

Interpretation

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Department of Political Science
Baylor University
1 Bear Place, 97276
Waco, TX 76798
- email* interpretation@baylor.edu

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SAMUEL MEAD

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

swmead@utexas.edu

Peter Hansen's new book is a challenging and thoughtful study of Plato's infamous and outspoken immoralists, Thrasymachus and Callicles. By attending to both the drama and the arguments of the relevant sections of the *Republic* and the *Gorgias*, Hansen probes the souls of these supposed "tough guys," and finds within them convictions that are best and paradoxically described as moral. The author's reason for doing so is laudably pedagogical; he aims to show how "Plato enables us to better understand ourselves, our own attachment to justice, and justice itself" (xv). But in order to supplement Plato's presentation of immoralistic psychology, and in order to emphasize further the timelessness of his subject, Hansen includes an engaging chapter on other "tough guys" from famous works of literature. Justice also holds sway over the hearts of Raskolnikov of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Michel of André Gide's *The Immoralist*, and Richard III of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Students of political philosophy and psychology should find Hansen's work helpfully provocative, and they will find his pedagogical aim fulfilled by the end of their study, even if they disagree with some of his arguments.

To be sure, Hansen is not the first scholar to claim that Thrasymachus is unwittingly attached to justice despite his famously outspoken rejection of that virtue. Previous commentaries have highlighted the indignation with which he enters the dialogue; he scornfully accuses Socrates of exploiting the arguments for his own gain instead of searching after the truth about justice.¹ While a full embrace of injustice would seem to leave Thrasymachus

¹ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 77; Devin Stauffer,

no room for genuine indignation, the tone of his subsequent speeches even suggests a resentful desire to expose justice itself for what it *really* is: a fraud perpetrated by rulers against their subjects.² Scholars have also highlighted Socrates's numerous and successful appeals to Thrasymachus as a teacher.³ These appeals bring out a side of the rhetorician that is passionately devoted to his artful profession, a profession directed at giving some promising youths the chance of success in the political arena. Thrasymachus is not simply out for himself; he does not consistently live by his own selfish principles.

Thus, what distinguishes Hansen's interpretation of Thrasymachus from previous commentaries is not his thesis that the rhetorician has an "unself-conscious" attachment to justice (8). Rather, Hansen claims to set himself apart by pinpointing the "heart of" and "key to" the rhetorician's lamentable confusion precisely in his moralistic and prideful admiration for artisanship (2, 35n39, and 38). The author accordingly sustains his interpretation of this admiration at much greater length than others have done.

Thrasymachus's high estimation of artisanship first manifests itself in his defensive insistence that the true ruler, like a true doctor, or like any knowledgeable artisan worthy of the name, does not make mistakes (see 340d–e).⁴ Hansen's Thrasymachus is ultimately unable to sustain whole-heartedly his position that such a ruler can only be out for himself. For as Socrates contends, and as Thrasymachus unselfconsciously believes, the art of rule, as such, is directed at something other than the good of its practitioner. As Hansen's interpretation progresses, it becomes clear that Thrasymachus holds on to some notion of art as an end worthy of genuine devotion. Even more, "he feels (unselfconsciously) that in devoting ourselves to this high thing, we somehow transcend our needs and limits (and thereby address our deepest need)" (24). At the same time, in Thrasymachus's eyes, the knowledgeable artisans who practice such devotion are truly worthy and therefore *deserving* of a true common good among themselves. "Like more conventional lovers of justice, Thrasymachus apparently feels that men engaged in a particular selfless activity should prosper" (45). Thus, by getting Thrasymachus to glimpse

Plato's Introduction to the Question of Justice (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 60; David Leibowitz, "Thrasymachus' Blush," in *Recovering Reason: Essays in Honor of Thomas L. Pangle*, ed. Timothy Burns (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 119; Thomas L. Pangle and Timothy W. Burns, *The Key Texts of Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 53.

² Devin Stauffer, "Thrasymachus' Attachment to Justice?," *Polis* 26 (2009): 1–10.

³ Pangle and Burns, *Key Texts of Political Philosophy*, 62.

⁴ All translations of Plato's *Republic* from *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 1968).

the contradictions between such opinions and his praise of injustice, Socrates induces the rhetorician's famous blush (46).

