

## Political analysis and the defence of justice in *Republic 8*

In this paper I argue that one of Plato's objectives in *Republic 8* is to respond to Thrasymachus' analysis of mainstream political practice (338d-339a). I first discuss exactly how Thrasymachus' analysis of democracies, aristocracies and tyrannies lends support to his thesis that justice is the advantage of the stronger (JAS). I suggest that Thrasymachus may not be asking his audience simply to infer from his political analysis that JAS is true. But Thrasymachus' political analysis draws attention to a strength of JAS, namely that JAS succeeds in safeguarding the unity of justice even though different things are regarded as just in different cities and different regimes sanction or require different things (and sometimes conflicting things) under the heading of justice. JAS preserves the unity of justice by identifying 'the same thing in all cities', namely the advantage of the rulers, and declaring it to be just.

Plato evidently thought that mainstream political practice was likely to give rise to Thrasymachean views of justice, for in *Laws 712c-714d* political conduct in democracies, tyrannies and elsewhere is used again to introduce and support JAS. I compare this later passage with its counterpart in *Republic 1* and compare the response in the *Laws* to JAS and to the political basis of JAS with Socrates' response in the *Republic*. A key part of Socrates' response is to return in *Republic 8* to democracies, oligarchies and other regimes and to show that the ruling factions in these regimes do not pursue the same objectives. On the contrary, under one regime wealth is valued and pursued, under a different regime freedom is valued and pursued, and so on. I suggest that a lingering need to respond to Thrasymachus' political analysis helps to account for the emphasis in Socrates' political analysis on values, on conflict between values and on the origin of values.

I conclude by discussing how and to what extent Socrates' alternative account of political practice undermines JAS. Socrates' political analysis in *Republic 8* does not show that JAS is false. But it shows that the practices identified as just by Thrasymachus do not exhibit the kind of unity that Thrasymachus claimed for them. And Socrates provides his audience with a way of regarding conventional politics that is more likely to give rise to moral inquiry than to belief in JAS. Socrates emphasizes not that different parties succeed in advancing their interests in different cities but that the ruling parties of different cities have different conceptions of human interests; the most intuitive response to this political analysis is to consider which party, if any, has the *right* conception of our interests.

### Selective bibliography

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