

# **‘JUSTICE IS THE ADVANTAGE OF THE STRONGER’: A SOCIOLOGICAL READING OF THRASYMACHUS’ THESIS IN PLATO’S *REPUBLIC* 1.338C1–347E3<sup>1</sup>**

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Thrasymachus’ thesis that ‘justice is the advantage of the stronger’ has been interpreted in three main ways: (1) sociologically, (2) prescriptively, and (3) as a definition of justice. In three sections, this paper focuses on (1) to advance the thesis’ sociological reach and applicability. But as claims that the thesis is incoherent threaten its explanatory and predictive power, Section One addresses that problem and shows that the thesis is neither elenctically nor definitionally incoherent. Section Two provides textual grounds for a sociological reading of the thesis, and Section Three indicates the thesis’ sociological capacity to explain human relationships.

*Keywords:* Plato; Thrasymachus; *Republic*; justice; strongmen; opportunism.

## *Introduction*

Thrasymachus’ claim (hereafter ‘thesis’) in *Republic* 338c1–2 that ‘justice (τὸ δίκαιον) is the advantage (συμφέρον) of the stronger (τοῦ κρείττονος)’, has been interpreted in three main ways: (1) descriptively, as a sociological account,<sup>2</sup> (2) prescriptively, as recommending how one ought to live,<sup>3</sup> and (3) as a definition of justice.<sup>4</sup> In three sections, this paper will focus on (1) for two reasons: to suggest that it requires as much attention as (2) and (3), and to contribute to existing sociological readings by advancing the thesis’ descriptive reach and applicability.

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<sup>1</sup> The page range of the text in the title (*Resp.* 338c1–347e3) focuses on what I am referring to as Thrasymachus’ thesis and does not extend to the thesis’ moral implication or the interpretation that injustice pays better than justice, which Socrates treats separately at 347e1–354a8. In concluding his examination of the thesis, Socrates distinguishes the two thus: ‘So I can’t at all agree with Thrasymachus that justice is the advantage of the stronger – but we’ll look further into that another time. What Thrasymachus is now saying – that the life of an unjust person is better than that of a just one – seems to be of greater importance’.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., White 1995, Samaras 2012.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Kerferd 1947, Henderson 1970, Harlap 1979, Annas 1981:36–7, Arp 1999, Piper 2005, Anderson 2016, Wedgwood 2017.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Hourani 1962, Welton 2006, Everson 2020. Both (1) and (2) are reflected in Barney 2017.

However, (1) is challenged by two lines of ‘attack’ that seek to undermine its validity, claiming it to be incoherent. These attacks are threatening in the sense that, if they are successful, the thesis, as a sociological account, would have no meaningful explanatory and predictive power. The first level of attack is Socrates’ elenctic examination; the second is that of scholars who claim that Thrasymachus<sup>5</sup> was incoherently trying to define ‘justice’. I address both attacks in Section One to show that, overall, Socrates’ elenctic attacks have little or no effect on the practical and pragmatic thrust of the thesis,<sup>6</sup> while the definitionists’ claim of incoherence is either false or has no application to the thesis. This paves the way for Section Two, where I provide textual grounds for a sociological reading of the thesis. On these grounds, I devote Section Three to the thesis’ sociological capacity to explain human relationships. To make retrospective references easy, I have indexed all quoted passages as ‘T’ for text, followed by an ordinal number – courtesy of Vlastos.

### (1) *The (in)coherence of the thesis*

#### (1.1) Socrates’ elenctic tests for coherence

Given the generality of the thesis and the vagueness or ambiguity of its key terms – ‘advantage’, ‘the stronger’, and ‘justice’ – it is unsurprising that ‘the stronger’ and ‘advantage’ initially attract Socrates’ demand for clarity, framed as a *reductio* (338c4–d1), which compels the following response from Thrasymachus:

T1: Don’t you know that some states are ruled by a tyranny, some by a democracy, and some by an aristocracy? And in each state this element is stronger, namely, ‘the ruler’ (τὸ ἄρχον).<sup>7</sup> And each makes laws to its own advantage. Democracy makes democratic laws, tyranny makes tyrannical laws, and so on with the others. And they declare what they have made... to be just for their subjects and they punish anyone who goes against this as lawless and unjust. This, then, is what I say justice is, the same in all states, the advantage of the established rule (τὸ τῆς καθεστηκυίας ἀρχῆς

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I assume that both Thrasymachus and Socrates are Plato’s characters in the *Republic*. The translation provided and occasionally adapted, is from Grube 1992 as revised by Reeve.

<sup>6</sup> Thus, I question Burnyeat’s assessment (2022:117) that Thrasymachus suffered a ‘humiliating defeat in Book 1’. Sparshott (1955:66), for a different reason, comes to the conclusion that Thrasymachus is not defeated.

<sup>7</sup> The neuter τὸ ἄρχον refers to an abstract ‘ruling element’ or ‘ruling power’, which depends on the kind of governance in place (the one, the few, or the many). However, I shall, for simplicity’s sake, refer to the term as ‘the ruler’.

συμφέρον). Since the established rule is surely the stronger, anyone who reasons correctly will conclude that justice is the same everywhere (πανταχοῦ), namely, the advantage of the stronger (338d5–339a3).

In this opening explanation and defence, the thesis takes a political turn: ‘the ruler’ (or ‘the established rule’) replaces ‘the stronger’. Understandably, Nederman, for example, does not hesitate to reduce the thesis to a political one.<sup>8</sup> But there are reasons which jointly constitute a good case for keeping the ruler and stronger distinct. First, T1 suggests that Thrasymachus provides ‘the ruler’ as an instantiation of ‘the stronger’ in response to Socrates’ demand for clarity: ‘...tell us clearly what you mean’ (338c4). Second, ‘the ruler’ is narrower in scope and does not cover all of Thrasymachus’ examples of ‘the stronger’ mentioned at 343d2–e7. Third, the conditions which make rulers stronger than the ruled are not exactly the same as those which, for example, make contractual partners and tax cheats stronger.<sup>9</sup> Fourth, keeping the distinction between the stronger and the ruler allows us to make sense of Thrasymachus’ claim that he will not call the professional, including the ruler, stronger when his knowledge fails him (340e2–4). This also makes sense of our common experience that some rulers are or can be weak. Fifth, both in and after T1, Thrasymachus, Socrates, Cleitophon, and Polemarchus continue to use ‘the stronger’ in place of or alongside ‘the ruler’. Sixth, after projecting the tyrant as the classic case of the ruler and stronger (344a1–c6), Thrasymachus’ conclusion recalls his thesis in its original language: ‘just as I said at the beginning (ὅπερ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἔλεγον), justice is what is advantageous to the stronger...’ (344c6–8). Finally, it is possible that the shift from ‘the stronger’ to ‘the ruler’ is a strategic move by Plato to fit Thrasymachus’ thesis into the political theme of the *Republic*. Thus, Zygmuntowicz (2019:2) is plausible: ‘it is obvious that Plato was happy to place historical figures into the dramatic scenery he had created; a scenery subordinate to his own goals and philosophical methods’.<sup>10</sup> Altogether, these considerations lead me to think that Thrasymachus refers to ‘the ruler’ as a clear and unequivocal instantiation of, but not a substitute for, ‘the

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<sup>8</sup> Nederman 2007:1: ‘...Thrasymachus’ main claim that “justice is the interest of the stronger”, namely, a “political” interpretation, according to which “justice is the interest of the stronger party in each polis as established in the law”’.

