

1 Plato's interpretation of the Sophist **Protagoras** (360 BCE)

2 from the *Theaetetus* by Plato (translated by Benjamin Jowett)

3 *Socrates*: Well, you have delivered yourself of a very important doctrine about knowledge; it
4 is indeed the opinion of **Protagoras**, who has another way of expressing it, **Man, he says, is**
5 **the measure of all things, of the existence of things that are, and of the non-existence of**
6 **things that are not**: -You have read him? *Theaetetus*: O yes, again and again.

7 Soc. Does he not say that **things are to you such as they appear to you**, and to me such as
8 they appear to me, and that you and I are men? *Theaetetus*: Yes, he says so.

9 Soc. A wise man is not likely to talk nonsense. Let us try to understand him: the same wind is
10 blowing, and yet one of us may be cold and the other not, or one may be slightly and the
11 other very cold? *Theaetetus*: Quite true.

12 Soc. Now is the wind, regarded not in relation to us but absolutely, cold or not; or are we to
13 say, with Protagoras, that the wind is cold to him who is cold, and not to him who is not?

14 *Theaetetus*: I suppose the last.

15 Soc. Then it must appear so to each of them? *Theaetetus*: Yes.

16 Soc. And "appears to him" means the same as "he perceives." *Theaetetus*: True.

17 Soc. Then appearing and perceiving coincide in the case of hot and cold, and in similar
18 instances; for things appear, or may be supposed to be, to each one such as he perceives
19 them? *Theaetetus*: Yes.

20 Soc. **Then perception is always of existence, and being the same as knowledge is**
21 **unerring**? *Theaetetus*: Clearly.

22 Soc. In the name of the Graces, what an almighty wise man Protagoras must have been! He
23 spoke these things in a parable to the common herd, like you and me, but told the truth, his
24 Truth, in secret to his own disciples. *Theaetetus*: What do you mean, Socrates?

25 Soc. I am about to speak of a high argument, in which all things are said to be relative; you
26 cannot rightly call anything by any name, such as great or small, heavy or light, for the great
27 will be small and the heavy light-there is no single thing or quality, but out of motion and
28 change and admixture all things are becoming relatively to one another, which "becoming" is
29 by us incorrectly called being, but is really becoming, **for nothing ever is, but all things are**
30 **becoming**.

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1 Plato's interpretation of the Sophist **Thrasymachus** (360 BCE)

2 from *The Republic*, translated by Benjamin Jowett

3 Listen, then, he [**Thrasymachus**] said; I proclaim that **justice is nothing else than the**
4 **interest of the stronger**. And now why do you not [praise] me? But of course you won't.

5forms of government differ; there are tyrannies, and there are democracies, and there are
6 aristocracies? *Socrates responds*: Yes, I know.

7 And the government is the ruling power in each state? *Socrates*: Certainly.

8 And the different forms of government make laws democratical, aristocratical, tyrannical,
9 with a view to their several interests; and these laws, which are made by them for their own
10 interests, are the justice which they deliver to their subjects, and him who transgresses them
11 they punish as a breaker of the law, and unjust. And that is what I mean when I say that in all
12 states there is the same principle of justice, which is the interest of the government; and as
13 the government must be supposed to have power, the only reasonable conclusion is, that
14 **everywhere there is one principle of justice, which is the interest of the stronger**.

15 Now I understand you, I [*Socrates*] said; and whether you are right or not I will try to
16 discover. But let me remark, that in defining justice you have yourself used the word
17 'interest' which you forbade me to use. It is true, however, that in your definition the words
18 'of the stronger' are added.

19 A small addition, you must allow, he said.

20 Great or small, never mind about that: we must first enquire whether what you are saying is
21 the truth. Now we are both agreed that justice is interest of some sort, but you go on to say
22 'of the stronger'; about this addition I am not so sure, and must therefore consider further.

23 Proceed. (*From this point on, Socrates asks the questions, allegedly to clarify Thrasymachus'*
24 *argument, and Thrasymachus' gives brief responses.*)

25 I will; and first tell me, Do you admit that it is just or subjects to obey their rulers?

26 *Thrasymachus*: I do.

27 But are the rulers of states absolutely infallible, or are they sometimes liable to err?

28 *Thrasymachus*: To be sure, he replied, they are liable to err.

29 Then in making their laws they may sometimes make them rightly, and sometimes not?

30 *Thrasymachus*: True.

31 When they make them rightly, they make them agreeably to their interest; when they are
32 mistaken, contrary to their interest; you admit that? *Thrasymachus*: Yes.

33 And the laws which they make must be obeyed by their subjects,-- and that is what you call
34 justice? *Thrasymachus*: Doubtless.

35 Then justice, according to your argument, is not only obedience to the interest of the stronger
36 but the reverse? *Thrasymachus*: What is that you are saying? he asked.

1 I am only repeating what you are saying, I believe. But let us consider: **Have we not**
2 **admitted that the rulers may be mistaken about their own interest in what they**
3 **command, and also that to obey them is justice?** Has not that been admitted?

4 *Thrasymachus:* Yes.

5 **Then you must also have acknowledged justice not to be for the interest of the stronger,**
6 **when the rulers unintentionally command things to be done which are to their own**
7 **injury.** For if, as you say, justice is the obedience which the subject renders to their
8 commands, in that case, O wisest of men, is there any escape from the conclusion that the
9 weaker are commanded to do, not what is for the interest, but what is for the injury of the
10 stronger?

