

## Chapter 18

### Thrasymachos

-----

#### 1. Fact

On the basis of what we have it is clear that, were it not for Plato, Thrasymachos would not deserve his own short chapter in this book. It is quite probable that he does not deserve special notice. He was a noteworthy orator and theorist of rhetoric. He probably did say, somewhere, in a speech or a textbook, that “Justice is the advantage of the stronger.” But how far he developed this remark into a political *theory* is quite uncertain, because Plato is our only witness for it. The facts about Thrasymachos that are independent of Plato’s brilliant fiction are as follows: He was a citizen of Chalcedon, on the Bosphoros (85 A 1, A 8). He was perhaps a few years older than Sokrates, or about the same age, because he was celebrated enough to be made fun of by Aristophanes in *The Banqueters* in 427 BCE (A 4). He spent enough time in Athens to be well-known there; and like Gorgias, he spent a lot of time in Thessaly. But in his old age, at least, he returned to Chalcedon; and he died there. On his memorial his profession was given as “wisdom” (A 8). But Gorgias might have had that put in his epitaph, even though he disdained to be a political theorist. Just possibly Thrasymachos hanged himself (A 7) — but that is probably an error. He was still active in Thessaly after 413 BCE (B 2).<sup>i</sup>

He was famous as an orator, and as an important early theorist of rhetoric. Aristotle mentions him as a worthy successor of the Sicilian Teisias (A 2) — who was the first author of a

textbook as far as we know. Theophrastos named him as the inventor of a new style in oratory (A 3). The one considerable fragment of his that we have was preserved as an example of his style (B 1). According to a late report he wrote a *Textbook* and several sets of model speeches (A 1), or model “openings” etc. Aristotle speaks of his “Pleas for Pity” (B 5), and Plutarch of his “Throwers” (B 7 — on the model of Protagoras). One of the fragments refers to his *Textbook* as the *Great Textbook* (B 3) — as if there was also a “Little Textbook”; and another late source says that all of his (then surviving) works were rhetorical textbooks or display speeches (A 13).<sup>ii</sup>

But Plato presents him as someone who was ready to teach “political wisdom,” and as wanting to be paid for a display speech about it; and we can accept this as part of what is implied by his epitaph, because Protagoras had set the fashion for the eastern Sophists. Gorgias came from the West, where the tradition of purely rhetorical instruction was slightly older, and independently established. So I shall now attempt (tentatively) to identify the factual basis of Plato’s fiction. (The one point that is testified independently is that Thrasymachos deserved his name, which means “Bold in battle” (A 6). This is probably at least part of the reason why Plato gives him the place that he has in the drama of the *Republic* — see A 10, *Republic* 336b.)

## 2. Fiction

In Book I of the *Republic* Thrasymachos breaks into the conversation quite furiously (at 336 B) just when Sokrates has convinced Polemarchos that it could never be the office of justice, or of the just man, to harm *anyone*. What Thrasymachos lays down — after trying in vain to get money from the audience for it — is that “Justice is the advantage of the stronger.” What he means by “Justice” here is the conventional view that it is virtuous to obey the laws of one’s community; and his position is that those in the community who have the power to make (or revise) the laws, will always do so with an eye to what is in their own interest. So (if one is not a member of the ruling class) justice is “another’s good.” Justice is profitable for those who make the laws, but not for those who obey them without participating in the making of them.

Something like this argument may have been among the “Throwers” (and hence it may have been in the *Great Textbook* if the “Throwers” were part of that); or it may have been in a “display speech.” This would not be inconsistent with the fragment in which Thrasymachos says that “the gods take no notice of human affairs, or they would not have left out justice, which is the greatest of goods among men. For we see that men make no use of it” (B 8). For that is just the other side of the “Thrower.” Fragment B 8 speaks of divine Justice as “what ought to be but is not”; the *Republic* tells us what the human pretence of justice *is* (in contrast with what we think it ought to be).

The long rhetorical fragment that we have was written apparently for a young “aristocrat” (or a member of Antiphon’s faction in the Assembly). What it says or implies about justice may not have been Thrasymachos’ own view at all. But if we assume that he personally sympathized with the class from which most of his students came — as Antiphon did, being hated by all proper “democrats” for so doing — then the speech illustrates another aspect of the concept of “justice” about which Thrasymachos was probably quite conscious. The speaker claims that his opponents are not thinking properly. “The ancestral constitution gives them trouble, though it is very easy to understand, and is what is most common to all citizens” (B 1, end).

