

## Thrasymachus, the Sight-lover

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The aim of this paper is to explain why Thrasymachus, upon first appearing in *Republic* I, prohibits Socrates from defining justice as what is good. I argue that Thrasymachus views such definitions as equivocal, since he conceives of the good as relative: what is good must be good *for* someone. This relative conception of the good makes Thrasymachus similar to the sight-lovers, who believe in good things, which are relatively good, but deny the existence of the good itself, which is absolutely good. Understanding Thrasymachus as a sight-lover permits an illuminating reframing of his outlook and his significance for the larger project of the *Republic*.

### I.

Thrasymachus bursts into the *Republic* by aggressively demanding that Socrates abandon his *elenctic* method and state what he thinks justice is (336b1-c6), but the demand comes with a prohibition:

And [a] don't tell me that [justice] is what is right, what is beneficial, what is profitable, what is gainful, or what is advantageous, but [b] tell me clearly and exactly what you are saying; for I won't accept such nonsense from you.<sup>1</sup> (336c6-d4)<sup>2</sup>

In [a] Thrasymachus prohibits a certain kind of definition; [b] explains why he does so: because the prohibited definitions are “unclear” and “inexact.” Discussion of [a]-[b] among commentators has been rare and brief, despite the enormous attention paid to Thrasymachus and his dispute with Socrates.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translations in this paper largely derive from Grube, G. M. A. 1992. *Plato: The Republic*. Revised by C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, to which I have occasionally made modifications for my own purposes.

<sup>2</sup> καὶ [a] ὅπως μοι μὴ ἐρεῖς ὅτι τὸ δέον ἐστὶν μὴδ' ὅτι τὸ ὠφέλιμον μὴδ' ὅτι τὸ λυσιτελοῦν μὴδ' ὅτι τὸ κερδαλέον μὴδ' ὅτι τὸ συμφέρον, ἀλλὰ [b] σαφῶς μοι καὶ ἀκριβῶς λέγε ὅτι ἂν λέγῃς: ὡς ἐγὼ οὐκ ἀποδέξομαι ἐὰν ὕθλους τοιοῦτους λέγῃς.

<sup>3</sup> The one exception to this general neglect is Welton, William A. 2006. “Thrasymachus vs. Socrates: What Counts as a Good Answer to the Question ‘What is Justice?’ (Republic 336b–9b).” *Apeiron* 39 (4): 293–317, who discusses the prohibition at much greater length. Though my own reading diverges from his, his article has helped sharpen my own views and on some points we are largely in agreement.

Thrasymachus appears to see a kind of unity among the prohibited terms, but what is it? An answer is provided at *Cratylus* 416e2-417a2, where Hermogenes mentions the very same terms and identifies them as “about what is good and fine [τὰ περὶ τὸ ἀγαθὸν τε καὶ καλόν].” All of the terms pick out things by signifying some way in which they are good, hence Socrates and his interlocutors’ homogenous treatment of them; they are, in effect, synonymous.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, while there is no explicit mention of “what is good” (τὸ ἀγαθόν, τὸ κάλον) in the prohibition, it is difficult to doubt that Thrasymachus intends it to be among the prohibited referents – indeed, what is good might stand in for any of the others.

The synonymy of the prohibited terms does not, however, explain why Thrasymachus finds them unclear and imprecise. On one quite popular reading of the prohibition, the terms all share a basic fault: they are just as unclear and controversial as ‘justice’ and so are unhelpful as *definentia*.<sup>5</sup> On this reading, Thrasymachus is objecting to any mention or use of these terms at all in a definition of justice. As popular as this reading is, it faces a significant problem in the form of Thrasymachus’ own definition of justice, for he himself will define it as what is advantageous (338c2) as well as what is good (343c3-4). If Thrasymachus were banning mention of the terms, then his definition would be inconsistent with his own strictures – this is precisely what Socrates claims at 339a7-8, highlighting the apparent conflict but treating it all the same as a minor issue. This very desire to minimize the inconsistency suggests that Plato thinks it is not the most urgent problem with Thrasymachus’ approach.

