

A new Thrasymachus: Genealogy and Essentialism in Plato's *Republic*

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Abstract:

This article seeks to reread Thrasymachus, or more precisely, fragments of Thrasymachus' position, in Book I of the *Republic*. To do so, I begin by articulating the sophist's function as a philosophical-literary character. As Plato takes on the dual role of philosopher and writer, the interpreter of the *Republic* approaches Thrasymachus as both the mouth piece for a (possibly confused) set of claims and, as I seek to show, a plot device. Because the interpreter doesn't only ask "what argument wins out?" but, "what lesson does Plato wish us to learn by argument X winning out?", Thrasymachus is approached internally to the philosophical-literary throughline of the *Republic*. In this article, I suggest that this practice clips the wings of a portion of Thrasymachus' position. This occurs because the philosophical-literary approach of the interpreter has as its condition that Thrasymachus thinks within the essentialist underpinnings of the *Republic*. Yet, this article argues that elements of Thrasymachus' position don't lend themselves to essentialism, and indeed call it into question. In the closing portion of this article, Foucault is turned to as a source of a critical methodology (in particular the genealogy) that can strengthen those anti-essentialist Thrasymachean fragments. I conclude that the interpretive tendency to approach Thrasymachus internally to the Platonic throughline of the *Republic* has withheld access from fragments which, precisely because of their incompatibility with said throughline, are the most rewarding to consider.

Keywords: Thrasymachus, Foucault, Genealogy, philosophy of authorship, philosophy of dialogue, Plato, The Republic.

Introduction

Thrasymachus, as presented in the *Republic*, is the sophist *par excellence*. If we are inclined to hold Socrates in high regard, the opposite is the case with his interlocuter. The rhetoric which Thrasymachus offers at a fee is jumbled, often contradictory, and seemingly vapid under Socrates' prodding. From this one can draw lessons: to embrace philosophical rigor, to question one's beliefs, to pursue a cohesive philosophy. The dialogue can teach us lessons because the *Republic* is both a work of philosophy and literature. As such, it is constituted by a set of philosophical-literary decisions made by Plato. These philosophical-literary decisions are to be interpreted and pieced together so as to uncover the dialogue's lessons. A lesson can be learned, for example, through interpreting each interlocuter as an instantiation of a philosophical belief: if one interlocuter fares better, the lesson would be learned that their belief

does so too. With this in mind, the scholar debates if Socrates did indeed defeat Thrasymachus, and the answers to this are multiple.¹

These answers are themselves philosophical-literary. In interpreting how Thrasymachus fails, the scholar decides what Plato was getting at by including this sophist. Annas remarks forcefully that “Plato is writing both parts [of the debate]; and presumably some point is being made” (Annas 1981, 56). Deciding Plato’s point becomes an interpretation’s foundation, in light of which Thrasymachus’ philosophical-literary function is interpreted.² Yet, this entails that a reading of Thrasymachus must meet the condition of compatibility with the Platonic throughline. In needing to account for Plato as an author (as the creator and coordinator of philosophical-literary elements) we address Thrasymachus as a character (as a philosophical-literary element whose coordination must be understood in relation to the Platonic throughline). Thrasymachus becomes *internal* to this throughline: as a problem for Socrates to overcome; a set of thoughts to be brought under scrutiny; a contribution to the broader lessons to be learned. Problematically, this keeps us from accessing the possibility of Thrasymachus being *external* to the Platonic throughline. This investigation will first attempt to turn us towards the *external* Thrasymachus, towards a voice which exists as an alternative to the Platonism, and secondly attempt to embolden this new interlocuter with more developed anti-Platonic critical tools found in Foucault.

While I will attempt to cast a new light on Thrasymachus, I state here that his redemption will not be sought outside of the text. I will not posit a historical Thrasymachus, rich in philosophical nuance, which Plato denigrates into the sophist we encounter in Book I. Instead, I wish to reinvigorate Thrasymachean fragments dulled by the need to interpret them internally to the Platonic throughline. In so doing, I will propose that a particularly sharp anti-Socratic fragment emerges from the text. This fragment is a primitive genealogy: the explanation of justice in terms of power. This will be found not only to go unaddressed by Socrates - who focuses instead on other, disparate elements of his interlocuter’s position - but also as offering a powerful critique of the structural underpinning of the Socratic quest: essentialism. To best explicate how exactly essentialism is challenged, Foucault offers a stern articulation of that which, in Thrasymachus, we find only in hints.

