

Foreword

This volume presents the English translation of a selection of 15 essays out of the 82 comprised in the seven-volume commentary on Plato's *Republic*, edited by Mario Vegetti and published in the series 'Elenchos' of the publishing house Bibliopolis (Naples) over the course of nine years, between 1998 and 2007.

This commentary is organised as follows: each volume regards a specific book of the *Republic*, or more than one if they form a unitary group (2-3, 6-7, 8-9), and comprises an introduction and an annotated Italian translation of the Greek text, both produced by the editor of the commentary¹ – respectively following Burnet's edition for the first seven books, Slings' text for the remaining ones – accompanied by a group of essays which examine the most important interpretative questions raised by the Platonic text.² Since the very beginning, the complexity of these questions required to involve in the project a group of scholars with different types of expertise. The original group included scholars affiliated to the Department of Philosophy of the University of Pavia. However, given that an increasing number of new competences were required, other specialists have been invited to join the project; the majority of these additional members come from other Italian Universities, while two of them are based in other countries. Of course, no 'orthodox' line of interpretation was imposed on the collaborators, and each scholar has been free to express his or her views in complete autonomy. Nonetheless, the nature of commentary is not that of a heterogeneous collection of separate contributions, because each essay has been discussed collectively and all of them follow a few basic methodological criteria.

It may be useful to summarise here the nature of these interpretative criteria, which were originally outlined in the *Preface* to the first volume.

a) First of all, we believe that contextualising the text in its historical and cultural environment, as well as understanding its literary form, are necessary (though of course not sufficient) conditions to reach a meaningful interpretation.

b) We based our work on the methodological assumption that the *Republic*, as perhaps all the other Platonic dialogues, is to be considered as a relatively autonomous text in the context of Plato's thought: that is to say that it does not presuppose, nor it implicates directly and cumulatively theories and arguments developed in other dialogues. The dialogue's autonomy is certainly relative because the author of the dialogues is the same and, therefore, it must be interpreted in keeping with the general lines of Plato's philosophy. However, considering the dialogue as relatively autonomous rules out the possibility to interpret it as an organic and integrated part of a continuous and homogeneous system of theories, while it imposes to look for answers to the questions it raises primarily within the argumentative line of the dialogue itself.

c) In addition, we think that the characters of the dialogue are denoted by a certain autonomy with regard to their theoretical views, which must be interpreted in keeping with their own specificity and in the light of their cultural and philosophical role; in other words, these

¹ All the introductions to these volumes, as well as the Italian translation of the whole dialogue, entirely revised on the basis of Slings' OCT edition, are now available in a single volume (Platone, *La Repubblica*, ed. by M. Vegetti, Bur, Milan, 2007).

² For a complete list of these essays, see the end of this *Foreword*. Volume 7 includes also a 121-page bibliography that includes all the titles quoted in the commentary.

characters – especially Polemarchus, Thrasymachus, Glaucon and Adeimantus – should not be regarded as mere pretexts for Socrates' refutations. The role of Socrates as well should be interpreted on the basis of the same principles: the dialogical character of Socrates cannot be immediately identified with the author of the dialogue, even though in the *Republic* the character Socrates presents topics and arguments that are doubtless part of Plato's philosophy: in this sense, the dialogue represents this philosophy in the dialectical process of its making. For these reasons, the dialogue and its characters should not be considered as mere 'literary decorations' of a systematic exposition of Plato's philosophy; on the other hand, though, the environment of the dialogues is not entirely and 'ironically' detached from the philosophy of the author, which otherwise would be completely inaccessible on the basis of his text.

d) We deemed it necessary to analyse the theoretical structures of the dialogues also in relation to the philosophical theories that seem to be constant elements of Plato's thought. We examined the theoretical consistency of the structure of the arguments both within the dialogue and in relation to the general lines of Plato's thought. Particular attention was devoted to epistemological and ontological issues, which are strictly related to the ethical and political aspects of the dialogue, since they are mutually connected to each other due to the reciprocal correlation of Being, Truth and the Good.

e) It seemed useful to integrate the commentary with essays that analyse some of the most important moments of the modern and contemporary *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the text (Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Freud, Dumézil) even though this examination is necessarily incomplete, since a comprehensive one would require a separate work.³

Finally, it must be noted that the necessarily limited selection of essays included in this volume is not based on any kind of qualitative judgment: in other words, these essays are not the ones that we regard as 'the best' among those contained in the volumes of the commentary. Instead our aim was that of presenting, within the bounds of possibility, a number of critical assessments of the most relevant aspects of the dialogue (politics, ethics, epistemology, ontology), in order to provide the readers with some samples of the interpretative style of the commentary together with some of the results that we think we have obtained in the interpretation of the *Republic*. This inevitable selection unfortunately led to the exclusion of those essays that were mainly concerned with the literary and psychological aspects of the dialogues, or with its *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Of course, we hope that the limited specimens presented in this volume will stimulate the readers to examine more extensively the collective work from which these essays derive.

M.V. – F.F. – T.L.

³ The story of the tradition of the *Republic* was the object of two conferences, whose proceedings have been published respectively in *La 'Repubblica' di Platone nella tradizione antica*, edited by M. Vegetti and M. Abbate, Bibliopolis, Napoli 1999, and *I Decembrio e la tradizione della 'Repubblica' di Platone tra Medioevo e Umanesimo*, edited by M. Vegetti and P. Pissavino, Bibliopolis, Napoli 2005. See further M. Vegetti, *Un paradigma in cielo. Platone politico da Aristotele al Novecento*, Carocci, Roma 2009.

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General Index of the Commentary

Volume I – Book 1

Katabasis (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)
 Bendidie e Panatenee (Silvia Campese-Silvia Gastaldi, Pavia)
 Cefalo (Silvia Campese, Pavia)
Dikaion-Dikaiosyne (Silvia Gastaldi, Pavia)
 Polemarco (Silvia Gastaldi, Pavia)
Techne (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)
 La battaglia (Lucia Canino, Pavia)
 La belva (Lucia Canino, Pavia)
 Trasimaco (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)
Misthotike (Silvia Campese, Pavia)
Prooimion e *nomos* (Massimo Stella, Pavia)

Volume II – Book 2 and 3

Glaucone (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)
 Gige (Francesca Calabi, Pavia)
 L'infelicità del giusto e la crisi del socratismo platonico (Fulvia De Luise – Giuseppe Farinetti, Alba)
 Adimanto (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)
 Socrate, Adimanto, Glaucone. Racconto di ricerca e rappresentazione comica (Massimo Stella, Pavia)
Grammata (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)
 La genesi della *polis* (Silvia Campese – Lucia Canino, Pavia)