<sup>9</sup> Wedgwood (2017:34) rightly observes that Thrasymachus states his thesis (i.e., in its original language) four times within six Stephanus pages (338c3, 339a2–4, 341a3–4, 344c7–9) and concludes that it must be his ‘official account of justice’.

<sup>10</sup> Compare the contention of Harrison 1967, Maguire 1971, and Nederman 2007 that Plato manipulates Thrasymachus.

stronger'.<sup>11</sup> So this paper shall assume a distinction between the ruler and the stronger.

Given the indeterminate scope of 'the stronger', we have to infer the strength and advantage credited to the stronger from the contexts of their concrete manifestations. In this respect, the ruler's strength goes beyond Polydamean physical power and reflects a complex combination of political status, constitutional authority, and epistemic ability. This strength would be different from that of the citizen who abuses public office or schemes to pay less tax than he should (343d4–e6). Thus, 'the stronger' and what makes him strong are contextually variable. Contextual variability also applies to the content of 'advantage'. The advantage that will accrue to the stronger, including the ruler, may range from 'opportunity to exploit', 'benefit', to 'interest'.<sup>12</sup> So when Thrasymachus conjoins 'profit' and 'advantage' (λυσίτελοῦν τε καὶ συμφέρον) at 344d6, the terms may be taken singly or jointly as a hendiadys. Further, 'advantage' may accrue once: simply as an opportunity to exploit; or it may occur in two stages: initially as an opportunity to exploit and then as the tangible benefit which the opportunity presents.

Back to the text. In three arguments, Socrates attempts to show that the thesis, taken in its political context, is incoherent. Socrates' first elenctic argument occurs at 339b7–e7. He gets Thrasymachus to admit that rulers are fallible and sometimes err in making laws that fail to secure their advantage. It follows that justice is what is advantageous and disadvantageous to the stronger (399c1–e7). To save Thrasymachus from an early and shameful refutation, Cleitophon gratuitously attempts to reconcile the rulers' strength with their epistemic fallibility. He suggests that rulers are to be taken to rule by means of laws they believe (ἡγοῖτο) are to their advantage (340b6–7). Different reasons have been given to explain Thrasymachus' rejection of this suggestion (340c5–6).<sup>13</sup> I contend that Thrasymachus rejects it because it diminishes the stronger's relative superiority to the weaker. In the context of governance, the stronger's superiority to the weaker lies in a kind of competence. This reading makes sense of Thrasymachus' response to Socrates, which is to the following effect: (1) When we address professionals, we express ourselves either in a loose or in a strict sense (τὸν ἀκριβῆ λόγον, 340e1–

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<sup>11</sup> Identifying 'the stronger' and 'the ruler' has led to all kinds of inferences, including the claim that 'obedience to the law' is a necessary feature or one version of Thrasymachus' definition of justice. See Nicholson 1970:210–232 and Piper 2005:26–27, who are not alone in equating the ruler to the stronger.

<sup>12</sup> Henderson 1970:220, *contra* Nicholson: '...Thrasymachus conceives of advantage in terms of private goods which can be enjoyed only by one person exclusively (343D–344B)'.

<sup>13</sup> See Hourani 1962:115, Sparshott 1966:424, Cross and Woosley 1970:46, Harlap 1979:355, and Arp 1999:26–27.

2). (2) In the loose sense, our expressions, taken literally, say that professionals make mistakes (340d5–6, e5–6). (3) But in the strict sense, the focus is exclusively on the professional's competence – his superior edge over the non-professional. Thus, when a doctor makes a mistake 'in the treatment of patients', we do not regard him as a doctor in that moment and with regard to that mistake (340e5–6, d1–3). So too is the accountant in regard to an error 'in accounting' (340d3–5). (4) Thus, in the strict sense, a professional, insofar as he is what we call him (*προσαγορευόμεν*, 340e1), never errs (340e7–341a4). (5a) *A fortiori*, 'the ruler, insofar as he is a ruler, never errs and (5b) unerringly decrees what is best (*βέλτιστον*) for himself' (341a1–4).

Note that although (5a) and (5b) are coordinate in the concluding statement at 340e7–341a2, (5b) cannot be derived from (1)–(4). In (1)–(4), Thrasymachus argues for the 'strict sense of the ruler' in terms of the ruler's infallible, technical competence in ruling, *not* in terms of the ruler's ability to infallibly identify his own benefit in ruling, which is the target of Socrates' elenctic attack. Note especially premise (3), where Thrasymachus conceives the doctor's (in)fallibility in relation to 'the treatment of patients', and the accountant's in relation to 'accounting', and not in relation to identifying their self-interest. So Thrasymachus' 'strict sense' argument may be illustrated by the following reconstruction: A title socially functions to pick out the value or disvalue it is framed to capture. Hence the formula: 'x, insofar as he is what we call him'. For example, the title 'A-student' refers to a student who *always*, that is, *infallibly*, scores A or A average in his/her coursework. The relevant sense of infallibility here is the ability to always perform to a standard of competence in the given field. The student's occasional lapses, which are not necessarily denied, and his/her motives for consistently performing at a high-level (e.g., to gain a scholarship for higher studies), play no role or are significantly subdued in what we mean when we call someone an 'A-student'. In general, then, the 'strict sense' formula captures the *overall*<sup>14</sup> competence of professionals,<sup>15</sup> which their putative titles focus on, and handily enable us to distinguish them from non-professionals. Consequently, as exemplified by the strict sense of the doctor and accountant, the ruler's pursuit of his personal interest in ruling is unaccounted for and is parasitic on 5a, the ruler's presumed competence – to the effect that if a ruler, strictly speaking, is one who competently, i.e., infallibly, performs the craft of ruling, then he is one who

<sup>14</sup> My 'overall' is close to Anderson's 'for the most part' (2016:19).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Henderson 1970:224: '[Thrasymachus] simply says, in effect, that our grounds for calling a man a doctor or an accountant are not that he makes, or is capable of making, mistakes in the practice of his profession, and the same holds true for rulers'. And Sparshott 1966:425: 'Manuals of medicine are about what doctors do right, not about what they do wrong nor about actions irrelevant to their skill'.

infallibly identifies and furthers his interest in ruling. In the literature, Thrasy-machus' undisputed belief that rulers rule in pursuit of their interest is often imported into his argument for the strict sense of the professional. For example, Moore (2015:326) writes: 'Thrasy-machus eludes this first attempt at refutation by asserting that, strictly speaking, rulers are not rulers unless they are correct about the judgments they make regarding their advantage'.