Certainly, Thrasymachus himself does not seem to suppose that there is any inconsistency between his critique and response – certainly not anything so obvious. He may well have good reason for this, for there is, after all, an important difference between his definitions and the prohibited ones, namely, that his definitions specify *whose* good justice is.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Thrasymachus treats this addition as quite important, ironically noting that Socrates presumably thinks the addition is “minor” (συμκρά: 339b1); once more, Plato’s decision to alert the reader to Thrasymachus’ modification of the term suggests that this is the source of his objection to Socrates. In other words, Thrasymachus objects to Socrates’ definitions of justice because they refer to what is good *without* relativizing it to a beneficiary. In defining justice as

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<sup>4</sup> As Welton 2006, 297 notes the synonymy of these terms also appears to underly *Cleitophon* 409c-d.

<sup>5</sup> For versions of this reading of the prohibition, see Adam, James. 1905. *The Republic of Plato*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 24 (s. v. 336d20); Shorey, Paul. 1937. *The Republic of Plato*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 39 (n. d); Sparshott, F. E. 1966. “Socrates and Thrasymachus.” *The Monist* 50, 456 and Sparshott, F. E. 1957. “Plato and Thrasymachus.” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 27, 58; and Welton 2006, 296.

<sup>6</sup> Cross, R. C., and Woosley, A. D. (1964). *Plato’s Republic: A Philosophical Commentary*. London/Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 24-5, are among the few who have noticed this. Welton 2006, 296 n. 6 notices it as well but appears to treat it as of minimal significance, relegating mention of it to a footnote.

what is good *simpliciter*, Socrates treats the good as something absolute, whereas Thrasymachus believes that what is good is relative.

There is a striking similarity between this view of the good and that offered by another much more famous sophist, Protagoras. In the eponymous dialogue Protagoras notes how “varied [ποικίλον] and many-sided [παντοδαπὸν] a thing is the good” (334b6-c1), so that nothing is absolutely good, but only relatively so. In light of Plato’s polemical tendency to treat sophists as unified by shared doctrinal commitments and to abstract from their differences, it is perhaps unsurprising if Thrasymachus is found to share Protagoras’ view.

Like Protagoras, Thrasymachus regards what is good as fundamentally relative. As Rachel Barney notes<sup>7</sup>, two assumptions inform this view. First is Thrasymachus’ belief “that wealth and power, and the pleasures they provide, are *the* goods in relation to which our ‘advantage’ must be assessed”<sup>8</sup>; second is his belief that these goods are zero-sum: “for one member of a community to have more of them is for another to have less”.<sup>9</sup> On this view there is no question of an absolute good, there is only the good of this or that sociopolitical group. Indeed, all that talk of absolute good does is obscure the true nature of justice as it operates in sociopolitical context.

## II.

Whatever its basis, there is no small irony in Thrasymachus’ charge that Socrates and his interlocutors are proceeding neither “clearly” (σαφῶς) nor “precisely” (ἀκριβῶς) in defining justice. For lack of clarity and precision is exactly what *Socrates* so often in Plato’s dialogues faults interlocutors with when they provide definitions.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Thrasymachus has a reason for his charge.

On the reading I am urging, Thrasymachus does not object to references to what is good in definitions of justice – indeed, he takes it as trivially true and uncontroversial that justice is what is good for *someone*; rather his prohibition is against defining justice without specifying

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<sup>7</sup> Barney, Rachel. 2017. “Callicles and Thrasymachus.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), §2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> A point made with citations in Leshner, J. H. 2010. “The Meaning of “saphēneia” in Plato’s Divided Line.” In *Plato’s Republic: A Critical Guide*, edited by Mark L. McPherran, 171-187. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 179-180. I am thinking, specifically, of what Leshner calls “settings” 2) and 4) in which σαφής and cognates occur in Plato.

who it is good for. Thrasymachus objects that Socrates neither implicitly nor explicitly relativizes the good to which he refers. As a result, Socrates' definition is, by Thrasymachus' lights, vague and ambiguous. This is problematic because it enables Socrates either to equivocate about the human good or to refer only vaguely to it; in either case, this would permit specious inferences and give his arguments a superficial cogency.