But the most astonishing, puzzling, and novel aspect of Hansen's treatment of Thrasymachus is not its sustained focus on artisanship. It is rather the surprisingly brief argument that the rhetorician is an "unselfconscious" believer, a man of faith who hides even from himself that "he believes gods reward the greatest injustice," that is, tyranny (29). Indeed, by Hansen's account, Thrasymachus "probably cannot" become conscious of his own belief (29). For "if he did, he would be at a loss—not simply because he would no longer know what he thinks, but more importantly because his hope of strengthening and perhaps transcending his fragile mortal life, a hope of which he is only dimly aware, would be undermined" (29; see 23, 54, 55). As far as I can tell, Hansen does not clarify how a belief in divine reward for the greatest injustice (tyranny) can offer any hope of transcendence to a teacher of rhetoric. But given his remarks on artisanship, I suspect he would say something along these lines: Thrasymachus unselfconsciously believes that in teaching the art of rhetoric to would-be tyrants, in devoting himself to helping such men become worthy of divine favor, the artisan-teacher somehow makes himself worthy of that same favor, and thus has grounds to hope for the transcendence offered by that favor. (See 29 with 30 and 44–46, but contrast with 20–21). Not only is Hansen's immoralist moral; he is, if in an extremely twisted and uncommonly self-deluded manner, religious.

But how does Hansen establish Thrasymachus's unselfconscious religious belief on the basis of Plato's text? Only by scrutinizing a single word in the orator's long and impassioned endorsement of successful tyrants. According to that endorsement, successful tyrants are "called happy [*eudaimones*] and blessed [*makarioi*], not only by the citizens but also by whoever else hears that he has done injustice entire" (344b–c). Hansen reminds us that "to be blessed is to be favored by gods," and he finds Thrasymachus's use of this word particularly striking and revealing:

The word is sometimes used simply to mean very happy, but in coupling it with *εὐδαίμονες*, Thrasymachus evidently wants to express something more than that. Perhaps many people Thrasymachus encounters say that tyrants are happy, but blessed? It seems unlikely that this is how a tyrant's subjects view him as he "takes away what belongs to [them]...not bit by bit, but all at once" and "enslaves" them (344a–b). Possibly some say this insincerely out of fear, but this would seem to be going further than necessary....Thrasymachus is exaggerating to some extent to support or dramatize his argument for the hypocrisy

of people's criticism of injustice. However, conscious exaggeration alone does not account for his use of the word "blessed," since it seems too far from what people actually say to help his case. He apparently thinks it will help his case because he thinks many do at least partly consider tyrants blessed. Even this seems to be questionable, however. It seems likely that Thrasymachus thinks this because *he himself* feels in some way that tyrants are blessed. (28, emphasis in the original)

Thus, in Hansen's view, Thrasymachus somehow feels tyrants are blessed by gods, and this is to say that Thrasymachus somehow "(albeit unselfconsciously) believes that the greatest injustice is favored by gods" (28). The teacher unselfconsciously believes the tyrant lives in harmony "even with the fundamental principle of the cosmos...Perhaps he gains not merely what he takes from others, but what the cosmos or the gods give him for embodying and demonstrating their principle [of selfishness] so finely" (28–29). And, somehow, such deeply buried beliefs form a basis for Thrasymachus's hope of strengthening and transcending *his own* mortal life.

"One might object" to the hefty interpretive weight Hansen places on a single word to reach these conclusions (28). I myself am skeptical of his suggestion that Thrasymachus believes (unselfconsciously) that unjust tyrants are blessed by gods. Is there perhaps a more plausible and less radical explanation for Thrasymachus's use of "blessed"? In Hansen's view, among Thrasymachus's aims in his long speech are (1) to convey the height of the artful tyrant's success and the superiority of his life to the just man's and (2) to expose the hypocrisy of people's criticisms of injustice (26, 27). Regarding the first, and in response to Hansen, would the crafty tyrant not look all the more successful and impressive in Thrasymachus's *own* eyes if such a man *could* coax from his subjects' lips the title of "blessed"—if he *could* sway his people "by stealth and force" into a kind of political and religious Stockholm syndrome (344a)? Regarding the second, and again in response to Hansen, might not Thrasymachus's cynical contempt for hypocrisy predispose him to believe that people really *do* deem the tyrant blessed? Would it not be all the more damning of them, in Thrasymachus's eyes, if many *did* deem their tyrant blessed in addition to happy?

Hansen is right: Thrasymachus probably has not encountered many people who openly and honestly dub their enslaver blessed. But is this sufficient evidence for the claim that Thrasymachus believes unselfconsciously in gods who bless injustice? Perhaps, instead, Thrasymachus is merely moved—both by his complicated admiration for the artful tyrant and especially by his indignant contempt for widespread hypocrisy—to overlook the dearth of people who would genuinely grace their oppressors with such a title. If this is

the case, Thrasymachus's speech would not reveal a hidden piety in the man; it would merely illustrate further his tension-ridden admiration for injustice, an admiration that sits alongside and influences his inability to decide consistently whether most people (including Socrates) are deceitful hypocrites or naive fools when praising justice (see 39, and cf. 336c–337a with 343a–d).