Thrasy-machus' conception of the 'infallible' professional is unquestionably normative. But this is not in conflict with the practical realism of his thesis. For example, performance contracts are hedged by guarantees of competence and commensurate outcomes: no negligence, substandard performance, or conflict of interest is tolerated. Who, after all, would hire or entrust his property or life to a professional if he did not realistically expect the professional to perform to standards of competence in the given field or if this expectation did not override thoughts about the possibility of failure, conflict of interest, or substandard performance?<sup>16</sup>

In his second argument (341b4–342e9), Socrates turns Thrasy-machus' strict sense of the professional against him. By latching onto the professional's technical expertise which, by Thrasy-machus' own standards at this point, is detached from the professional's personal interest, Socrates argues that Thrasy-machus' own strict sense of the professional leads to incoherence – for the second time; for, in the strict sense, every expertise is set over and benefits its subject, the weaker, not the stronger (342c10–d1, e5–9), contrary to the thesis.

In response, Thrasy-machus stages an emotionally charged, yet intellectually stimulating, reply – to the effect that there is no necessary incompatibility between the strict practice of expertise and the simultaneous pursuit of self-interest:

T2: [You] don't even know about sheep and shepherds. You think that shepherds and cowherds seek the good (*ἀγαθόν*) of their sheep and cattle, and fatten them and take care of them, looking to something other than their master's good and their own. Moreover, you believe that rulers in cities – true rulers (*τοὺς ὡς ἀληθῶς ἄρχοντας*) – think about their subjects differently than one does about sheep, and that day and night they think of something besides their own advantage (343a2–c1).

In this analogical argument, Thrasy-machus corrects, improves or weakens his earlier conception of 'the strict sense' of the professional in a way which makes it

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<sup>16</sup> Samaras (2012:180) offers a different reasoning. In trying to reconcile Thrasy-machus' sociological realism with his apparently normative conception of the 'infallible ruler', he argues that 'behind the concept of the ruler *qua* ruler does not lie some kind of ideal agent theory, but only the simple assumption that a ruler who makes mistakes will not stay in power much longer'.

even more practically realistic. First, the analogy shows that the disadvantage of the ruled need not be to their total detriment: the sheep do *in fact* benefit from the strict exercise of shepherding.<sup>17</sup> Conversely, the ruler's advantage need not be total: any relative advantage, provided it is unmerited, is consistent with the thesis.

Second, the analogy suggests that the professional's personal interest can coexist with the strict and competent exercise of his expertise. For example, if the shepherd's or his master's interest is to consume or sell his sheep, *that* interest is, from the beginning, invested in the strict exercise of the shepherding process.<sup>18</sup> In real politics, too, the personal interests of politicians in power quietly accompany their choices of policy, award or execution of contracts, the laws they pass, and the policies they adopt, whether these laws and policies are induced by civil society agitation or by powerful, unelected lobbyists.

Third, the shepherd-sheep analogy has implications for our general understanding today about conflict of interest in public service and about the character of rulers.<sup>19</sup> That is, just as shepherds quietly operationalise their own or their masters' interests through their publicly visible *care of the sheep*, so rulers quietly operationalise their interests through their publicly visible *service to the people*. Thrasymachus describes his strongmen as being of sound judgement, (εὐβουλία) and prudent (φρόνιμοι) (348d). If so, it would be in their character to be Protean in order to succeed. For example, rulers would have to appear just by obeying the laws which they unjustly use to exploit the people, to give the impression that the rule of law works.<sup>20</sup> And the dividends for their efforts in lip-service or hypocrisy would be cost-effective: they would thereby earn the respect and trust of the ruled, who would believe that the policies and laws are for their common good and deserve to be applauded – just as the sheep may applaud the skilful shepherd, if only we could understand their language. Overall, then, and independently of what it was intended to convey, the shepherd-sheep analogy is a powerful metaphor of how conflicts of interest pass unnoticed in public service and/or how leadership manages to keep conflicts of interest below the radar of public view and scrutiny.

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<sup>17</sup> Novitsky (2009:14) notices this.

<sup>18</sup> Hansen (2015:349) writes: 'Art depends upon human beings to provide its aim or purpose.'

<sup>19</sup> There are too many examples of professionals recognized for their technical efficiency and outstanding contribution to the advancement of their company/society and awarded prizes over several years only to be discovered later to have been corrupt all along.

<sup>20</sup> So Wedgwood's claim (2017:36) is questionable: '[if] x cannot be more powerful than himself, it follows that whenever x is acting justly, x is doing something that is to the advantage of someone other than x'.

In the passage under discussion (T2), Thrasymachus' angry tone, 'you don't even know (γινώσκεις) about sheep and shepherds' (343a7–8), is part of an accusation that Socrates is childishly naïve about how justice and injustice really work in practice. It is to address Socrates' naivety that Thrasymachus begins to adduce unjust persons to instantiate the stronger (343c1–7). The shift becomes obvious at 343c7–d2, where Thrasymachus addresses Socrates' naivety thus: 'You must look at it as follows, my most simple (εὐηθέστατε) Socrates: a just person always gets less than an unjust one'. The catalogue of unjust persons and their conduct culminate in the tyrant and his conduct.<sup>21</sup> Yet, Thrasymachus does not end by identifying the stronger and the unjust person. Of course, it does not follow from this that he does not conceive them as the same. However, it is revealing that he concludes his profile of unjust persons by crediting the 'rewarding' consequences of their injustices, not to their being unjust, but to their being stronger: 'And, as I said from the first, justice is what is advantageous to the stronger, while injustice is to one's own profit and advantage' (344c5–6). The impression is that Thrasymachus refers to the unjust as an instance, likely a paradigmatic instance, of the stronger. By keeping the unjust and the stronger distinct, he reminds us that not all unjust persons are strong or strong enough or strong at all times to benefit from their injustices.