On Foucault and Genealogy

It might seem overzealous to bring Foucault into this dialogue. Briefly, I wish to motivate this decision through exploring what in Foucault would most rewardingly enliven elements of Thrasymachus’ position. Foucault understands power as dynamic; as co-extensive with knowledge; as a producer of reality. These critical principles can contribute to an attempt to articulate justice in terms of power. Further, this investigation is aided by Foucault’s genealogical method. Bernard E. Harcourt usefully distinguishes between the possible qualities of a genealogy. A genealogy can be *subversive* through its focus on de-essentializing, can *problematize* through bringing into question the unquestioned, and can *possibilize* new understandings through articulating alternatives (Harcourt 2024, 2-4). These are

qualities to “draw upon in combination,” to further critical inquiry (Harcourt 2024, 2-4). Foucault, as the scholar in which one finds both the above understanding of power and the genealogical method, cannot but be rewardingly brought to this dialogue.

In the following I will provide a characterization of essentialism. I state now that this essay treats genealogy and essentialism as contrary approaches to philosophy. Where I will seek to show that certain Thrasymachean fragments are anti-essentialist, I understand myself to be expressing a genealogical tendency. Where, alternatively, I address more directly their genealogical tendency, I understand myself as characterizing further their anti-essentialist drive.

Essentialism

Before Thrasymachus’ cacophonous arrival, Socrates and Polemarchus are in pursuit of the essence of justice. Counterintuitively, to attempt to pin down the essence of a thing, one must first presuppose that there is such an essence to pin down. If I were to set myself the task of determining the essence of love, I would presuppose that there is such a thing as love. One might interject with reference to a history of poetic answers of the type “love forbids definition”. Yet, if my task results in this conclusion, then that would mean precisely that my task has failed, not that it is accomplished. This possible exception of love proves the rule. When Socrates and Polemarchus search for the essence of justice, success presupposes justice itself. The assumption of the existence of an essential justice is the simple, intuitive form of essentialism to which I propose Thrasymachus offers a challenge. By essentialism I intend the belief that there is a discoverable and determinate essential core to the object of one’s philosophical analysis. The dialogue Thrasymachus interrupts presupposes essentialism, albeit in a simple, intuitive form. In this essay, ‘essentialism’ and ‘intuitive essentialism’ will be used interchangeably to refer to this simple, intuitive essentialism.

In setting the stage for this investigation, I distinguished between an internal Thrasymachus and an external Thrasymachus. The *differentia* was the basis on which Thrasymachus is interpreted. When he is approached as a character one approaches him internally to the Platonic throughline. When one doesn’t approach him in such a manner, Thrasymachus can be accessed in his (possible) externality. I contend that a condition of a character existing internally to the Platonic throughline is structural adherence to essentialism. Essentialism is a meeting point of Plato the philosopher and Plato the author. If the lesson to be learned is that the essence of justice is X, then the lesson and the characters subjugated to it must necessarily obey the structure of essentialism. The question immediately presents itself: could an external Thrasymachus think outside of the underpinning essentialism?

To state clearly: the position offered here is not that interpreting Thrasymachus internally is wrong (and externally correct). Instead, I intend to bring to the fore the impact of Plato’s authorship on interpretation, allowing Thrasymachus to be approached afresh. The aim is not to deny the presence of a Thrasymachus who functions neatly as a Platonic character, but instead to free fragments of his position, which only uncomfortably serve this function, from needing to do so. In so doing, one addresses a Thrasymachus that offers a more potent alternative to the Socratic position. This potency

derives from the following: to locate Thrasymachean fragments that fail to presuppose essentialism is to locate a critique of essentialism. Anti-essentialist theses express the contingency of an essentialist underpinning: they show that philosophy could be done otherwise (the *possibilizing* quality of genealogy). The final dimension of the potency this interpretation wishes to free is the ability of fragments to *problematize* the Socratic quest for the essence of justice by challenging the conditions of its possibility – essentialism. The possibility of Thrasymachus calling into question the very viability of the Socratic quest (like the poet who disparages any definition of love), entails the possible impossibility of this quest.

