

PLATO'S IMMORALISTS AND THEIR ATTACHMENT TO JUSTICE: A LOOK AT THRASYMACHUS AND CALLICLES

ABSTRACT

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Every reader of Plato knows that Socrates defends justice against the attacks offered by Thrasymachus and Callicles. However, it isn't easy to say exactly what either defense consists of. Indeed, Glaucon suggests that while Thrasymachus has been silenced, his attack on justice has not been refuted. Do his conversations with Thrasymachus and Callicles merely show that Socrates is clever enough to trip up two outspoken immoralists?

I argue that there is much more to them than that. Plato shows that these men who denounce justice are nonetheless deeply, though unselfconsciously, attached to it. Thrasymachus admires skillful artisans and thinks that devoting oneself to one's art makes one a good man, worthy of good things. Callicles thinks something similar about politically active men. Thus both men believe in a form of distributive justice. Moreover, despite denying the reasonableness of self-sacrifice, both men, especially Callicles, reveal a kind of devotion to injustice, which they experience as genuine justice or what Callicles calls "natural justice."

The surprising attachment to justice that Thrasymachus and Callicles display resembles the attachment to justice that most people feel. Plato's portrait of these men leads us into fundamental reflections about justice, our attachment to justice or morality, and the human longing to transcend frailty and mortality. I argue that much of what Plato writes is meant not only to teach about the subjects Socrates discusses with his interlocutors, but also to show that the interlocutors are deeply attached to incoherent and often unselfconscious opinions about

those subjects. Moreover, these two aims are largely one. We learn about justice from learning about Thrasymachus' and Callicles' beliefs about justice, and vice-versa.

Finally, I examine presentations of immoralists in three other authors: Dostoevsky, Gide, and Shakespeare. I find similarities between these presentations and Plato's, but also a more explicit emphasis on belief in god, particularly in Dostoevsky and Shakespeare. I argue that to believe in justice as a way the world "should be" is ultimately (though not necessarily self-consciously) to believe that some god or moral order wants it to be that way and draws it in that direction.