Socrates does not appear to fully appreciate the pragmatic orientation and implications of Thrasymachus' shepherd-sheep analogy. So he accuses Thrasymachus of deceptively pivoting from the strict sense to the loose sense (345b7–e1). But Thrasymachus does not pivot. He uses two different expressions to talk about professionals in the strict sense: 'the precise account' (τὸν ἀκριβῆ λόγον) in relation to the doctor, accountant, and grammarian at 340e2; and the 'true sense' (ὡς ἀληθῶς) at 343b4–5 in relation to rulers (ὡς ἀληθῶς ἄρχουσιν), who are likened to shepherds (343b3–5). Socrates employs a similar locution for rulers, τῷ ὄντι ἀληθινὸς ἄρχων, at 347d4–5. Yet, by believing that Thrasymachus' strict sense of the professional has already impaled him on the rack of incoherence (345c5–6), Socrates proceeds to give his third argument (345e3–347d6), which is to the following effect: (1) Every profession is unique in terms of the benefits it provides; (2) every profession is internally structured and directed to benefit the subject *only* and not the profession or professional; (3) professionals (*a*) demand or expect some form of compensation for benefitting others instead of themselves, and (*b*) this demand for, or expectation of, compensation belongs to a separate expertise called

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<sup>21</sup> Harlap (1979:350), following Maguire 1971:148, sees a shift from a political to a moral context at 343c–344c. But the political context also has a moral dimension: obedience to the law is taken to be both legally and morally just. On my reading, Thrasymachus merely expands the instances of stronger-weaker relationships to make an inductive point – that the thesis is justified as a common experience.

wage-earning (346a9–d6). (4) Therefore, in the strict sense, every profession benefits the weaker/subject and not the professional, who is the stronger, contrary to Thrasymachus' thesis. This argument could be defended to a degree if it were not for a weakness in (3b): if wage-earning is a distinct expertise, its strict practice benefits *only* the stronger, contrary to Socrates' claim that *all* expertise benefits the weaker/subject. But if we excise (3b), Socrates' third argument can be defended normatively, in the sense that a professional who competently and *conscientiously* exercises his expertise, benefits the weaker/subject in a way in which his wages or other forms of compensation are not necessarily in conflict and are of secondary importance. Note, however, that 'conscientiously' is introduced here as a buffer against any conflict of interest. Thrasymachus' sociological realism cautions that in the real world of human experience, this and similar buffers are not guaranteed.

Overall, then, the impact of Socrates' elenctic examination on Thrasymachus' thesis is at best benign, that is, *if* we assume that professionals will perform their duties conscientiously. But in terms of the thesis' pragmatic thrust, the elenchus has only helped to clarify and strengthen it.

#### (1.2) The definitionists' imputation of incoherence

Commentators who see Thrasymachus' thesis as an attempt to define justice, claim to see incoherencies (the list is long but see e.g., Everson 1998, and Arp 1999:24). These definitionists (so named for convenience) claim that Thrasymachus gives three accounts of justice, which are potentially incoherent, namely, (1) justice is 'the advantage of the ruler/stronger' (338c1–2), (2) justice is 'obedience to the laws' (339c6–9), and (3) justice is 'the good of another' (343c3). Here are just two of the many incoherencies supposedly derivable from the logical relationship of (1), (2) and (3). First, (2) will conflict with (1) if the rulers mistakenly pass and enforce laws that benefit the ruled but not the ruler. Second, (1) requires the ruler to be just in order to further his own interest, whereas (3) requires him to be unjust if (1) is to hold.

In response, I contend that claims (2) and (3) are taken out of context. As a few other scholars have noted (e.g., Novitsky 2009:22), nowhere does Thrasymachus specifically assert (2) or (3). Claim (2) first occurs at 338d10–e4, where Thrasymachus says that rulers enforce obedience to the laws they have made to their own advantage, as justice. What this suggests is that obedience to the laws is not enforced in a vacuum: it is enforced as a means to achieve a specific end – the ruler's advantage; and justice denotes the whole means-end situation. That is why Thrasymachus immediately follows claim (2) with the conclusion: 'This, then, is what I say justice is, the same in all states, *the advantage of the established rule*' (338e4–339a1; my emphasis). Besides, most of the non-political applications of the thesis do not require (2). Now, claim (3) occurs only once, not in isolation but

as part of a long and complex sentence (343c1–d1) which, for readability in translation, is broken into two coordinate sentences. It is the first of these sentences (343c2–5) which concerns us. In it all the three claims about justice imputed to Thrasymachus – here marked 1\*, 2\*, 3\* – appear in a single syntactic structure asserted by Thrasymachus, who is accusing Socrates of being naïve about how justice actually functions in society:

...ἀγνοεῖς ὅτι ἡ μὲν δικαιοσύνη καὶ τὸ δίκαιον ἀλλότριον ἀγαθὸν τῷ ὄντι, τοῦ κρείττονός τε καὶ ἄρχοντος συμφέρον, οἰκεία δὲ τοῦ πειθομένου τε καὶ ὑπηρετοῦντος βλάβη...

T3: ...you don't realize that justice and the just [3\*] are in fact another's good, [1\*] the advantage of the stronger and the powerful, [2\*] but personally harmful to the one who obeys and serves...

In this sentence, the subject, 'justice and the just', has three predicates marked 1\*, 2\* and 3\*, of which 1\* and 3\* are in apposition. Thus [3\*], 'another's good' (ἀλλότριον ἀγαθόν), is explicated and limited by [1\*]. The result is that [3\*] and [1\*] are equivalent: 'the good of another' means 'the advantage of the stronger and the powerful'. And this is consistent with, if not equivalent to, the predicate of (1) – the thesis, as stated at 338c1–2. [2\*] makes the predicative 'harmful' the adjectival complement of the subject, thereby describing justice and the just as something harmful, while specifying the implicit victim of the harm as the 'one who obeys and serves', namely, the ruled/servant. This indicates that 'obeying' or 'serving' constitutes the behavioural means by which the ruled/servant gets harmed. Consequently, 'obedience to the laws', implied at both 338e3–4 and 343c2–4, means the same: the *means* by which rulers induce just behaviour from the ruled, who thereby get harmed. The *end* of Thrasymachean justice is the advantage of the stronger. So 'obedience to the laws' is only the 'means' part of the 'means-end' conception of only political justice, and not justice in general. On this analysis, Thrasymachus is neither offering multiple definitions of justice nor incoherently trying to do so.

The account of 'obedience to the law' offered here is consistent with my earlier interpretation of Thrasymachus' defence of his thesis, including the shepherd-sheep analogy. Thus, it could be said that rulers subtly manage the pursuit of their interest (as in shepherding) by projecting obedience to the law as a virtuous duty (as just) that citizens *must* discharge to facilitate their rulers' 'duty of care' towards them – the duty of protecting and provisioning them.

*(2) A sociological reading of the thesis*

Having argued that Thrasymachus' thesis does not suffer from any elenctic or definitional bug of incoherence, I now proceed to provide four textually grounded justifications for a sociological reading. The first is Thrasymachus' indifference as to whether his thesis is read prescriptively or descriptively. The second is the inductive character of the instances of the stronger-weaker relationships.<sup>22</sup> The third is Thrasymachus' morally neutral attitude to what are conventionally called just/justice and unjust/injustice. The fourth ground calls for an inference to some sociological assumptions. The effect of these grounds is to be taken cumulatively.

