Unravelling Thrasymachus' Arguments in "The Republic" 

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I

There has been much discussion recently of the encounter between Thrasymachus and Socrates in Book I of Plato's Republic. I am not here concerned with whether Thrasymachus' arguments and Socrates' replies are valid, interesting and important though that problem is, but with the fundamental problem of deciding what exactly Thrasymachus is saying about τὸ δίκαιον, justice. Clearly, this is a necessary preliminary to the raising of any other question about Thrasymachus' arguments. Such an investigation may also contribute to our understanding of The Republic as a whole: given the structure of the dialogue, to know what Plato dissents from can provide valuable clues to what he assents to.

In brief, my aim is to support Professor Kerferd's interpretation that Thrasymachus' doctrine is that "justice is the advantage of another". Kerferd's view has not been generally accepted. I shall argue that the standard view found in most commentaries, that Thrasymachus thinks "justice is the advantage of the ruler(s)" is open to major objections, and that Kerferd's interpretation is to be preferred because it avoids these objections. I shall argue further that some of the implications of Kerferd's interpretation provide additional

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Since I shall be using the single word "advantage" throughout, it must be stressed that Thrasymachus uses two words, speaking of τὸ τοῦ κρατοῦντος ξύμφερον (e.g. 338 C) but of ἄλλοτρον ἄγαθόν (e.g. 343 C). "Advantage" and "interest" are the common translations of ξύμφερον, although "good" has very occasionally been used; "good" is the usual translation of ἄγαθόν. Now, in both cases "advantage" seems to me the word best suited to Thrasymachus' meaning and to his nuances, ambiguities, and word-plays, despite the risk of making his position more uniform in appearance than it is. I shall therefore write of "the advantage (τὸ ξύμφερον) of the ruler" and of "the advantage (ἄγαθον) of another".

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reasons for thinking that it comes nearer the mark than any other. With Kerferd as guide, Thrasymachus' arguments can be exhibited as both consistent and coherent, once it is understood that he is concerned to characterise and not define, that he prefers to do this by his own method of argument, and that he presents his case in an unexpected order.

II

According to most commentators in English, Thrasymachus sees justice as a political relationship between rulers and subjects, and asserts that justice is the advantage of the stronger, i.e., of the ruler(s). On the face of it, this means that Thrasymachus is only discussing justice in the political sphere, since rulers' enactments cover a limited range of the conduct which can be called just or unjust. However far one stretched his terms like "rule" (nomos) or "law" (nomos), so that they included not only legislation but also social regulation such as is attributed to Lycurgus, they still would not encompass all moral conduct. This interpretation, that Thrasymachus means that justice is the advantage of the ruler(s), is open to two objections: (1) it seems not to fit properly into the development of the argument of The Republic; and (2) it is not a doctrine which Thrasymachus holds consistently.

(1) It is, to say the least, odd and surprising to find the discussion

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