Such a charge of equivocation is, in fact, more than a possibility. Not only does Thrasymachus quite generally claim that Socrates fails to argue in good faith, but only speciously and sophistically; he accuses Socrates specifically of “doing harm to or in arguments” (ἐν τοῖς λόγοις or τὸν λόγον κακουργῶν: 338d3-4, 341a7-8). This is not, I think, simply a vague or general accusation of dialectical malfeasance. Precisely the same charge is levelled by Callicles against Socrates in the *Gorgias*, a dialogue often paired with *Republic I* not least due to similarities in Callicles' and Thrasymachus' attacks on justice.<sup>11</sup> Callicles deploys the charge when accusing Socrates of fallacious argument by equivocation:

This is in fact the clever trick you've thought of, with which you do harm in arguments [κακουργεῖς ἐν τοῖς λόγοις]: if a person makes a statement [about justice] in terms of law, you slyly question him in terms of nature; if he makes it in terms of nature, you question him in terms of law.<sup>12</sup> (483a2-4)<sup>13</sup>

What enables Socrates to proceed thus is his reference to justice without explicitly relativizing it to natural justice or legal justice. Socrates' “imprecise” and “unclear” references to justice permit his sophistical equivocations in argument. If Thrasymachus is using the relevant phrase in the same way, then he must view Socrates as guilty of a similar move in *Republic I*.

On the two occasions when Thrasymachus explicitly uses the phrase in the *Republic*, there seems little doubt that he is accusing Socrates of equivocation. In the first case, Socrates is criticizing Thrasymachus' first definition of justice as the advantage of the stronger (338c4-d2). He mockingly asks whether Polydamas the pancratists' diet is just because it is good for the stronger; to this, Thrasymachus replies with his accusation (338d3-4). It seems clear that

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<sup>11</sup> Another dialogue thought by some (e.g., Welton 2006, 297) to be relevant here is the *Clitophon*, specifically 409c-d. I am dubious of this connection, for the central issue in that passage is not equivocation at all but a problematic vagueness that bespeaks a lack of knowledge (see 409d-end). It is, therefore, not merely the more measured nature of *Clitophon* that explains why the charge that Socrates ἐν τοῖς λόγοις or τὸν λόγον κακουργεῖν is nowhere present in that dialogue.

<sup>12</sup> This translation is based on Zeyl's in Cooper, John. 1997. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, but I have modified it to hew more closely to the Greek.

<sup>13</sup> ὁ δὴ καὶ σὺ τοῦτο τὸ σοφὸν κατανενοηκῶς κακουργεῖς ἐν τοῖς λόγοις, ἐὰν μὲν τις κατὰ νόμον λέγη, κατὰ φύσιν ὑπερωτῶν, ἐὰν δὲ τὰ τῆς φύσεως, τὰ τοῦ νόμου.

the charge is that Socrates is equivocating between the sense of ‘stronger’ as *physically* stronger and the other sense that Thrasymachus has in mind, namely, more powerful socio-politically.

In the second case, Thrasymachus is responding to Socrates’ argument that the rulers will sometimes do through ignorance what is disadvantageous to themselves; if justice is whatever the rulers prescribe, then justice is sometimes advantageous, but sometimes not (339b7-e8). To this, Thrasymachus draws a distinction between a ruler in the “precise sense” (κατὰ τὸν ἀκριβῆ λόγον: 340e1-2), according to which a ruler never errs, and a looser sense of ruler, employed more generally; he then accuses Socrates of equivocation between the two (341a7-8).