Interpreting fragments

To perhaps oversimplify, Thrasymachus is known to make two (possibly incompatible) claims:

- A. Justice is that which is in the interest of the stronger.
- B. Those acts denominated as unjust are, in actuality, just.³

When confronted with two (possibly incompatible) claims, our urgency isn't to force compatibility, but to account for their difference. One method of doing so is considering whether a claim accepts or rejects the *Republic's* 'rules of the game'. By this I intend the conditions of being internal to the Platonic throughline: to accept the rules of the game is to both take up a literary function and to presuppose essentialism. Our aim being that of freeing fragments which struggle to obey the rules of the game, it is productive to ask whether these claims differ in their ability to play along. Two considerations:

1. Immediately, it is important to notice the more properly normative dimension to claim B. Thrasymachus seems to be saying that justice and injustice exist, but that their normative predication should be reversed. This (to speak loosely) is a *satanistic* stance: good is actually bad (and bad actually good). To briefly bracket the philosophical dimension of the rules of the game, a satanistic thesis allows for a satanistic character. The journey of the satanist character within the Platonic throughline (e.g., how they fare and how their attitudes change) is one that lends itself happily to the construction of philosophical-literary lessons. Thereby, this moralizing aspect of claim B begins to indicate its ability to accept the rules of the game.

2. In observing the distribution of claim A and B in Book I, a clear picture emerges. Thrasymachus' position begins as A, but upon encountering Socratic prodding, seemingly shifts to B. Shortly after his intrusion, upon encouragement to explain his position, Thrasymachus summarizes at 339a: "the just is [...] the advantage of the stronger". This is plainly claim A. From 339b to 339e Socrates asks Thrasymachus a series of questions with the aim of showing that Thrasymachus' thesis is a contradiction. Yet, from the first Socratic question the dialogue moves away from claim A, and towards claim B. Socrates asks: "don't you [...] say that it is just to obey the rulers?" This question evidently concerns the normative predication of justice. The apparent contradiction subsequently drawn ("according to your account, it is just to do not only what is to the advantage of the stronger,

but also the opposite, what is not to their advantage”) hinges on opposed acts receiving identical normative predication. In other words, the contradiction drawn is that Thrasymachus holds claim B and not-B. Thereby, Socrates’ engagement with claim A is such as to leave it be, and address claim B instead. A consequence of this is that claim A only appears for the first moments of their exchange, while claim B gets all the screentime. The greater screentime of claim B seems to suggest an affinity at playing by the rules of the game. Claim A’s brief, early presence, and its following absence can be read oppositely: it struggles to find a place in the dialogue.

Both claim B’s screentime and its moralizing dimension hint at its participation in the Platonic throughline. The interlocuter-character to whom we assign claim B readily becomes internal to the Platonic throughline. Claim A, instead, seems far less able to participate in the throughline: its relative normative silence renders the character to whom it is associated a dull philosophical-literary plot device – something perhaps betrayed by its lack of screentime. Could this mean that claim A is external to the Platonic throughline? For a claim to be external it must fail to meet the rules of the game: fail to have a literary function and fail to presuppose essentialism. The considerations above relate only to the former. Yet, claim A’s apparent inability to take on a literary function could hint at its separation from essentialism. This hint will guide the next stage of this investigation: a closer engagement with the text to uncover fragments which fail to presuppose essentialism.

Invigorating fragments

We seem to have attained a hint that textual fragments of claim A could not presuppose essentialism. An exemplar fragment of claim A is: “justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger” (338c). Immediately, it must be said that this is a proposed definition of justice. A definition of justice seemingly entails essentialism. Yet, this is only at first glance. To try to push further, let us contrast it with (one of) Polemarchus’: justice is to “treat friends well and enemies badly” (332d-e). To decide if claim A presupposes essentialism, one is brought to ask if these two definitions are structurally equivalent. Aside from the definitions themselves differing, are we to place such weight on Thrasymachus’ “nothing other than” as the difference between presupposing and challenging essentialism? Can a mere “nothing other than” entail the possible impossibility of the Socratic task?

