

Logos and Ergon in Book I of Plato's Republic

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The first book of the *Republic* ends in *aporia*, with Socrates claiming that none of the interlocutors have given a proper definition of justice. What then would constitute a “proper” definition? A solution is suggested during Book I when Thrasymachus is driven to demand that we understand a particular word “according to its precise meaning.”¹ Initially, he and Socrates invoke *logos* to define the special power (*dynamis*) and work (*ergon*) of certain arts (*technai*). Similarly, each of the three “definitions” of justice articulated in the first book defines some kind of activity: giving back what you owe and telling the truth (Cephalus), benefitting your friends and harming your enemies (Polemarchus), and obeying laws that serve the interests of the strong (Thrasymachus). Each definition presumes that it is the nature of “the just” to perform this certain kind of work (*ergon*) or act (*praxis*).² Precise definition is initially invoked in order to distinguish the proper work of a certain art. But I will show that Plato does not limit the logic of potency and work to the realm of *techne*, even in a dialogue dominated so notoriously by the art as model. We begin by studying the initial problem that precise definition is supposed to solve.

The Problem

Plato has Thrasymachus define “the just” as follows: what we call “the just” is merely the “advantage” of “the more dominant,” i.e. the rulers of a certain political order.³ He claims that they make laws only for the sake of their own “advantage,” which functions as the purpose (*telos*) of their lawmaking: “each ruling power

1. “*kata ton akribē logon*” (340e; my emphasis). The word in question is (*to archon*, ruler). I provisionally translate *logos* as meaning, in conjunction with its verb *legein* ‘to say, to mean.’ ‘Precise speech’ is also verbal: “*akribologē*” (340e), as in the English idiom ‘strictly speaking’ and ‘properly speaking.’

2. Excellence at a certain kind of work is also called *arête* or “virtue.”

3. Thrasymachus himself distinguishes at least three types of political government or ‘ruling power’ (*to archon*): tyrannic, democratic, and aristocratic. The dominant power is identified with the ruling power at 338d: “this dominates (*kratei*) in each city: the ruling power (*to archon*).”

establishes laws for the sake of its own advantage."⁴ Socrates generally agrees that the just is something advantageous and beneficial, but is unconvinced of the 'added thesis' that it is only good for the 'more powerful.' So it requires examination (*skeptēon*). First, he gets Thrasymachus to agree that it is just for those who are ruled to obey the law. Then he asks whether rulers are fallible (*hamartēin*) or infallible (*anamartētoi*).⁵ Thrasymachus affirms the former without qualification. As this claim comes under scrutiny, he is led to define *precisely* the difference between ruling and failing to rule. If (1) the just is nothing but what benefits the lawmaker, and (2) it is just to obey the law, but (3) lawmakers are fallible at making laws that benefit themselves, justice could require that one obey an "unjust" (harmful) law. So his claims seem to contradict themselves: how could it be just to do injustice? Suddenly, Cleitophon intervenes on his behalf: what Thrasymachus *meant* was that the "advantage" of the lawmakers is merely what *appears* to be beneficial to them. In that case, Thrasymachus is charged with the claim that the "strong" have no clear knowledge of their own good. Rosen summarizes his dilemma neatly:

Thrasymachus claims that justice is the interest of the stronger. It follows that, in order to be just, the weaker must obey the commands of the stronger and act in their interest. But if the rulers mistakenly command what is not advantageous to themselves, the weaker are required by justice to act unjustly. The proper inference from this would seem to be that one must know one's interest; strength alone is not sufficient. But before Thrasymachus can introduce this clarification, Cleitophon engages in what at first seems like a mistaken defense of the Thrasymachean argument. [He] attributes to Thrasymachus the thesis that justice is what seems to the stronger to be to his advantage. Cleitophon must mean by this that with respect to the advantageous, what seems so, is so. In this case, there is no knowledge of what is genuinely advantageous, and this is altogether unacceptable to Thrasymachus, who in his own way is a

4. "Tithetai tous nomous hekastē hē archē pros to autē sympheron" (338e). Lawmaker in Greek is *nomothetos*.