Paideia/mythologia (Silvia Gastaldi, Pavia)
Hyponoia. L'ombra di Antistene (Fulvia De Luise – Giuseppe Farinetti, Alba)
Theologia (Franco Ferrari, Salerno)
 Medicina (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)
 La nobile menzogna (Francesca Calabi, Pavia)

Volume III – Book 4

Infelicità degli *archontes* e felicità della *polis* (Fulvia De Luise – Giuseppe Farinetti, Alba)
 Ricchezza/povertà e l'unità della *polis* (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)
Nomos e legislazione (Silvia Gastaldi, Pavia)
Sophia/logistikon (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)
Andreia/thymoeides (Francesca Calabi, Pavia)
Sophrosyne (Silvia Gastaldi, Pavia)
 La trottola (Ferruccio Franco Repellini, Milano)
Epithymia/epithymetikon (Silvia Campese, Pavia)
 Freud e la *Repubblica*: l'anima, la società, la gerarchia (Massimo Stella, Pavia)
 La *Repubblica* e Dumézil: gerarchia e sovranità (Patrizia Pinotti, Pavia)

Volume IV – Book V

Beltista eiper dynata. Lo statuto dell'utopia nella *Repubblica* (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)

La prima ondata: il “dramma femminile” (Silvia Campese, Pavia)

Nudità (Silvia Campese, Pavia)

La *technē antilogikē* fra *erizein* e *dialegesthai* (Fulvia De Luise Giuseppe Farinetti, Alba)

L'utopia dalla commedia al dialogo platonico (Anna Beltrametti, Pavia)

La seconda ondata: la comunanza di donne e figli (Silvia Campese, Pavia)

La “razza pura” (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)

La guerra della *kallipolis* (Silvia Gastaldi, Pavia)

Il regno filosofico (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)

Teoria delle idee e ontologia (Franco Ferrari, Salerno)

Conoscenza e opinione: il filosofo e la città (Franco Ferrari, Salerno)

Aristotele discute la *Repubblica* (Francesca Calabi, Pavia)

La critica aristotelica alla *Repubblica* nel secondo libro della *Politica*, il *Timeo* e le *Leggi* (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)

La *kallipolis* di Rousseau (Fulvia De Luise, Trento)

Il confronto di Marx con Platone (attraverso Hegel) (Giuseppe Farinetti, Alba)

Volume V – Books 6 and 7

Il sapere del filosofo (Franco Trabattoni, Milano)

L'allegoria della nave (Silvia Gastaldi, Pavia)

Il filosofo selvatico (Fulvia De Luise – Giuseppe Farinetti, Alba)

Megiston mathema. L'idea del “buono” e le sue funzioni (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)

L'idea del bene: collocazione ontologica e funzione causale (Franco Ferrari, Salerno)

Il sole e la sua luce (Francesca Calabi, Pavia)

La linea e la caverna (Ferruccio Franco Repellini, Milano)

Dialettica (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)

La caverna (Silvia Campese, Pavia)

Le matematiche al tempo di Platone e la loro riforma (Elisabetta Cattanei, Cagliari)

Astronomia e armonica (Ferruccio Franco Repellini, Milano)

Teoria musicale e antiempirismo (Angelo Meriani, Salerno)

I filosofi a scuola e la scuola dei filosofi (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)

Il Bene nell'interpretazione di Plotino e di Proclo (Michele Abbate, Salerno)

Volume VI – Books 8 and 9

Il tempo, la storia, l'utopia (Mario Vegetti, Pavia)

Il numero geometrico (Geoffroy de Calataÿ, Bruxelles)

L'*oikos* e la decadenza delle città (Silvia Campese, Pavia)
 Timocrazia (Francesca Calabi, Pavia)
 Platone contro la democrazia (e l'oligarchia) (Lucio Bertelli, Torino)
 La città delle api (Fabio Roscalla, Pavia)
 Il tiranno (Giovanni Giorgini, Bologna)
 Desideri: fenomenologia degenerativa e strategie di controllo (Marco Solinas, Firenze)
 L'infelicità dell'ingiusto: il caso del tiranno (Silvia Gastaldi, Pavia)
 I piaceri giusti e l'esperienza del filosofo (Fulvia De Luise, Trento)
 L'immagine dell'anima e la felicità del giusto (Silvia Gastaldi, Pavia)
Repubblica VIII e *Leggi* III (Francisco Lisi, Getafe)

Volume VII – Book 10

La *mimesis* e l'anima (Silvia Gastaldi, Pavia)
 Il problema dell'esistenza di idee di *artefacta* (Franco Ferrari, Salerno)
 Φυτουργός, δημιουργός, μιμητής: chi fa cosa in *Resp.* X 596a-597e? (Francesco Fronterotta, Lecce)
 La prova dell'immortalità dell'anima (608c-612c) (Maurizio Migliori, Macerata)
 Il mito di Er: le fonti (Francesca Calabi, Pavia)
 Il mito di Er: significati morali (Fulvia De Luise, Trento)
 Il fuso e la Necessità (Ferruccio Franco Repellini, Milano)
 La filatrice cosmica (Silvia Campese, Pavia)

Chapter 1

Thrasymachus: power unveiled

1. The character of Thrasymachus

The character of Thrasymachus in *Republic* 1 doubtless represents one of the most extraordinary Platonic literary constructions, a subtle combination of respect and irony that comes close to comic tones but never reaches caricature, carefully fashioned from the initial violence of the rhetorician bursting in the discussion until his final girly blushing, after Socrates' refutation.

At the same time, Plato entrusts this character with the crucial task of raising the conceptual tone of the dialogue dramatically, after a re-examination of common moral beliefs that took place in the opening discussion with Cephalus and Polemarchus. The complex of theses defended by Thrasymachus, which represent a powerful Platonic synthesis of the most radical claims held in the Athenian ethico-political debate at the turn of 5-4th century, will, explicitly or implicitly, determine the overall development of Books 2-9 by imposing a drastic shift from private to public dimension; only at the end of this complex journey they can be finally considered overcome, if not completely refuted. Both the psychological and conceptual autonomy of the character Thrasymachus from the historical figure of Thrasymachus the sophist-rhetorician seems to be limited by one constraint only: the possibility to recognise the latter in at least *some* of the former's characteristics.