First: Thrasymachus' indifference. At 343d1-2 he claims that 'a just person always gets less than an unjust one'. And at 344c3-4 he describes large-scale injustices with impunity, compared to small-scale ones (343d1-344a6; 348d5-7), as stronger, freer, and more masterly (343c4), and as making the doers 'happiest, and the sufferers of them... most wretched' (344a3-6). But when Socrates later asks him not to leave until he has accounted for or has found out 'which whole way of life would make living most worthwhile for each of us', Thrasymachus immediately responds: 'Is *that* what I seem to you to think?' (344d1-e4).<sup>23</sup> Arguably, this response of Thrasymachus' reflects an indifference to the moral implications of his thesis.<sup>24</sup>

Thrasymachus also says at 344b3-c2 that when someone succeeds in doing complete injustice, 'he is called happy (εὐδαίμονες) and blessed (μακάριοι), not only by the citizens themselves but also by all who hear that he has done the whole injustice (αὐτὸν τὴν ὅλην ἀδικίαν ἠδικηκότα)'.<sup>25</sup> In this passage, Thrasymachus attributes the adulation of the successfully unjust person to others or to society in general. In doing so, he speaks to a common experience, even today: the famous, irrespective of how they became so, are often invited to chair, or to be guest speakers at grand social events, the front seats reserved for them, their name and accolades acknowledged above all else by loud proclamation and applause.

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<sup>22</sup> Some scholars have usefully drawn attention to the historical Thrasymachus' profession as a diplomat and a teacher of rhetoric – professions that immersed him in first-hand empirical experience of how justice functioned in the different polities of his own time. See, e.g., White 1995:307-327 and Anderson 2016:6.

<sup>23</sup> Without textual support, Putterman (2000:89) claims that after Socrates asks Thrasymachus if his rulers always know what is to their advantage, Thrasymachus substitutes the verb 'should' for 'are' to say not that his rulers are selfish, but that they should be.

<sup>24</sup> It might be argued that Thrasymachus is protesting Socrates' manipulation of him.

<sup>25</sup> Speaking to this passage, Anderson (2016:8) conjoins 'admired' and 'emulated', as if the latter is a necessary consequence of the former.

Again, at 347de6–e3 Socrates believes that he has disposed of Thrasymachus' thesis. He now proceeds to examine the thesis' moral implication that the unjust life is better than the just one. Crucial for elenctic effect, the examination is to begin with Thrasymachus admitting that he truly and sincerely believes his own claim: that the unjust life is better than the just one (348e5–349a6). Here too Thrasymachus responds: 'What difference does it make to you whether *I* believe it or not? It's my *account* you are supposed to be refuting' (349a7–8). What makes sense of Thrasymachus' nonchalant shrug at both 344d1–e4 and 349a7–8, is that it is possible to state an admiration for someone without personally desiring to be like him; and, in general, it is possible to state admiration for something without personally desiring it or commending its adoption.<sup>26</sup> This leaves open the possibility of reading Thrasymachus' thesis either prescriptively or descriptively.<sup>27</sup> Among the several possible factors which contribute to the identity of a thesis as descriptive is the indicative mood that characterises its formulation. 'Justice is the advantage of the stronger' is an example. Another example is the sub-thesis (stated here in reverse): 'the unjust person always gets more than the just one' (343d1–2).

The second textual justification for a sociological reading of the thesis is the inductive character of all the instances of the stronger-weaker relationship. It begins at 338d5–339a1 (in T1), where Thrasymachus instantiates his thesis in political terms: 'anyone who reasons correctly will conclude that justice is *everywhere* (*πανταχοῦ*) the same, the advantage of the stronger' (339a2–3; my emphasis).<sup>28</sup>

Thrasymachus reinforces the inductive justification for his thesis with more sociological instances of the stronger-weaker relationship:

T4: The just person everywhere gets less than the unjust one. First, in their contracts with one another, you'll never find, when the partnership ends,

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Henderson 1970:223: 'At any rate, to describe a certain way of life as the best life for man is not equivalent to, nor does it entail that everyone should, or even can, live such a life'; White 1995:322: 'At no point, however, does [Thrasymachus] express clear approval for self-serving by the strong'. But Moore (2015:330–1), taking an elenctic view of the matter, comments on 349a7–8 by saying that Thrasymachus is not rejecting the immoralist view ascribed to him; he is simply resisting the psychological turn of the elenchus, which depends on the sincere belief of the interlocutor.

<sup>27</sup> Roberts 2024:33: 'Whether or not Thrasymachus is offering a normative definition – or at least a definition with normative implications – there is no doubt that empirical facts and description loom very large in his account'.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Kerferd 1947:19–47 and White's assessment (1995:321) of Thrasymachus' thesis as 'only descriptive, an empirical generalization of what Thrasymachus sees happening everywhere'.

that a just partner has got more (πλέον)<sup>29</sup> than an unjust one, but less. Second, the unjust person pays less on the same property and gets more of the refunds/rebates than a just one. Finally, in public office the unjust person takes advantage of the public purse and favours his friends and relatives. The opposite is true of a just person. You'll understand this most easily if you turn your thoughts to tyranny [despotism] – the most complete injustice, the one that makes the doer of injustice happiest and the sufferers of it... most wretched (343d1–344a6).<sup>30</sup>

These instances of the unjust and injustices are common social experiences, even today. Note the inductive universalism of Thrasymachus' oblique tenses: <sup>31</sup> *whenever* or *wherever* (ὅπου ἂν...κοινωνήσῃ 343d4) and 'you would *never find*' (οὐδαμοῦ ἂν εὔροις, 343d5). In the world today, contractual partnerships, potentially rewarding for each partner, regularly face challenges pertaining to the distribution of duties, powers and benefits; some people who have leverage tend to influence valuations of their property in order to pay less taxes than they should or less than others for the same property; and the abuse of public position, power or authority for private gain by officials is a global and recurring 'epidemic'.

The third textual justification for the sociological reading of the thesis occurs at 348c3-349a3, where Thrasymachus reveals his understanding of the sociological and pragmatic functions of the conventional registers of 'just', 'justice', 'unjust', and 'injustice':

T5: *Socrates*: Do you call justice (δικαιοσύνην) a virtue (ἀρετήν) and injustice (ἀδικίαν) a vice (κακίαν)?

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<sup>29</sup> In Liddell, Scott and Jones (1968:1415), πλέον ἔχειν has multiple senses: 'to have more', 'to have the advantage', or 'to have the best of it'. Consequently, Barney's suggestion (2017, §1) that πλέον ἔχειν is best translated 'greed', is too restrictive. 'Greed' will readily fit the tyrant's excessive or insatiable form of pleonexia and some non-political forms of injustice. But some Thrasymachean injustices may be induced by a passing urge or need that can be satisfied without being necessarily greedy. Besides, 'to have the advantage' and 'to have the best of it' are not necessarily or always expressions of greed.

<sup>30</sup> The tyrant that Thrasymachus describes at 344a1–c6 as the classic case of the unjust superman is somewhere between a folk legend and a fully historical tyrant and can easily pass for a metaphor, a visual magnifier showcasing what normally escapes public notice: the impunity of rulers and/or the multiple and diverse benefits/opportunities they have for exploiting their power and trust.