5. Primarily, *hamartēin* means 'to miss the mark,' and presupposes a 'mark' or end (*telos*) of which the failure is deficient.

champion of *technē*.⁶

The Solution: Precise Definition

Thrasymachus first responds by making a general temporal distinction: "you presume that I call the one failing *stronger* then, when he fails!?"⁷ For Thrasymachus then, strength involves not failing i.e. being *right*. Indeed, Socrates had inferred the distinction of right and wrong from their agreement on fallibility: "correctly or incorrectly" (*orthōs ... ouk orthōs*).⁸ Before, Thrasymachus had unthinkingly affirmed that the strong sometimes fail to do their proper work. Now, accused either of contradiction or of the claim that lawmakers operate without exact or technical knowledge of the good, he counters that the one who fails at doing what the "strong" properly do is not, properly speaking, *actually* strong. So Socrates replies, "I did assume you meant [that you still call them stronger] when you agreed that the ones ruling are not infallible but are able to be mistaken." In this way, Thrasymachus is led to define the *proper* act of ruling (versus the 'failure' to rule): "to make what's best for himself."⁹ This "most precise" (*akribestaton*) definition will be problematized, at least in part. But the principle of precise definition is preserved.¹⁰ We are about to watch Thrasymachus give a brief demonstration of "precise speech." This involves defining the particular *act* and product that characterizes each of the arts. 'Precise' definition is rooted in and articulates the proper *work* of a thing, the realization (*telos*) rather than failure or deficiency. In general, the distinction is being made between potency (*dynamis*), work (*ergon*), and deprivation (*steresis*), of which "failure" is a species.¹¹ Properly speaking, we ought not

6. Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Republic a Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, (2005), 43-44.

7. 340c.

8. 339c.

9. 341a.

10. Recurring e.g. at 346b3: "or indeed if you want to distinguish precisely, as you established" (*eanper boule akribōs diorizein, ōsper hypethou*). For the meaning of hypothesis as 'ground' or principle in Plato see Allegra De Laurentiis, "Hegel's Reading of Plato's *Parmenides*," in *Subjects in the Ancient Modern World: On Hegel's Theory of Subjectivity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 104, 107. Cf. *Phaedros* 270e-271a on Thrasymachus and the call for precise definition.

11. These become the three primary *archai* of change in Aristotle (*Physics* I).

to predicate an *act* of a subject that is deficient in (or incapable of) realizing it. Thrasymachus gives the first two examples that come immediately to mind:

do you call someone making an error (*ton examartanonta*) about the sick a healer (*iatron*) in virtue of the very thing (*kat' auto touto*) he makes an error about? Or [do you call someone] a logician (*logistikon*) who makes an error in reasoning (*en logismō*) then when (*tote hotan*) he makes the error, in virtue of this very mistake (*kata tauten ten hamartian*)? 340d¹²

We predicate an attribute like *iatron* of a subject in virtue of the *ergon* that a *iatron* as such is *supposed* to accomplish.¹³ The work of the subject *qua* healer is 'to heal' while their work *qua* calculator is to calculate and not to miscalculate. Thrasymachus observes,

But I suppose that we talk that way in a manner of speaking (*oimai legomen tōs rhēmati outōs*), e.g. that the healer made a mistake, or that the logician made an error, or the grammarian [did so]; but I assume that each of these, insofar as this is what we address him as (*kath' hoson tout estin ho prosagoreuomen auton*), never makes a mistake; so that, according to precise meaning (*kata ton akribē logon*), since you too speak precisely (*akribologē*), none of the skilled workers (*tōn demiourgōn*) err.¹⁴

What is this loose 'manner of speaking'? Steadman in his lexical commentary suggests that it is our "ordinary" manner of speaking.¹⁵ Is it an ordinary or conventional way of speaking that we should distinguish from an unconventional or even preconventional mode of speech? Since "we talk that way" (*legomen outōs*) corresponds to the question "in what way" or "how" (*pōs?*), we can ascertain that Thrasymachus means a way, mode, or manner of speaking. The imprecise mode of speech

12.340d

13. Cf. 341d: one is called a captain "in virtue of the art and the rulership of the sailors" (*kata tēn technēn kai tēn tōn nauṓn archēn*).

14. 340d-e.

15. Geoffrey Steadman, *Plato's Republic I: Greek Text with Facing Vocabulary and Commentary* (Self-published), 45.

indicates the way in which we are wont to predicate acts of a subject that are incidental to what it is, e.g. "the doctor built a house." Here subject and predicate are *incidentally* rather than *essentially* (analytically) related to one another. Properly speaking, a subject builds a house qua housebuilder, not qua doctor. The work (and verb) of each potency is naturally distinct, although situations can arise in which both potencies are at work simultaneously.