This “ancestral constitution” was the shibboleth of all who wanted to reform the Athenian democracy. The logic of Thrasymachos’ argument is that although the present policies and decisions are biased, there is a standard of what is truly fair for all in the political tradition. In the *Republic*, Book II, Glaukon and Adeimantos revise the Book I position of Thrasymachos in this sense. Justice, they say, is a beneficial burden that is equal for everyone in the democracy, because everyone makes the contract (and agrees to it). In Thrasymachos’ Fragment 1, the argument is that justice is “obedience to the law”; the interpretation of the law which thus acquires authority, may be biased; but the bias can be corrected. Actual human justice can correct itself in the light of ideal, or divine, justice.

Probably Thrasymachos himself was sceptical about this possibility. He recognized clearly enough that the “ancestral constitution” favored a particular social group. All actual decisions and

policies were the result of a struggle; and he could help anyone (who would pay) to maximize their weight and influence in that struggle. He almost certainly held that “the gods do not care”; and, very probably (like Protagoras) that — except as imaginary powers to be appealed to in speeches — they do not exist. Thus far, we can go along with Plato’s portrait.

What seems to me certain, is that Thrasymachos never said that “Justice is goodhearted folly”; or that “successful injustice is the true virtue” (i.e., the rational human excellence). He may have said (or implied) that tyrannical power was the highest achievable condition of “happiness.” That was a matter of common opinion, and popular agreement. But in any *serious* discourse one did not mix that kind of truism with talk about justice and virtue.<sup>iii</sup>

Plato divides the argument between Sokrates and Thrasymachos into two stages. In between the two “acts” Thrasymachos tries to leave, and has to be persuaded to remain. In the second “act” he defends the position that “injustice” is what is really virtuous, because it is the maximizing of “profit” for the agent; and Sokrates forces him to admit (under protest, and without really agreeing) that even the successful profit-seeker must have an inwardly just (unified or harmonious) soul. The problem of the whole dialogue is thus unveiled: What is the relation between psychological “justice” (or inner harmony) and social justice (or outer “concord,” to borrow Antiphon’s expression)?

It is made very clear that most of what Sokrates gets Thrasymachos to agree to at this stage, is not really his view at all; and his attempt to leave the company is Plato’s way of telling us (I think) that the position he has been put in at that point is not one that he ever publicly held (or sought to defend). (In the *Gorgias*, Plato makes the same distinction by letting the task of respondent pass from Gorgias himself to his impulsive disciple Pölos — who also deserved his name as an unruly “colt.”)

So we should not take anything in the *Republic* after 343c to be founded upon the writings of Thrasymachos himself. He may have drawn the analogy between the ruler and the shepherd (343bc), because Homer called kings “the shepherds of the people”; and the metaphor helps

Thrasymachos' thesis that rulers are self-interested. But it is at least doubtful that he considered the question of whether rulers *understand* what their own advantage is (339b-e). If he did, he would have said that they *ought* to understand it; and that that was one of the ways in which he could help a young candidate for political power. So Plato is not unjust to him on that issue; but the interruption by Kleitophon (who was probably a paying student of Thrasymachos) may be the point where the dialogue takes leave of what Thrasymachos actually said (*Republic* 340a) — Kleitophon plays the same role for Thrasymachos, that Pelos plays for Gorgias in fact.<sup>iv</sup>

### 3. Forecast: Mitylene and Melos

It seems likely that Thrasymachos, like Antiphon, was professionally committed to the ideology of “aristocracy.” There has to be a governing class and a governed majority in his view; so all possible emphasis should be placed on the traditions and attitudes that make for cheerful acceptance of the *status quo*.<sup>v</sup> The position put forward by Glaukon and Adeimantos in the *Republic* is a “democratic” response to the assumption that there naturally is, and always must be, a ruling class. They propose the thesis that social justice arises through a “social contract” in which all citizens agree to accept the limits and obligations of a law that they all decide upon and authorize. Thrasymachos — if I am right — would have said that that ideal was illusory.

The position of Glaukon and Adeimantos is the logical climax of the theory of social development sketched in Protagoras' Myth; but it is not the necessary end of intelligent reflection about social relations. Kallikles begins precisely from their conception of justice as a covenant of the weak and cowardly majority; and he applies the “Thrasymachean” doctrines that “Virtue is strength” and “Justice is another's good” to it (*Gorgias* 483b-484c). Rational “strength” on his view is being able to do as one likes. The Anonymous Writer counters Kallikles' position by pointing out that no mortal individual can actually be a “man of adamant,” and arguing that if there were such a one, everyone else would unite to overcome him (D.-K., 89, 6:2-3). But this only exposes the moral inadequacy of the position of Glaukon and Adeimantos. For a democratic political *community*,

secure in its own “social contract,” can easily take *itself* to be the “man of adamant”; and what Kallikles says about the “strong man” being beyond all illusions of philosophical “virtue” is then verified in the behavior of the democratic City towards other communities. (It is no accident that Kallikles offers the barbarian despot Xerxes as a paradigm case. In Plato’s opinion, the defeat of Xerxes was the spark that set the fire.)