The explicit charge of equivocation is not found in Thrasymachus’ initial outburst when he institutes his prohibition; nevertheless, there is good reason to think that it is precisely what is bothering him. Thrasymachus’ entry into Book I is preceded by the final portion (335a6-e5) of Socrates’ discussion with Polemarchus. Plato clearly suggests that this discussion is what prompts Thrasymachus’ entry. Not only does he burst into the text at the conclusion of that discussion, but Socrates makes plain, first, that “he had attempted many times to take over the discussion” (336b1-2) and, second, that Socrates observed him before he entered “just as [the] discussion began to make him savage [ἤρχετο...ἐξαργιρίεσθαι]” (336d7-8).

More importantly, the substance of that argument, specifically its conclusion, amounts to a negation of the account of justice that Thrasymachus will give, for Socrates attacks the idea that justice might be bad for anyone. He insists that such a view belongs only to tyrants in history who mistakenly supposed themselves to have “great power [μέγα...δύνασθαι]” (336a5-7). Not only will Thrasymachus himself insist on the happiness and excellence of tyrants, but he will identify them as examples of his view that justice is the advantage of the stronger and injustice one’s own benefit (344a4-344e8). For Thrasymachus, it is precisely “the person with great power” (note the similar phrasing: τὸν μέγала δυνάμενον, 344a1) who is happiest and best by practicing “complete” injustice (344a4-5).

The argument at issue is against part of Polemarchus’ definition of justice, namely, that justice is (in part) harming one’s enemies (335a7-b1). In criticizing this claim, Socrates argues roughly as follows (335b2-d13). To be harmed is to be made worse, therefore, less good. But goodness cannot make things less good and since justice is good, neither can justice make things less good. Therefore, it cannot be just to harm anyone (e.g., one’s enemies).

To understand Thrasymachus’ objection to this argument, we need first note the role that goodness (the good, what is good) plays in the argument. Socrates insists that goodness cannot make things bad and since justice is good, neither can it make things bad. This is a view

of goodness as absolute as opposed to relative; to see that this must be so, we need only consider the alternative and relativize the good. Consider a view of the goodness in question as the goodness *of the rulers*. On such a view, justice is good, but because the goodness is that *of the rulers* rather than absolute goodness, it is entirely possible that justice is simultaneously bad for the subjects. Indeed, we may go further, it may be that *through* being good for the rulers it is bad for the subjects – this, after all, is precisely Thrasymachus’ position and it helps explain why the argument prompts his enraged entry into the discussion. Socrates obscures this possibility by treating goodness as absolute, but that is precisely the position that Thrasymachus rejects. No wonder, then, that Socrates’ argument strikes Thrasymachus as sophistical.

### III.

The distinction between relative and absolute forms of *F* (or *F*-ness), whether this is the good, the advantageous, or whatever, looms large in Plato’s thought. It is important not to presume that its appearance in the dispute between Thrasymachus and Socrates is of merely parochial significance. In particular, the distinction is central to one sort of argument for the existence of Forms, instances of which appear throughout Plato’s dialogues.<sup>14</sup> A particularly clear example of this kind of argument is provided in the famous “summoners” passage of *Republic* VII (523a1–526b4), where Socrates explains the importance of arithmetic for drawing one towards being (523a3, 524e1, 525c5–6), that is, towards the Forms.<sup>15</sup>

In the passage, Socrates identifies a class of “summoners” (τὰ παρακαλοῦντα: 523b9), perceptions that summon the understanding (ἡ νόησις) to reflect on the Forms. Though he provides an example with regard to the tallness/shortness of fingers, it is clear that the points apply equally to goodness/badness, piety/impiety, *inter alia*. One perceives one’s ring finger

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<sup>14</sup> The distinction I make between relative and absolute forms of the *F* or *F*-ness is intimately related to one much discussed in the literature: that between “complete” and “incomplete” predicates, introduced by Owen, G. E. L. 1957. “A Proof in the Περὶ Ἴδεῶν.” *The Journal of Hellenistic Studies* 77 (1), 108–9. Brentlinger, John. 1972. “Incomplete Predicates and the Two-World Theory of the *Phaedo*.” *Phronesis* 17 (1), 70–1, provides a logically perspicuous analysis; for more recent discussions of this issue, see Silverman, Allan. 2002. *The Dialectic of Essence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 84–7, and Harte, Verity. 2019. “Plato’s Metaphysics.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, 2nd ed., edited by Gail Fine, 455–480. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 465–478.

