Thrasymachus' Definition of Justice in Plato's Republic

GEORGE F. HOURANI

The problem of interpreting Thrasymachus' theory of justice (τὸ δίκαιον) in Republic i, 338c-347e, is well known and can be stated simply. He makes two assertions about the nature of just or right action, each of which appears at first glance as a "real" definition:

1. Justice is serving the interest of the stronger.¹
2. Just action is obedience to the laws of one's state.

But, as Socrates quickly points out (339b-e), these two assertions cannot both be true as definitions, because their two predicates conflict in certain instances; for obedience to the laws by the subjects is occasionally not in the interest of the rulers. Thus the only way in which Thrasymachus' position can be maintained without inconsistency is if one of his assertions is not seriously meant by him as a "real" definition. Assuming, then, as a working hypothesis that he has a consistent position, we must look in the text for answers to the questions, which assertion does he mean seriously as a "real" definition? and what is the logical character of the other assertion? We shall then be able to see the relation of the two assertions to each other in his argument.

The obvious answer to the first question, and the one that generally remains in our memory of Thrasymachus, is that he defines "justice" (a loose word for "just action") as doing what is in the interest of the stronger. This answer also seems to be supported by Thrasymachus' own deliberate choice in face of the contradiction shown by Socrates, for he then says that justice is the real interest of the stronger, not what they think to be their interest as shown in the laws they make (340c-341a). Nevertheless I believe there are good reasons for the other view, that Thrasymachus' intended definition of justice is obedience to law (conventionalism or legalism). This view is not new – it has been held by Grote, Gomperz, Lindsay, Bosanquet, Winspear and others – but it needs to be justified by a closer examination of the text than has yet been made for this purpose. The present article attempts to do this, and to answer objections raised by Professor G. B. Kerferd in an article publish-

¹ At this stage Thrasymachus is concerned with the nature of just action as performed by subjects of states. Later, in order to embrace just action as performed by the rulers, he broadens "the interest of the stronger" to "the interest of others". See below, p. 116.
ed some years ago. It will also be maintained that “Justice the interest of the stronger” is meant not as a definition but as an important generalization, based on the underlying conventionalist definition combined with supposed facts of psychology and politics. I shall go through the argument between Socrates and Thrasymachus in the nine pages referred to, in the order of the text, and then consider its relation to later parts of the Republic.

338c-339a. Thrasymachus begins the statement of his position with a bold pronouncement:

“I declare that justice is nothing else than that which is advantageous to the stronger” (338c). This looks at first glance like a definition. But when we examine Thrasymachus’ explanation of how he reached this conclusion we come to a different view of it. The explanation is given briefly (338d-339a) in three premisses and a conclusion.

[i]: “Then it is the government (τὸ ἔργον) which is master in each city, is it not?
   Certainly.

[ii]: Well, every government lays down laws for its own advantage – a democracy democratic, a tyranny tyrannical laws, and so on.

[iii]: In laying down these laws they have made it plain that what is to their advantage is just for their subjects. They punish him who departs from this as a lawbreaker and an unjust man.3

[Conclusion]: And this, my good sir, is what I mean. In every city justice is the same. It is what is advantageous to the established government. But the established government is master, and so sound reasoning gives the conclusion that the same thing is always just – namely, what is advantageous to the stronger”.

2 Tr. A. D. Lindsay, rev. ed. (London, 1920). φημεν γὰρ ἐγὼ εἶναι τὸ δίκαιον οὐκ ἔλλο τι ἢ τοῦ χρηστόνος ξυμφέρον. Ed. J. and A. M. Adam (Cambridge, 1909). F. M. Cornford (Oxford, 1941) translates εἴναι as “means”. This is how we should normally understand the word in this sentence, but it shuts out a lurking ambiguity in the Greek which becomes important later. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from Lindsay’s translation which is less interpretative and generally closer to the Greek than Cornford’s.
3 Lindys omits “for their subjects”. θέμεναι δὲ ἀπέφηγαν τοῦτο δίκαιον τοῖς ἀρχομένοις εἶναι, τὸ σφίς ξυμφέρον, καὶ τὸν τούτου ἐκβαινοντα κολάζουσιν ως παρανομοῦντα τε καὶ ἄδικοιντα.