In Defense Of Thrasymachus". *American Philosophical Quarterly* , Vol. 7, No. 3 (1970): 218- 228

Leigh Fiona. "Platonic Dialogue, Maieutic Method and Critical Thinking", *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 41, No. 3, (2007)

Nicholson, P.P. "Unravelling Thrasymachus' Arguments in The Republic". *Phronesis*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1974): 210-232

Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Moscow, Idaho: Roman Roads Media LLC, 2013

Riassunto in lingua italiana

La *Repubblica* è considerata tra le opere più celebri della produzione letteraria nella Grecia classica, soprattutto dato il suo ruolo nell'espressione della dottrina filosofica di Platone. Essa è strutturata come un dialogo cosiddetto "diretto", ossia riportato dall'autore all'interno del testo piuttosto che da una voce narrante esterna. L'ambientazione è la casa di Cefalo, Polemarco e Lisia, rispettivamente padre e figli appartenenti ad una famiglia immigrata ad Atene da Siracusa, ed arricchitasi grazie al commercio. Gli altri personaggi principali, che intervengono in modo sostanziale nella discussione sono Socrate, Glauco, Adimanto e Trasimaco.

I primi libri contengono il progetto politico della città ideale, che l'autore illustra nel dettaglio, affrontando sia temi astratti quali la giustizia e la virtù, sia presentando il proprio modello di società. Ad esempio, è proprio in questa occasione che Platone, attraverso la voce del suo maestro Socrate, narra il celeberrimo "mito della nobile menzogna", altrimenti detto mito "dei metalli", secondo cui la razza umana sia divisa in tre categorie: gli aurei, gli argentei e i bronzei. I primi sarebbero destinati a governare la città, i secondi a difenderla ed infine i terzi a lavorare in qualità di artigiani o contadini.

Un altro elemento che rende la *Repubblica* così centrale nella discussione filosofica è il contenuto degli ultimi libri, in cui Platone espone la sua teoria dell'esistenza, introducendo elementi come l'iperuranio e la Teoria delle Idee. La conoscenza di queste verità deve essere rivelata all'uomo attraverso l'indagine filosofica che, secondo l'autore, può avere successo soltanto tramite l'uso del dialogo. L'importanza di questa scoperta viene spiegata all'interno del settimo libro, attraverso il "mito della caverna", che simboleggia l'uscita dell'uomo dal buio dell'ignoranza verso luce della conoscenza filosofica.

Il valore dato allo scambio di opinioni è sicuramente un retaggio degli insegnamenti di Socrate, solitamente ricordato come il filosofo che si rifiutò di scrivere e preferì realizzare il suo progetto esclusivamente attraverso il *discorso*. Esso procede secondo un metodo particolare, definito "socratico" in quanto peculiare dello stile del filosofo. In particolare, si costituisce di un elemento fondamentale: la dottrina della maieutica, secondo la quale

l'obiettivo del sapiente non è quello di rivelare la verità al suo ascoltatore, ma condurlo alla conclusione attraverso una serie di domande mirate, chiamate "elenco".

E' tuttavia interessante concentrare l'attenzione sulla discussione riguardo la giustizia contenuta nel primo libro, ed in particolare sullo scambio tra Socrate e Trasimaco, ispirato dall'intervento di quest'ultimo in seguito alle parole di Cefalo e Polemarco. E' proprio il padrone di casa a dare il via al dialogo, interrogandosi sul ruolo che la sua accumulata ricchezza gioca nell'aver raggiunto una vecchiaia serena e priva di preoccupazioni. In seguito a questa affermazione, Socrate lo induce attraverso una serie di domande a formulare la sua definizione di giustizia, ossia "essere sincero e ripagare i debiti". Questo punto di vista estremamente banale non riesce a reggere all'insistenza del celeberrimo filosofo, costringendo Cefalo ad una ritirata.

E' suo figlio, Polemarco, che subentra al suo posto nel tentativo di difenderlo. In modo molto simile al padre, egli ritiene la giustizia come il far bene ai propri amici ed il nuocere ai propri nemici. Anche questa opinione è, a detta di Socrate, estremamente riduttiva; il successore di Cefalo non è infatti in grado di presentare delle argomentazioni che reggano alle sue domande.