Now, "Socrates' conversation with Callicles is much longer than the one with Thrasymachus, and it penetrates deeper" (59). The same can be said of Hansen's commendable analysis of Callicles. In four acute chapters, Hansen and Socrates show us that despite Callicles's attack on (conventional) justice, an unselfconscious attachment to it permeates the youth's heart and mind. A brief sketch of the highlights of these chapters must suffice.

Callicles attacks justice on the basis of an "exaggerated" distinction he seems to have picked up from philosophers (or, more likely, from "people who have been influenced by philosophy"): "by nature, everything more shameful is also that which is worse, such as suffering injustice, whereas by convention doing injustice is more shameful" (64 and 483a).⁵ "Nature herself" shows there is no genuine justice except the rule of the stronger (72 and 483c–d). Still, for Callicles, "stronger" is not reducible to or identical with whoever comes out on top; in his mind, it is just for the strong to exploit the weak, and unjust that the weak so often prove clever enough to turn the tables and exploit the strong (72). Callicles praises "nature" over convention, but he is unwilling to accept what nature truly has to offer.

As Hansen shows, interwoven with Callicles's notion of strength is his admiration for manly tyrants (Xerxes and Darius) who do not let conventional morality or moderation get in the way of their grand political ventures (see 76–77 and 96). Yet, Callicles's admiration for selfish tyrants is surpassed by his admiration for public-spirited Athenian statesmen such as Pericles.⁶ Still, in both tyrant and statesman alike, Callicles sees a manly and virtuous capacity to protect oneself from evils. A dubious and hopeful notion of the self-sufficiency, even invulnerability, of political men thus serves as a basis for his criticisms of philosophers, who *deserve* a beating in part because they are unable to protect themselves from harm (see 75, 80, and 128). Indeed, the youth is strikingly quick to criticize vulnerability, and, as Hansen explains, Callicles's wariness of it leaves him incapable of embracing (conventional)

⁵ All translations of Plato's *Gorgias* from Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

⁶ See, however, Hansen's helpful discussion of Callicles's failure to mention Aristides "the Just" and Socrates's mention of Aristides in his myth (124–25).

justice as a virtue, a virtue he is nonetheless “attracted to” (132; cf. 98 and 128–34). “Despite his outspoken immoralism, Callicles feels with part of his mind or soul that justice is a genuine virtue which deserves to prosper,” yet his sense of the hostility of the world obscures this from him, and leads him to embrace “nature” over convention (131, 132). Even Callicles’s half-hearted endorsement of hedonism must be viewed in light of the youth’s exceptional wariness of vulnerability and admiration for invulnerability (108, 109, 114). And for that reason, Callicles’s hedonism must also be viewed in light of what the youth himself calls “the infuriating thing,” that is, the vulnerability of (conventional) justice (see 112–15, 119, and 130–38).⁷

In Hansen’s view, “the longing for justice to be protected might suggest, as its culmination, a desire for protection so complete that suffering injustice is not genuinely an evil at all” (147; cf. 128). In accordance with this view, the author meticulously interprets the famous myth that Socrates gives to Callicles; its portrayal of divine judgment in the afterlife “supports and is implied by beliefs which Callicles himself holds” (153). Is Hansen’s Callicles, like his Thrasymachus, in the grip of an unselfconscious piety?⁸ Apparently, the youth is hardly moved by Socrates’s myth (151), but perhaps this is only because his “other beliefs”—for example, the belief that religion is a tool used by the many to deceive the strong (71)—prevent such movement from occurring (153). Thus, unmoved by the myth, and having left Socrates’s arguments for the goodness of justice unrefuted, Callicles “will be dissonant in his whole life” (482b6).

By showing the dissonances within Callicles and within Thrasymachus, Hansen’s book illuminates the interplay of justice and the soul. His chapter on Dostoevsky, Gide, and Shakespeare continues to do the same. Still, readers will have to decide for themselves whether they follow and agree with all of his claims regarding piety, both conscious and “unselfconscious.” Indeed, in Hansen’s view, “piety is an aspect or consequence of belief in justice or morality, a belief even Richard [III] shares whether or not he realizes it” (175). Readers who remember what is at stake in such a weighty claim will find that Hansen’s book helpfully challenges them to address their own dissonances.

⁷ On these crucial points, compare 131–34 and 139n22 with Devin Stauffer, *The Unity of Plato’s “Gorgias”: Rhetoric, Justice, and the Philosophic Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 116–21. According to Hansen, “Callicles is attracted to (conventional) justice but frustrated by its weakness; and he also feels that a good man can take care of himself. The latter feeling is not simply an effect of the former, but is strengthened by it” (132). Hansen seems to think that Stauffer underemphasizes the latter feeling’s irreducibility to an effect of the former feeling (see 139n22).

⁸ Compare 71, 73, 99, 107, 132–34, 137, 153, 162, 164 and 175.