The difficulty connected with fixing the position of Thrasymachus in Republic I is familiar. What is he doing? Defining justice? If so, which of the different things he says is intended to be the definition? Or, is he not defining, but giving an analysis of, justice? Or is he denying that there is any such thing as justice? And, if not the last, what is his attitude toward it: does he hold a theory of natural right; or of legalism? Or is he merely making a cynical comment about the way things are?

All these interpretations (and others) have been held, mostly without any close examination of the text, or of opponents' views. In fact, the problem seems to have been brought into clear focus for the first time by G. B. Kerferd in 1947. It was further clarified, fifteen years later, by the interchange between Kerferd and Hourani; and, since then, by the analyses of Cross and Woozley and of W. K. C. Guthrie.

Kerferd had suggested, in his first article, that Thrasymachus'
basic position is that "justice is another's good", and that, in last analysis, he was proposing a theory of natural right. Hourani, on the other hand, concluded that the definition, "justice is obedience to the laws", was what Thrasymachus was trying to express, and that, therefore, he was a legalist. Kerferd’s "Reply" answered Hourani, and reiterated his initial position.

The problem arises because Thrasymachus says three distinct things about the just. It is:

(1) "the advantage of the stronger" (338 c). This is so because "the stronger" is immediately identified as the ruler-legislator in a state, and it is added that every ruler legislates for his own advantage and labels obedience to his self-serving laws, "justice" (338 e f.). Hence,

(2) the just is obedience to the laws (339 b 7). It appears also, however, in the course of Thrasymachus' exposition, that justice is

(3) "another's good, one's own hurt", the implication being that this is not different from (1): 343 c ἀλλότριον ἀγαθὸν τῷ ὑπετ. τοῦ κρατοῦσας τε καὶ ἄρχοντος συμφέρον.

Kerferd apparently thinks he is defending the historical Thrasymachus against possible charges of inconsistency.4 But, whether, in fact, the Thrasymachus of Republic I has anything, or much, to do with Thrasymachus of Chalcedon, is moot. The answer depends, in part, on our interpretation of Republic I. If, like Kerferd I 27, we interpret Thrasymachus there as holding a theory of natural right, it is hard to reconcile this with Thrasymachus, fr. 8, DK, which calls justice the greatest of human goods, though, it adds, man make no use of it. If, on the other hand, like Guthrie,5 we see in the Thrasymachus of Republic I "a disillusioned moralist", fr. 8 can be reconciled. So, indeed, can fr. 1, 6 a speech addressed to the Athenian Assembly, accusing the political parties of contending simply for victory, though they think they differ ideologically. The fact is, the speech goes on, they are (all?) seeking the "ancestral

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4 In his opening sentence (Kerferd I, 19), he cites approvingly a statement by E. Schwartz describing Thrasymachus as "a sophist of the fifth century whom scholars of modern times almost without exception have treated carelessly and with less than justice".1


6 See Guthrie, History III, 295-298.