

# Socrates and Thrasymachus on Perfect and Imperfect Injustice

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## ABSTRACT

It is argued that the true definition of justice in Plato's *Republic* appears not in Book IV but in Book I, where it is clear that justice is other-oriented or external rather than internal as per Book IV. Indeed, on Book IV's definition, there is virtually no difference between justice and moderation. Considered here is a single argument between Socrates and Thrasymachus (351b-352d), in which Socrates contends that imperfect injustice is "stronger" than perfect. Rather than producing a just group, the justice between members of a group strengthens the injustice of a group whose external project is already unjust.

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In my view, the true Socratic definition of justice in the *Republic* is to be found not in Book IV, but in Book I. The definition Socrates proposes in Book IV, which would have justice be a wholly internal matter, a function of what goes on within a city and within a man as opposed to a matter of the relationship between cities and between men, is, I believe, not at all one that Socrates genuinely endorses. Although all virtues—including justice—are internal in one sense, namely, insofar as they are dispositions of the soul, there is something distinctive about the virtue of justice, something that keeps it from collapsing into its close cousin moderation; and that is that justice is, essentially, an outward-directed virtue. As in several other dialogues, notably the *Crito* and the *Meno*, where Socrates' own view, I believe, surfaces early and prepares the reader to resist views that appear later on in these dialogues, so too in the *Republic*. Here Socrates suggests right at the start what justice is really all about, thereby precluding in advance the false definition to be offered in Book IV. My claim in this paper is that the argument Socrates offers in Book I, in which he seeks to dispel Thrasymachus's cynical and ugly notion that perfect injustice, injustice that is massive in scale and maximally destructive, is the greatest thing going, consistently sees injustice as something that obtains between parties, and so prepares us to reject the Socratic proposal in Book IV that justice is an internal affair. There is much more to be learned about the Socratic conception of justice in Book I generally. I would go so far as to say that Book I as a whole serves as a prophylactic against the later definition of justice; forewarned is forearmed.

Unmistakable irony pervades Socrates' dealings with Thrasymachus in *Rep. I*. In this paper I shall focus on just one of the argu-

ments (351a6-352d2) with which Socrates in Book I seeks to bring Thrasymachus to his knees. It is the argument for the claim that imperfect injustice, that is, the dilution of perfect injustice with some measure of justice, makes a city (as well as other entities, as will be seen) stronger (*kreittōn*) than perfect injustice does. This odd claim on which Socrates expends so much intellectual energy accomplishes, I will argue, two things: (1) it makes a mockery of Thrasymachus's view though without actually refuting it; and (2) it prepares the reader to resist the presumably "Socratic" definition of justice in Book IV.

Let us begin with a quick look at Book IV, where the untenability of the newly proposed Socratic definition of justice sits right there on its face. At 441d-e we have the following (Bloom's translation):

And further, Glaucon, I suppose we'll say that a man is just in the same manner that a city too was just . . . Moreover, we surely haven't forgotten that this city was just because each of the three classes in it minds its own business . . . Then we must remember that, for each of us too, the one within whom each of the parts minds its own business will be just and mind his own business.

If justice is minding one's own business, then the *parts* of a city and the parts of a soul are just if *they* mind their own business, and, by the same token, the city and the individual are just if *they* mind their own business. But this passage draws the blatantly fallacious conclusion—the fallacy committed is the fallacy of composition<sup>1</sup>—that if the *parts* mind their own business so too does the whole, and, worse, that *because* the parts mind their own business so too does the whole. (Several

other passages raise similar concerns: 4.423d,<sup>2</sup> 433a-b,<sup>3</sup> 434c,<sup>4</sup> 443c<sup>5</sup>; 9.576a-b<sup>6</sup>) Why would anyone think that if, or, worse, because, the parts mind their own business, the whole does so as well?