A questo punto, Trasimaco interviene nella discussione, accusando Socrate di non possedere una sua idea e di celare la propria ignoranza mettendo in ridicolo i suoi interlocutori. Perciò, incoraggiato dai presenti, il sofista rivela cosa lui crede sia la giustizia: servire l'interesse del più forte. Si tratta di un punto di vista estremamente rivoluzionario, non soltanto nel contesto dell'opera, in quanto in aperto contrasto con le opinioni degli altri personaggi, ma soprattutto considerando il periodo in cui viene scritta la *Repubblica*. Secondo il pensiero politico dell'epoca, infatti, la giustizia era ritenuta una delle più importanti virtù, necessaria per vivere secondo i principi di onestà ed equilibrio. Questo è il punto di vista di tutti i partecipanti al banchetto di Cefalo, ad eccezione di Trasimaco; persino Platone, nonostante egli abbia presentato gli interventi del padrone di casa e di suo figlio come contributi banali alla discussione, concordava sul ritenere la vita giusta come quella vissuta nel modo migliore. E' proprio questo il messaggio di Socrate, che in quest'opera ha lo scopo di rappresentare la voce dell'autore.

Oltre ad essere controverso, il contenuto del discorso del sofista è anche estremamente complesso. Nel corso del dialogo con Socrate, infatti, egli presenta più "definizioni" del concetto di giustizia: esso viene inizialmente descritto come il concorrere al benessere di chi

governa, poi del più forte, poi come sinonimo di "legittimità" ed infine l'atto di fare il bene dell'altro. In realtà, le sue "ritrattazioni" sono spinte dall'insistenza di Socrate che, percependo la multidimensionalità del discorso del suo interlocutore, pone domande sempre più specifiche. Lo scopo sarebbe quello di indebolire le basi del suo ragionamento ed indurlo ad ammettere la sconfitta, come nel caso dei suoi "predecessori". Questo metodo tuttavia non è efficace nei confronti di Trasimaco, che riesce a mantenere perlopiù intatte le sue argomentazioni senza ritrattarle – ed è proprio per questo che lo si può considerare vittorioso.

Il suo discorso può essere senza dubbio ritenuto discordante e incoerente, se analizzato in modo superficiale. Alcuni studiosi considerano questo fattore come elemento sufficiente a rappresentare Trasimaco come personaggio incapace di esprimersi in modo lineare. Essi di conseguenza rifiutano totalmente la validità filosofica delle sue argomentazioni e la sua importanza all'interno dell'opera.

Altri autori, tra cui Julia Annas, difendono Trasimaco sostenendo che, sebbene inizialmente si esprima in modo apparentemente poco chiaro, egli è in grado di giungere alla conclusione del suo discorso una volta riconosciuta l'inesattezza delle sue precedenti affermazioni. All'interno di questo gruppo vi è tuttavia disaccordo su quale sia la "vera" definizione di giustizia secondo il sofista, in quanto non è ritenuto possibile che tutte siano valide contemporaneamente; secondo Annas, per esempio, egli tiene una posizione immoralista, sostenendo che l'essere giusti significhi favorire l'altro a scapito di sé stessi.

Vi è infine un terzo gruppo di studiosi che propone una tesi più convincente, ossia che il discorso di Trasimaco sia in realtà estremamente coerente e coeso, e non un'incomprensibile insieme di false definizioni senza alcun tipo di legame tra loro. Il ruolo del personaggio è infatti quello di presentare un punto di vista moderno e per questo controverso, che richiede di essere spiegato e compreso da diverse prospettive. Non è possibile considerare la giustizia come un concetto "monolitico", ascrivibile ad un ambito in particolare. Esso è rilevante in tutti gli aspetti della vita, pubblica e privata, e dunque influenza sia le relazioni tra i governi ed i propri sudditi, mediate dalla legge, sia quelle tra gli individui stessi.

Tra queste interpretazioni vale la pena considerare quelle di Henderson e Nicholson che, nonostante le loro differenze, concordano nel presentare tutte le definizioni di giustizia di Trasimaco come ugualmente importanti e dipendenti l'una dall'altra. Henderson, in particolare, sostiene che egli risulti vincitore nel confronto con Socrate, non perché quest'ultimo ammetta di non essere riuscito nell'intento di screditare le sue argomentazioni, quanto perché egli non

viene costretto a ritrattare. Abbandona la discussione con le stesse idee con cui vi era entrato in maniera così violenta, e sebbene vi siano passi del suo intervento in cui ammette i propri errori, non rifiuta la sua iniziale definizione di giustizia come ciò che è utile al potere – e nocivo per il bene dell'individuo.

Il suo successo nel mantenere intatta la sua posizione prova che l'interpretazione di Henderson sia la più convincente. Quello di Trasimaco non è infatti un discorso privo di senso e di logica, o l'intervento inizialmente confuso di un filosofo che soltanto alla fine è in grado di presentare la propria posizione definitiva; al contrario si tratta dell'espressione – articolata in modo eccellente – di un punto di vista che può essere definito "rivoluzionario". L'apparente incertezza nell'esprimersi linearmente va infatti attribuita non ad una sua incapacità di argomentare, quanto alla natura complessa e controversa dei contenuti.