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“Critically Responding to Thrasymachus’ Conception of Justice”

In Plato’s The Republic, Socrates begins to question the conceptions of justice of a few people in the city of Athens. Those who took on the challenge of answering that I will write about were Thrasymachus and his two brothers, Gloucon and Adeimantis. Particularly I want to define Thrasymachus' ideas of “the stronger”, “advantage”, and his brothers’ reformulation of the argument. I will also compare it critically against what Socrates says in response about justice.

Thrasymachus claims that justice is the advantage of the stronger (338c, 339a) and in this statement are lots of loaded words with meaning. Firstly is that there is a people group who can be defined as the stronger. And secondly is that whatever their advantage is what constitutes justice. In a basic sense, the “stronger” is the person who is in charge politically. The rule maker who has a say over a group of people’s behavior is a person who is stronger in comparison with those who are subject to obey. Because of this definition of who “the stronger” is, justice is exclusively related to political matters. If justice is the advantage of the political ruler and that of the political ruler alone, then justice is relegated to that sphere of existence. What Thrasymachus argues then is that what is just and unjust is found in this relationship between the ruler and subjects. Specifically what is just and unjust is found in the power struggle between those in charge and those under those in charge. What hangs in the balance of this power struggle is what Thrasymachus calls the advantage. Advantage is defined to be what is beneficial to a person just like in common day understanding of the word. In the context of the argument for what is just, Thrasymachus argues that whatever is beneficial to the ruler is what is just. He sees it like this because the subjects obeying a ruler is what constitutes justice. It is to obey the rules of the ruler even when it is not to their advantage.

Socrates has some rebuttal for this logic. Firstly, this is because inside it is the idea that what is advantageous or beneficial to the people who are not the stronger, is to act unjust to the rules regardless of what they are. An example of this is that if a ruler places a rule that “one should not steal”, it is to the advantage of the ruler that the subjects obey, but the subjects advantage would be when they disobey this rule. But in the event that the ruler is a tyrant and the rules are the opposite such as “one should steal”, the subject should act unjustly to these rules and not steal to be in the advantageous. Hence one is doing what was disadvantageous in the first instance. This is paradoxical because how can the same action be advantageous and disadvantageous to both groups at the same time? Secondly, Socrates does not believe that the ruler’s benefit is necessarily in contrast to the benefit or advantage of the people. Socrates compares the ruler to a physician. A good physician finds it advantageous to help and heal his or her patient. And he uses the example of a good captain having a benefit in leading his or her crew in the correct direction. Socrates’ then asks why it would be disadvantageous to a ruler to make rules for the benefit of his subjects? A good ruler is advantageous when his subjects are also advantageous then.

Thrasymachus’ brothers Gloucon and Adeimantis take up what is left in the argument and argue to Socrates that justice is not advantageous in itself, rather that justice is more of a social contract where subjects compromise to not be advantageous to themselves by doing unjust things. For example, all the subjects agree to be just because the penalty for these actions are too great and painful. They also agree on the grounds that it is painful to have these actions done to them, and so it is just better if everyone agreed to not cause that pain to others for self preservation. They hold the premise of Thrasymachus that it is beneficial to people to act unjustly because of profit and that if there were no penalties so that one could get away with it, one would be mad to not act in such a manner. The brothers pose the question to Socrates then for a concise definition of justice and in it to prove that justice is good and worthwhile in of itself without connection being punished and not being punished.

Plato answers this on behalf of Socrates in The Republic in the following way. Socrates believes that the way to understand justice is by not looking first at individuals actions, rather that one should look at a city. He concludes this because in the conversations he has had thus far, individual actions that are universally labeled just are not so under inspection. One example of this is to say that it is justice to always pay one’s debts. If in an attempt to pay one’s debt he returns a weapon to someone gone mad, his action once thought as just is now certainly unjust. This leads Socrates to believe that where there is a just and moral city, being a social group of people, there are just individuals. And that these just people are not just based on actions that they do. Another important reason for looking at a city is because those who are leaders of a just city are just individuals. He uses the idea that a ruler’s advantage is to do the good for the whole city and nothing else. This is the same idea he uses to refute Thrasymachus, but now he redeems it in such a way that justice is the advantage of the stronger in a city. However it is justice only when the stronger is rightly positioned and defined as a ruler in the purest thought. This certainly leads to the concepts in The Republic of dividing people according to their aptitudes, an education system that creates these just philosopher-kings. Those who are just not because of actions but because of an attention and knowledge of the forms.