Socrates will maintain that precise speech distinguishes each of the arts into its own work: "I assume you would not call the art of wage-earning the art of medicine, even if someone became healthy *while* earning wages." Conversely, you would not "call the art of medicine that of wage-earning even if someone earned pay while healing."¹⁶ Strictly speaking, it is not the *ergon* of a healer to earn wages; his work is to heal and produce health. Someone can both heal and earn wages but the *ergon* of each remains distinct: someone can do their work for free.¹⁷ Indeed, "each of the arts is different in each case in this way, in having a different power."¹⁸ The distinctive potency and work of each art differentiates it ontologically from the rest:

If it needs to be considered precisely (*ei dei akribōs skopeisthai*), the medical art produces (*poiei*) health, the wage-earning art wages, the homebuilding art homes, and the wage-earning art accompanying it wages, and all the other arts are this way: each does its own work (*to autēs ekastē ergon ergazetai*).¹⁹

Each of the arts is defined by its own (*autēs*) potency and work. However, *erga* and *dynamai* are mentioned elsewhere in the dialogue that are *not* those of the *technai*. Lycos gathers the main instances of *ergon* that have occurred so far:

When applied to people's activities, it means 'job' or 'work', and when applied to natural kinds like men and horses it means the 'characteristic behavior' we associate with the kind. The word is used for the craftsman's

16. 346b.

17. *proika ergazētai* (346e).

18. *iō heteran tēn dynamin echein* (346a).

19. 346d.

activity as well as for the product of that activity... The range of meanings of 'ergon' has already been fully exploited in Book I: as *product* of activity at 330c; as the *activity* in respect of which the just help friends and harm enemies at 332e; as what *something does* relative to what it is (the *ergon* of cold is to cool, of the good to benefit, of the bad to harm) at 335d; as *characteristic end*, goal or achievement at 346d 5-6 (the end of each craft is to benefit its 'object'). (147).²⁰

Kinds of Ergon

During his conversation with Cephalus, Socrates observes, "just as poets love their own poems (*hoi poiētai ta autōn poiēmata*) and fathers love their own children, in the very same way the moneymakers are careful about their money as if it were their own work (*ōs ergon heautōn*)."²¹ Clearly, poems, children, and money are supposed to be examples or species of ergon. Moreover, the crucial phrase *ergon heautōn* anticipates the definition of justice articulated in Book IV: *to ta autou prattein* or "doing what's properly one's own."²² To be each thing means to do its proper erga: *to ta [erga] autou prattein*. If justice allows each its own ergon, the "precise" distinction of each thing into its proper logos is itself an instance of justice at work. Socrates assumes that 'granting something its own erga' is something done "justly."²³

Ergon is made explicit at 332e when Socrates asks Polymarchus "in what act and with regard to what work is [the just one] most able (*en tini praxei kai pros ti ergon dynatōtatos*) to benefit friends and harm enemies?" 'The just' are supposed to perform some kind of act that fulfills the definition 'to benefit friends and harm enemies'. This is Polymarchus's interpretation of Simonides's directive "to give to each its due."²⁴ The interpretation becomes problematic, at

20. Kimon Lycos, *Plato on Justice and Power: Reading Book I of Plato's Republic* (Albany, N.Y.: State

University of New York Press, 1987), 147.

21. 330c.

22. 433a.

23. *dikaiōs* (352e, 353d). Throughout the dialogue speaking precisely (*akribōs*) converges with speaking justly (*dikaiōs*), truly (*alethōs*), rightly (*orthōs*), wisely (*sophōs*), beautifully (*kalōs*), perfectly (*teleōs*), and "really" or ontologically (*ontōs*).

24. 331e.

least in part. But the utterance of Simonides holds, provided it is interpreted relative to the concept of *ergon*.

Ergon is also explicit during their examination of the notion that it is just to harm your enemies. Socrates can assume that "it is not the *ergon* of heat 'to cool' but [the work of] its opposite (*tou enantiou*)."²⁵ Likewise, it is "not the work of dryness to moisten, but [the work of] its opposite." Plato has in mind the correspondent *erga* of the elements and their elemental qualities. Note that their work is their verb: the work of the hot and the dry is 'to heat' and 'to dry'. Fire does this as well as 'to burn', 'to glow', 'to rise', 'to illumine', etc. All these *erga* belong to the *ergon* of fire as a whole. The specific *to prattein* of fire is *to ta [erga] autou prattein* – to do *ta erga* that belong to its natural potency. Fire is by its very nature unable to cool or to moisten: it is "impotent" (*adynatos*) to do the kind of *erga* that belong to the opposite nature.