There is, however, an even bigger problem in Book IV with regard to its definition of justice—bigger than its confusion of wholes with parts. And this is its most persistent and insistent claim that the justness of the whole consists in the internal order generated by the parts' minding their own business, the contention that the justness of city and soul *is a matter of* how their parts interact, and not at all about what they—city and soul—do or do not do. (See re the city: 434c.) The striking—indeed shocking—statement at 443c with respect to individual justice makes this point loud and clear: “And in truth justice was, as it seems, something of this sort; however, *not* with respect to a man's minding his external business,<sup>7</sup> but with respect to what is within.”<sup>8</sup> Not only is this a bizarre understanding of justice, but it reverses what we just saw at 441, where the justice of the whole was precisely *its* minding its own business—even if, improbably, it is said to do so as a result of the parts' minding theirs.<sup>9</sup> As an aside, we should note that the definition at 443 far better suits moderation than it does justice,<sup>10</sup> whereas the straightforward definition at 441 far better suits justice. One might say that moderation is a necessary condition for, but not the cause of, justice; imagine not being able to distinguish the cause from that without which the cause would not be a cause! (*Phaedo* 99b)<sup>11</sup>

Let us turn now to Book I—specifically to Socrates' argument with Thrasymachus, beginning at 351b and concluding at 352d, regarding perfect and imperfect injustice. Socrates here advances, against Thrasymachus, the peculiar claim that imperfect injustice makes an entity

“stronger” (*kreittōn*) than perfect injustice does. Socrates' argument is surely spurred by Thrasymachus's lauding at 344a of the man who is able to get the better of others “in a big way” (*ton megala dunamenon pleonektein*) whose injustice is whole (*holēn* -344c), copious (*hikanōs* - 344c), and “most perfect” (*teleōtatēn*), rather than “partial” (*merei; kata merē* -344b),<sup>12</sup> this praise being reinforced at 348d, where Thrasymachus affirms that those who can do injustice perfectly are good and prudent (*phronimoi*). Moreover, the term “stronger” (*kreittōn*) recalls Thrasymachus's contention that justice is the advantage of the stronger, a pronouncement proudly repeated by him as he concludes his encomium for perfect injustice at 344c: “and, as I have said from the beginning, the just is the advantage of the stronger (*tou kreittonos sumpheron*).”

When one considers Book I in light of Book IV, it is important to note, first, that Thrasymachus, when asked, agrees that “a city is unjust that tries to enslave *other cities* unjustly, and has reduced them to slavery, and keeps many enslaved to itself,” and that he adds: “And it's this the best (*hē aristē*) city will most do, the one that is most perfectly (*teleōtata*) unjust” (351b). What makes a city unjust, then, is that it does unjust things—to other cities. Injustice, as both Thrasymachus and Socrates recognize here, is external. The question Socrates next poses is whether this *unjust* city exerts its power over other cities with justice or without justice. It would appear that this justice, the justice that will enhance the unjust city's power to do injustice, is internal: it is the cooperation among the city's members. Readers of the *Republic* seize immediately upon the similarity between what Socrates says here and what he will say in Book IV, namely, that justice is internal, and they will conclude that we have here a precursor

to the later view. And indeed admittedly we also have here in Book I another idea that will get considerable play later on (especially at IV.442-44), namely, that injustice produces factions, hatreds, and quarrels, and justice produces unanimity and friendship. But, as we have already seen, in Book IV the *city* was just because its parts were just, whereas here the city is *unjust*—indeed more successfully so—because its parts are just. This is not a small difference.

Let us look then more closely at the argument. First, it is worth attending to the character of the other groups to which Socrates makes reference here: not just a city, but an army, or pirates, or robbers, or any other tribe “*which has some common unjust enterprise.*” So, it is groups bent on injustice—external injustice—that are the subject of this exchange.