In the fifty years after the defeat of Xerxes, Athens emerged as an imperial power; and under the pressures of war her power politics became openly Kalliklean. Thucydides provides us with two marvellously dramatic examples of how the political theories of the Sophists were realized in the rhetoric of the Athenian Assembly, and in the actual policy of the City.

First, there was the case of Mitylene. In 428 BCE, Mitylene threw off its allegiance to the Athenian Alliance, and went over to the Spartan side. The Athenian fleet was able to put down this “rebellion”; and the Athenian Assembly then debated how the rebels should be punished. The Assembly voted that all males of military age should be put to death, while the women and children should be sold into slavery. But on the next day — after a ship had been despatched with this verdict — there was a revulsion of feeling, and the debate was reopened. Kleon, who had supported and secured the verdict of death, said that they must accept their “tyrannical” status and stand by it. The Athenians must not be swayed as an audience by their delight in the new rhetoric (of which he was himself clearly no mean exponent).

On this occasion, however, it was reason that triumphed over terror. Diodotos, who had been on the losing side in the first debate, argued that “both men and cities” were naturally disposed to offend, and that those who offended must not be driven to despair. Even if the men of Mitylene deserved death, this must not be openly admitted. By a narrow margin, his view prevailed; and another ship was sent (with every incentive for a speedy passage). A fairly large number of “ringleaders” were put to death, and the walls of Mitylene were razed to the ground (Thucydides, III, 36-50).<sup>vi</sup>

Kleon was only repeating what (according to Thucydides, II, 63) Perikles himself had said: the Athenian Empire was a tyranny. It might have been wrong to acquire it; but it was now dangerous to let it go. Diodotos appealed not to “justice” but to “interest.” The little island of Melos committed no crime against the Athenian Empire except that of not wanting to be part of it. But against them the penalty was actually exacted. Thucydides makes the Athenians say that their rule is lawful because they were the leaders in the defeat of the Medes (V, 88); and the Melians claim that the Gods will favor them, because they stand for right against injustice (V, 104). But the Athenians comment that the Spartans identify *interest* with *justice* “more than anyone else” (V, 105); and what determines interest is the balance of natural *strength* — “by the necessity of nature the stronger rules over others.”

The Melians offer first the “general interest” of democratic “justice” (V, 90). But the prudence of Glaukon and Adeimantos is useless, until there is a properly *constituted* covenant. The Athenians answer that the path of prudence is to be obedient to greater strength, not rebellious. For them to accept the Melians as neutrals would be a sign of weakness; it would encourage others to opt for a similar neutrality. The Gods are *not* on the side of this respect for autonomy. The law of nature is that the stronger party should rule. (As Kallikles put it, this is the *nomos* of *physis* itself — *Gorgias* 483e).<sup>vii</sup> One ought not to be *ashamed* of giving in to superior strength. It is prudent to behave in strict accordance with one’s actual power.

The Melians decided to resist; and they gave the Athenian invaders a lot of trouble. So the Athenians put all the males of military age to death and enslaved the rest, planting a colony of their own in place of the original settlement — which was Spartan in origin (Thucydides, V, 85-116).<sup>viii</sup> The view of the Anonymous Writer was justified in the end. The Athenians lost the War; the supposed “man of adamant” was overcome by the alliance of the rest. But we are still struggling with the problem of “power politics” that Thrasymachos opened up.

## Notes

- 
- i. But Dionysios thinks he was younger than Lysias — whose birth he places in 459 BCE (A 3).
  - ii. For his style and reputation see A 1, A 3, A 12, A 13; also Plato, *Phaedrus* 267c).
  - iii. There were “eristic” Sophists who made a good living by saying (and “proving”) scandalous or paradoxical things. But I regard them as “entertainers” — who contributed to philosophy only by setting logical problems about language. Only the first generation of the Sophistic movement — the cultural *educators* — are dealt with in this book.
  - iv. For Kleitophon as a probable disciple of Thrasymachos see *Kleitophon*, 406a.
  - v. This reading may be attaching too much importance to the one extended speech-fragment that we have. But in any case the purely *factional* theory of politics that Plato ascribes to Thrasymachos involves the assumption that aristocratic conservatism is a permanent factor in political life; the rationality of a democratic “social contract” theory is denied.
  - vi. But Book III should be read from the beginning. The speech of the ambassadors of Mitylene at Sparta — III, 8-14 — is very relevant to the “Panhellenic” hopes and appeals of Gorgias and other followers of his.

- 
- vii. The simple *opposition* of *nomos* and *physis* is ascribed to Hippias by Plato; and it became a commonplace. But it was not usual in the most serious thought of the Sophists.
- viii. Thucydides says that the besieged city was finally betrayed by a group who favored surrender. Did they perish too?