<sup>31</sup> An anonymous reviewer cautions that 'words indicating generalization, especially in the mouth of a rhetorician, do not unequivocally attest to inductive universalism – that is, to Thrasymachus' actual views – since they may merely be a requirement of rhetorical style'.

*Thrasymachus*: That's hardly likely, since I say that injustice is profitable (λυσιτελεῖν) and justice (δικαιοσύνην) isn't.

*Socrates*: Then, what exactly do you say?

*Thrasymachus*: The opposite.

*Socrates*: That justice is a vice (κακίαν)?

*Thrasymachus*: No, just very naive simplicity (πανὸ γενναίαν εὐήθειαν).

*Socrates*: Then do you call being unjust duplicity (κακοήθειαν)?

*Thrasymachus*: No, I call it sound judgment (εὐβουλίαν).<sup>32</sup>

*Socrates*: You consider unjust people (οἱ ἄδικοι), then, to be 'wise' (φρόνιμοί) and good (ἀγαθοί)?

*Thrasymachus*: Yes, those who are completely unjust, who can bring whole cities and communities under their power. Perhaps, you think I meant pickpockets? Not that such crimes aren't also profitable, if they're not found out, but they aren't worth mentioning by comparison to what I'm talking about.

In summarising this exchange, Socrates says that Thrasymachus places 'injustice in the category of moral virtue (ἀρετή) and wisdom (σοφία) and justice among their opposites' (348e2–3). In response, we may be reminded that the terms 'virtue' and 'wisdom' apply morally or non-morally: in the latter case, ἀρετή is 'excellence' and σοφία is 'practical intelligence'.<sup>33</sup> In T5 Thrasymachus indicates that he conceives these in terms of their sociological function,<sup>34</sup> namely, in terms of the dispositions they refer to and their potential, pragmatic impacts on relationships. Such a conceptual attitude to conventional morality could conceivably be expository, and need not entail immoralism,<sup>35</sup> especially in view of Thrasymachus' express refusal to commit 'personally' to Socrates' moral interpretation of his thesis at 344d1–e4 and 347de6–e3.

Taking Thrasymachus' conceptual attitude to conventional morality as expository, enables us to see T5 as explaining and increasing our understanding of Thrasymachus' earlier claims about 'the just' and 'the unjust', and about 'the stronger and 'the weaker'. For example, Thrasymachus had claimed earlier that an

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<sup>32</sup> I have adopted Chappell's (1993:6) contextually sensitive translation of πανὸ γενναία εὐήθεια as 'naïve simplicity'; κακοήθεια as 'duplicity', but I prefer 'sound judgment' for εὐβουλία to Chappell's 'practical intelligence'.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Samaras 2012:183 n.6.

<sup>34</sup> Moore (2015:329) speculates: 'This is the closest that Thrasymachus comes to eschewing 'impolitic' views, but this seems to be a strategic attempt not to offend his audience rather than a genuine reconsideration to avoid holding an anti-social view'.

<sup>35</sup> See Williams' (2006:97) definition of 'immoralist', and Barney (2017 §5 and §6) on Callicles and Thrasymachus as representing two strands of immoralism.

unjust partner always gets more than a just one (343d2–4). By T5 we now understand this in (more) pragmatic terms to mean that a person of ‘sound judgment’ always gets the better of the ‘naïve’ or ‘innocent’ partner. T5 also enables us to see that a party is or may become stronger or weaker depending, in part, on internally inhibiting or facilitating dispositions and attitudes. Dispositions or attitudes that a weaker party may exhibit include being ‘obedient’ (τοῦ πειθομένου), ‘servile’ (ὕπηρήτου ὄντος), ‘naïve’/‘innocent’/‘simple’ (ὡς λιθῶς εὐηθικῶν), ‘just’ (δίκαιος, 343c7) and ‘polite’ (ἀστειῶς, 349b1–5). Let us add to these what the shepherd-sheep analogy suggests, namely, sheep-like dispositions or attitudes such as malleability and suggestibility. There is also a ‘fear’ factor. According to Thrasymachus, those who refrain from doing injustice have no fear of doing it but of suffering it (344c2–3). On the other hand, dispositions and attitudes that the stronger may exhibit include courage, prudence, smartness, sound judgment, and eloquence. Altogether, then, a sociological reading of Thrasymachus’ thesis can be taken to yield the following claim:

*In any given society, the courageous, prudent, eloquent, practically intelligent, smart, socially or politically powerful and the like tend to take advantage of the cowardly, moral, naïve, innocent, polite, malleable, suggestible, and so on.*

If this is right, Thrasymachus’ sociological claim looks like a theory of opportunism, courtesy of T. D. J. Chappell. But instead of Chappell’s claim that Thrasymachus is an opportunist,<sup>36</sup> I would contend that Thrasymachus draws attention to the risks of opportunism in our daily lives, given the type of societies we live in. On such a supposition, Thrasymachus’ thesis can be taken to set the stage for Plato to show in the *Republic* that it is possible to create a truly virtuous society in which the risks of opportunism may only exist at the barest minimum, if at all.

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<sup>36</sup> Chappell 1993:14; White 1995:322: ‘Thrasymachus denounces the hypocrisy of popular attitudes: people pay lip-service to justice but everywhere prefer the fruits of injustice’. Cf. Barney 2017 §2: ‘Thrasymachus is offering a critique of justice, understood in rather traditional terms’. However, I refrain from the further step of attributing to Thrasymachus the claim that justice is ‘a tool used by the powerful to manipulate the weak’ (Barney 2017, §2) or that justice is ‘a device of the strong for keeping the weak in their place’ (Chappell, 1993:16). Plato’s text on Thrasymachus’ thesis makes no allusion to the conspiracy of the strong or the powerful against the weak. This not to deny that some links exist between Thrasymachus’ thesis on justice and the general Sophistic genealogical account of justice or with Glaucon’s account in book II. In Book I, 338c1–347e3 Thrasymachus is apparently concerned with the stronger and the weaker operating in existing societies with already established social and moral infrastructure.

The trajectory of my argument is that Thrasymachus' thesis exposes the consequential implications of the practice of conventional morality. However, the relevant consequences are not invariably negative for the weaker/just. Thrasymachus says only that 'justice is the advantage of *the stronger*'. He does not say, 'justice is the advantage of *the unjust*'.<sup>37</sup> Let us recall that Thrasymachus holds a normative conception of the stronger, but not the unjust. In responding to Socrates' request as to whether or not he accepts Cleitophon's suggestion, he says: 'Do you think I'd call someone who is in error stronger at the very moment he errs?' (340c5–6). In respect of the unjust, Thrasymachus acknowledges, for example, that pickpockets are unjust persons. But he ranks them very low among unjust people. His reason is 'not that crimes of pickpocketing are not profitable, if they are not found out', but that pickpockets 'are not worth mentioning by comparison [to those who are completely unjust and can bring whole cities and communities under their power]' (348d4–7). Although the completely unjust and the pickpocket *generally* share a propensity to practice injustice, the latter may lack courage, skill for careful planning, and/or impunity. Being aware of these deficiencies, along with the probable consequences of failure, could deter him from practising injustice, though he remains unjust in mind (cf. 344c2–3). Besides, if Thrasymachus will not call someone the stronger when he errs, he will certainly not call the pickpocket the stronger *when* he is caught, even if he remains unjust. And if the pickpocket may fall short of the standard of the stronger, while remaining unjust, the unjust cannot be the same as the stronger.

