SOCRATES/THRASYMACHUS:
THE EXTENT OF THEIR AGREEMENT

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The doctrine that might is right depended on a theory of nature. It is answered by an alternative theory which argues that justice, not injustice, is according to nature. A. D. Lindsay

In his History of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides bore witness to the decline and fall of Greek civilization. He attributed it to ‘a general deterioration of the Greek character’. Whether the cause of this deterioration was a human failing, or whether it was caused by the war, the effect was still the same: any distinction between good and bad, truth and falsehood, love of power and love of polis, was lost. It would seem then that ‘the simple way of looking at things’, which Thucydides saw as the mark of a noble or generous nature, no longer appealed to his contemporaries.

Thucydides’ lament can be heard even today. ‘Boredom with established truths’, Bernard Crick reminds us, ‘is a great enemy of free men’. Crick’s favourite thinker, George Orwell, in responding to yet another time of troubles, warned: ‘we have now sunk to a depth at which the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men’. His warning was seconded by the American jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes, who, twenty years earlier, had testified that ‘at this time we need education in the obvious more than investigation of the obscure’. But even the obvious sometimes needs a defence, especially when confronted by an equally obvious truth, as in the famous

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1 A version of this article appeared in the Winter/Spring 1997 issue of Philosophical Inquiry (Athens), vol. xiv, nos 3–4. It is printed here with revisions.
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7 From a review of Bertrand Russell’s Power: A New Social Analysis, in The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York, 1968) I, p. 375. However, Orwell differed from Thucydides in at least one important respect. Instead of attributing the cause of our moral collapse to a defect in character, he blamed it on our having ‘become too civilized to grasp the obvious’. II, p. 251. Perhaps the difference here is the difference between a classical thinker and a more modern one.

POLIS. Vol. 17. Issues 1 and 2, 2000
exchange which takes place in the first book of the Republic between Socrates
and Thrasymachus.

Plato’s indictment of the Greek world is not so different from Thucydides’,
except that it is more personal. The question of who or what was responsible
for Athens’ troubles may be restated as who or what was responsible for the
trial and conviction of Socrates. This is no small matter if one is prepared to
argue that through the philosopher’s efforts, a civilization might be saved.
Socrates was Plato’s role model, the philosopher writ large: his ‘painter of
constitutions’. Socrates was also everything that the Athenian was not, and
his death, the most dramatic manifestation of all that had gone wrong in Ath-
ens. In the Republic, it is Athens’ turn to be put on trial. It soon becomes clear,
however, that it is understanding rather than retribution that Plato seeks.
Understanding is everything for him, for without it, even if a people were to
stumble on the right path, they could not keep to it. ‘Do you think’, he has Soc-
rates ask, ‘that men who unintelligently believe what is true are any better
than blind men going the right road’? No doubt there are degrees or levels of
understanding in Plato’s Republic. His philosophers need to understand what
is true, his rulers need to understand philosophy, and his people need to un-
derstand their rulers. Plato’s explicit paradox is matched by an implicit one: not
only must the coming of his utopia await the coming of kings who become
philosophers, or philosophers who become kings, but it must also await the
coming of a philosopher-king loving people.

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To isolate what was troubling Plato, and therefore to track the sort of behav-
iour that he identified with corruption, the verbal sparring between Socrates
and Thrasymachus is a good place to begin. Plato’s skill is such that it is easy
to forget that both Socrates and Thrasymachus are his creations. Thus he is not
only conducting an argument with us, his readers, but with himself. This
enables him to anticipate the questions that we, were we in his company,
would almost certainly have asked.

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9 Republic, 501c.
10 Ibid., 506c.
11 The Greek word for corruption, Alan Bloom informs us, was ‘kakoëtheia’ which,
in turn, was made from two words meaning ‘bad habits’. See his edition of The Republic
of Plato (New York, 1968), p. 446. Habits are learned and therefore can be unlearned,
provided, of course, that they are habits.
12 The character of Thrasymachus will appear in many guises in the utopian genre. In
Walden Two, for example, B.F. Skinner has his Thrasymachus, Professor Castle,
scoffing at the brave new world of Frazier (Skinner’s Socrates); ‘but’, Skinner reassures
his readers, Castle’s ‘occasional chuckling failed to disturb Frazier’. As a consequence,
‘his amusement passed out of control and into open contempt’. B.F. Skinner, Walden