<sup>15</sup> For other examples, see *Euthyphro* 6e–8a, *Laches* 190e–191b, 192b–193c, *Hippias Major* 288c–289a, *Phaedo* 100d–101b, and even earlier in the *Republic* I.331c–d and 475d–480a. Nehamas, Alexander. 1973. “Predication and Forms of Opposites in the *Phaedo*.” *The Review of Metaphysics* 26 (3): 461–491 provides detailed analysis of several different instances of this form of argument. See also Nehamas, Alexander. 1979. “Self–Predication and Plato’s Theory of Forms.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (2), 94–5, and Nehamas, Alexander. 1975. “Plato on the Imperfection of the Sensible World.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 12 (2), 108.

as simultaneously short (relative to the middle finger) and long (relative to the pinky finger); this is the phenomenon referred to as the “compresence of opposites”.<sup>16</sup> “[T]he soul is puzzled as to what the sense signifies” longness or shortness to be (524a5-6), since what seem to be two opposed things are mixed together and indistinguishable. In consequence, the soul is forced to call upon the understanding, which can make sense of the confusion only by grasping what longness and shortness are. The nature, essence or being of the relevant property is what Plato identifies as the Form and what is picked-out in the definition of the relevant property as what causally explains sensible things possessing it. These Forms must be purely intelligible precisely because perceptions “produce no sound result” (523b3-4); in making sense of summoners, the soul must ascend from the perceptible realm of becoming to the intelligible realm of being, the realm of the Forms.

The compresence of opposites is a consequence of the fact that sensible things manifest properties in a relative way; in the case of the example, the longness/shortness in the finger is relative to the length of other fingers – it is an artifact of the participation relation between Forms and sensible things. The finger manifests longness in relation to one finger and shortness in relation to another; it is the relative nature of the manifestation of properties that makes them problematic and requires the positing of Forms. By contrast, the Forms are not thus qualified, a point Plato makes most explicitly perhaps in the *Symposium*, when speaking of the Form of the Beautiful:

it is not [1] beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor [2] beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor [3] beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it [4] beautiful here but ugly there, as it would be if it were beautiful for some people and ugly for others.<sup>17</sup> (211a2-5)<sup>18</sup>

Socrates here lists four different ways in which beauty/ugliness may be qualified, emphasizing that the Form of Beauty/the Beautiful is absolutely beautiful rather than merely relatively so. As noted, the same applies to the case of the other Forms, most saliently for our purposes, Goodness; in general, the Form of the *F* is treated by Plato as being *F* absolutely – this seems the force of Plato’s claims that Forms are “always the same in all respects” or “always are” (484b4, 485b1-3).

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<sup>16</sup> Owen 1957, 110.

<sup>17</sup> From Nehamas and Woodruff’s translation in Cooper 1997.

<sup>18</sup> οὐ τῆ μὲν καλόν, τῆ δ’ αἰσχρόν, οὐδὲ τοτὲ μὲν, τοτὲ δὲ οὐ, οὐδὲ πρὸς μὲν τὸ καλόν, πρὸς δὲ τὸ αἰσχρόν, οὐδ’ ἔνθα μὲν καλόν, ἔνθα δὲ αἰσχρόν, ὡς τισὶ μὲν ὄν καλόν, τισὶ δὲ αἰσχρόν.

#### IV.

The distinction between relative and absolute *F*-ness, which informs the distinction between Forms and sensible things, provides a way of framing Thrasymachus' prohibition. Put simply, Thrasymachus' prohibition mandates an account of justice only in terms of relative rather than absolute goodness. To be sure, this is not how Thrasymachus himself understands it, for he views claims of absolute goodness as problematic. Either a) such claims are implicitly relative, in which case they should be made explicitly relative to avoid vagueness or equivocation; or b) such claims are not implicitly relative, in which case they are irremediably vague and equivocal, which makes them not well-formed; indeed, they are not claims at all. In the case of b), such claims are neither precise nor clear, which is exactly the charge levelled by Thrasymachus against Socrates' definitions.