If it makes sense to decouple the stronger from the unjust, the indeterminate scope and openness of the stronger can theoretically accommodate all kinds of strongmen – both benign and vicious. For example, some stronger persons may draw their superiority from an ability to *influence* others (i.e., the weaker) by persuasion and attraction. Since persuasion may be fair or foul, exploitation is not an invariable consequence. And since those attracted to the stronger may see him as modelling their values and aspirations, they would voluntarily imitate him or do his bidding. In general, the stronger-weaker dynamic is not an automatic zero-sum in which the stronger invariably gains as the weaker loses. It is rather the exposure of the weaker to the *possibility* of being exploited by the stronger.<sup>38</sup> Besides, actual exploitation will depend on a conflict of interest, together with the effective availability to the stronger of relevant facilitating resources and capacity.

I now turn to the fourth justification for the sociological reading of Thrasymachus' thesis. This justification supports the interpretation I have given so

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<sup>37</sup> *Contra* Henderson 1970:221: 'for the stronger by definition is one who takes advantage of all opportunities to benefit himself'.

<sup>38</sup> So Henderson 1970:220.

far. But more importantly, it explains why Thrasymachus' social world is characterised by stronger-weaker relationships. The justification is a few sociological assumptions deducible from his political instantiation of the thesis (338d5–339a1) and the catalogue of non-political instances of the thesis at 343d1–e7. In the thesis' political manifestation, Thrasymachus claims that, irrespective of ideological orientations, *rulers are everywhere the same*: they make and enforce laws that serve their interest. This inductive claim depends on the assumptions below, which appear to structure Thrasymachus' inductive vision:

- $A_1$  humans, individuals or groups, seek their interest, and
- $A_2$  humans have a desire to gain advantage over others in pursuit of their interest.

$A_1$  and  $A_2$  mean that humans have an inclination (or a tendency) to seek their own interest, and not that they are or have an inclination to be unjust.  $A_1$  obviously drives  $A_2$  but the desire in  $A_2$  does not automatically issue in action or benefit. As argued earlier, even when one person is or becomes stronger than another, the stronger person's actions involve or require facilitating resources: he is primarily stronger in having the upper hand, an advantage in the form of opportunity to exploit; but whether this edge converts into benefit will depend, among other things, on the courage to take the risk and the smartness to convert this risk into benefit.

Nor are  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  arbitrarily hypothesised: they make sense of Thrasymachus' thesis and are consistent with a number of apparently wild claims made by Thrasymachus. For example, he claims at 344c2–3 that those who reproach injustice do not do so because they are afraid of doing it; they do so for fear of suffering it. This claim assumes that all are self-seekers ( $A_1$ ), that self-seeking is repressed in some by fear of the negative consequences; and that if such people can get away with the consequences, they will pursue it irrespective of how it affects others ( $A_2$ ). Thrasymachus also claims at 343b5–6 that 'night and day rulers do not think of anything besides their own advantage'. This claim is obviously hyperbolic, but it is not empty: it is grounded in  $A_1$  and  $A_2$ ; for, if we are all inclined to self-seeking, our thoughts will be or will involve self-seeking in all relevant situations, especially if we are politicians in power, enjoying a high degree of impunity. Finally,  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  underlie and explain the injustices which Thrasymachus lists at 343d1–344a6.

The strongest confirmation that  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  are not arbitrary can be gleaned from Glaucon's revival (*ἐπανανεώσομαι*) of Thrasymachus' argument (*λόγον*) at 358b7–c1. Glaucon situates Thrasymachus' argument within the larger context of the general Sophistic account of the origins of justice. According to this account, most people do not pursue justice as a good, but only as a compromise between doing injustice with impunity, which all desire but cannot achieve, and suffering

injustice without being able to take revenge, which no one desires (358e1–359b5). Then he proceeds to add:

T6: We can see most clearly that those who practice justice do it unwillingly and because they lack the power to do injustice. If in our thoughts we grant to a just and an unjust person the freedom to do whatever they like, we shall catch the just person red-handed travelling the same road as the unjust, through *πλεονεχία*. *This is what anyone's nature* (φύσις) *naturally pursues as good*, but nature is forced by law into the perversion of treating fairness with respect (359c1–8) (my emphases).

If humans are naturally pleonectic (desire ‘to have more’, or ‘to have the advantage’, or ‘to have the best of it’) and pursue pleonexia as their good,<sup>39</sup> then humans seek their own interest ( $A_1$ ) and advantage over others who are also in pursuit of their own interests ( $A_2$ ).<sup>40</sup> Altogether,  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  are consistent with and illuminate Thrasymachus’ thesis. More importantly, they encourage us to rethink the ‘theory’ of Thrasymachus’ immoralism as possibly misleading us into missing a Thrasymachean truth about who we are as humans and why we relate the way we do. This leads me to the next and final section, which considers the thesis’ sociological reach in explaining human relationships.

### (3) *Some contemporary manifestations of the thesis in human relationships*

Thrasymachus’ thesis has the capacity for application to, and for the explanation of, human relationships across diverse domains of human experience. In what follows, constraints of space enjoin a restriction of such an account to a handful of domains.

#### (3.1) Issues of trust

Trust is arguably the foundation of any form of communal existence. It involves the ability of individuals to keep faith and perform obligations reliably. Thrasymachus can accept this and still claim that trust is not always assured because it is undermined by, or in tension with, our self-seeking tendencies. This view can be illustrated by the game theory known as the Prisoner’s Dilemma. This dilemma is adapted here to a heuristic tool only and not as an attempt to explicate a Socratic or Platonic dilemma or view. It is intended to show how an issue of trust

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<sup>39</sup> In the *Gorgias*, Socrates provides a strong ethical response to Callicles’ hedonic conception of pleonexia (see 491e-494b and 507d-508a). Cf. Barney 2017 §4.

<sup>40</sup> Harrison (1967:32) entertains the opinion that Plato strategically postponed focus on φύσις by allowing Glaucon to state it later in his reintroduction of Thrasymachus’ thesis. But an implicit reference to nature in the thesis (or its defence) can hardly be denied.

may arise between two or more people and how Thrasymachus' thesis may caution how to adjust or even predict what is likely to happen.

