The Virtues of Thrasy machus

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‘We should at least consider the possibility that justice is not a virtue. This suggestion was taken seriously by Socrates in The Republic, where it was assumed by everyone that if Thrasy machus could establish his premise—that injustice was more profitable than justice—his conclusion would follow: that a man who had the strength to get away with injustice had reason to follow this as the best way of life. It is a striking fact about modern moral philosophy that no one sees any difficulty in accepting Thrasy machus’ premise and rejecting his conclusion, and it is because Nietzsche’s position is at this point much closer to that of Plato that he is remote from academic moralists of the present day.’


Thrasy machus’ statement of an alternative to standard views about justice in Republic Bk.I sets the challenge which Republic Bks. II-X must answer. If this is not a serious challenge, if Thrasy machus’ alternative view of justice is not interesting, plausible or coherent, it is not clear why moral philosophers should bother with The Republic at all. Here I will offer an interpretation of Thrasy machus’ alternative view of justice which does make his view out to be interesting, and plausible, and coherent. My interpretation differs in one way or other from some very well known interpretations; I hope it will become clear what, if anything, my interpretation achieves that these others do not.

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Consider the conflicts between these seven understandings of Thrasy machus:

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1. Thrasydamus makes no clear point; on Plato’s depiction he is merely confused. (So Macguire, in Phronesis XVI (1971) 142-163.)


3. Thrasydamus is a Thucydidean cynic.

4. Thrasydamus’ position is the same as Callicles in the Gorgias.
   (Shorey, the Loeb translator of The Republic, Vol. I, p.64: ‘The actual ruler or shepherd of the people . . . tends the flock only so that he may shear it. All political experience and the career of successful tyrants . . ., [Thrasydamus] thinks, confirms (sic) this view, which is that of Callicles in the Gorgias’.)

5. Thrasydamus is a Nietzschean immorality.
   (So Shorey again, in his Loeb translation of The Republic Vol. I, p.x: ‘Thrasydamus . . . affirms the immoral thesis that justice is only the advantage of the . . . stronger’ (p.x) – a thesis which Shorey goes on to call, not only ‘Nietzschean’, but ‘sophistic’, ‘Machiavellian’, and ‘Hobbesian’.)

6. Thrasydamus believes that justice means obedience to the laws.
   (So G.F. Hourani, Phronesis VII (1962), 110-120.)

7. Thrasydamus means to recommend injustice as a way of life.
   (So, famously, G.B. Kerferd (Durham University Journal, IX (1947-8), 19-27, Phronesis IX (1964-5), 12-16: ‘Thrasydamus . . . makes it clear that his own ideal is for everyone to seek his own interest, and he regards justice as always involving the contrary, namely seeking another’s interest, and injustice as always involving seeking one’s own interest’. So also Philippa Foot, to judge by her suggestion, above, that Thrasydamus’ thesis is that ‘a man who [has] the strength to get away with injustice [has] reason to follow this as the best way of life’.)

It will already be clear that, of these seven views, I disagree most strongly with (1). Yet even (1) seems, prima facie, quite plausible. After all, Plato does make Thrasydamus say all of the following:

1 All translations from Plato in this paper are my own.