These features were probably the very psychological and intellectual characteristics that led Plato to choose Thrasymachus as the main character of *Republic* 1, as well as to entrust him with the crucial role we have already mentioned. Thrasymachus is described as a capable and threatening individual (*deinos*, 337a1), a characterisation which corresponds to the historically trustworthy portrait that Plato gives of him in the *Phaedrus*. Here both his rhetorical power and the violence of his psychological attitude are underlined: the sophist is described as *deinos* and *kratistos*, culminating in his Homeric personification as the 'Chalcedonian power' (267c-d). His name may have concurred as well in order to determine Plato's dramatic choice since, according to Aristotle's testimony (*Rhet.* 2.23 1400b19), Thrasymachus' name was already perceived by his contemporaries as a talking name ('the violent fighter'): all these elements are perfectly suitable to the violent radicalness of the theses defended by Thrasymachus in the dialogue. Plato exploits this opportunity to emphasise also another trait of the historical Thrasymachus: his professional activity as teacher of rhetoric and logographer, for which he is willing to ask money as compensation to teach his views on justice (337a). Plato may have reproduced as well, at least at the beginning of his speech, the essential character of Thrasymachus' rhetorical style, if he was actually capable of expressing his thoughts in a sharp and clear manner, as in the testimony of Dionysius of Halicarnassus (DK A3). Thrasymachus' opening section, in 338c, shows exactly these stylistic qualities.

Although not explicitly attested, it is also probable that the cultural and political extraction of the historical Thrasymachus represented an additional element that could be recognised in Plato's character, as the former might have been close to those sophistic circles that

shared various forms of radical criticism to the ‘ideology of the city,’⁴ in direct opposition to Protagoras and, as we will see later on, to Socrates himself.

2. The ‘historical’ Thrasymachus

Two common misunderstandings, in my view, hindered the interpretation of Plato’s Thrasymachus, contributing to outline a trivialised or misleading image of this figure. The first consisted in the attempt to unify the ‘historical’ Thrasymachus with Plato’s character, or even in using the latter as a testimony on the former. In this perspective, the testimony provided by three speech fragments become crucial: here Thrasymachus is presented as a supporter of *patrios nomos*, the ‘ancient constitution’ (DK B1), an opposer of the tyrant Archelaus (B2), longing for that justice that has been forgotten by gods and men (B8). From these fragments we get an image of Thrasymachus as a moralist, disillusioned by the development of human events, and therefore his speech in the *Republic* would represent an embittered vent of frustration. This image, sustained by authoritative scholars such as Untersteiner, Guthrie and Kerferd,⁵ which aims at redeeming Thrasymachus from the reputation of being a cynical, immoralist, philotyrannical intellectual, image associated to his name ever since Plato’s time, unfortunately is not well grounded. Fragments B1 and B2 derive from logographic texts, in which the author defended his client’s point of view, and there is no good reason to assume that he agreed with it. In so far as B8 is concerned, it is a fragment by Hermias who, one thousand years later, could only have known Thrasymachus from Plato’s texts and developed for the first time this ‘moralising’ interpretation (repeated, as we have seen, by numerous modern scholars). In order to understand Plato’s Thrasymachus, then, we should forget the so-called ‘historical’ Thrasymachus, as very little of his theoretical and political positions can be reasonably reconstructed.

The second, subtler misunderstanding consists, as we will see in detail later, in hypothesising some kind of coherence between the two principal theses argued by Thrasymachus in the *Republic*. Here it will suffice to say that, if we postulate this coherence, we would end up with an image of Thrasymachus which emphasises only the second, philotyrannical aspect of his character, as Kerferd does; this approach encourages us to identify him, in a trivialising manner, with Callicles’ arguments in the *Gorgias*, arguments that are definitely significant but less radical and powerful than the Thrasymachean ones represented in *Republic*.⁶

Later on we will argue these points further. However, getting rid of the illusion to reconstruct an ‘historical’ Thrasymachus as well as getting rid of the temptation to identify this character with other figures such as Callicles opens up a new space to understand the independent philosophical role that Thrasymachus plays in *Republic* 1: a role that, in my view, consists in arguing a radicalised and rigorised version of different positions (not necessarily compatible with each other) which were so diffused in many intellectual circles during the crisis of the *polis* that Plato felt necessary to evoke in their stronger form (that is to say in his own interpretation, which overcame the possible conceptual limits of who historically argued those points). This move was necessary for Plato in order to use them to develop, both posi-

⁴ For the concept of ‘ideology of the city’ and its interpretative functions, cf. Lanza-Vegetti (1977), 13-27.

⁵ For Untersteiner, who follows an earlier essay by A. Levi, see the commentary to A6 in Untersteiner (1954) and (1967) vol. 2, 196 ff.; cf. Guthrie (1971) and Kerferd (1976).

⁶ The coherence thesis has been argued by Kerferd (1976), as well as Kerferd (1964), 12-16. This thesis is sustained as well by Hourani (1962), 110-120 (even though he proposes a legalistic interpretation, rather than Kerferd’s naturalist one). Kerferd’s position is followed by Harrison (1967), 27-39 and Neschke-Hentschke (1985), 9-25, who emphasises the question of *pleonexia*.

tively and negatively, the theoretical structure of the dialogue. Thrasymachus represents the ‘real’ adversary in the dialogue, capable of arguing effectively against Socrates, forcing him to overcome his own limits and, therefore, uplifting the conceptual level of the dialogue to a dimension suitable to its final aims.

3. Thrasymachus’ rigour

In order to outline Thrasymachus’ role appropriately, it is necessary to start from a methodological question that, in my view, has not been adequately dealt with so far. Thrasymachus’ approach to the problems related to understanding the concept of *just* consists essentially in a methodological prohibition: one must not develop his arguments by means of reduction or assimilation of the analysed concept to other ones. For example, Thrasymachus prohibits to equate the concept of *just* with the term *deon*, i.e. what should be done, or with the whole family of quasi-synonyms related to the notion of profit, such as *ophelimon*, *lysiteloun*, *kerdaleon*, *xympheron* – all common items in the ethico-political debate of the 5th century. This procedure is far from unfamiliar to Socrates himself: it will suffice to mention the identification of beauty with *propon*, *chresimon*, *dynaton* and *hedy* presented in *Hippias major*, although it was destined to be dismissed as insufficient at the end of the dialogue. On the contrary, Thrasymachus asks to proceed with the investigation *σαφῶς καὶ ἀκριβῶς*, in a clear and rigorous manner (336d): these highly significant terms were destined to become, since then, specific characteristic of his epistemological style.

Thrasymachus demands to follow a ‘correct way of reasoning’ (*ὀρθῶς λογιζομένῳ*, 339a3), capable of revealing the conceptual invariance of each term (*πανταχοῦ τὸ αὐτό, ἰνί*). Expressions and concepts such as *akribologia* (340e2), ‘the highest rigour’ (*to akribestaton*, 340e8, 341b8) and the ability of pushing arguments to their logical limits are recurrent in Thrasymachus’ language, doubtless exploited by Plato in order to underline his cultural collocation as well as the role he plays within the development of the dialogue. The terms *saphes*, *orthos*, *akribes* in the 5th century represented signposts of an innovative, advanced methodology, which privileged rigorous verifications of facts, strict reasoning, clear and certain results, as opposed to old-fashioned ways to access the truth, e.g. by means of revelation and traditional authority. This epistemological configuration characterises Hippocratic medicine as well as Thucydides’ historiography, and obviously Protagoras’ and Prodicus’ sophistic thought.