Let there be two prisoners suspected of being complicit in a crime. Their dilemma arises from knowing what they have done and the implications of three options available to them. Option 1: If both cooperate by staying silent about the truth, they are likely to be acquitted for lack of (adequate) evidence. Option 2: If both betray each other – which means they each disclose what actually happened – each gets a high but not the maximum sentence, as they are likely to be compensated for being honest. Option 3: If one – a trusting accomplice – cooperates by staying silent but the other – a prudential accomplice – betrays by incriminating the other, the cooperator is likely to get the maximum sentence, thereby bearing the entire punitive burden of their joint crime; and the informant may even be acquitted. However, [and here is how self-interest undermines or is in tension with trust], *since neither prisoner knows what is in the other's mind or what the other would say under the pressure of interrogation*, it would be rational to betray the other prisoner. So mutual trust, the most rewarding option, is less likely to occur, whereas breach of trust, which is costly to one prisoner or both, is the more likely to occur. Consequently, to enter into a relationship fully trusting in the other's voluntary cooperation is naïve and imprudent, unless one hedges one's expectations with reliable guarantees.

It may be objected that society is possible because people do not live in or feel the prisoners' dilemma: they are generally cooperators, trusting in each other. Thrasymachus might respond that society is possible because of social conditioning, which is not evenly effective and/or which only succeeds in repressing but not in eliminating our self-seeking tendencies; hence, as 344c2–3 implies, if people think they can get away with injustice they will do it. Thus, *mala fides* in any relationship is always possible and it is rational to expect or, better still, to hedge against it.

### (3.2) Intimate relationships

Edward Alsworth Ross (1921:136) formulated the Law of Personal Exploitation, to reflect his finding that the one who cares less in an intimate relationship tends to exploit the one who cares more, while Willard Waller (1938:191) formulated a similar principle – the Principle of Least Interest – to capture his finding that power between a couple is almost never equally distributed and that where one partner is far more emotionally invested than the other, the less-involved partner tends to have more power and tends to dictate the conditions of the relationship. These complementary principles may justly be taken to be variants of Thrasymachus' stronger-weaker dynamic, tailor-made for intimate relationships.

### (3.3) Religion

In most churches in Christian Africa today, the laity tends to be exploited by the church establishment, using Thrasymachean methods. One such method pertains to the liturgical order of offertory. In a typical church service in Ghana, there will be at least two offertory sessions. For maximum visibility, the receptacles for the offering are placed in the copious space between the front row of the pews and the pulpit. The offering sessions begin with pieces of danceable music to rouse the congregation, who have to process out of their pews to make their offering in the full view of everybody. The offertory process has the effect of exposing anyone in a pew who fails to join the procession, thereby putting him or her under social and psychological pressure to make an offering. I see nothing wrong with making an offering in church if it is *truly* voluntary or if it is required to fund church infrastructure, staff and church-related programmes, but the method of inducing it, like other liturgical methods invented for the sale of ‘spiritual goods’, is Thrasymachean: the church (the stronger) leveraging its spiritual power and authority over the laity (the weaker) to its advantage. Indeed, the laity has become a veritable milk-cow for the church establishment. A simple Google search gives a glimpse of the staggering net-worth of African pastors, especially sole-proprietors of churches. The opulence of these pastors and their systematic and endless exploitation of the laity – most of whom live in conditions of multi-dimensional deprivation – are a common sight in Christian Africa and constitute one of the tragic instances of the diachronic and cross-cultural reach of Thrasymachus’ thesis.

### (3.4) Law

Criminal law and the entire criminal justice system, a significant feature in any modern society, is itself a testimony to Thrasymachus’ sociological insight. Henderson (1970:227) observes: ‘...the vulnerability involved in acting justly has to be compensated for by the imposition on society of a system of laws, police, courts, and prisons to protect the just from the unjust’.

Thrasymachean strongmen – both small-scale and large-scale – have evolved and continue to evolve in ever greater number, variety, sophistication, and power—to the extent that tyrants and tyrannical behaviour are no more required to illustrate grand injustices. In both authoritarian and democratic regimes, the perpetrators, including powerful individuals, groups and transnational corporations, create impunity for themselves through state capture, which renders the justice system ineffective and easy to manipulate, to serve and protect their vested interests. Today, highly developed, not just flawed, democracies are not immune to dominance by Thrasymachean strongmen, now more visibly instantiated by oligarchs of business and industry. In the diversity of their inordinate influence, they shape power, policy, public opinion, law, and justice.

And the weaker – individuals or groups but also huge populations – are at the receiving end, often unaware of their predicament.

In civil matters, the law of torts is designed to provide relief to victims not only of other people's negligence but also of their acts of injustice, and to deter others from committing similar offences. Contract law, in large part, is designed to control pleonectic tendencies and to secure interactions that are mutually beneficial to the parties and to society as a whole. Where the law or regulatory framework is weak, the scenario described by Thrasymachus at 343d2–4 is most likely: the stronger partner cheats the weaker.

Legal adjudication also supports Thrasymachus' sociological insight. The primary goals of adjudication are two: finding the truth and impartially resolving disputes. Most jurisdictions practise the adversarial system in contrast to the inquisitorial system. Although the adversarial system is a great truth-finding mechanism, it also promotes Thrasymachean strong-weak relationships. As Michael Bayles reports (1987:35):

Many resources are spent by a party trying to mislead the court. One party's claim is incorrect, yet all that party's efforts are bent toward supporting the claim and getting the court to reject the truthful claim of the other party... Lawyers often try to discredit witnesses [on the other side] whom they know are telling the truth, and many criminal lawyers put their clients on the stand even when they know they are committing perjury. In addition, wealthier parties such as large corporations have many advantages over poorer parties. The richer parties – landlords, banks, and so on – can play long-run strategies. For example, they wear down opponents by endless delays and drive up expenses...to discourage the opposing parties from going to trial and perhaps other deserving parties from even suing. Poorer parties often cannot afford to pay for investigators, expert testimony, lawyer's time, and so on. Many possible witnesses are reluctant to come forward...because of the possible harassment and humiliation in cross-examination, time lost from work and so forth.

The passage reflects how Thrasymachus sees conventional justice: it indicates that even judicial justice is not guaranteed to the holder of the truth, and that it is virtually guaranteed to benefit the stronger party – the richer or the one who can afford better legal representation.

### Conclusion

I have generally argued that Thrasymachus' thesis can be applied to social phenomena and power relationships. It is a plausible alternative to the definitional and prescriptive readings that have dominated interpretations of the thesis. The textual evidence for the sociological approach is strong: the empirical instantiations of the thesis, the inductive reasoning that underlie these instantiations, Thrasymachus' refusal to commit to Socrates' moral interpretation of his thesis, together with his non-moral conception of conventional morality are mutually reinforcing, cumulatively forceful and justify a sociological reading. They also fit into an interpretation of his thesis as an exposition of the pragmatic and functional consequences of conventional morality. I have supported this interpretation with credible instances of how the thesis explains human relationships in limited but diverse domains of social experiences in contemporary times, to illustrate the possibility of the thesis' far wider scope, applicability, and probable effects on the minds and lives of those who live under such moralities.

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