Second, the point Socrates makes is that if the members of these groups were to act unjustly toward one another, the group enterprise would not succeed. The injustice here, then, the injustice of each of the group’s members, is also *external*. In other words, when the members of the groups treat each other unjustly, that creates disharmony in the group. What it does not create is the group’s injustice. The group is unjust—that is a given. And it is unjust, regardless of the harmony or disharmony within. The group’s internal harmony, produced by the individual members’ external justice, enables the group’s external injustice, empowers the group to do wrong. And so it is most emphatically not the case that when the members of a group treat each other justly, thereby creating harmony in the group, the group becomes just. The justice of each member toward others—and so, *external*—is what produces the group’s internal harmony which in turn makes the group’s injustice more effective. What the justness of

each member toward others does not produce is the group’s justness.

To be clear: the injustice that produces disharmony and renders the group less effective in its dastardly project is the members’ “acting unjustly *to one another* (*allēlous* - 351c10).” By extension, it would be the members’ acting *justly* to one another that would render the group *more* effective in the very same unjust projects. The justice among members would not make the group just; it would make the group more effectively unjust—in Thrasymachus’s word, reprised here by Socrates, “stronger.”

Socrates next asks about a group of two men. Is it not the case, he asks, that when injustice comes into being between two they will become enemies to one another? Note that the injustice here is again external; it arises between the two men and is not a feature of the two as a unit.<sup>13</sup> The injustice that these two men exhibit in their dealings with one another causes faction and enmity to arise within the group of two. Faction and enmity are now internal to the group. Once again, the injustice itself is external; the disharmony it causes, internal—not internal to the individuals but internal to the group they form. Disharmony makes it impossible for the two men *together* to accomplish anything, to bring to fruition any common goal. Yet the internal harmony or disharmony within a group has no effect at all on the justness or unjustness of the group. The assessment of the group as just or unjust depends entirely on whether the group’s external project is just or unjust. Internal harmony or disharmony enables or hampers, respectively, the ability of the members of any group to work together effectively.

Socrates’ final move is to consider injustice within one man. Here, too, readers have been quick to detect a similarity between

Socrates' exchange with Thrasymachus and his later city-soul analogy. After all, here in Book I Socrates has begun with a city and talked about its injustice and its internal dissension, and has then shifted to considering an analogous single individual and his injustice and internal disharmony. But, here, too, the real differences outweigh the superficial similarities. For here in Book I, unlike in Book IV, the disharmony, the factiousness, produced within one man by parts that are unjust toward one another is not what makes the individual unjust; instead, what it does is make him unable to function effectively to accomplish any project—in our case, presumably an unjust one. As in a larger group in which dissension brings about the group's dysfunction, compounding the enmity that already exists between it and other groups and between it and those who are just, so, too, injustice in an individual ruins everything: one is one's own enemy because of internal conflict, and one is an enemy to those who are just because one's projects are unjust. Finally, since the gods are just, anyone who manifests injustice will be an enemy of the gods, to whom the just man but not the unjust man is a friend. Thrasymachus agrees, but only, he says, so as not to irritate the audience. Perhaps Thrasymachus believes that the gods prefer the unjust man, since, as he had said earlier, those who are thoroughly unjust are the ones called happy and blessed (344b-c).

The point of the argument is this: in a group bent on injustice the group's members are unjust to the extent that they share the unjust end of the group. If, however, they are completely unjust—that is, if they have in themselves not even enough justice to keep them from harming one another—they cannot accomplish the goal they pursue in common with the other members of their group. So,

those who lack justice completely, those who are not even partially just, are unable to accomplish, together with others, the unjust goal they share. The group of many or of two is its own enemy, an enemy to all its opponents, and an enemy to those who are just. The single individual whose internal dissension prevents him from accomplishing his evil mission is an enemy to himself besides being an enemy to those who are just.