In the field of medicine, these terms are recurrent items in a crucial work with regard to the development of methodology: *On Ancient Medicine* (*eidenai to saphes* 1.21; *eidenai to akribes*, 9.22; e cfr. *Aēr* 1.1, *orthos zetein*; *Progn.* 25, *orthos proginoskein*; *VM* 13, *orthos ietreuein*). ‘Correct research on facts’ lies at the core of Thucydides’ methodological programme (II 40.2), sharing with doctors both the need for *saphes* and *akrabeia*. With regard to sophistic thought, it is barely necessary to remember the attention that Protagoras (DK A10) and Prodicus (DK A11, 16) devoted to the question of linguistic and conceptual *orthotes*.

On a methodological level, therefore, Plato characterises Thrasymachus as a supporter of the latest intellectual fashions of his age, which proposed a new epistemological attitude denoted by rigorous research, procedural correctness, certainty of the obtained results, as opposed to the old-fashioned relationship with the truth, regarded as coextensive with the concept of being and considered as a result of revelation or authority – a conception with strong religious overtones, derived from Parmenides and the archaic sapiential tradition.

All this, however, does not only outline the cultural dimension assigned by Plato to the ‘sophist’ Thrasymachus, as one could anticipate. Thrasymachus’ methodological assertions, in my view, define the specific role he plays in the dialogue: he rigorises some conceptions

diffused in his cultural environment, achieving an unprecedented level of precision by bringing them to their logical limits and clearest formulations.

Obviously, this ‘rigorising’ interpretation cannot be attributed to the ‘historical’ Thrasymachus, as far as we can tell, but should be rather intended as the result of Plato’s powerful mind. On the other hand, he clearly needed a mouthpiece in order to express in this part of the dialogue his re-interpretation of other people’s positions, so he found it in the powerful and violent logographer, who performs the same function that, from Book 2, he will assign to his brothers (doubtless young aristocrats with oligarchic and sophistic sympathies).

4. Thrasymachus’ first thesis

Now it is time to look more closely at the arguments that Thrasymachus rigorises on the basis of his methodological assertions, and we will analyse also their cultural presuppositions and adversaries, and their reciprocal coherence; finally we will look at whether Socrates refutes them or not and we will examine their role in the rest of the dialogue.

The first thesis (from now on Ta) is defined by Thrasymachus in a rhetorically effective manner, in which the conclusion anticipates its demonstration. In his contention, ‘Just’ is nothing else than the ‘advantage of the stronger’ (τὸ τοῦ κρείττονος συμφέρον, 338c) because 1) just is what laws specify to abide; 2) laws are enacted by whoever detains power (*to archon*), whatever the constitutional form is (tyranny, aristocracy or democracy); 3) the ultimate end of laws is to keep power in the hands of who issues them; 4) ‘strong’ is who detains power, be it an individual, a group or majority (depending on different constitutional assets); 5) Therefore, insofar as subjects are concerned, ‘just’ consists in complying with the laws issued by the strongest, hence the concept of ‘just’ coincides with the latter’s interest in maintaining power (338d-e).

It is difficult to overemphasise the strength of Thrasymachus’ argument, as he combines in an original and rigorous way two different, though very diffused positions in 5th century ethico-political thought: on the one hand, he points at a conception along the lines of juridical positivism (*Rechtpositivismus*) as expressed in (1), on the other he unveils the real nature of power, of any kind (*Machtpositivismus*), as in (2-4).

The power of the rigorisation developed by Thrasymachus can be best understood by contrasting it briefly with the positions that it synthesises and conceptually overcomes. The identity, or strict coimplication, between the concepts of *dikaion* (just) and *nomimon* (legal) – i.e. justice as compliance with political and juridical norms issued by laws and in courts – was deeply rooted in Greek culture. This conception was originally guaranteed by religious sanction: in Hesiod, *Eunomie* (Good Law) is the sister of *Dike* (Justice) and both are daughters of Zeus (*Th.* 901 ff.); this characterisation indicates the divine origin of law and guarantees its congruence with the justice of the gods. *Eunomie* is still conceived as a divinity in Solon’s thought, the proto-legislator of Athens (3.30 ff.). In Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, the newly established laws and courts, which are responsible for administering *dike*, are placed under the protection of Athena, the chief divinity of the *polis* (vv. 468, 483-84, 571-72).

But even when the *polis* with its political and ideological dimension substituted the old religious guarantee, the strict coimplication of law and justice does not disappear: on the contrary, it seems even reinforced by the newly acquired autonomy of the juridico-political dimension and its authority on the social life. A great sophist such as Protagoras assigned to the laws the task of rectifying and improving the citizens’ moral attitude (*Prot.* 326c ff); he maintained as well that the city, in its autonomy, represented with laws the very norm and criterion of justice (‘whatever seems right and honourable to a state is actually right and honourable to it, so long as it believes it to be so’, *Theaet.* 167c). In the same cultural dimen-

sion, the sophist known as ‘Anonymous of Iamblichus’ maintained that *nomos* and *dikaion* represented the conditions of possibility for human coexistence in a *polis* (3.6, 6.1).

There is no reason to doubt that the ‘historical’ Socrates shared as well, for the most part, such a deeply rooted position within the traditional conceptions of *polis*. According to Xenophon, Socrates affirmed that although laws are the results of conventional, therefore mutable, agreements between the citizens, what is ‘just’ is nothing else than what is consistent with laws, i.e. *nomimon* and *dikaion* are one and the same thing (*Mem.* 4.4.12): ‘to live respecting the law and to be just is the same’ (*Mem.* 4.4.18). With clear reminiscences of Hesiod and Solon, Socrates adds that ‘the gods as well are pleased with the identification of just and lawful’ (*Mem.* 4.4.25). And this is the case not only with Xenophon’s Socrates, as Plato’s Socrates in the *Crito* maintains very similar positions. There is no virtue without justice, and justice mainly consists in respecting the positive norms established by law, which constitute the pact of coexistence between citizens. The personified figures of the Laws – fathers and mothers of the citizens – remind Socrates of something he had always taught, that ‘virtue and justice (*aretē/dikaiosyne*) and lawful things and the laws (*nomima/nomoi*) are the most precious things to men’ (*Crit.* 53a-c ff).