Late at night, you hear a sound coming from the back garden. To say that this rustling is the doing of a fox, as opposed to “nothing other than” a fox, is a slight but significant difference. The latter more directly acknowledges alternative causes (a burglar, an escaped convict) and labels the ruckus in part through their negation. Of course, negated alternatives are present in both cases, but in the latter more emphasis is placed on the fact that it is *not* a burglar. The rustling in the back garden is a horizon on which danger can emerge, and in deciding that it is “nothing other than” a fox is to close that horizon. The relevance of this “nothing other than” closing that horizon is due to this horizon having, in a qualified sense, the structure of essentialism. That noise is a bridge between you and a determinate something that exists. This bridge is a precondition of you determining the nature of that something (the wind, a fox, a burglar). Being afraid of what the clatter could entail has as its

condition that the clatter entails something. It is now opportune to ask: why is it that this “nothing other than” reassures us? It reassures us because it silences the frightening possibility of the clatter. Of course, we are still answering the question that the clatter poses us. Yet, in a qualified sense, to say that the clatter is “nothing other than” a fox is to say that there isn't a clatter: the noise is no longer a bridge between you and anything.

To begin to unite this reflection with Thrasymachus' claim at 338c, notice the similar ambiguity in their usage of “nothing other than”: on the one hand, the claims married to “nothing other than” are answers to their respective questions (“what is justice?” and “what was that noise?”). On the other hand, it has been seen that, at least in the case of the clatter, this “nothing other than” dissolves the structure on which the question-horizon emerges. It is to be seen if this second aspect of “nothing other than” can be located in claim 338c. If it were, then this would be the locus of anti-essentialism: the dissolution of the essence quested after by Socrates.

What animates the clatter is fear. What enlivens the Socratic dialogue is curiosity. While the colour is different, searching for the essence of justice and trying to determine what that clatter was are structurally analogous. Both require a something to relate to: a structural condition of both is the existence of a something (to be fearful of or to quest after). It is at this point that the prior reflection on the ability of “nothing other than” to close the question-horizon in the case of the clatter should be applied to Thrasymachus' claim. If saying that the clatter is “nothing other than” a fox is to say that there isn't a clatter, then is saying that justice is “nothing other than” the interest of the stronger to say there is no justice? This would entail a problematization of the quest for the essence of justice. For this to be used to suggest that Thrasymachus is challenging the structure of essentialism beneath the dialogue, one must account for more than this “nothing other than”. Yet, Thrasymachus begins to appear externally.

Claim A defines justice as the interest of the stronger. It is here that a peculiar quality of genealogy emerges. The genealogy is composed of a simultaneous affirmation and negation.

Through accounting for the dynamic reality of a something (affirmation), one dissolves the metaphysical category of *essentia* that constrains that something (negation). For this Thrasymachean fragment to be genealogical, then, we'd need to find this odd interplay of affirmation and negation. Thrasymachus' “nothing other than” was seen to negate the essentialism underpinning the dialogue. Hence, we ought to search for, in claim A's definition, the corresponding affirmative dimension of genealogy.⁴ Briefly, to proceed it is necessary to consider what such an affirmation would look like:

(i) Denying justice's essence doesn't necessitate a denial of its existence. Instead, a genealogy of justice should account for justice as it is lived.

(ii) In accounting for justice's existence, one must explain its coming into existence. This significantly changes the way justice is interrogated. It is no longer justice's essence that is worth attaining, but its function. Hence: claim A contains the affirmative dimension of genealogy if therein we find an account of justice as it is lived and of its function.

A symptom of this affirmative dimension's presence is in the following fragment. Here Thrasymachus includes in his analysis the different historical-political realities from which justice

can take shape: “democracy makes democratic laws, tyranny makes tyrannical laws, [and these are, in their respective cases, all just]” (338d-e). Instead of questing for the essence of justice, Thrasymachus accounts for justice’s plurality. This is an example of Harcourt’s *problematizing* and *possibilizing*: problematizing thinking essentially, possibilizing thinking plurally. Justice, in each case, is defined according to its function in its historical-political reality. This allows justice to come forth as it is lived: differently. Thrasymachus’ success here is clearer when contrasted with Socrates’ failure. While in Book VIII Socrates addresses the politics of different city-states (timocracy, oligarchy, etc.), justice is only found in the kallipolis. The essentialism of Socrates prevents him from accessing plurality: there is only one justice. Instead, Thrasymachus is able to give expression to plurality: there are multiple justices, differentiated by justice’s function in its historical-political reality.