In the passage that concludes this exchange Socrates completes the feast: perfect injustice in those who work together is impotent; it can accomplish nothing. It is in fact the partially unjust—that is, those members of a group who are sufficiently unjust to want to harm entities outside the group but not so unjust as to want to harm each other—who achieve their evil ends. The modicum of justness that resides within the members of the group does not make the group just. On the contrary, it helps the unjust group accomplish its unjust goal.<sup>14</sup>

We notice that as Socrates concludes the discussion, the matter of injustice within one man drops out. We may wonder why Socrates introduces the matter of injustice within the single individual at all. There are, perhaps, two reasons. The first of these is that it prefigures Socrates' later analogy between city and soul but draws the analogy significantly differently: externally rather than internally. In Book I, just as the city is stronger—in accomplishing its injustice—when its members are just vis-à-vis one another, so is the individual stronger—in accomplishing his injustice—when the elements in his soul are just vis-à-vis one another. The second reason is integral to the case against perfect injustice that Socrates makes here in Book I. For unless Socrates can say about a single man what he says about two or more, he cannot rule out the greater potency of perfect injustice for

the man who commits injustice alone—that is, for the tyrant of whom Thrasymachus is so enamored (344a). Socrates has to be able to say that a man who is internally at odds with himself—that is, one who has internal faction and so is not only unjust with respect to others but experiences injustice among the parts within his own soul—is less successful, weaker, in his injustice than one who is internally at peace, that is, than one whose internal parts are only partially unjust.<sup>15</sup> There is absolutely no suggestion in Book I—indeed, quite the contrary—that an individual is just because of any sort of internal friendship.<sup>16</sup>

None of the above is intended to minimize the importance of optimal internal order, whether at the group or the individual level, as it is described not only in Book IV, but in Book IX at 588c-590c as well (by way of the colorful image of the human being who contains within a human being, a lion, and a many-headed beast). In a properly ordered city or soul, where reason is king, appetites are held in check, and spirit is reason's devoted ally, the likelihood that injustices will be committed is indeed greatly diminished. Yet two important points need to be made. First, this condition of the soul is not justice but, as I would argue—and have argued elsewhere—is moderation; it is called justice only to strengthen Socrates' case for the profitability in itself of justice.<sup>17</sup> But, second, as was argued in this paper, justice is external; even the best internal harmony is not what justice is. The very best internal harmony will certainly dispose one to justice and make the committing of injustice unlikely, but, as Book I shows, the justice of the whole is not a matter of the relations of its parts but of the character of its (external) projects. It is the members or parts that are in those relations that may be said to be just or unjust—because their relations are external.

To conclude: the differences between Book I and Book IV are critical. If Book I is right about what justice is then Book IV is wrong. According to Book I, what determines whether a person is just or not is how he treats, or is disposed to treat, others. What decides whether or not a city is just is how it treats, or is disposed to treat, other cities. What makes a member of a city or of any group just or unjust is how he treats others—both members of the group and those outside the group. And what makes a part of an individual unjust is (1) how it interacts with the individual's other internal parts, and (2) the extent to which it shares the unjust ends of the individual of whom it is a part. A city is just not because its citizens are just to one another; an individual is just not because his internal parts are just to one another. A city whose citizens are just to one another is more successfully unjust than one in which the citizens are unjust to one another; individuals whose internal parts are just to one another are more successfully unjust than those whose internal parts are unjust to one another. If Book I is right, then justice is always other-regarding and never internal.

The joke, of course, is on Thrasymachus, who meant by *perfect* injustice injustice that casts its net wide and deep, in contrast to petty crime, which is what he would no doubt mean by imperfect (or partial) injustice. The way in which Socrates has gotten the better of Thrasymachus is by changing the sense of his terms. And so, although Socrates has actually done nothing to derail Thrasymachus's claim that thoroughgoing unflinching perfect injustice, in Thrasymachus's sense at any rate, is best—indeed, the matter of whether justice or injustice makes a man happy is not taken up until the next argument—Thrasymachus stands, once again, defeated. This man, who

never denied or had any need to deny the value of cooperation in joint ventures, finds himself affirming, however reluctantly, that, after all, imperfect injustice is stronger than perfect.