Thrasymachus’ premise (Ta1), therefore, is soundly based in the widespread opinions diffused in the culture of 5-4th century and, in this respect, not even Socrates can question it. Thrasymachus, though, radically overcomes this premise, not by refuting it but, rather, by unveiling its ideological nature. Behind the laws and the idea of justice represented and ratified by them, there are neither the gods nor the concordant will of the citizens: there is only the pure reality of power. The abstract term employed here, *to archon* (338d10), represents adequately the effort toward conceptual rigorisation that Plato attributes to Thrasymachus. It is power that controls force (*kratos*) in the city, first of all the force to enact laws, consequently sanctioning what ‘just’ actually is. And there is an internal logic in power – and in any kind of power – that leads it to legislate in its own interest, which primarily is an interest in its own consolidation and stability (338e). The fact that the ‘advantage of the stronger’ mainly consists in power’s own interest in its self-preservation is confirmed in a passage of the *Laws*, where Plato summarises without uncertainties Thrasymachus’ thesis of the *Republic*: ‘the laws, they say, in a State are always enacted by the stronger power (τὸ κρατοῦν) [...] with the primary aim of securing the permanence of its own power (τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ μένειν)’ (*Leg.* 4.714 c-d).

This exposure of the *inertial* nature, so to speak, of power does not undermine the equation law-justice but makes its reassuring ideological justification collapse; however in Thrasymachus’ view it does not have any specifically tyrannical aspects: it is proper to all forms of power known to the Greeks, which Thrasymachus identifies in tyranny, democracy and aristocracy (338d-e), recalling the traditional classification by Herodotus (3.80-82). Whether power is controlled by a single individual, by a small group of *aristoi* or by the whole *demos*, its essential nature does not change.⁷

Thrasymachus’ critiques of the ideology of law and his denunciation of the *arcana imperii* are certainly anticipated by a radical pre-existent trend in political thought that, in the last part of the 5th century, elaborated on what Athens had learnt from a ‘violent teacher’, as Thucydides (3.82.2) describes the experience of the Peloponnesian war and the civil strife that accompanied it, which ended up in destroying the illusion of cohesion and stability in the civic body of a *polis*. Plato presents Thrasymachus as an heir of this tradition of thought but

⁷ The mutual entanglement of justice and power in Thrasymachus is clearly shown by Lycos (1987), 42-49 and 65-69. On the contrary, the whole analysis of Cross-Woozley (1964), 23-60, is undermined by the fact that they overlook the juridical mediation (*nomos*) introduced by Thrasymachus between the dimension of power and morality (*dikaiosyne*).

also, as we will see further on, as a person who is capable of bringing these reflections to their extreme limits, with unprecedented logical rigour.

The fact that democratic laws are functional to the self-preservation of power had already been maintained in a ‘violent’ text such as pseudo-Xenophon’s *Athenian constitution*, possibly stemming from a close associate of Critias and his circle.⁸ But in this text there is an archaic residue: the law of *demos* is bad, *kakonomia*, while the aristocratic law, although functional to the interests of the *agathoi* (as well as the former was to the interests of *demos*), is nonetheless good (*eunomia*, 1.8). Therefore, there is a criterion of value, which enables to discriminate laws even without assessing the actual norms they ratify, a criterion that depends on the absolute values proper to opposite social groups. According to Thrasymachus, instead, the conceptual dimension before any kind of legislation is perfectly neutral so far as values are concerned: there is only pure power, whatever the social group that controls it.

A similar distance separates Thrasymachus from the memorable Thucydidean dialogue between Athenians and Melians (5.89 ff.). The Athenians, with the overwhelming superiority of their military power, impose on the Melians to choose between the subjugation and extermination. The Melians invoke divine justice and hope in the protection eventually provided by the gods to just people (5.90; 5.104). But the Athenians reply that there is only one eternal *nomos*, only one ‘necessity of nature’ that holds true both for men and gods, and it is that ‘by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can (ὄν ἄν κρατῆ, ἄρχειν)’ (5.105.2). The concept of *dikaion* holds true between equals in power, when ‘equal necessity’ applies to both sides, otherwise the strongest act in keeping with their power and the weakest suffer (5.89).⁹ In this way, though, the Athenians acknowledge a disjunction between justice, force and power, as Pericles stated in his last speech in Thucydides: the city’s empire is actually a tyranny, that maybe is unfair (*adikon*) to hold, but also dangerous to lose. Force (*kratos*) leads to power (*arche*), and both overcome justice, if the opposed forces are not equal. For Thrasymachus this contraposition would not make sense: justice is product and function of force and power, it does not exist before but only after the norms produced by them; by definition, power can never be defined as ‘unjust’.

Even more archaic, from Thrasymachus’ point of view in the *Republic*, is the position attributed by Plato to another of his characters, Callicles, the sophist of *Gorgias* (in spite of the misunderstanding maintained by many interpreters, who read Callicles as identical to him or even as a complement of Thrasymachus’ thought).¹⁰ Callicles embraces a form of oligarchic nostalgia and even laments that the stronger and powerful people (*erromenesteroi/dynatoi*) are subject to the weakest by means of laws, which impose a definition of the concept of ‘just’ (*to dikaion*, 483b-e) as equality. The metaphor employed by Callicles – that of shackled and tamed lions – clearly betrays that the cultural horizon of his oligarchic nostalgia is that of the Homeric hero. But this is exactly why his position is archaic in comparison with Thrasymachus’ arguments: Callicles considers being mighty as a natural, absolute quality that is due by birth to a specific class and its best representatives. But what is the meaning of this ‘might’, if it is defeated by the weakest and is subject to their laws? According to Thrasymachus, power control is the only telling sign of might: in his conceptual framework, entirely centred on political conflict, the strongest are those who can issue laws (therefore, in a democratic context, exactly those considered to be *astheneis* by Callicles), the weakest those

⁸ For a ‘Critian’ interpretation of this text, see Canfora (1982) and Canfora (1980). On the question of power, cf. Vegetti (1977) and Serra (1979). Cf. as well Flores (1982).

⁹ The dialogue strongly anticipates Thrasymachus’ language, although without the mediation of law, when the Athenians affirm that the Spartans consider ‘just what is useful’ (τὰ συμφέροντα δίκαια, 5.105.4). On this text, cf. the commentary by Canfora (1991) and Canfora (1992).

¹⁰ Cf. in this sense Broze (1991), 99-115, as well as Kerferd (1976).

who have to undergo them (the ‘strongest’, according to Callicles and pseudo-Xenophon, who both share an oligarchic and naturalistic ideology that is completely alien to Thrasymachus). Among all the positions expressing radical criticisms to the ideology of laws and justice, the closest to Thrasymachus is the one attributed to Alcibiades by Xenophon. Against Pericles, who defended the usual equation of law and justice, Alcibiades objected that law always implies some kind of imposition of the strongest (whoever detains power, be it the people or the richest) on the subjects; law, therefore, is violence, unless it is accompanied by universal persuasion, i.e. an improbable unanimity (*Mem.* 1.2.40-45).

