

The Presence of Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*

Rob Kelly

Course: HONR 311

Instructor: Dr. Jim Walter

Essay Type: Short Essay Exam

In Plato's *Republic*, the character Thrasymachus provides an intense yet short-lived appearance in the discussion of justice early in the story. Though he seems to almost completely withdraw from the discussion for the remainder of the book, his early arguments provide a major impetus in Socrates' search for justice and prove to be an ever-present force contributing throughout the entirety of the work.

After Socrates refutes the primary arguments of Justice from Cephalus and Polemarchus, Thrasymachus jumps into the discussion as a "wild beast" "as if to tear [Socrates] apart." He quickly insults the interlocutors and shows a high disdain for philosophy. He claims to know what justice really is without having to go through all the "asinine" arguments, simply stating it as "the interests of the stronger." He is clearly basing this view on simple observations of various rulers of his time. After Socrates refutes this argument by using examples of doctors and captains working for the benefit of their patients and sailors, respectively, Thrasymachus comes back with the argument of shepherds fattening sheep up for their own profit instead of for the benefit of the sheep. After this, Thrasymachus seems to want to "run away" from the argument as if there is nothing more to discuss. But after Socrates tactfully refutes this argument and leads Thrasymachus to finally agree that rulers rule for the benefit of the ruled, Thrasymachus blushes. Though defeated on this point, he's not yet satisfied with Socrates' argument, and sticks by one of his previously stated views which held that injustice is more profitable than justice. However, he shrinks back and seems no longer able to speak for himself after Socrates refuted his argument

on justice. Despite his withdrawal from the argument throughout the rest of the *Republic*, his early ideas help lead Socrates farther on his search for justice through the construction of a hypothetical just city. In describing the education of the guardians of this city, Socrates discusses the need for a balance between gymnastics and poetry. He relates how too much gymnastics lead the spirited part of someone to be overtightened and hard. "He'll be museless and hate discussion" explains Socrates. This hardness and hate for discussion reminds us of the actions of Thrasymachus at the beginning of the argument defining justice. Thrasymachus becomes an example of a "badly tuned soul" that Socrates goes on to describe.

On examining Thrasymachus' idea that it pays to be perfectly unjust, Socrates refutes this argument in Book 4 as he speaks of the souls three parts; wisdom, spirit, and desire. The civil war between these three parts is shown to be the cause of injustice, but before Socrates can correlate this with the regimes of certain governments, he is stopped by others including Thrasymachus. Having to digress to explain "common property," Socrates once again refutes Thrasymachus' earlier argument of justice being to the advantage of the stronger by showing that true rulers in his just city would not be allowed private possessions. There is no "mine" and therefore no private interest of the stronger.

On defending his need for "philosopher kings" in the rule of his city and discussing the ability to place them in power, Socrates' goes back to discuss the "popular" view of philosophers as being useless and/or as being cranks and scoundrels. But he explains, with the metaphor of a ship, that they are only useless because the "mainstream" won't use them. When Socrates says, "it's not in the nature of things for the wise to go to the door of the rich," he is undoubtedly referring to Sophists like Thrasymachus. He shows this kind of "wise" people as perverted by upbringing, who grow to teach nothing but the "conviction of the many." He then uses a

metaphor of a beast, where people define justice by the whims of the beast, otherwise known as the whims of the mainstream. These educators grow rigid to any kind of wisdom that isn't determined by the whims of the beast and hate discussion of anything of the contrary. This kind of discussion, or Dialectics as Socrates comes to call it, becomes the most important part of education in Socrates' city. Thrasymachus' obvious disdain for discussion shows his own inability to get past his preconceived notions of philosophy determined by the mere appearance of things.

After Socrates examines the five regimes of the soul as they move from aristocracy to tyranny, he is eventually able to show how the tyrant becomes a slave to his own appetites and proves most wretched of all leaders. This finally completely refutes Thrasymachus' argument that the unjust is better off than the just. He sums up the matter when he says that they "break away smartly.. .but [in the end] trot off uncrowned. "He goes on to say "as for the unjust, at the end of the race, most will be caught and whipped." Thrasymachus is indeed "caught" by Socrates in the beginning of the Republic, and by the end is whipped into wisdom of true justice from Socrates' enduring argument.

Rob Kelly is a Kinesiology major. Dr. James Walter was his Honors professor.

Dr. Walters's Comments: *Rob does two things quite remarkable for an undergraduate student of Plato's 'Republic'. In his compact essay, not only does he display an in-depth understanding of complex perspectives on justice put forth by the protagonist Socrates, he deftly explains how Plato has artfully made rude objections by a seemingly minor character early in the dialogue function as a structuring device for nearly all the important ideas examined thereafter.*