Thrasmachus and Justice: a Reply

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In my article written in 1947 I argued that the true position held by Thrasmachus in Republic I was that 'Justice is (the promotion of) another's good'. The initial statement that 'Justice is the interest of the stronger' was an incomplete statement of Thrasmachus' position, intended to shock and provoke, but correct for all cases where a subject (the ruled) was seen in relation to someone stronger than himself who ruled over him, since in such cases 'another's good' for the ruled is the interest of the stronger. I contended also that 'Justice is obedience to the laws' was likewise an imperfect statement of Thrasmachus' position, correct only for those cases where obedience to the laws involved seeking another's good. G.F.Hourani agrees that the first statement, 'Justice is the interest of the stronger', does not correctly state Thrasmachus' position, but he argues that the statement 'Justice is obedience to the laws' does represent his real position. I do not think that he proves his case, and I remain satisfied that my original analysis is correct, provided that we assume, as Hourani is prepared to assume with me, that there is a unitary doctrine which Thrasmachus holds, and he is not simply being driven from pillar to post in the course of argument.

Hourani begins by assuming that when Thrasmachus makes two partially inconsistent statements about justice, namely 'Justice is serving the interest of the stronger' and 'Justice is obedience to the laws of one's state', one of these statements must represent what Thrasmachus really means. He then argues that as the first cannot be Thrasmachus' definition, the second must be so intended. This is quite unjustified. There is no more reason to suppose that the second constitutes a definition intended by Thrasmachus than that the first does. The question in each case must be whether the supposed definition accords with what Thrasmachus subsequently says. Hourani next makes a further assumption which seems to me not only wrong but dangerously wrong when used in the interpretation of Plato. He maintains that a 'synthetic' proposition or one resting on empirical

premises cannot be a definition – a definition for Hourani is concerned with the meaning of words, and for a definition he says 'no other facts could be relevant but the usages of language' – p. 15. Now since J.S. Mill this has been a very common view, perhaps the most usual view, of what constitutes a definition. But it cannot be too frequently repeated that when Plato asks questions in the form 'What is x' he is not asking questions about the meaning of a word or about linguistic usage – he is asking questions about something which he regarded as a thing. Consequently synthetic statements conveying factual information is exactly what he is looking for in such cases, and any answer which did not contain such information would not satisfy him.¹ We can say if we wish that it follows that he is not really searching for definitions, or we can say that he is searching for definitions in a sense different from that in which we use or ought to use the term. This is as we choose. But it follows that the introduction of 'non-synthetic' as a criterion for identifying the intended answer to a 'What is x' question in Plato is completely wrong. Yet this is what Hourani does. He argues that 'Justice is the interest of the stronger' cannot be the definition intended because it involves or rests upon synthetic premisses, whereas 'Justice as obedience to the laws' is non-synthetic and so is appropriate as a definition.

To this I would answer that it is not because it involves or rests upon synthetic premisses that 'Justice is the interest of the stronger' cannot be intended as a definition of justice – the objection is that it does not cover all the cases of 'seeking another's interest' which is eventually found to be the true view of Thrasymachus. It is the same test which must be applied to 'Justice is obedience to the laws'. But it may be noted that the statement 'Justice is obedience to the laws' as attributed to Thrasymachus is in fact just as much synthetic as the statement 'Justice is the interest of the stronger', for 'Justice is obedience to the laws' is something which the rulers have brought about by declaring it to be the case, cf. ἀπέφυγαν in 338 e 3, ὄνομάσαι in 359 a 3, and Laws 714 d. It is presented as a 'fact of politics' that the rulers require their subjects to treat the laws they have made as a source of justice – they declare that what the laws prescribe is just for their subjects to do. Here a possible objection may be forestalled. It might be said that this is a 'stipulative' definition of justice by the rulers which would have the effect of determining the meaning of the word for the future.

¹ For the whole question of Platonic 'definitions' in relation to modern views of definition see R. Robinson, Definition, Oxford 1954.