It may be tempting to read in the *Republic*’s character of Thrasymachus a projection of Alcibiades’ positions, as well as the tragic conflict that put him not only against Pericles (and Socrates), but also against the whole *polis* of Athens. However, the violence of law is not the central theme of Thrasymachus’ thesis. Its central core, as we have seen, consists in considering power as prior to law, therefore external to the normative dimension instituted by laws; not even Xenophon’s Alcibiades reaches this extreme radicalisation of political thought, and this refined unmasking of the relationship between politics and moral dimension. Thrasymachus’ position, then, must be considered as a theoretical apex of Plato’s thought, both in its critique to the ideology sustaining the equation between law and justice, and in its rigorous interpretation of previous critiques to this ideology, posed in the ethico-political debate between 5th and 4th century. This is such a powerful position that makes largely ineffective the attempts to refute it attributed to the character of Socrates in *Republic* 1.

5. Socrates’ refutation

Socrates attacks twice the first argument of Thrasymachus. The first attack (339c-341a) is based upon of the possible fallibility of governors-legislators. As any other ‘expert’ (*technites*), they can make mistakes, issuing laws that they think are functional to maintaining power control but, instead, are actually counterproductive. In this case obeying laws would mean, from the subject’s point of view, damaging the interest of the stronger rather than acting in their interests. Faced with this objection Cleitophon, who sustains Thrasymachus, proposes a different formulation of Ta: just is acting as those detaining power *believe*, correctly or not, is in their interest (340b). Thrasymachus does not accept this suggestion,¹¹ probably because he does not want to deal with the difficulties derived from the relation between being/appearing, knowledge/belief, fields in which Socrates represents a well-known threat. His reply, instead, is in his typical rigorising style. Ta’s truth condition consists in the fact that it envisages ‘true’ power holders, who as such do not make mistakes, in the same way as a doctor does not make mistakes so far as he is a doctor, i.e. expert in a *techne*. The governor who is mistaken ceases to be *kreitton*, as the doctor who errs is not a doctor anymore because, in the moment in which he makes a mistake, he gets out of his the area of his expertise (*techne*).¹²

The second attack takes place in two phases. Firstly (341c-343b) Socrates recurs to the craft model, maintaining that each one of them does not work for its own benefit, but in the interest of the object that is within its competence; in this sense, the doctor works in the interest of the bodies’ health. Thrasymachus’ reply is blunt and irrefutable on this level: shepherds do not work in the herd’s interest but in their own; they protect and feed it only because they

¹¹ Among different hypotheses with regard to Thrasymachus’ refusal of Cleitophon’s suggestion, the most plausible is in Annas (1981), 42: Thrasymachus does not want to hold a mere conventionalist position (because he wants to show that prior to this there is a rigorous logic of power).

¹² The rigorous level of Thrasymachus’ discourse ends up to be explicitly accepted by Socrates (who at 341c speaks of ὁ τῷ ἀκριβεῖ λόγῳ ἰατρός).

want to make profit by selling or slaughtering it. Now Socrates has to increase the complexity of his own argument (345c-346d) and, therefore, he creates a new *techne* called *misthotike* (the craft of wage-earning). Medical art aims at health and not at the doctor's remuneration; however, as he earns a salary, he must practice *misthotike* as well as medicine.

But this argument is fallacious. Either *misthotike* is not a *techne* (and therefore the remuneration of the expert has to be an effect of his primary craft), or it is a *techne*: but in this last case, there is at least one craft that does not provide a service but works exclusively to the expert's own benefit. This violates the general definition of *techne* provided by Socrates, and could allow Thrasymachus to argue that politics is a craft that follows the model provided by *misthotike*.

In order to avoid this embarrassing situation and to persist in sustaining the argument that describes power as a kind of service similar to the *technai*, Socrates resorts to a statement that he tries to present as factual (345e-347d).

That power *per se* does not generate a profit is demonstrated, in Socrates' view, by the fact that the person who holds it has to be compensated with some kind of remuneration. On a conceptual level, this consideration is not satisfactory because it reproduces the contradiction proposed by *misthotike* (i.e. thanks to the wage, holding power becomes profitable); but, even more importantly, this is not a matter of fact, because Socrates cannot disregard the competition for power existent at his time, which by itself demonstrates how conquering power is universally considered desirable (hence profitable, in a way or another). Socrates, then, has to introduce a moral restraint: the best men (*epieikeis*, 347b1) are those that do not desire power but accept to hold it only in order to avoid being governed by worse individuals. In addition, Socrates has to relate his conception of power as service, therefore neither desirable nor profitable, to the future of utopia ('For we may venture to say that, if there should be a city of good men only...', 347d). In this way, Socrates demolishes the factual value of his consideration: at present and so far as men who actually are involved in politics are concerned, it is not true that power is considered not desirable or profitable. Thrasymachus' thesis, then, resists to this second assault as well, and Socrates seems to acknowledge this fact when he temporarily concludes: 'This point then I by no means concede to Thrasymachus, that justice is the advantage of the superior. But *that we will reserve for another occasion*' (347d-e).

The strength of Thrasymachus' first thesis consists in the fact that it is entirely and purely political, i.e. it is centred on the question of power. Thrasymachus does not make reference to any kind of natural right (*physei*), as opposed to Callicles in the *Gorgias* and similar sophistic positions, such as Antiphon's. Overcoming both the limits of individual (Cephalus) and factional morality (Polemarchus), Thrasymachus plays the crucial role that forces the dialogue – and Socrates himself – to raise to the level of politics and deal radically with the question of power.

However, Plato implicitly accepts the supporting pillars of the thesis. He will never put into question the coimplication of law and justice (which, in Book 4, will be articulated in a complex hierarchy of functions and powers within the city and the soul). Least of all will he doubt that the aim of legislation consists in assuring the stability of power, which now is largely delegated to the educational strategies legally established by the *polis*, but do not exclude even the use of public lies and violent coercion, which are justified by the need for stability.

Plato's only true answer to Thrasymachus consists in the effort to guarantee the ethical quality of the government that is above the system laws-justice-stability. This answer will be formulated only in Book 5, and will consist in giving power either to a group of philosophers who are selected on a moral and intellectual basis, or to kings/tyrants philosophically retrained. Nonetheless, in order to avoid that the interest (*sympheron*) of the *archontes* returns

to be private or factional, and in order to guarantee that their interest will coincide with the universal benefit of the community, it will be necessary to put in place the ‘communist’ reforms that are discussed from 3.416a ff., and finally in Book 5 both family and private property are banned for the *archontes*. This ‘communism’, then, appears to be a necessary consequence of Thrasymachus’ challenge, as the only way to overcome his otherwise invincible exposure of the nature of power, and to guarantee radically the function of collective ‘service’ that Plato attributes to power.