## Notes

- 1 One passage commits the reverse fallacy, namely, division: 9.586e: when the whole soul follows the true pleasures, each part of the soul does so as well.
- 2 Each man is one and not many so the city will grow to be one and not many.
- 3 The *city's* justice is a matter of each participant minding his own business and not being a busybody (*polupragmatos*), so minding *one's* own business is probably justice.
- 4 Each of the classes minding its own business in a city would be justice and would make the city just. Here it seems appropriate to ask: are the classes just because they mind their own business or is the city just because the classes mind their own business?
- 5 Socrates calls the arrangement in the rudimentary city in which each man does his own job and nothing else a “phantom of justice.” Is Socrates saying that in his first city each worker's doing his own job was what made the workers just or, insofar as he regards this phantom of justice as a crude precursor to what will be the new city's justice, that each worker's doing his own job was what made the city just?
- 6 Tyrannic man is no one's friend, so he is unjust according to our earlier definition—that is, because his parts are not friends. (It is worth noting that parts being friends with one another and in accord with one another is the mark of moderation—not of justice—at 442c.)
- 7 I use “external” (*exō*) to indicate relations between entities, and “internal” (*entos*) for a state within an entity.
- 8 It seems that this is meant to be a gloss on (or a correction to) 441d-e, where the natural reading is that the individual “within whom each of the parts minds its own business” and who therefore “will be just and mind his own business” is precisely one who minds his own *external* business, as the parts do theirs. If what was intended at 441d-e were that the just whole minds its own business internally, the connective would not have been the simple conjunction of *te kai*. That Socrates is aware that justice is indeed external may be seen from his slippery slide from the judge's justice, which seeks to ensure that no one has what belongs to others or is deprived of what belongs to him, to the justice of “having and *doing* one's own and what belongs to one.” This internal justice, which ends up being a matter of

the whole being just because its *parts* do only their own job, is not the justice a judge enforces; the judge enforces the doing one's own that is external—that is, the doing one's own that respects boundaries: what the parts presumably do—not what the whole does.

- 9 One advantage of the definition of justice as minding one's own *external* business is that it can be applied to all things without equivocation: to the parts of an individual soul, to the individual person, to the parts of the city, and to the city. And to acts as well.
- 10 Careful attention to 443c-444a reveals that when a person orders his soul he makes it “*moderate* and harmonized.” When he acts with his moderate soul, and with wisdom supervising, the acts produced are just and fine; and these just and fine actions preserve and help produce the condition that gave rise to them, namely, the condition of moderation and harmony.
- 11 At 443a, having tested the new concept of justice against “vulgar” (*phortika*) standards, Socrates says that “the cause of all this is that...each of the parts in him minds its own business.” But surely the parts' minding their own business is but a prerequisite for a person's not doing the unjust acts named. Such a person is said to be only least likely to do such things. Justice makes one just; moderation makes one less likely to commit injustice.
- 12 This point is mocked at 352c, where Socrates says that injustice can be successfully pursued only by those who are “half bad” (*hēmimochthēroi*) from injustice, the perfectly unjust being unable to accomplish anything.
- 13 Socrates adds: “and to those who are just,” without offering any explanation for the addition. Those who are unjust externally—and the assumption throughout this argument is that we are talking about those who are unjust externally—are enemies of those who are just, whether men or gods. When injustice is also internal, there are also enemies within.
- 14 If we extend Socrates' conclusion to the case of a single individual, it will turn out that the parts of the individual must want to harm other individuals. Unless *this* form of injustice—the signing on to a project that would harm outsiders—exists in the members of the group (or in the parts of an individual), the group (or individual) as a whole would not be unjust.
- 15 The interesting implication of Socrates' position in Book I is that the more successful tyrants are those who have gotten all their internal ducks in a row—those whose reason, spirit, and appetite are both in accord with one another and supportive of the tyrant's ends. The tyrannic personality, as we learn in Book IX, is an internal and external mess, and the actual tyrant the most wretched of all men.
- 16 Socrates never says of groups, or of single individuals regarded as groups with internal members, that

they are perfectly or imperfectly unjust. It is always said of the participants in the unjust joint venture that they are the one or the other.

<sup>17</sup> See my *Philosophers in the Republic: Plato's Two Paradigms* (Cornell: Cornell University Press [Ithaca 2012]), Chapter 5.