The position I am attempting to carve out is confined to a handful of fragments – and is left behind rapidly as the dialogue progresses. Yet, this investigation never sought to claim that all of Thrasymachus’ disparate theses were anti-essentialist. Instead, our guiding principle was to provide the conceptual apparatus to relieve fragments which struggled to conform to essentialism from needing to. These relieved fragments, without refinement, only hint at genealogy rather than constitute a genealogy proper. To be sure, this is fresh air, but quickly stifled. Can we open a window?

The refinement of fragments

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault articulates a dual functionality of power: power is not only a repressive force, a force which acts by negation and by reaction (reactive power), but also a creative, constitutive force (Foucault 2020, 22-24). Accounting for justice in terms of solely reactive power has its limitations. For example, the pleasure of acting justly is only uncomfortably explained by reference to the fear of punishment. An account is enriched if power is also conceptualized as creative. Foucault extends the conception of creative power to its extreme with the claim that “[power] produces reality” (Foucault 2020, 194). In using Foucault to open a window, so to speak, power replaces “the interest of the stronger” as our conceptual nexus in our account of justice. It isn’t clear if Thrasymachus’ account can bypass the conceptual limits of reactive power. The relationship proposed by Foucault (power producing reality) can push claim A further. For example, claim A struggles to account for the original emergence of justice. Thrasymachus attempts to do so here: “[the rulers] declare what they have made [...] to be just for their subjects, and they punish anyone who goes against this as lawless and unjust” 338e. This explanation inherits the limits of conceptualizing solely with reactive power: justice as it is lived will scarcely conform to the mere fear of punishment. When power is understood to produce reality, this limitation is surpassed.

The format of this investigation prevents a rigorous exposition of all the critical tools in Foucault that could enliven Thrasymachus’ position. Yet, exhausting their hypothetical collaboration was never the intention. In this article, I wished to wrestle free Thrasymachean fragments that had heretofore been interpreted internally to the Platonic throughline. In putting to one side a search for the lessons imbedded in Book I, the need for Thrasymachus to obey the rules of the game fell away. With¹ the

disappearance of this need, it becomes clear when Thrasymachean fragments obey said rules, and when they don't. In our analysis, obeying the rules meanings furthering the structural essentialism of the dialogue and not obeying means offering an alternative to this essentialism. Through his "many-colouredness", Thrasymachus attempts both the former and the latter. Having created the conceptual space to express this, this analysis is able to account philosophically for Thrasymachus appearing confused and muddled. Being able to do so, as opposed to relegating an explanation of this to a Platonic lesson, is evidence for the extent to which this practice was rewarding. Differentiating between obeying and critiquing the rules of the game allows Thrasymachus' 'contradictory' position to be untangled. A difference between Thrasymachus and Socrates that was allowed to appear was the sophist's focus on the function of justice, instead of its essence. This is a bold methodological break that struggles to emerge when the interpretive priority is given to explicating the Platonic throughline. The difficulty encountered in accessing Thrasymachus is the difficulty of wrestling him free from the Platonic hold. But in using Thrasymachus, in incorporating him in a philosophical-literary story, in a set of lessons, an Achilles' heel is incorporated into the *Republic*. That is, if we look for it.

Endnotes:

1. An example of scholarship bringing into question the Socratic victory is in Rosen, see: (Rosen 2017, 38-59). "It is not Thrasymachus personally who frightens him but the thesis that might makes right". Another example is Annas, see: (Annas 1981, 50-51).
2. Another example of this is in Barney, where the inability of the dialogue in Book I to reach a conclusion is explored as a philosophical-literary decision by Plato, see: (Barney 2006, 44-62).
3. Commonly in the literature these are known as *conventionalism* and *immoralism* respectively: see Annas, (Annas 1981). One reason I avoided these labels was to encourage new interactions with these fragments, which could be stifled by labelling them traditionally. Further, *conventionalism* as a label for A. might overemphasize the importance of legislation in Thrasymachus' position: it isn't legislation that makes right, but might.
4. This allows us to explain a prior source of confusion. This section began by noting the brute fact that Thrasymachus does give a definition of justice. It seemed then that this forbade an anti-essentialist reading of claim A. Now, through the tool of the genealogy, the presence of a definition no longer runs contrary to an attempt to dissolve the notion of an essential justice.

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