6. Thrasymachus’ second thesis

The second thesis argued by Thrasymachus (Tb) starts by stating that ‘justice and the just are literally the other fellow’s good’ (343c), i.e. justice consists in respecting the laws that were issued in the interests of power holders, not for the benefit of the subjects; complementarily, injustice represents ‘one’s own benefit’, in this case meaning the benefit of the power holders. In this way, as Thrasymachus clearly underlines, a conceptual transition takes place, moving the discourse from the political dimension of Ta to a moral one (just/unjust), which characterises Tb (343d2).¹³ The identification between injustice and power allows Thrasymachus to argue that the unjust is strong, capable of having advantage (*pleonexia*) over just people, and therefore is happy; perfectly powerful and happy will be a person who is perfectly unjust, i.e. a tyrant who subdues cities and peoples with violence and deception (344a-c).

Actually, it is not difficult to show that Tb (whose effect is to identify Thrasymachus with Callicles and the ‘tyrannical’ logic of *pleonexia*)¹⁴ is derived from Ta only by means of a rhetorical fallacy, and that Ta not only does not imply Tb but also contradicts it.¹⁵ The (rhetorical) procedure by means of which it is derived works as follows: if justice concerns the subjects as it consists in observing the laws, after a simple, polar logical structure, injustice will be proper to who issues the laws, i.e. the strong and mighty. But this is not the case: according to Ta, the couple just/unjust subdues only law subjects, as they are just if they observe it or unjust in the opposite case. Before the establishment of laws, i.e. on the level of power, the problem of justice/injustice does not exist. As precisely written by Kerferd, who on the other hand does not accept this interpretation, ‘the person [or group] who issues laws cannot be just or unjust, they will be above or out of the domain of justice’. Maguire adds the following accurate remark: ‘The governor-legislator is entirely external to the sphere of justice and injustice’.¹⁶

¹³ Algra (1996) insists on this aspect and tries to reduce the distance between Thrasymachus’ two theses by observing how they set the theoretical dimension for the double investigation of the *Republic*, on political and individual justice (51).

¹⁴ The ‘free and lordly’ (*eleutherios/dispotikos*) character of tyrannical injustice (344c) clearly links Tb with Callicles’ oligarchic nostalgia (cf. the longed-for return of the ‘overman’ *naturaliter despotes* in *Gorg.* 484a). The tyrant’s absolute freedom, in relation to his discretionary control of *nomos* and *dike*, had already become a *topos* of tragic literature. In Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, no one is *eleutheros* except Zeus (v. 50), because he holds ‘Justice next to him’ (*παρ’ ἑαυτῷ τὸ δίκαιον*, vv. 186-187) and, therefore, is the gods’ *tyrannos*. In Euripides’ *Suppliants*, first performed around 424 BC, the tyrant exerts power (*kratei*) owning the law as if it were personal property (*κρατεῖ δ’ εἰς τὸν νόμον κεκτημένος αὐτὸς παρ’ αὐτῷ*, vv. 431-432). This linguistic mixture, which reactivates well-known formulas in the minds of the readers, helps Plato in moving from Ta and Tb and in reducing Thrasymachus to an ultimately philotyrannical thinker.

¹⁵ Tb’s inconsistency with Ta has been correctly highlighted by Maguire (1971); cf. as well Annas (1981), who detects an ‘inconsistent set’ of premises (35). Cf. for the same approach, Cross-Woolzley (1964), 38-41.

¹⁶ Cf. Kerferd (1976), 561; Maguire (1971).

In the light of Ta, there is no point in attributing injustice to people who hold the power of issuing laws. According to its juridical positivism, grounded upon power positivism, the latter results to be ethically neutral in the moment in which the law is issued. Of course, once a law has been issued, the power holder can observe it himself and, unless he makes a mistake, he will not be able to act differently, because the law's (direct or indirect) aim is to preserve his power. Otherwise he would not be unjust but stupid (i.e. he would stop being *kreitton*), because in this case he would work against himself.

The definition of Tb as 'injustice holds power (*archei*)' (343c), therefore, cannot be derived from Ta but contradicts it, and produces a simplified, or at any rate less individualised, image of Thrasymachus, one that is plainly an expression of a wide-spread position in political thought.

It is the case, now, to enquire into why Plato attributed to his character such different positions. I think that we can immediately exclude the hypothesis that, in this way, he wanted to underline Thrasymachus' confusion, or even conceptual chaos.¹⁷ As we have seen, Plato repeatedly associates with this character a need for rigour, which is accepted without irony by Socrates as well; more generally, Thrasymachus' role in Book 1 is so critical for the further developments of the discussion that, as we must keep in mind, the bystanders force him *twice* to stay and not leave before he had completely played his dialectical role. Then, why is Thrasymachus exposed to the easy risk of being charged with inconsistency and confusion? The scholars who have correctly diagnosed a contradiction between Ta and Tb formulated two symmetrical proposals to interpret it: the most plausible one (Maguire) maintains that Ta represents the 'real' Thrasymachus (i.e. the historical Thrasymachus), and Tb is a Platonic manipulation of it; another, opposite position has been proposed (Annas), which maintains that the 'real' Thrasymachus is represented by Tb: this interpretation is less plausible, as it leads the reader to confuse Thrasymachus with Callicles.¹⁸ Both these hypotheses, though, end up being invalidated by the impossibility of having any sort of confirmation or verification on the 'real' Thrasymachus deriving from non-Platonic texts.¹⁹ It seems to me methodologically more correct to attribute both Ta and Tb to the 'character' of the dialogue, and this brings us back to the question of what is the sense of the coexistence of these incoherent theses.

I think that we can find in the text sufficient elements in order to formulate a satisfactory hypothesis: Plato considered Tb as the 'truth' underlying to Ta, not in a logical sense but in a rhetorical, psychological and political one;²⁰ this is to say that he wanted to indicate how Ta's conceptual rigour with regard to power, law and justice actually ends up leading to the legitimisation of tyrannical violence, as in Callicles' case. The concept, derived from Tb, according to which 'injustice is good' is defined by Socrates – for its transgressive character with regard to common sense – as 'harsher' and more difficult to attack (348e); and Socrates himself states that he thinks it expresses Thrasymachus' authentic opinions concerning the truth (τὰ δοκοῦντα περὶ τῆς ἀληθείας, 349a6-8) – and Thrasymachus significantly replies to this statement by inviting him not to care about what he thinks but, rather, to refute the actual discourse.

¹⁷ Cf. on this position e.g. Méron (1979), 136 ff.

¹⁸ Cf. Maguire (1971), 159 ff.; Annas (1981), 37 and 45.

¹⁹ Quincey (1981) maintains that the formula 'the advantage of the stronger' would be a textual quotation from a rhetorical treatise by Thrasymachus; but he can only prove that Plato knew these texts, as attested by *Phaedr.* 267c-d, not that he found this definition there.