So the logic of *ergon* and *dynamis* is not limited to the *technai*, even in a dialogue so notoriously dominated by the art as model. Any being naturally performs specific *erga*. It is the nature of a thing to do the *erga* that belong to it in virtue of its species (*eidos*). *Ergon* is essentially bound up in the proper definition of justice, operating as its *telos*. During the final passages of Book I, Plato conceives of justice and injustice as having a certain *ergon*. Socrates asks,

Does it appear to you that a city or an army, pirates, thieves or any other group (*ethnos*), as many as unjustly work in common toward something, would ever be able to do it (*praxai an ti dynasthai*) if they should be unjust to one another [or do each other injustice] (*ei adikoien allēlous*)?... For surely, Thrasymachus, injustice makes factions and hatreds and fights among each other, but justice unified intention and friendship (*homonoian kai philian*)... If then this is the work of injustice (*ergon adikias*), to produce hatred wherever it's present, won't it also, when it occurs among the free as well as the enslaved, make them hate each other and form factions and be unable to act in common with one another (*adynatous einai koinē met' allelōn prattein*)?²⁶

25. 335d3.

26. 351c-e.

Here, Socrates offers us various examples in order to understand the 'ergon of injustice.' It is the impotence of an entity like a city to work in common (*koinē*), to be incapable of unanimity or agreement (*homonoia*); civil war is an image of injustice. So justice is an entity's ability to act as a whole, as one, as "friends" (*philian*). Socrates then gets Thrasymachus to agree that the same thing can be observed in an army, a *genos*, and "anything else whatsoever" (*allō hotōoun*). The same goes for any partnership (*koinonia*) between two individuals. So he infers that generally, injustice refers to the disorder and discord of any individual whole:

And even when it's present in one thing (*en heni*) I suppose [injustice] will do these same things which it does by nature (*poiēsei haper pephuken ergazesthai*); first it will make it unable to act, being at faction and not unifying itself with itself (*adynaton auton prattein poiēsei stasiizonta kai ouk homonoounta auton heautō*), and thence [make it] an enemy both to itself and to the just.²⁷

Sachs also observes that the identity of injustice in each case is crucial. The example of the gang of thieves, he writes,

is offered as a picture of the way injustice divides a group of people against itself, so that even an unjust purpose can be accomplished in common only by those who practice justice among themselves. Socrates generalizes this into a suggestion that justice, if one should ever come to understand it, would be what unites people. And since he goes on to ask about justice within a single human being, we are left with the possibility that justice may be the power that makes any whole made of parts capable of acting as one thing rather than many.²⁸

If its work is analogous in each instance, it appears to be definable in general. But this comprehensive definition is only suggested within the first book, never made explicit. Thus, it ends in *aporia*.

27. 351e-352a.

28. Joe Sachs, *Republic* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Pub., 2007), 10.

Ergon and Arête

The argument now turns to the concept of *ergon* in general. The *ergon* of a thing is characterized as what it alone (*monō*) is able to do or is best (*arista*) at doing.²⁹ Socrates asks whether anything can see other than eyes, or whether anything can hear other than ears. It would seem that by definition, what can hear is an ear. But when several kinds of thing do share the same *ergon*, there can be one that *excels* at it. Plato gives the example of pruning a vine, which could be done by any kind of cutting-instrument, but can be accomplished *best* and “most beautifully” by a pruning knife. So there is a kind of cutting-instrument that is better than the rest of its genus at accomplishing the specific work. This kind of excellence exhibits the nature of *arête*. Likewise, just as it is the work of eyes to see, the excellence of the eyes is to see *well*. Excellence is opposed to *kakian*, which, often translated ‘vice’, here has the sense of ‘deficiency.’³⁰ Ontologically, “badness” is deficiency: “ears when deprived (*steromena*) of their excellence will accomplish (*apergasetai*) their work badly (*kakōs*).” Excellence and goodness in this sense are analogous as the excellence of natural potency.

29. 352e.

30. 353b-c.