11 Nothing can be clearer, Socrates, said Polemarchus.

12 *After several other issues are discussed, Thrasymachus returns to the attack. He restates his*
13 *thesis, defending it from socio-political realities:*

14 Oh, no; and so entirely astray are you in your ideas about the just and unjust as not even to
15 know that justice and the just are in reality another's good; that is to say, the interest of the
16 ruler and stronger, and the loss of the subject and servant; and injustice the opposite; for the
17 unjust is lord over the truly simple and just: he is the stronger, and his subjects do what is for
18 his interest, and minister to his happiness, which is very far from being their own.

19 Consider further, most foolish Socrates, that the just is always a loser in comparison with the
20 unjust. First of all, in private contracts: wherever the unjust is the partner of the just you will
21 find that, when the partnership is dissolved, the unjust man has always more and the just less.
22 Secondly, in their dealings with the State: when there is an income tax, the just man will pay
23 more and the unjust less on the same amount of income; and when there is anything to be
24 received the one gains nothing and the other much. Observe also what happens when they
25 take an office; there is the just man neglecting his affairs and perhaps suffering other losses,
26 and getting nothing out of the public, because he is just; moreover he is hated by his friends
27 and acquaintance for refusing to serve them in unlawful ways.

28 But all this is reversed in the case of the unjust man. I am speaking, as before, of injustice on
29 a large scale in which the advantage of the unjust is more apparent; and my meaning will be
30 most clearly seen if we turn to that highest form of injustice in which the criminal is the
31 happiest of men, and the sufferers or those who refuse to do injustice are the most miserable--
32 that is to say tyranny, which by fraud and force takes away the property of others, not little
33 by little but wholesale; comprehending in one, things sacred as well as profane, private and
34 public; for which acts of wrong, if he were detected perpetrating any one of them singly, he
35 would be punished and incur great disgrace-- they who do such wrong in particular cases are
36 called robbers of temples, and man-stealers and burglars and swindlers and thieves.

37 But when a man besides taking away the money of the citizens has made slaves of them,
38 then, instead of these names of reproach, he is termed happy and blessed, not only by the
39 citizens but by all who hear of his having achieved the consummation of injustice. For
40 mankind censure injustice, fearing that they may be the victims of it and not because they
41 shrink from committing it. And thus, as I have shown, Socrates, injustice, when on a

1 sufficient scale, has more strength and freedom and mastery than justice; and, as I said at
 2 first, justice is the interest of the stronger, whereas injustice is a man's own profit and
 3 interest.

4 Plato's interpretation of the Sophist Callicles
 5 from the *Gorgias* (translated by Benjamin Jowett)

6 **Callicles:** For the truth is, Socrates, that you, who pretend to be engaged in the pursuit of
 7 truth, are appealing now to the popular and vulgar notions of right, which are not natural, but
 8 only conventional. Convention and nature are generally at variance with one another: and
 9 hence, if a person is too modest to say what he thinks, he is compelled to contradict himself;
 10 and you, in your ingenuity perceiving the advantage to be thereby gained, slyly ask of him
 11 who is arguing conventionally a question which is to be determined by the rule of nature; and
 12 if he is talking of the rule of nature, you slip away to custom: as, for instance, you did in this
 13 very discussion about doing and suffering injustice. When Polus was speaking of the
 14 conventionally dishonourable, you assailed him from the point of view of nature; for by the
 15 rule of nature, to suffer injustice is the greater disgrace because the greater evil; but
 16 conventionally, to do evil is the more disgraceful. For the suffering of injustice is not the part
 17 of a man, but of a slave, who indeed had better die than live; since when he is wronged and
 18 trampled upon, he is unable to help himself, or any other about whom he cares.

19 The reason, as I conceive, is that the makers of laws are the majority who are weak; and they,
 20 make laws and distribute praises and censures with a view to themselves and to their own
 21 interests; and they: terrify the stronger sort of men, and those who are able to get the better of
 22 them in order that they may not get the better of them; and they say, that dishonesty is
 23 shameful and unjust; meaning, by the word injustice, the desire of a man to have more than
 24 his neighbours; for knowing their own inferiority, I suspect that they are too glad of equality.
 25 And therefore the endeavour to have more than the many, is conventionally said to be
 26 shameful and unjust, and is called injustice, whereas **nature herself intimates that it is just**
 27 **for the better to have more than the worse, the more powerful than the weaker; and in**
 28 **many ways she shows, among men as well as among animals, and indeed among whole**
 29 **cities and races, that justice consists in the superior ruling over and having more than**
 30 **the inferior. ...**

31 ...these are the men who act according to nature; yes, by Heaven, and according to the law of
 32 nature: not, perhaps, according to that artificial law, which we invent and impose upon our
 33 fellows, of whom we take the best and strongest from their youth upwards, and tame them
 34 like young lions, -charming them with the sound of the voice, and saying to them, that with
 35 equality they must be content, and that the equal is the honourable and the just. But if there
 36 were a man who had sufficient force, he would shake off and break through, and escape from
 37 all this; he would trample under foot all our formulas and spells and charms, and all our laws
 38 which are against nature: the slave would rise in rebellion and be lord over us, and the light
 39 of natural justice would shine forth. ... **[The] Law ... makes might to be right, ... [The]**
 40 **possessions of the weaker and inferior properly belong to the stronger and superior.**