²⁰ That a 'stress of powerful emotion' binds together these two positions has been signalled by Guthrie (1971), 91 ff.; the fact that Plato tried 'gradually to elicit from the ambiguous formula of T. what he really means' had been noted by Nettleship (1964).

Plato seems to suggest, then, that the thesis on ethical neutrality of power and *Rechtpositivismus*, whatever their theoretical rigour, foreshadow a tyrannical conquer of the space of power itself, as widely attested by Thucydides with regard to political practice and represented by Callicles in the Platonic dialogues.²¹ So Thrasymachus' *dokounta* would find in these positions their 'factual' actualisation, which they anticipate, if not in theory, at least in their psychological and political outcomes.

The introduction of Tb, however, generates at least two important effects in the dynamics of the dialogue. On the one hand, it makes it possible a delay in answering Ta, postponed to Book 4 and 5. On the other hand, its rhetorical power and its 'Critian' aura prompt a more effective answer on a rhetorical and psychological level:²² the very answer that Glaucon and Adeimantus will urge Socrates for. But even in that case, a theoretically satisfactory answer will be given only by Book 8's critique to the tyrant, a critique that is based on the psychology of Book 4. So far as Book 1 is concerned, the inadequacy of Socrates' answers to Tb is openly attested by Socrates' own final self-criticism (354a-b): without a shift to the political dimension, and to the theory of the soul that is related to it, Thrasymachus cannot be properly refuted.²³

However, at least one of Socrates' objections to Tb, which have been defined as 'all weak and unconvincing to an amazing degree' (Annas),²⁴ is not completely ineffective as it anticipates the political level of the following discussion. Socrates notes how between perfectly unjust individuals, who always try to obtain more than their subjects and their equals (*pleonexia*), no kind of cooperation in the management of power can possibly take place: neither a gang of thieves, nor a *polis*, nor an army could actually work in these conditions (351b-352a). Without some form of justice, i.e. of cooperative values, no kind of power can resist, because it would end up collapsing under the weight of the conflict between subjects and governors, as well as among the governors themselves. In other words, it seems impossible to think of a form of power that is entirely defined by coercion and despotism: without a minimum level of consensus to power, without rules shared by power holders and subjects not even structures which aim at using power as a tool for oppression and plunder can work. This objection is a good one, which leads the way to searching for a kind of power that is directed at public service and, therefore, has to be sustained by a level of consent that makes it stable and gets rid of *stasis* for ever: a quest that will reach its completion in Book 5 of the *Republic*.

²¹ The question of *pleonexia* (desire to have a larger part than the one prescribed by the social order) is present both in Thucydides, where it explodes in opposition to the 'current laws' in the case of the civil wars in Corcyra (3.82.6), and in the Platonic character of Callicles (*Gorg.* 483c3), who expresses positions that are very close to Tb. Boter (1986) underlines that Thrasymachus (i.e. Tb) maintains that justice is *isotes*, injustice *pleonexia*; this was the common opinion of the Greeks, which is overturned by the tyrant who, by means of law, presents (his own) *pleonexia* as just (266-274). The Anonymous of Iamblichus (6.1), on the contrary, maintained that law is a remedy against *pleonexia* of power (*kratos*), which is not to be considered as *arete*.

²² Critias (perhaps with Alcibiades) represent the occult and threatening protagonist of the dialogue. As leader of the Thirty, he was the person behind the deaths of Polemarchus and Niceratus, responsible as well for the attempt to involve Socrates in his hopeless regime (*Ep.* 7.324e ff.). If a fragment from *Sisyphus* (DK B25) can be attributed to him, he would have been the author of a 'punishing' theory of laws, which set a *dike tyrannos* in order to prevent the 'natural' supremacy of power (vv. 5-7). On the need of a more forceful rhetorical style in order to refute Thrasymachus, demanded by Glaucon and Adeimantus, cf. Annas (1981), 56 ff.

²³ And actually he does not consider himself refuted: Socrates' arguments, in his view, are only good for the banquet at the festival of Bendis (1.354a).

²⁴ Annas (1981), 50.

So, the *Republic* as a whole seems to be oriented by the necessity of giving an adequate response to Thrasymachus. Not to take his position seriously would mean, in the end, not to take seriously the whole dialogue.²⁵

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²⁵ Reeve (1985) maintains too that Thrasymachus powerful arguments require for Plato a ‘new departure’.

Chapter 2

Poetry: *paideia* and *mimesis*

The importance of poetry in the *Republic* is revealed by the two, lengthy discussions that Plato devotes to this question. The first one appears in Books 2-3 and is included in the elaboration of an educational project suitable for the future defenders of the city; the second treatment of poetry, instead, takes place at the beginning of Book 10: here the attention is focused on the mimetic nature of poetry and its ontological value, as well as on the dangerous effects that it can exert on the soul, being far from knowledge and ethics.

In this essay we will try to give an account of the whole development of Plato's examinations of poetry. I will start by examining the context of the passages of interest of Books 2-3, in which the fundamental motives of Plato's critique begin to take shape, as these motives will be reiterated and analysed in a theoretical light in the last book.

1. The function of the Guardians

In order to understand the characteristics of Plato's approach to poetry in Books 2-3, it is necessary to start by analysing the previous characterisation of the Guardian's image: this is introduced for the first time within the second type of city described by Socrates, the *polis tryphosa*.

Warriors are the last professional figures that appear in this type of city. They are mentioned when, as the city gradually expands in order to host an increasing number of agents, the escalation of its economical needs imposes to acquire new resources, thus making war unavoidable. Martial activities are immediately conceived as a part of the overall division of labour: fighting techniques are regarded as a sort of specialist expertise, incompatible with any other type of professional career. In order to acquire this skill, a special type of training is necessary, which teaches how to handle weapons carefully. In order to detach this image from the traditional model of citizen-soldier, Plato strongly underlines the complexity of fighting techniques, a characterisation which actually stands in contradiction to what we know about the modalities of hoplite combat: the *phalanx* was largely based on the resistance of the collective body and required very little specialist knowledge. For this last purpose, gymnastics and practice in handling weapons were certainly sufficient types of training and were both regular parts of a citizen's life.²⁶ Perhaps Plato's position reflects his awareness of the developments of warfare in the 4th cent., subsequent to the growing number of employed mercenaries with specific professional expertise.

The privileged status granted to military skills in the *Republic* and, consequently, to the figure of the Guardian who masters them, is the result of a clear axiological criterion, openly stated for example in 374e: 'Then, said I, in the same degree that the task of our Guardians is the greatest of all, [374e] it would require more leisure (σχολή) than any other business and the greatest science and training (τέχνης τε καὶ ἐπιμελείας μεγίστης)'. The military function

²⁶ On the function of warriors, and in particular hoplites, in the Greek city see Vernant (1968) and Vidal-Naquet (1975).