Thrasymachus never defines justice as absolutely advantageous or good, but always specifies to whom it is advantageous or good, whether the stronger (338c1-2), the regime in power (338e1-339a4), or simply another (343c3-4). In each of these cases, what is good relative to one group or person is bad relative to another, so that the compresence of opposites is baked into his definitions. Even on those occasions where the relativization is not explicitly made, it is usually a small matter to make it explicit.

Once Thrasymachus' prohibition is framed in this way, it is possible to see him as being very similar to the "sight-lovers" (φιλοθεάμονες) introduced in Book V (475d1–476e2) by Glaucon; these "strange people" (ἄποιοι) will appear to count as philosophers according to Socrates' characterization of them as "lovers of learning" (φιλομαθεῖς). It is vital that Socrates distinguish true philosophers from those who merely appear to be so, especially in the context of 5<sup>th</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> century Athens where confusion of the two was common and likely.<sup>19</sup> It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that Thrasymachus should share much in common with that group of individuals who, although "like" philosophers (475e2) and so mistaken for such by many, are in fact not.

Socrates describes the sight-lovers as those who believe in the existence of beautiful or just or good *things* – that is, *F* things – but do not believe in the existence of the *F* itself, the

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<sup>19</sup> See Halliwell, Stephen. 1993. *Plato: Republic 5*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 201 for discussion of the "highly contestable" nature of φιλόσοφος. For a more recent and thorough examination of the evidence about φιλόσοφος and its usage, one not inconsistent with Halliwell, see Moore, Christopher. 2020. *Calling Philosophers Names: On the Origins of a Discipline*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. especially chapters 5, 6 and 8. While Moore argues for continuity among the referents of the term, he does not deny that Plato is responsible for a controversial restriction of it.



Form of the *F* (476b4–8).<sup>20</sup> Philosophers, by contrast, believe in the existence of both the Form of *F*-ness and the *F* things that participate in it (476c9–d3). The upshot is that the sight-lovers possess only “opinion” (δόξα) while “knowledge” (γνώμη) is possessed by the true philosophers alone (476d5-6).

Thrasymachus’ status as a sight-lover helps to explain his approach to the question of the nature of justice. As one recent line of interpretation of Thrasymachus’ approach has it, he is “offering an empirical and descriptive account of the way justice is commonly practiced, as opposed to a normative or analytic definition”.<sup>21</sup> 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. Thrasymachus conceives of goodness and justice, etc., as grounded in sensible things and abstracts his account of the nature of justice from empirical data.

Socrates notes the intense difficulty of convincing the sight-lovers of the existence of the Forms because of their confused dream-like state, which bespeaks a kind of psychic illness (476d8–e2); he notes this in terms that explicitly recall his difficult and ultimately unsuccessful interaction with Thrasymachus. The violence of that interaction is recalled too when Socrates imagines the sight-lovers becoming “angry” (χαλεπαίνη: 476d8) with those who try to persuade them of the existence and nature of the Forms – the same word and its cognates are used repeatedly in relation to Thrasymachus (336e2: χαλεπός, 337a1-2: χαλεπαίνεσθαι, 354a12-13: χαλεπαίνων). Indeed, the anger and frustration reflects an inability to grasp what is being argued and discussed. For Thrasymachus, Socrates’ approach can be rendered intelligible only as sophisticated trickery and specious argument, a classic case of “making the worse argument the stronger” (*Apology* 18b8–c1).

The final bit of evidence I want to consider in favor of reading Thrasymachus as a sight-lover is his reaction to Socrates’ response to his prohibition. In his response, Socrates remarks:

You knew very well that if you ask someone how much twelve is, and, as you ask, you warn him by saying “Don’t tell me, man, that twelve is twice six, or three times four, or six times two, four times

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<sup>20</sup> The following discussion relies on the reading of the sight-lovers passage put forth by Baltzly, Dirk. 1997. “Knowledge and Belief in Republic V.” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 79, 243-52. I agree that “the sight-lovers are people who do not share Plato’s foundational presuppositions about what is required to answer a ‘What is it?’ question” (243); among these presuppositions is the ontology of Forms. However, I depart from Baltzly in thinking that the sight-lovers must include the sophists. For another discussion from which I have benefitted considerably, see Penner, Terry. 2006. “The Forms in the Republic.” In *The Blackwell Guide to Plato’s Republic*, edited by Gerasimos Santas, 234-262. Oxford/Malden/Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 246-8.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, Merrick E. 2016. “Thrasymachus’ Sophistic Account of Justice in *Republic* I.” *Ancient Philosophy* 36 (1), 156. Anderson cites a number of scholars who articulate and defend such an approach.

three, for I won't accept such nonsense," then you'll see clearly that no one could answer a question framed like that. (337a8-b6)<sup>22</sup>

Thrasymachus replies to this with a sarcastic retort suggesting that he thinks the mathematical example has little to do with the case of justice.<sup>23</sup>

But as readers of the *Republic*, we know that the mathematical example is deeply relevant.<sup>24</sup> Not only is arithmetic crucial to turning the soul from the world of perceptual becoming to the world of intelligible being, but arithmetical claims are grounded in and made true by the Forms.<sup>25</sup> This being so, it should be unsurprising if Plato portrays Thrasymachus balking at the mathematical example, since Thrasymachus balks at the very idea of explanation in terms of Forms, in particular, for our purposes, the Form of the Good.

## V.

I have argued that Thrasymachus' view of the good as always relative indicates that he is intended by Plato to be a representative of the sight-lovers. Such a view explains various aspects of Thrasymachus' character and outlook: his indignant entry into Book I, his empirical methodology, his intense anger at what he views as Socrates' sophistic methods, his rejection of the mathematical example, and his prohibition of certain answers to the question "what is justice?"

This view also explains the dialectical stalemate between Socrates and Thrasymachus at the end of Book I, which underwrites the dissatisfaction of all the discussants with the argument thus far and which prompts the decision to start all over again in Book II. The heart of this stalemate is a fundamental disagreement about the nature of the good, which reflects a disagreement in theoretical approach. Thrasymachus, the sight-lover, conceives of the good in worldly terms as always and everywhere relative; Socrates, the partisan of the Forms, conceives of the good as absolute, a transcendent Form accessible only to the understanding. The resolution of this disagreement must wait for the epistemological and metaphysical reflections

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<sup>22</sup> εὖ οὖν ἤδησθα ὅτι εἴ τινα ἔροιο ὅποσα ἐστὶν τὰ δώδεκα, καὶ ἐρόμενος προείποις αὐτῶ— “Ὅπως μοι, ὦ ἄνθρωπε, μὴ ἐρεῖς ὅτι ἐστὶν τὰ δώδεκα δις ἕξ μηδ' ὅτι τρις τέτταρα μηδ' ὅτι ἑξάκις δύο μηδ' ὅτι τετράκις τρία· ὡς οὐκ ἀποδέξομαι σου ἐὰν τοιαῦτα φλυαρῆς” —διῆλον οἶμαι σοι ἦν ὅτι οὐδεὶς ἀποκρινοῖτο τῶ οὕτως πυνθανομένῳ.

<sup>23</sup> Welton 2006, 297-8.

<sup>24</sup> This point has been rigorously argued and investigated by Welton 2006.

<sup>25</sup> The proof text here is the “summoner's passage” at *Rep.* VII.523a1-526b4. The issue of whether mathematical claims are “about” the Forms is a fraught one, which I have tried to avoid taking a stand on here. For a helpful discussion of this issue, with which I am largely in sympathy, see Franklin, Lee. 2012. “Inventing Intermediates: Mathematical Discourse and Its Objects in *Republic* VII.” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 50 (4): 483-506.

of Books V-VII. Thus, Books V-VII function not as a mere digression, as is sometimes supposed, but as an integral part of Socrates' response to Thrasymachus.

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